



Ewa Łukaszyk

Faculty of "Artes Liberales"  
University of Warsaw

## Is There Tunisian Literature? Emergent Writing and Fractal Proliferation of Minor Voices

### 1.

For the last thirty years or so, "minor" has been one of the key terms in the literary studies. Its special meaning is due, in first instance, to Gilles Deleuze (1975), who put the quality of being minor as a condition of questioning, innovation and thus creativity. Also Harold Bloom (1973), with his complex vision of the literary process seen as an eternal fight of a minor poet against his great predecessors, contributed to this consideration for minority, regarded as the golden gate leading to true originality in literature. In this double limelight, being minor is fundamentally nothing else than becoming major.

Nonetheless, it remains current in the literary studies to use the term "minor" without explicit reference to these creative and innovative dynamics. Such terms as "minor poet" or "minor literature" may also refer to a marginal reality, of secondary importance and lesser value. The usage of this term presupposes a comparison and explicit or implicit reference to such terms as "centre", "dominant symbolic system" and finally, a great or "major" literature and its language. The minor may or may not struggle to displace that centre and to invert that hierarchy in order to become a new major. It may also happen that minor literatures and minor writers accept pacifically their peripheral position, contenting themselves with filling the space on the margin without engaging in the Bloomian agon or wrestling for influence and greatness.

The usage of the term "minor literature" presupposes a comparative, globalizing vision. In fact, each "literature" is a self-sufficient world, with its own institutions, reading public, hierarchies of values, traditions, genres and imagery. As a local phenomenon, no literature is minor. It becomes



minor only when it is confronted with another, exterior literary system or put in a situation of exchange. Minor literature may be thus defined by its indebted condition, as it becomes the borrower of paradigms and models without contributing in the same way to the major literary system. As a consequence, it could be claimed that, at the present day, all literatures are minor, as they are indebted in the global system of *Weltliteratur*. This old term, initially introduced by Goethe, has recently received a new meaning, referring to the universe of translations and market circulation of literature that is read massively outside its original cultural context (Damrosch 2003).

In the title of this article, I ask a provocative question concerning the existence or non-existence of the Tunisian literature. For sure it exists as a local phenomenon, with its own institutions and reading public, as modest as those might seem to the European eye. But the presence of the European critic – non-neutral instance that I incarnate for the purpose of this article – introduces a global comparative perspective, alien to this self-sufficient world with its own traditions, genres and imagery, deeply rooted in the history of Arabic written culture, as well as in the local folklore, mentality and system of beliefs. This external eye that introduces comparative terms might proclaim the non-existence of Tunisian literature as a phenomenon visible in the global landscape. The severe European critic could also adopt relatively benign terms claiming that, given the context of the booming francophone literature in the Maghreb, Tunisia is a blank space where the boom, surprisingly, didn't happen. Thus, the problem could be formulated as follows: very similar cultural and historical conditions led to a great minor literature struggling to become major in Morocco, and to a modest minor literature that accepts its own peripheral condition in Tunisia. Why?

Of course, the way how I've formulated my problem implies already a clear, perhaps a peremptory judgement concerning the general position of the Tunisian literature. In the presentation that follows, I will try to justify this diagnosis, trying, at the same time, to build a hypothesis concerning this lack of parallelism in the development of the literary systems in North Africa, asymmetry that appears as striking to my Eurocentric critical eye.

## 2.

Undoubtedly, the post-colonial epoch that filled the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century introduced a great time for minority in literature. Diverse combinations of emergent writing with major literary languages produced not only a wave of originality and innovation, but also quite a new definition of international success for non-European and non-Western writers. For at least three decades many a reader and many a bookseller may have been under the impression that the centres of literary production in English

shifted to Nigeria and Sudan, the most important Portuguese prose is written in Angola and Mozambique, and the leading experimentation in French novel is conducted in Morocco, where the literary boom started as early as the 50ties and, with a generation of writers that followed, created an important corpus of francophone literature in vogue during the 80ties and the 90ties.

