

Introduction: Laying out the Study of Bodies in Tunisian Novels

1 An Anecdotal Starting Point

Like so many other research projects focusing on Tunisia after 2011, the idea for this book came from Mohammad Bouazizi's¹ self-incineration on 17 December 2010. Bouazizi's act of self-effacement captures the immediate importance of bodies that this study examines. People from near and far were affected by the popular protests against the Tunisian regime that had begun to draw attention to Bouazizi's plight. There are and were no images of the self-incineration, but early protests were photographed and filmed, and these images and videos were widely disseminated.² Rather than claiming that Bouazizi was the match that lit the fuse for the uprisings throughout the Arab world in early 2011, I claim that he is a symbol for what was at stake in these protests: human dignity and vulnerability. Bouazizi showed how authoritarian politics can influence people and violate them, not just from a societal point of view, but by visiting harm on their bodies.



Figure 1: Ben Ali at Bouazizi's hospital bed. Photo by picture alliance / dpa | Stringer.

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- 1 I will use the established spelling of Arabic names throughout this book, except where no such name exists in any media articles or publications; in this case, I will favor the use of transliteration.
 - 2 Compare Khatib, Lina. 2013. *Image Politics in the Middle East*, esp. 118; as well as Hostrup Haugbølle, Rikke. 2013. "Rethinking the Role of the Media in the Tunisian Uprising." In *The Making of the Tunisian Revolution*, edited by Nouri Gana. 169–174.

In contrast to the absence of visual evidence of the aforementioned incineration, the Tunisian Presidency attempted to officially disseminate another image. This image was taken on 28 December 2010, eleven days after the initial event, and showed then-Tunisian president Zine El Abidine Ben Ali next to Bouazizi in his hospital bed at what seemed to be a press event (compare Khatib 2013: x, 177).³ What is remarkable about the image is the role that bodies play within it. The bodies suggest aspects of absence, presence, and political (in)visibility. Bandages trace the shape of a body that does not have any visible features or signs of individuality. Allegedly, this is Bouazizi, yet at the same time, it is a placeholder for anonymous, common people. Even though Bouazizi is only visible in contours, and is absent as an individual, he has ultimately succeeded in gaining political visibility with his self-effacement. Conversely, Ben Ali is clearly present in the front row of visitors, looking at the bandaged figure. He stands out through the darkness of his suit and captures the attention of the medical personnel, as well as the interest of those who look at the image.

The picture is staged and political and it was disseminated in the hopes of appeasing the protestors. However, the image also symbolizes the sickness of common Tunisians who are under the observation of politicians in shiny suits. The medical staff seem to challenge Ben Ali with their arms crossed in front of their bodies, looking at him glaringly; however, this impression might just be a side-effect of hindsight. Ben Ali fled the country, deposed, just two weeks after this picture was taken.

The media used images of other people who had set fire to themselves (compare Kraidy's *The Naked Blogger of Cairo* 2016: 32), given that there were no images of Bouazizi's self-immolation. This suggests the public's curiosity to see Bouazizi's body burning.

Bodies carry meaning. Algerian psychoanalyst Malek Chebel alludes to a generic, common body that explains society in his *Le corps dans la tradition au Maghreb*. This body constitutes society's understanding or sense of self. It can be the code through which to understand society, but it also brings society into existence: "Le corps explique la société. Il est son sens, son code et une grande partie de sa raison d'être" (1984: 12). According to Chebel, society seems to be based on the body. While the present study does not agree with the positing of a generic body (compare *Chapter 1* below), it does share Chebel's belief that society can be approached through the various bodies that comprise it, including those that are presented in cultural productions, such as novels. The presences and absences of bodies in Ben Ali's hospital photo first inspired this thought. These presences and absences reflect the historically formed socio-political situation, as it breaks apart. This situation is about to move into new directions as can be known with hindsight. This study attempts to trace these developments in specific between 1956 and 2011, that is between the independence of Tunisia and the uprising that led to the departure of Ben Ali.

