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The Literary World of the North African *Taghrība* *Novelization, Locatedness and World Literature*

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Abstract

The novels by North African novelists Waciny Laredj, Majid Toubia and Abdelrahim Lahbib that refashioned the traditional Arabic genre of the *taghrība* inspired by the medieval epic of *Taghrība of Banū Hilāl*, still a living oral tradition in the region, offer an interesting case study of location in world literature. They circulate both within national (Algerian, Egyptian and Moroccan) literary systems and the pan-Arab literary field while maintaining a distinct aesthetic and political locality. In these novels, the literary life of the North African *taghrība* takes forms and meanings that are geographically and historically located, and that are shaped by the positionality of the authors. This paper intervenes in the discussion on location in world literature from the perspective of Arabic novelistic traditions by showing that the pan-Arabic literary field itself is far from homogenous but is marked by a diversity of narrative styles and techniques that can be both local/localised and transregional at the same time. Therefore, we need to shift our understanding of world literature beyond macro-models of “world-system” that assume a universally-shared set of literary values and tastes.

Keywords

Taghrība – North African novel – Arabic literature – Waciny Laredj – Majid Toubia – Abdelrahim Lahbib

1 Introduction

Taking its cue from David Damrosch's recent realisation that world literature cannot be a homogeneous canon but is shaped by its location, this paper argues through a close reading of recent North African Arabic novels that the world

in “world literature” is always located somewhere, geographically, aesthetically and intellectually, and is never just a “given” with universal tastes and forms. Damrosch calls for “close attention to the life of world literature within particular national and regional systems” since “world literature exists first and foremost at a level in between the local and the universal: it is formed by the interactions of two or more national literatures within a given cultural space” (213). And “to understand world literature in this way is to return to the national cultural spaces within which it circulates and is read” (212). This paper shows that we also need to return to *transregional* cultural spaces like the pan-Arabic cultural field. If we depart from the Goethean understanding of world literature as the availability of non-European literary works to European readers in translation¹ (i.e. world literature is what circulates out of its original culture in translation) and from the idea of “world-system” macro-models that assume a universally shared set of literary values and tastes with Europe at the centre (Casanova), we can move beyond the idea of western impact and diffusion. In other words, we can examine literary networks with shared cultural heritage like those of the pan-Arabic cultural field, a field that existed well before the colonial period and has continued to sustain a community of authors.² These networks are “worldly,” and works circulate intra-regionally and across national cultural spaces without necessarily gaining a “global” reach.

This pan-Arabic heterogeneous and often fragmented cultural field is not unified and fixed but has changed due to historical and political factors like, for example, colonialism, the establishment of the modern Arab nation-states, and the rise of competing regional nationalisms.³ However, a sense of a real and imagined Arabic literary community that transcends national, communal and religious boundaries has been important in facilitating cultural and literary exchanges and circulation based on the idea of a common language and

1 As Naaman argues, “In light of the fact that translations from Arabic into English make up only 1 percent of all international translations, the likelihood that an Arab writer, particularly a lesser-known or younger writer, might get his or her novel published in English is very slim. In other words, the international literary market is, in the main, of little consequence to the majority of literary practitioners within Egypt and the Arab world more broadly” (451).

2 See Al-Musawi, whose ambitious evocation of the Arabic “republic of letters” between the twelfth and eighteenth centuries argues against the perception that these were centuries of decay.

3 For example, Jacquemond argues that beyond a very small circle of internationally translated novelists, Egyptian – and by extension Arab – writers write for a pan-Arabic public. Although Egypt occupied a position of dominance in this pan-Arab literary and cultural field, this dominance has been on the retreat since the 1960s, and today the Arab literary field is “multipolar” – “Cairo, along with its writers, editors, reviews, and institutions, occupies a position that is certainly important, but that is no longer hegemonic” (12).

a shared cosmopolitan culture and heritage. Pan-Arab literary journals,⁴ festivals, and prizes⁵ have contributed to this sense of a “literary community” by fostering literary and critical debates across the Arabic speaking region.

In this paper I explore how the *taghrība*, a sub-category of the biography (*sīra*), of the Banu Hilal tribe⁶ that has circulated widely in oral and written forms in the Arabic speaking world since medieval times from the eastern Mediterranean (the Mashreq, verbatim “east”) to North Africa (the Maghreb, verbatim “west”), has been aesthetically and politically reinvented in contemporary Arabic novels in North Africa so as to foreground a shared cultural heritage but also their distinct locality. *Taghrība* literally means migration/exile and refers in particular to the “march to the West” of the Arabic-speaking Banu Hilal tribe, nomads who migrated from the drought-prone Arabian Peninsula to North Africa in the tenth century CE, looking for better living conditions. In contemporary Arabic novels, the *taghrība* becomes a literary narrative and trope on which different histories of migration, exile and oppression can be grafted.