But not all the ex-colonies and ex-protectorates participated equally and proportionally in the post-colonial literary boom. The map of post-colonial literature contains blank patches of silence. It is not easy to say why booms happen in some places, while other regions or countries remain silent or don't manage to reach the same level of international reception and recognition. Undoubtedly, complex cultural, historical and political circumstances contribute to the fact that the climate for writing isn't equally propitious everywhere. In the first place, the relation between literature and political situation is unclear. The miracle of literature may happen in hard times, against manifold forms of oppression and facing great tragedies (it may be claimed that such is the case of Algeria, country that has produced during the last decades some important literature in spite of its tormented political situation). But not all tormented peoples give birth to important books, and not all fat and quiet nations can be proud of great literary achievements. Of course, great literature is unpredictable; it could never be reduced to a linear consequence of a given combination of factors or circumstances. Nonetheless, as I try to sketch a concise presentation of my case of surprising, perhaps significant absence, I shall add some comments concerning the interior contradictions that, as I suppose, might have contributed to a phenomenon of a great minor literature that could have been, but finally didn't appear.

Tunisia did have writers. Modern Tunisian writing emerged early. In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the country occupied its due place in the context of Arabic cultural revival, as Tunisia contributed with the work of a juvenile poet, Abou-l-Qasim Ach-Chabbi (also spelled Echebbi, 1909–1934). The suggestive figure of this young man composing patriotic verses occupied an important place in the Tunisian imagery, incarnating the paradigm of a “national poet”. On the other hand, the literary importance of Echebbi consisted in a comprehensive project of poetic innovation, breaking with strictly codified tradition of Arabic verses that had become obsolete. The project was exposed not only in Echebbi's own poetic work, but also in conferences, such as the famous lecture at the Khaldounia (institution considered as the first modern school created in Tunisia) in 1929, that provoked a violent reaction of the traditionalists and a vivid discussion with lasting echoes reaching beyond the frontiers of Tunisia.

Echebbi's literary quest aspired for a renovated language, a new form of literary Arabic, breaking with the purist tradition of the "classical" expression and introducing the local idiolects that existed till that moment only as forms of oral communication. Nonetheless, the importance of this new tradition in poetry contradicted and was contradicted by the francophone influence that became predominant during the following decades. Tunisian literature split in two currents that, instead of feeding one another, introduced a division of its creative potential. My hypothesis is that a kind of fractal principle had been introduced. Subsequently, as the development of Tunisian literature goes on, the principle of division leads to further proliferation of minor voices, instead of enacting the opposite dynamics: empowerment by synergy and synthesis of cultural contradictions. The literary quest, or the "creative project", as a Tunisian/Canadian scholar Hédi André Bouraoui called it (1977), had led to some kind of impasse. As a consequence, during the post-colonial decades Tunisian literature has remained minor among the minor.

In all kinds of academic studies, Tunisia is conventionally compared to Morocco. Even if both countries are not immediate neighbours, similar dynamics of the southern Mediterranean coast seem to justify such comparative approaches in areas as distant as agriculture and family planning. Also from the cultural point of view, these two countries seem to share a common background, at least as remote as the presence of the Andalusian heritage. Both Morocco and Tunisia had been important destinations of the refugees pushed off the Iberian Peninsula by the advancements of the Reconquista in the 14<sup>th</sup> and the 15<sup>th</sup> centuries. Andalusian origin is clear in the biography of the greatest intellectual figure of Tunisia, the historiographer and historian Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406), that will reappear several times in my further analysis. Also in the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, Tunisia and Morocco shared similar historical destinies as French protectorates. Gaining their independence in mid-50ies, both countries remained under a strong influence of French language and French culture, promoted in Tunisia by Habib Bourghiba, not only political, but also spiritual leader of the newly born nation. During the post-colonial period, in spite of diverse projects of increasing the usage of Arabic instead of French, idea that became popular in all the Maghreb, the gallicization of certain spheres of Tunisian culture, such as education, continued and perhaps even progressed. But it might be precisely this intense, but after all superficial and frustrating gallicization that, entering in contradiction with the emergent writing in Arabic and the search of an idiosyncratic literary language, provoked an essential fissure. Organic development of creativity that could have led to a literary flourishing comparable to the Moroccan had

been blocked. Similar circumstances lead thus to different consequences. The Tunisian case seems to be a stalemate between two equally tempting languages, while in Morocco the situation resembles rather a constant dynamic oscillation between the temptation of French and a state that I would qualify as a satisfied possession of a language of one's own.