As a society, Tunisia is formed by diverse discourses, one of which is literature. At the same time, literature is formed by society. The two are in constant exchange and influence

3 Khatib describes how the Tunisian regime's initial reaction was to ignore the burgeoning protests as state television "broadcast non-political programs, such as a documentary about the Seven World Wonders". Khatib argues that the scene with Ben Ali at Bouazizi's hospital bed was used to change this narrative and to present the president as a "'caring' leader", even though Bouazizi "was most probably already dead during Ben Ali's visit [...which; C.P.] was not disclosed to ensure a positive photo opportunity" (2013: 176-177). 28 December 2010 was also the date of Ben Ali's first televised speech to address the demonstrations (compare Kraidy 2016: 42).

one another to a significant degree. Bodies, and the diverse understandings that are attributed thereto, stand in a similar relation to society; they shape it even while they are being shaped. An analysis of all three (society, literature and bodies) through a reading of figurations of human bodies in Tunisian novels, therefore, promises to yield great insights into post-colonial Tunisia. This book proposes cultural knowledge instead of offering a litany of facts about Tunisia, such as figures on its population or its income average. A couple of examples of this kind of cultural knowledge include the analysis of gender relations throughout history or an elaboration of how disability was perceived after Tunisian independence. The result is an embodied understanding of the country that offers a relevant background from which to better understand a broad variety of issues, such as the uprising of 2010–11, questions about illegal immigration, Islamic terrorism, and the relationship between North Africa and Europe.

2 Material Outlines and Existing Research. The Scope of this Study

This study focuses on the genre of the novel. Like all literary works, the novel is a cultural product created in a historical and social setting. It reflects the individual author's experiences and aspirations, albeit to different extents, and these experiences are refracted in the work's narrator. Author and narrator are not identical, and they do not necessarily share opinions and perspectives, but it is the author who gives shape to the narrator. Realist modes in literature specifically claim: "to represent human reality in all its detail"; however, these modes cannot be entirely taken at face value as Samah Selim suggests in her "The Narrative Craft: Realism and Fiction in the Arabic Canon" (2002). Selim highlights how early novels were meant to shape and educate the future nation when discussing the beginnings of the novel in the Arab world – her focus is on Egypt. The realities depicted had to conform with the official understanding of what constituted a nation and what was the desired position of the individual in society (2002: 113, 117–118). These tendencies are present in some of the works that this study analyzes. Mohamed Laroussi El Metoui's *al-Tūt al-murr* contains a similar nationalist didacticism, Koelman's *Le Sadique* has the ambition to reflect the lived realities of the Tunisian labor market after the arrival onto the scene of women.

Selim refers to Lennard Davis' *Resisting Novels. Ideology and Fiction* (1987) who finds fitting words to express the relation of novels to the surrounding society:

[N]ovels are pre-organized systems of experience in which characters, actions, and objects have to mean something in relation to the system of each novel itself, in relation to the culture in which the novel is written, and in relation to the readers who are in that culture. [...] Likewise, fiction becomes, in turn, one of the ways in which the culture teaches itself about itself, and thus novels become agents of inculcating ideology. (Davis 1987: 24–25)

Davis describes how literature is produced in exchange with societies, not with the intention just to mirror, but also to influence. He argues that its suggestion of being "not art but life" is a part of how novels function and that they aspire to contain "the totality of a society at a given moment" precisely in order to influence readers (Davis 1987: 25–26). In the context of Arabic literature, the connection between the early novels and nation-building allows them to be used to read the (if nothing else, aspired for) nation and the ideologies that are meant to influence readers. This study looks out for ideological baggage in novels and reads very different narratives in dialogue with each other in order to follow Davis and Selim in not treating novels as directly sociological sources. Yet, I do not wish to suggest

that the collection of novels chosen can be free from ideological undercurrents and external economic influences.

Not all of the works analyzed were written as realist narratives. In fact, when put in order on the basis of the year of their publication, they suggest a development away from realism and towards its critique. More recent works pair realist perspectives with a disrupted certainty of representation: narrators are unreliable, parallel truths are presented, and texts are framed through other texts (e.g., novels are written in novels). This last technique is reminiscent of popular Arabic narratives and is something that is usually absent from realist fiction (Selim 2002: 125). This concept's distinct presence in the works I study indicates how Tunisian literature grapples with realist fiction's genre requirements, as well as with literature's representational function. It shows a refusal to directly mirror, while confirming the Tunisian writers' critical preoccupation with their surrounding society. This oscillation between different poles and aspects is a figure of thought ('Denkfigur') that will appear time and again in this study. Oscillation forms a way to address Tunisia's post-colonial situation, as well as issues of bodies in literature more generally, which makes it so relevant for this book.