Significantly, all three Arabic authors who have reinvented the *taghrība* in their novels are from North Africa. In fact, I would argue that the *taghrība* is the North African sub-genre par excellence that allows Maghrebi authors to negotiate their position within the pan-Arabic world, particularly with its putative centre in the Mashreq. The authors are the Algerian Waciny Laredj with his novel *Nuwār al-Lūz: Taghrībat Saleḥ Ben ‘Amer Azūfri* (*Almond Blossoms: the Exile of Saleh Ben Amer the Bachelor*), first published 1983 and republished 2012; the Egyptian Majid Toubia with his four-volume *Taghrībat Banī Ḥaṭḥūt* (*The Migration of Banī Ḥaṭḥūt*), written in the 1980s and 90s and later compiled in one volume in 2005; and the Moroccan Abdelrahim Lahbib with his *Taghrībat Al-‘Abdi Al-mashūr beweld Al-ḥamriyya* (*The Journey of al-‘Abdi known as the Son of Ḥamriyya*, 2013).⁷ All are widely read and respected novelists in the pan-Arabic

4 These include, among others, *al-Ādāb* (*Literature*, 1952) funded by the Lebanese Suhail Idris; *al-Shi‘r* (*Poetry*, 1958), founded by the Syrian/Lebanese poet Yusuf al-Khal; *Mawāqif* (*Positions*, 1968), by the Syrian poet Adonis; *Gallery 68* (1968), by the Egyptian writer Edwar al-Kharrat, and the bilingual (French/Arabic) literary Journal *Souffles/Anfās* (1966), by the Moroccan novelist and poet Abdellatif Laabi in 1966.

5 Major pan-Arab literary prizes include the Naguib Mahfouz Medal for Literature (1966, Cairo); the Mohamed Zafzaf Prize (2002, Morocco); the Sheikh Zayed Book Award (2007) and International Prize of Arabic fiction (2008, both Abu Dhabi), and the Katara Prize (2014, Qatar).

6 The *Sira of Banū Hilāl* is divided into three cycles: The first two deal with the Hilalis when they are in the East, while the last cycle is called *taghrība* and is devoted to their migration to North Africa (Galley); more on it in the next section.

7 None of the novels has been translated into other languages, and all translations from them are mine.

literary field. Toubia is a canonical figure of 1960s and 70s in Egypt known for his leftist leaning and political engagement. Laredj is a prolific Algerian writer who writes in both Arabic and French known for his political engagement and pan-Arab solidarity.⁸ Although Lahbib is less known than Toubia and Laredj, his works command respect and circulate in the Arab world, particularly after his *Taghribat Al-'Abdi* was shortlisted for the Arabic Booker Prize in 2014. These novels present us with an interesting case-study of location in world literature because they circulate both within national (Egyptian, Algerian and Moroccan) literary systems and the pan-Arab literary field while maintaining their distinct locality. In these novels, the North African *taghrība* takes forms and meanings that are geographically and historically located and shaped by the positionality of the authors. Both Laredj's and Toubia's novels reuse the *taghrība* to map out the recent colonial and postcolonial histories of their nation from below, i.e. from the point of view of the peasant masses, and to critique the foundation myth of postcolonial Algeria and Egypt. Lahbib instead reuses the *taghrība* in combination with the *rihla* or travelogue to open up the space of the Moroccan nation beyond its territorial boundaries both geographically and intellectually. His novel offers a local and transregional spatial and textual imaginary that extends from Morocco to the Middle East through Africa – which is presented as an important component of Arabo-Islamic culture – and Europe. In its reflection on the decay of the Arabo-Islamic *umma*, the novel foregrounds the idea of transregional social, political and literary connectivity. My paper, therefore, complicates Damrosch's point above by showing that once one takes a located approach to the study of world literature as it circulates in national and transregional cultural spaces, a different picture of the world in world literature emerges: One that is no longer generic and global, but which is shaped by what we call “significant geographies” (Laachir, Marzagora & Orsini), a spatial and conceptual metaphor that captures the complexity of the changing interaction between the local, the regional and the global. “Significant geographies” points to local and distant geographies and networks that are significant to authors, communities and texts, they can be imaginative (like the case in Lahbib's text), conceptual (like Laredj's Algerian and pan-Arabic space) and/or real (like Toubia's remapping of Egyptian history). Location, these novels show, is rooted in national debates while being open to the shared transregional Arabic cultural and political space.

8 The multilingual Laredj completed his postgraduate studies at the University of Damascus in Syria in the 1970s; he perceives himself as an Arab who writes trans-regionally to 300 million readers within the “unified linguistic horizon” of the Arabic speaking world that goes beyond the Mashreq/Maghreb dichotomy. See Interview with Laredj.