The situation of Tunisian literature is thus complex and paradoxical. Once again, the comparison with Morocco will help to catch the great lines of the process, as the country illustrates the dynamics of a typical post-colonial literary boom. The Moroccan literary production, since the end of the French protectorate in the 50ies, was strongly orientated towards Paris. This new literary phenomenon was a typical example of a "post-dialogue", fostered by the intrinsic need of "talking through" the symbolic violence that had happened during the colonial period, as well as discussing the current affairs related to the massive migrations that followed the independence of the Maghreb. As a consequence, the Moroccan literature was not only written in French, but also printed and promoted by powerful Parisian editorials, such as Denoël, Seuil and Gallimard. It was them who gave notoriety even to the early Moroccan scandalizers, such as Driss Chraïbi. Later on, the phenomenon of the Moroccan novel written in French became an argument in favour of the francophone cultural project. This fact boosted again its international presence in book fairs, translations, etc., contributing to the success of the next generation of Moroccan writers, whose leading figure has been Tahar Ben Jelloun, distinguished with *Légion d'honneur* in 2008.

While the Moroccan writers were gaining fame and recognition using their influential French editors as a trampoline, their Tunisian colleagues remained in the obscurity, relying on local book market, producing books that were often self-published and sold in small shops serving a very narrow reading public all over the country. Jean Fontaine, a missionary priest who spent in Tunisia more than half of a century, becoming one of the leading experts on its literature written both in Arabic and in French, explains how difficult is the task of completing an exhaustive bibliography of the books published in the country, even if – or due to the fact that – the researcher deals with such a microscopic reality:

First, it is necessary to comment on the total figure for this production: it is not really abundant. The annual average can be listed as follows: a dozen through 1970, about 20 up until 1980, about 40 up until 1990. The year 1994 was exceptional because the Ministry of Culture paid the editor the equivalent price for printing, from which we derive the figure of a hundred or so works that came out during that particular year. It will not soon be equalled, since the Ministry overturned this policy in 1995, the year that saw production regress to the 1985 figure (Fontaine 1997: 74).

The nature of this production partially explains the situation. Writing in French can hardly be considered as the main feature of Tunisian literature. According to Fontaine's statistics, more than a half of the books produced over a period of approximately four decades in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century consist of Arabic poetry. The fact could be considered as a due continuation of the line initiated by Echebbi, but, as I assume, this part of the literary production can be considered as good as lost in the perspective of an international literary agent. This poetical tradition is strongly idiosyncratic and particularly hard to render in translation. Sadly, its projection inside the Arabic world is also reduced. Even if the book markets all over the Arabic world are in a dynamic process of formation, the literary canons proposed to this emergent public at the occasion of big book fairs organized in the Gulf countries derive from the European perception of literature, the dominant literary taste, as well as Eurocentric scholarship and criticism. The book market of the rich Arabic countries is strictly connected to great centres of the globalized publishing industry, reflecting quite faithfully the trends of the annual Frankfurt international book fair. In Eastern Arabian perspective, francophone Moroccan novels, translated into Arabic, have incomparably greater projection than Tunisian Arab-speaking poetry.