The novel is this study's chosen genre because as a genre it does not per se hold a truth claim in contrast to other texts, such as sociological works (compare Massad 2007: 269). The novel offers insights into society through its fictionality. It teaches its readers how the individual is, or ought to be, perceived in relation to society. A novel suggests that its narrative contains living beings (most of whom have bodies) in order to be convincing and this is an assumption that is necessary for the functioning of the novel as a fictional genre (Davis 1987: 12, 103). The assumption is adopted throughout this study, while never forgetting that the novel's beings and bodies only exist in language.

Choosing fiction over autobiographies does not lead to more ideology. Rather, autobiographies also contain ideological representations (compare Massad 2007: 269). However, fiction highlights purposeful creation in specific. Fiction authors have made a wide variety of distinct choices and exclusions based on their specific agenda. Characters are created to move and behave naturally, following the laws of causality and logic from the text-external world just closely enough to make the fictional relatable and understandable (this does not mean that there are no fantastical elements within them, as *Chapters 2* and *3* show). The fictional world, the characters, and their bodies are actualized in the reader's mind in the act of reading, even though not all of the details are supplied by the writer. In contrast to poetry, novels necessarily contain a narrative, as opposed to expressions of feelings and ideas. In comparison with prose poetry, the narratives found in novels are more elaborate and greater attention is paid to the space that is both the literal and the social surroundings that interact with the characters' bodies. In contrast to short stories, a more complicated and parenthetically more complete storyline is presented; novels generally contain a development of the characters or of the issues at stake. In contrast to drama, novels are better equipped to present the interior state of the characters, which allows the characters to be read not only from the outside, but as individuals with mental processes, feelings, and an external materiality (compare Davis 1987: 105).

This book's main focus is on Tunisian literature. However, criticism that disagrees with the discussion of national literatures in the post-colonial context is not ignored, specifically for diverse and mobile regions such as the Maghreb (compare Kaiser 2015: 29). After all, Maghreb countries share central influences, such as the experience of previous French colonialism, multilingualism, and a peripheral position in academic research; their literary productions are similarly marginalized, particularly in terms of Arabic studies. Tunisian

literature, however, is specifically ignored, as will be addressed in the paragraphs to follow. This study's concentration on Tunisian literature is valid since it also acknowledges Tunisian literature's close connections to other arabophone and francophone literatures, as well as to other traditions. In order to address its plural influences, Tunisian literature is understood as being on the move and as difficult to territorialize. It oscillates around a center (Tunisia) and it cannot be fixed, due to various other contexts in which it might be localized (e.g., the arabophone or francophone literary fields respectively, the Maghreb as a region, the Mediterranean, or countries that were previously French colonies). This understanding of Tunisian literature borrows from Ottmar Ette's concept of a *Nationalliteratur ohne festen Wohnsitz* (a national literature without a fixed abode, see *ZwischenWeltenSchreiben. Literaturen ohne festen Wohnsitz*, 2005). Ette explores the central themes of these non-fixed and mobile national literatures, and these themes will appear in the analyses of the Tunisian works later in this book. Examples include the perception of progress as a storm, as well as the return to a homeland that has become foreign (2005: 160). Oscillation itself is a recurring theme in the analyses found throughout this book, as mentioned previously. The analyses contain journeys to France and back, moves from the village to the city, towards and away from one's partner, between layers of text, narrators, fact and fiction, absence and presence, and even between languages.

The concept of the nation needs to be considered with further care, however. Abdelmajid Hannoum discusses how the absence of the cultural concept of the nation, together with a perceived inferiority of the Maghreb's inhabitants, were used as justification for its colonization in his article "Notes on the (post)colonial in the Maghreb". In post-colonial times, the newly independent nations were imagined based on the colonial nation (2009: 329). Hannoum writes: "The concept of the nation, with its key categories of unity, territory, language, history, progress, modernity and even will, are all colonial modern categories, despite their restructuring in national narratives" (2009: 340). Despite this, the category of the nation cannot entirely be escaped here. Tunisia, as a nation state, influences the period of time that this study addresses (see below for further details regarding the time frame employed by this work). It does so both by providing a context for the literary productions and by influencing what is being published through subsidies and (indirect) censorship.⁴