Paradoxically, in order to become a famous Arabic writer in North Africa, the advice would be to write in French rather than in Arabic. The shortest way to the reading public still pass through Paris. A real-life case that happened to me in summer 2012 helps to illustrate this phenomenon. Entering the leading Tunisian bookshop "Al-Kitab", situated in front of the Municipal Theatre in Tunis, in the Ibn Khaldun Avenue that the events of the recent revolution made famous, I expressed my wish to buy a volume of Meddeb's poetry, which allegedly reflects a Sufi inspiration, as I deduced from some concise remarks I could find online. The bookseller, by no means an ignorant, was greatly surprised by my suggestion. He didn't know that Abdelwahhab Meddeb ever wrote any verses. By the contrary, he associated this author with his francophone essays that he could offer me both in the original, Parisian edition and in affordable, local reprint. In consequence, Meddeb's Sufi poetry remained a kind of phantom literary fact, circulating as a rumour, but never really read, nor by me as European scholar, nor by my Tunisian bookseller and his clients. Also the writer himself doesn't seem to accentuate this inspiration there where he manages to reach his readers. Only some marginal remarks in *Printemps de Tunis* (Meddeb 2011) make the rumour plausible, as he evokes Sufi terms, such as *fanā'* and other "states" of the mystical consciousness (Meddeb 2011: 62, 70). Otherwise, this current of reflection or spiritual quest, if a quest there was,

remains silenced. The book as a whole is a perfect example of the thought issued from the laic principles of the French revolution.

This might be the suitable moment to open a parenthesis for a commentary concerning the Tunisian tradition of francophone essay. It is in this domain that one can find another Tunisian author with non-local influence, Albert Memmi (born in 1920). Even if this descendant of an Italian Jew is often regarded as just another French author of North-African origin, the content of his thought in the 50ties and the 60ties, oscillating between a redefinition of his Jewishness and the post-colonial reflection, inscribes him organically in the non-European context, in spite of his close relationship with French culture in general and with French existentialists, Camus and Sartre, in particular. The most important essay by Memmi, often cited in parallel with Fanon, is *Portrait du colonisé, précédé du portrait du colonisateur* (1957), in which he affirms on one hand the inevitability of decolonization and on the other, warns against its dangers. Meddeb can be seen as a descendant of this strongly gallicized line of Tunisian thought, situating the country in a larger historical and geographical context, in which Europe not only forms the unavoidable frame, but also dictates the coordinates for the understanding of the Mediterranean. In *Printemps de Tunis*, Meddeb's personal commentary on the Tunisian revolution, a particular, strongly Eurocentric vision of the Mediterranean history is evident. The Tunisian insurrection in 2011 is shown as a part of the same historical process that had led to the Prague Spring in 1968 and to the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, forming a series of events corresponding to the basic paradigm of Bastille in 1789 (Meddeb 2011: 10). The intellectual tools for the understanding of the Tunisian history only in small proportion come from Ibn Khaldun. The influence of Rousseau and Renan is much stronger. Finally, the commentary on the Tunisian revolution under the pen of a Tunisian author couldn't be better set in a French horizon than this:

Tout cela me fait penser à une phrase de Victor Hugo que je cite de mémoire : rien ne résiste à une idée dont l'heure est arrivée. Quand les citoyens n'ont plus peur, les tyrannies les mieux assises en apparence s'écroulent. C'est la part non contrôlée de l'histoire. Celle que Bossuet attribue à la Providence, Hegel à l'Esprit, Braudel à l'Inconscient. L'idée est la même, le concept qui la désigne varie selon le lexique de l'époque (Meddeb 2011 : 41)<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> "All this makes me think about a phrase of Victor Hugo that I quote from memory: nothing resists an idea when its time has come. When the citizens are no longer afraid, the most stable tyrannies collapse. It's the not controlled part of the history. One that Bossuet attributes to the Providence, Hegel to Spirit, Braudel to the Unconscious. The idea is the same, the term that designates it changes according to the vocabulary of the epoch".

3.

Tunisian fiction comes in the last place in my article. That reflects at the same time its lesser importance and its culminating value as a phenomenon of minor literature. This dimension of minority can be shown from several perspectives. First of all, this narrative tradition, hesitating between Arabic and francophone expression, seems to have established itself in a significantly “minor” thematic field, that of love story. Its tradition had been established in the 30ties with the arabophone novels and short stories by Béchir Khraief, published primarily in the newspapers. It has been continued, both in Arabic and in French, by the authors that have appeared on the Tunisian literary scene during the last decade. Such is the case, just to give an example, of Salah El Gharbi, author of a short francophone novel *La troisième fille* (2011).

Curiously, the feebleness of literature, associated, as it has been suggested above, with a relative lack of book market and reading public, may have been a factor that shifted the talents away from the domain of writing towards other means of expression, such as cinematography. Significantly, I couldn't find sufficient material to speak in this essay about Tunisian feminine writing. Nonetheless, if a ranking of specimens of Tunisian culture with the greatest projection abroad was established, unavoidably I would have to mention, perhaps in the first place, a film made by a woman, *The Silences of the Palace* by Moufida Tlatli<sup>2</sup>. It gives a suggestive, feminine perspective on Tunisian history, shown from a particular, domestic perspective of half-servants, half-slaves of the bey, and placed as a background for love that appears as the main content of this feminine world. Thus, as I suppose, the major Tunisian love story of our times is a cinematographic, not a literary narration. This fact might indicate that literature as a means of expression tends to occupy a minor place in the landscape of Tunisian culture, suffering concurrence of other modalities, especially those containing visual and performative elements (such as the powerful indigenous tradition of chant and dance that forms the framework of the feminine Tunisian culture, as suggested in Tlatli's cinematographic discourse<sup>3</sup>).

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<sup>2</sup> The film, realized in 1994, won several important awards, such as Cannes Film Festival's Golden Camera, the Golden Tanit of Carthage, British Film Institute Awards' Sutherland Trophy, Toronto Film Festival's International Critics' Award and Istanbul International Film Festival's Golden Tulip.

<sup>3</sup> Both heroines of the film, mother and daughter, are singers and dancers. It's also by her songs that the older woman participates in history, provoking, at least in the symbolical logic of the cinematographic narration, the revolt against the bey. Significantly, both women are illiterate: the daughter is shown as she learns, laboriously, how to write her name, helped by her lover, a young teacher.

Still, I should return to the neglected aspects of the Tunisian novel, which I intentionally showed above in a reductive way, under the common denominator of love story. Such a perspective helps to accentuate a relative unity of a narrative tradition, but leaves outside some individual writers. The most important figure has been already mentioned: that's Albert Memmi, who was not only the post-colonial thinker, but also a novelist. In the latter domain, his work allows me to introduce another important aspect of the Tunisian literature, its internal complexity as a mosaic of even smaller, marginal identities. Memmi represents more than one minority inside the Tunisian minor context. In his novelistic autobiography, *La Statue de sel*, he gives an account of his origin as a son of a Berber woman and a Jew. His multiple attachments, as Tunisian, Jew and a representative of the French culture, lead to repeated trauma of rejection: first at the occasion of a pogrom in which the Arabs kill their Jew neighbours, and later on, when France abandons the Jews to the fate prepared for them by the Nazis. Nonetheless, his cultural aspirations remain close to the European shore, never claiming the inheritance of the desert. On the margin of his autobiographical narration, he gives merely a sketch of some apotropaic gestures of his mother that evoke the ancestral world of the desert:

Ma mère changea de visage, sa bouche se fit petite et hostile, devant cet appel brutal au mauvais œil. Farouche, elle vint vers nous comme une femelle attaquée dans ses petits, et, feignant de nous caresser, elle nous passa le long du corps sa main grande ouverte, les cinq doigts bien allongés (Memmi 1966 : 23)<sup>4</sup>.