My understanding of what can be considered Tunisian works involves a description, in some sense, of oscillation between the locality and the people (and not the nation) and it includes diasporic writing by authors who moved away. The works studied are not necessarily published in Tunisia or determined by the nationality, place of residence, or language of their authors in reflecting the history of Tunisian culture. Works by authors who either live in Tunisia or have Tunisian heritage, address a Tunisian readership, or tell tales about

4 Jean Fontaine describes a practice according to which the Ministry of Culture acquired a fixed number of copies of a book after it had been published. This supported its production by guaranteeing a certain turnover, see Fontaine, "Le Champ littéraire tunisien. Introduction bibliographique", 1994: 386; compare also Abir Kréfa's "Corps et sexualité chez les romancières tunisiennes. Enjeux de reconnaissance, coûts, et effets de 'transgressions'", 2011: 114–115, in which she writes that although censorship did not officially exist in Tunisia, it was achieved through a notification that had to be given to the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of the Interior, and to the National Library through an official release permission that was required to distribute books. These details were confirmed to me in a personal conversation on 8 October 2015 with Moncef Chebbi, the director of Arabesques Édition/Dār nuqūsh 'arabiyya.

Tunisia were chosen for inclusion. This selection criteria included works that are or were, at the time of publication, available on the Tunisian book market or that could be accessed through local libraries.⁵

The works chosen were written in either Arabic or in French. This choice reflects the Tunisian literary scene that, reminiscent of French colonial presence in Tunisia, mainly sees publications in these languages. The bilingualism is reflected and sustained, for example in the annual awarding of the literary prize COMAR d'Or, which since 1997 rewards the best novels of the year in both languages.

Tunisian works are given full attention here to build a basis for further comparative research and the exclusive focus on Tunisian works is motivated by the marginalization of Tunisian literature in research. Tunisian literature is under-researched in comparison with other national literatures, such as its Egyptian or Algerian counterparts, not just in Western scholarship, but also in literature departments throughout the region, even in Tunisia itself. This has been the impression of my research stays in the country since 2014. It is further reflected in the knowledge of Tunisian works and their authors abroad, or rather their lack thereof. Finally, there is an apparent limitation that is posed by the scarcity of works on Tunisian literature in general and of secondary sources for the novels discussed in this book in particular. Even the more famous examples of the works examined have not provoked much academic engagement to date.

The authors of existing studies can be grouped according to their departmental backgrounds in either Romance Studies, Arabic Literature, or Comparative Literature departments. These different research backgrounds contribute to a tendency for most studies on Tunisian literature to work monolingually; that is, these examinations deal either with francophone or arabophone texts. Only a small number of studies discuss both and it is especially rare that a non-Tunisian scholar addresses francophone as well as arabophone works. Researchers are not generally trained in the acquisition of both languages. This is the result of how literature departments are organized and is informed by the education they provide. Such departments are mostly circumscribed by languages that motivate scholars to focus on one language, thereby discouraging a bilingual education that a thorough study of Tunisian literature necessitates. This is the case in Europe, North America, and even in Tunisia itself. Arabic and French departments are separated, and they produce students (and scholars) who are proficient in only one of the two languages. In the German case, Arabic literature is taught as part of regional studies degrees, whereas French literature is taught at the Romance Studies department; this has resulted in separate disciplines between which there is hardly any collaborative exchange.

One researcher focusing on Tunisian literature in Arabic and in French immediately stands out in terms of the sheer volume of their scientific output: Jean Fontaine. Originally from France, Fontaine has lived in Tunisia from 1956 until his death in 2021. He has devoted his attention to the Tunisian literary landscape in an encyclopedic fashion. This is reflected in his three-volume *Histoire de la littérature tunisienne* (1988, 1994, 1999), in his *Le roman tunisien a 100 ans. 1906–2006* (2009), and in his many other articles, monographs, and edited volumes. Fontaine laid the groundwork for the organization and cata-

5 Libraries have been included since the Tunisian book market is characterized by a number of problematic elements that influence the accessibility of books; see below for further details.

logging of Tunisian literature, both as a researcher and in his position as librarian of the Institut des Belles Lettres Arabes (IBLA) in Tunis and as the director of its journal, the *Revue IBLA*. Another exception to the general lack of critical engagement with Tunisian literature is Svetozár Pantůček's study *Tunisskaja literatura kratkij očerk* (1969), which is available in a German version entitled *Tunesische Literaturgeschichte* that dates back to 1974. He also addresses Tunisian literature in both Arabic and French.