Tunisian literature is not very audible in the international context. What is more, it also contains internal zones of inaudibility: the feeble voice of self-published poets, the literary silence of women. And finally, there is also that great silence of the desert, hardly mentioned by Memmi in relation to his childhood, and hardly mentioned by Meddeb on the margin of his essay on the Tunisian history and revolution. But some desert there is, at least as he reports the hostility of the modernizers towards the tribal world, characterizing the great lines of the Tunisian history leading to the revolutionary upheaval in 2011. The creation of the modern state, inspired by Bourguiba, implied the necessity of “*éradiquer l'esprit tribal mû par l'instinct de la désobéissance*” (Meddeb 2011: 15)<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Evidently, the quoted fragment evokes the apotropaic gesture of the *hamsa*, used as a counter-charm against the evil eye: “My mother's face changed, her mouth became small and hostile, confronted with this brutality of the evil eye. Fierce, she came to us like a female attacked in her offspring and, pretending a caress, she passed through our bodies her big palm with five fingers stretched out”.

<sup>5</sup> “Destroying the tribal spirit moved by an instinct of disobedience”.

The tribal world found no place in the gallicized ideological sphere of the post-colonial state. Nonetheless, in the context of emergent writing, the universe of oral literature, of folk tales and chants of the women should have been recognized. Between Arabic and French, there is a forgotten, third element: Berber tribes and their languages. Their presence in the domain of writing is still scarce, if not inexistent. Nonetheless the complex tribal constellation, a margin of all margins, is not to be identified only with the Berbers. There are also Arabic nomads, those Banu Hilal that, significantly, Meddeb himself sees through the eyes of Ibn Khaldun (2011: 13), as a primordial, elemental presence that continues, but not as a voice to be heard. There are Arabs at the margin of the Arabness understood as a civilization of writing, situated not only beyond literary communication, but also beyond solidarity and beyond the community of historical destiny. They are judged to be alien to the basic social link that Ibn Khaldun called *asabiyya*. The main stream of the Tunisian culture drives away from them, leaving the marginalized desert identities in a deeper and deeper isolation.

Again, some examples of Arabic writing, such as the novels and short stories by Hassouna Mosbahi, a writer born in a Bedouin family and sensitive to manifold dramas of the nomadic existence in the contemporary world, open larger space to the multiple dimensions of marginality. But even in his case, what becomes the crucial axe of meaning is the discrepancy between the urban elite and those living at the margin. Mosbahi contributes to my vision of a fissure dividing the Tunisian culture. On the other hand, the German exile of this writer living for twenty years in Munich introduces another dimension into my sketch of the Tunisian minor condition: that of displacement. A third language, German, may appear in this context as a dynamizing *tertium*, breaking the stalemate between Arabic and French. The aspiration of arabophone expression wins, paradoxically backed up by German and, recently, also English translations.

Nonetheless, I should be honest to my reader stating clearly that the presence of this author on the book market and in the general consciousness of the reading public is still very feeble. At this moment, I'm going down to the very minor of the minor writers, signaling a name that appears neither in French, nor German, nor Arabic Wikipedia<sup>6</sup>, even if Mosbahi received some scholarly attention (S'hiri 1997), as well as several literary prizes. This literary phenomenon is at the tiniest tip of the fractal. Nonetheless, as shows the success of the English translation of *A Tunisian Tale* (Mosbahi 2011), this tiny reality is paradoxically big enough to call the attention of

<sup>6</sup> Mosbahi is mentioned on the "list of Tunisian writers" that exists in French, German and Arabic version of Wikipedia and contains about sixty names: Nonetheless, the proper encyclopaedia entries on this author are still under construction.

an international literary agent and to find its place in the globalized sphere of publishing, promoting and reading<sup>7</sup>. Mosbahi's Arabic prose that started nearly half a century ago<sup>8</sup> may finally find its way to a larger public through English translations.

## 4.

*Die Wüste wächst: weh dem, der Wüsten birgt! / Stein knirscht an Stein, die Wüste schlingt und würgt. / Der ungeheure Tod blickt glühend braun / und kaut, - sein Leben ist sein Kaun...* (Nietzsche 1967: 385)<sup>9</sup>. Tunisian writing is a growing fractal that could be suggestively described by this Nietzschean metaphor of a self-consuming entity. This growth is far from the paradigm of a triumphantly expanding minor literature, driven by the aspiration of conquering a place of its own in the global system of *Weltliteratur*. What proliferate are the dimensions of being minor, forming smaller and smaller identities, corresponding to less and less audible voices.

Curiously, diverse marginal figures and the whole universe of marginality is exactly the substance of the Moroccan writing, the source of this particular desert flavour that attracts the international public. Chraïbi's heroes penetrated deep into the outer regions in *Une enquête au pays* (1981); Ben Jelloun made his international career exploring the figure of Harrouda, a kind of Berber witch that lives in a cave (1973). Tunisian writing tries to put in practice a universalist strategy. Meddeb turns his back to Banu Hilal and inscribes Tunisian historical destiny in the great pattern of European modernity, evoking common roots in the French revolution. Moroccan literature brings the fractal dynamics back to unity, introducing the marginalized, infinitesimal identities into a universality of great, original literature. Writing in French, Moroccan authors rarely aspire to the gallicized identity of Memmi or Meddeb. Perhaps this is how they manage to conserve their appeal of exoticism in the eyes of French and international readers. Memmi and Meddeb remain deeply immersed in the North African world, but at the same time they explicitly claim for European solidarity, solidarity that Europe is often unwilling to give, even if arguably it should be seen as its moral duty. The anecdote of my Tunisian bookshop experience is revealing. Meddeb's mistake consisted in letting

<sup>7</sup> The translation of *A Tunisian Tale* has been commented in one of the leading journals shaping the opinions of the global public, "World Literature Today" (Levy 2012); since the success of this novel, the writer has been also promoted through the international network of Goethe-Institut.

<sup>8</sup> Mosbahi won the Tunisian Broadcasting Prize for his stories in 1968.

<sup>9</sup> "The desert grows: woe to him in whom deserts hide! / Stone grinds against stone, the desert devours and strangles, / Glowing brown monstrous death stares / And *chews*; its life is to chew ..."

his literary and intellectual identity split in two. One part, corresponding to those mystic poems I never managed to read, had been left apart and finally became silenced. The other, overacting the claim of universalism and proclaiming with excessive insistence the “Europeanness” of Tunisia, sounds hollow and inauthentic.

On the other hand, the “Europeanness” of immigrants, without being proclaimed, becomes ineluctable fate, with poetic image of Tunisia as a lost homeland in the background. Both the Moroccan and the Tunisian writers such as Chraïbi and Mosbahi might be better understood, if included into the category of “Afro-European literature”, postulated by Sabrina Brancato (2008), instead of being squeezed in the framework of supposed “national” literatures of their countries. The traditional concept of national literature clearly finds no place in the complex reality of the contemporary Mediterranean.

Some generalizing conclusions come to my mind. In the globalized world, undoubtedly there is enough space for minor literatures. Perhaps even the minor literatures are the only ones the globalist reader is really interested in. There is no literary success without a considerable investment in being minor. Everyday practice of the book market corroborates the hypothesis of Deleuze who affirms that being minor, understood as the quality of what is de-centred, is an essential key to creative questioning and innovation. But successful minor literature is the one that proclaims its roots, at the same time being able to reintroduce them into the dominant sphere. The qualities of what is de-centred and peripheral must be affirmed with such strength that the dominant symbolical universe is repositioned and renegotiated. In consequence of this process, minor literature becomes an emergent major. On the other hand, claiming participation in the universality from a peripheral position, as in case of Meddeb, presupposes that the existing centre is respected; there is no effective renegotiation of the peripheral situation. As a result, such minor literature, instead of becoming a new major, proliferates infinitesimally at its own margins, producing minuscule fractal reflections of its essential condition of minority.