On the Tunisian side, Ali Abassi's more recent study *Littératures tunisiennes. Vers le renouvellement* from 2006 can be mentioned and which, in addition to prose, discusses poetry in both Arabic and French. Abassi's book, despite its title, lacks a stringent overview of Tunisian literary history (2006: 209). Instead, the work is comprised of a collection of individual essays and conference papers which address many important Tunisian authors; however, the work does not follow one concrete thematic argument.

Even more relevant to this study's purposes is another work that was published only after the dissertation on which this book is based, was written and defended. This work is Samia Kassab-Charfi and Adel Khedher's *Un siècle de littérature en Tunisie. 1900–2017* (2019) which offers a literary history of Tunisian literature written by Tunisian literary scholars. It discusses not only Arabic and French works, but it also refers to publications in other languages that are present in the region, such as Italian and Sardinian, and takes note of the strong Jewish-Tunisian presence. It is an exceptional work of profound scope that was certainly overdue. Its mission differs from that of the present work, but it is a good reference point for those interested in receiving an historical overview of Tunisian literature, its topics and trends. It also offers short paragraphs about several of the authors studied in this work.

Some of the novelists discussed in the present study have written about Tunisian literature themselves. The novelists include Messaouda Boubakr, Fredj Lahouar, Hassouna Mosbahi, Aroussia Nalouti, and Kamel Riahi. Other Tunisian critics who discuss, review, and research Tunisian literature include Taoufik Bacchar (e.g., *Écrivains de Tunisie. Anthologie de textes et poèmes traduits de l'arabe*, together with Salah Garmadi, 1981), Tahar Bekri (e.g. *De la littérature tunisienne et maghrébine, et autres textes*, 2002), Muṣṭafā al-Kīlānī (e.g. his two-volume overview of modern Tunisian literature *al-Adab al-ḥadīth wa-l-mu'āṣir* ['Modern and contemporary Literature'], 1990), and Maḥmūd Ṭarshūna (e.g., in his monograph *Naqd al-rivāya al-nisa'iyya fī tūnis* ['A discussion of the Tunisian women's novel'], 2004).⁶ Mohamed-Salah Omri needs to be mentioned as a writer from the younger generation who is based abroad (e.g. *Nationalism, Islam and World Literature. Sites of Confluence in the Writings of Maḥmūd Al-Mas'adī*, 2010[2006]), as well as Douja Mamelouk (with her hitherto unpublished dissertation entitled *Redirecting al-nazar: Contemporary Tunisian Women Novelists Return the Gaze*, Georgetown University 2010).

Romance Studies' research tradition reads the francophone part of Tunisian literature by itself, in the context of other post-colonial francophone literary texts or alongside France's

6 For brevity's sake, reference is made to monographs solely; however, all of the authors mentioned have also published a wide array of journal articles and chapters. Maḥmūd Ṭarshūna, in addition to being a critic and a prominent figure in Tunisian higher education in his field of comparative literature in specific, also writes novels and Tahar Bekri is a poet. Taoufik Bacchar translated Messadi's *Mawlid al-nisyān* (discussed in the following section) into French (published in 1993).

literary production. Examples from Romance Studies include Susanne Heiler's *Der Maghrebinische Roman. Eine Einführung* (2005) and Jean Déjeux's *Littérature maghrébine de langue française* (1980[1973]), or *The Transcontinental Maghreb: Francophone Literature across the Mediterranean* by Edwige Tamalet Talbayev (2017). In many of the works that address literature from the Maghreb, Moroccan, and Algerian literary perspectives receive greater attention, such as for example in Julian Vigo's *Performative Bodies. Hybrid Tongues. Race, Gender, Sex and Modernity in Latin America and the Maghreb*, (2010). Albert Memmi's anthologies of Maghrebi writers, *Anthologie des écrivains maghrébins d'expression française* (1965) and *Ecrivains francophones du Maghreb* (1985), also needs to be mentioned here. Memmi, a Tunisian sociologist and novelist, published these anthologies as introductions to the writers of the Maghreb; however, the great majority of authors mentioned are Algerian. In the first collection, for example, he presents seventeen Algerian writers, three Moroccan, and only himself as a Tunisian author, which is certainly not representative of the Maghreb. The following section of this introduction will offer further details about Memmi's work as a novelist.

Aside from the aforementioned monographs, studies can be found both in anthologies and journals that are published both in Tunisia and abroad. For example, there are the US-based *Expressions maghrébines*, the review of the Coordination Internationale des Chercheurs sur les Littératures Maghrébines (CICLIM), the Review *CELAAN (Revue du Centre d'Etudes de Littératures et des Arts d'Afrique du Nord)*, or the French review *Les lettres romanes. Les Cahiers de Tunisie* or the *Revue tunisienne des langues vivantes* are Tunisian reviews that both publish in French primarily, featuring fewer contributions in English or Arabic.

This book makes use of articles and studies by Romance Studies scholars; however, it contends that a sole focus on one language alone falls short of presenting Tunisian literature in its multilingual nature. This is equally the case with studies that focus on Tunisian works written in Arabic solely or which discuss arabophone Tunisian literature only in the wider context of Arabic literature. The latter, however, is not very common. In contrast to Romance Studies, Arabic Studies has tended to exceptionally marginalize Tunisian literature and the Maghreb as a whole, while focusing on the literary production from the Arabic East and Egypt, resulting in even fewer publications that somewhat included Tunisian literature. As an exception, one might refer to issue 39 of the British periodical *Banipal. Magazine of Modern Arab Literature*, which ran under the title "Modern Tunisian Literature" (2010) and which was edited by Samuel Shimon. The issue contains Tunisian prose and poetry that has been translated into English from both Arabic and French. One can also find collections of translated works, such as the aforementioned anthology *Écrivains de Tunisie* by Taoufik Baccar and Salah Garmadi. Generally, studies on arabophone Tunisian literature are published in Tunisia primarily, either as individual monographs, such as the referenced *Naqd al-riwāya al-nisā'īya fī tūnis* by Maḥmūd Ṭarshūna, or as articles in journals or anthologies; examples of the former include *al-Ḥayāt al-thaqāfiya*, *Qiṣṣaṣ*, *al-Masār* and an example of the latter might be the anthology *Muḥammad al-'Arūsī al-Maṭawī. Dirāsāt wa-shahādāt* ('Muḥammad al-'Arūsī al-Maṭawī. Studies and testimonies') under the direction of 'Umar bn. Sālim (1992).

This situation is similar to the state of Moroccan literature, as thoroughly described by Karima Laachir⁷ in her article “The Aesthetics and Politics of ‘Reading Together’ Moroccan Novels in Arabic and French” (2016). Literary traditions in Arabic and French exist alongside one another, but without ever interacting in Morocco. They are studied separately and without acknowledging their shared historical, cultural, geographical, political, and aesthetic aspects. Laachir traces the situation back to colonial times and to an “unfinished Arabization policy” that continued the existing “divide between the Moroccan intelligentsia educated either in French or in Arabic Fusha (and rarely adequately in both languages)” (2016: 25). Novels written in French are oftentimes viewed within the French post-colonial field and without reference to the local Arabic production; some even consider that such works should not even be regarded to belong to the national literature. However, as Laachir notes, the francophone and arabophone novel developed almost simultaneously in Morocco in an effort to contribute to the national culture. The subdivision results in the weakening of the local literary field. Laachir suggests what she calls a ‘reading together’ in order to overcome this lack, that is a reading that acknowledges the cultural and linguistic intertextuality of the literary works. ‘Reading together’ involves a reading that attempts to analyze a “multilingual literary field in Morocco beyond the ideological language dichotomy or the ‘national’/‘foreign’ language paradigm, existing hierarchies, divisions, and exclusions” (2016: 32). This book’s approach follows her call to enable a dialogue between novels written in Arabic and in French, both in terms of the socio-political contexts they reflect and in terms of their aesthetics.

This is precisely the void that this book attempts to fill. It is not my goal to compare and contrast the two languages in terms of subjective notions of precision or audacity. Rather, it is my aim to establish a dialogue between the works in order to best capture Tunisia’s literary production. In doing so, this book goes further than either the historical or encyclopedic/bibliographic approaches referred to above by discovering a narrative about Tunisian society.