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## Czy istnieje literatura tunezyjska? Pisarstwo emergentne i fraktalna proliferacja mniejszościowych głosów

Artykuł stanowi próbę świadomie „tendencyjnego” przedstawienia literatury tunezyjskiej z eurocentrycznej perspektywy. Postawione w tytule pytanie, wskazujące na wątpliwe istnienie tej literatury, wynika ze skrzyżowania spojrzenia na rzeczywistość lokalną z ujęciem globalnym, operującym ponadlokalnymi pojęciami rynku literackiego i obiegu literatury tłumaczonej. Literatura tunezyjska rysuje się jako zjawisko

wybitnie mniejszościowe nawet wówczas, gdy zostaje ujęta w ramy regionalnego porównania z literaturą marokańską. Uwidacznia ono naturę i konsekwencje wyborów dokonanych przez pisarzy tunezyjskich poczynając od lat 20. i 30. XX wieku. Te wybory określiły rozbieżne kierunki poszukiwań własnego języka literackiego oraz podwójną aspirację „arabskości” i „europejskości”, jaka wprowadziła wewnętrzne pęknięcie w lokalnym pejzażu kulturowym. Ten podstawowy rozłam jest potraktowany w artykule jako element wprowadzający swoistą zasadę fraktalną. Niczym fraktal, literatura tunezyjska nie rozwija się w kierunku syntezy sprzecznych tendencji i synergii prowadzącej w konsekwencji do umocnienia jej obecności i oddziaływania, lecz w kierunku proliferacji wymiarów mniejszościowości. Oznacza to eksplorację coraz dalszych rejonów pisarskiego doświadczenia przez głosy coraz słabiej słyszalne, pozbawione czytelniczego zaplecza, choć same w sobie interesujące.

Wywód o „fraktalności” literatury tunezyjskiej został zilustrowany przykładami odnoszącymi się zarówno do pisarstwa w języku arabskim, jak i francuskim. Wzmiankowanymi w artykule założycielami nowoczesnej tradycji poezji, prozy narracyjnej i eseju są odpowiednio Echebbi, Khraief i Memmi. Kolejne nazwiska, takie jak Meddeb i Mosbahi, konotują różne sposoby usytuowania pisarza tunezyjskiego wobec Europy, pomiędzy poszukiwaniem odrębności a postulatami uniwersalizmu i poczuciem głębokiego związku z kulturą francuską. To ostatnie roszczenie może być interpretowane jako przyczyna wyciszenia wielu wymiarów tunezyjskiej tożsamości; w artykule zwrócono uwagę na milczenie grup nienależących do tunezyjskiej kultury miejskiej, reprezentujących świat pustyni, które doczekały się co prawda literackiego wyrazu, przemieszczonego jednak w europejski kontekst i w dużym stopniu pozbawionego bezpośredniego czytelniczego zaplecza. Skomplikowane oddziaływanie języków i przekładów, mogących wesprzeć te mniejszościowe poszukiwania literackie, prawdopodobnie dałoby się lepiej uchwycić dzięki poszukiwaniu nowych perspektyw syntetycznych, na przykład podejmujących pojęcie „literatury afroeuropejskiej”, niż przy zastosowaniu tradycyjnego pojęcia „literatury narodowej”, które wydaje się mieć ograniczone zastosowanie w odniesieniu do aktualnej literatury północnoafrykańskiej.

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## Is There Tunisian Literature? Emergent Writing and Fractal Proliferation of Minor Voices

The article presents the Tunisian literature from the non-local perspective of global literary market and the circulation of translated literature. The minor status of the studied phenomenon becomes obvious even when the Tunisian literature is compared with the Moroccan one. What is more, this comparison helps to understand the consequences of some choices made by the Tunisian writers, choices that established

diverging directions of literary quest and the ambivalent aspiration of belonging both to the Arabic and the French linguistic and cultural zone. This basic ambivalence is treated in the article as essential fissure and a kind of fractal principle, conducing to the proliferation of minor voices, instead of synergistic pattern of development leading to the synthesis of cultural contradictions. Some of these voices, such as Abdelwahhab Meddeb, try to inscribe themselves in the universalist, gallicized context, while others, such as the emigrant Arab-speaking writer Hassouna Mosbahi, find in the translation a chance of reaching new readers and the promise of escaping the status of minor or emergent writers.

**Key words:** Tunisian literature – emergent writing – francophone literature – translated literature – Abdelwahhab Meddeb – Hassouna Mosbahi