The relative scarcity of research pertaining to Tunisian literature and the difficulty to access these works, both in Tunisia and abroad, reinforce each other.⁸ The Tunisian book market does not guarantee the availability of even recently published books. Instead of selling local works, bookshop owners sell international bestsellers that have been translated into Arabic, as well as works by French authors. Books are mainly available for purchase directly via the publishers (or authors) and at the annual book fairs that are organized in Tunis, Sousse, or Sfax. In addition to the national library, IBLA’s library – despite the horrendous destruction that a fire caused in 2010 – offers researchers access to large amounts of Tunisian literary production, journals, and newspapers and has done since its reopening in 2014. The strained access to literary works can be expected to not only influence research, but also the status of literature and of writers in Tunisia in general. This must

7 For a thorough discussion of Laachir’s approach and my use of it in the analysis of two Tunisian novels, see my forthcoming article “‘Reading Together’ for the Nuance. Gender Roles and Politics in Tunisian Novels by Women Writers From the 1990s”, *The Journal of North African Studies*.

8 This difficulty is noted by Jean Fontaine’s “Le Champ littéraire tunisien. Introduction bibliographique” in which he comments about the inaccessibility of the Bibliothèque Nationale as copyright library to researchers in the 1990s (1994: 383). This, in my personal experience post-2011, was entirely different and I was able to access all of the books that I requested in this library.

be the reason why many of the novels analyzed discuss the importance of the issue of writing, as will be shown throughout the course of the chapters that follow.

The divide between Arabic and French is also present on the part of the producers of Tunisian literature. The ‘choice’ of one of the two languages is often accompanied by an ideological refusal to consider literature written in the respective ‘other’ language. However, this perceived ‘choice’ is not really a choice; it is the result of personal experiences, colonial, and post-colonial language politics and is an issue that is closely connected to the author’s sense of identity as a writer (Laachir posits a similar view [2016: 26]). However, the resulting disregard for authors who have chosen the other language dangerously limits any knowledge of Tunisian literature since it excludes large sections thereof. This selection process also produces images of Tunisian literature that fail to depict reality; instead, only imaginary chronologies are shown.

It is rare that an author publishes literary works in both languages, but Fredj Lahouar has to be mentioned here as one notable exception. His work will be addressed in *Chapter 5* of this work. The opposite perspective, selecting only one language in which to work, is more common. I was advised by some of the authors of the novels analyzed to limit my scope to one language as this would be the ‘real’ Tunisian literature. I believe, however, that this would be an unfair limitation. Ali Abassi agrees and addresses the marginalization of literature in one language as “suranné, risible et dangereux” (2006: 212), that is as ‘old-fashioned, laughable and dangerous’.

The decision to write this dissertation in English – rather than in Arabic, French, or in my native German – might seem to complicate this book’s linguistic situation further. However, works in English that present Tunisian novels written in both Arabic and French in specific are lacking in the field of Maghrebi literary studies. My goal is to occupy this lacuna. At the same time, this approach will allow me to address the widest possible community of academic readers and will serve to offer them an introduction to French and Arabic works, while also being a third way between the two, as opposed to simply describing one half of Tunisian literature in the language of the other.

3 Al-Mas‘adī and Memmi as Points of Departure

Two authors provide suitable points of departure through which to dive into Tunisian post-colonial literature. Both authors were shaped by the colonial situation. That these authors are also the two who have received the most scholarly attention in the field of Tunisian novelists only makes them more relevant. The first author is Mahmoud Messadi (Maḥmūd al-Mas‘adī), one of the most important Tunisian intellectuals of the 20th century who went on to become ‘Minister of Education and Culture’ after independence (Elmarsafy 2012: 66, Glück 2007: 101). As an author, he aimed to interpret modernity and its challenges differently and wanted to establish a shared Tunisian identity. This is reflected in his attempts to create a link between modern Arabic literature and its heritage by mixing both Western and Islamic influences (Omri 2010[2006]: 1, 73, and 2007: 435). The second author is the aforementioned francophone novelist, critic, and sociologist Albert Memmi. Memmi grew up speaking dialectal Arabic in the Jewish ghetto of Tunis. Through the merits he acquired as early as elementary school, he received scholarships and eventually studied in Algeria and Paris; he settled in Paris in 1956, the same year that Tunisia received its independence. In addition to his novels and his anthologies of Maghrebi writers, he has also published poetry and sociological studies including observations on racism and colonialism that I intend to address below (Brozgal 2013: xv–xviii).