Laredj and Toubia's novels draw directly upon the anonymous *Taghrība of Banū Hilāl*. Laredj's novel directly refers to the famous heroes of the *taghrība* and recasts them in a new light in contemporary Algeria. Toubia uses the narrative structure of the *taghrība* – with its flow of epic tales of heroes – to recount the forced migration of the male members of the Bani Hathut family from their home village near the city of Minya on the western banks of the Nile river to the north and south of Egypt from the eighteenth up to early twentieth centuries. Laredj's quartet *Nuwār al-lūz* reflects on the disillusionment of the 1970s and early 1980s with the hollow revolutionary and socialist rhetoric of the postcolonial Algerian nation state, which turned up to be repressive of its people.

Lahbib's novel *Taghrībat al-ʿAbdi* does not refer to *Taghrība of Banū Hilāl* directly. It tells the story of a contemporary secondary school Arabic teacher, researcher and novelist who stumbles in an old market upon a nineteenth-century manuscript in the peripheral city of Safi, a Moroccan port on the Atlantic coast with a rich history of trade and connections with Africa and Europe but whose glorious past is eclipsed. The manuscript is the travelogue of an unknown nineteenth-century Moroccan religious scholar who embarked on a journey from Morocco to Mecca and Medina via Timbuktu, east of the Sahara and Cairo seeking for answers to question of the decay of the Islamic *umma* threatened by European colonialism. The researcher decides to "edit" the manuscript because he believes that the writer of the manuscript wanted it to be circulated among the general public. Thus, there are two layers to the narrative: the manuscript, and the researcher-narrator's footnotes that are used to elucidate, explain and back the contents of the manuscript, blurring the boundaries between fiction and reality. This meta-fictional narrative that uses a text-within-a-text format and a self-referential style of writing, resembles that of Umberto Eco's *Il nome della Rosa* and Roberto Bolaño's *2666*, both of which used this format to convert the trope of the forgotten manuscript into meaningful and thrilling narratives.

All three novels use the *taghrība* as a metaphor for *tagharuub* or *ightirāb* – estrangement, alienation, or separation from one's native land. These terms are linked in Arabic to *gharīb* (stranger), *gharāba* (strangeness), and *ghurba*, exile or separation from one's homeland. In Laredj's and Toubia's novels, the masses are estranged from their own lands and their rulers are perceived as foreigners and invaders in the case of Egyptian history, or exploiters, usurpers, and heirs to the French colonial power in the case of postcolonial Algeria. Lahbib's *taghrība* is linked to the *riḥla*, and one of the titles the researcher chooses for the manuscript is "*Ḥekāyat al-gharīb fi belād al-barbar wa al-ʿarīb*" (The story of the stranger in the land of Berbers and Bedouins, 17). It uses the notion of exile or being a foreigner in one's own land in the sense of discrimination against

non-elite religious scholars, al-‘Abdi’s motive for leaving Morocco and to travel (35). The recasting of the *taghrība* in these novels is linked to a process of transformation of the protagonists, of becoming aware of their identity and history and, as we shall see, the novelization of the genre takes local forms informed by local aesthetics and politics.

This last point importantly links my discussion to current debates on Arabic literary modernity and the “importation” of European genres like the novel. Framing Arabic literary modernity exclusively as the product of the encounter with Europe, and “hence as perennially imperfect process of reproducing hegemonic European genres” (Selim 688), has resulted in “privileging the novel in critical discourse” but ignoring “the specific engagements of local traditions with foreign forms” (Omri “Local Narrative” 245). Instead, Moroccan critic Yaqtin has championed an approach that explores the continuities between local and transregional semi-oral and written Arabic narrative forms such as the *riḥla* (travelogue), *maqāma* (prose narrative, see Omri “Local Narrative”), and *sīra* (epic, biography) *before* and *after* the encounter with Europe. Their reuse in the Arabic novel foregrounds textual connectivity with Arabic literary traditions. Yet I suggest that within the diverse Arabic literary field novelistic traditions are far from homogenous or universal but present us with a range of narrative styles and techniques that are both local and localised. I take the *taghrība* as an example of this locality.

The aesthetic locality and at the same time the transregionality of the novels I examine lie in these texts’ reworking, and often combination, of the *taghrība*, *sīra* and *riḥla*, and the intertwining of oral and written traditions. My discussion therefore contributes to the argument of Ouyang (“Fictive Mode”) and Omri (“Introduction”) about the novelization of Arabic literary genres, i.e. how local forms come to determine the shape of the Arabic novel, and it shows how this novelization continues in contemporary novels. Through these examples of located novelization of the *taghrība* that circulate between national and transregional literary spaces, I show how world literature in Arabic speaks from a localised aesthetics and politics.

2 *Sīra, Taghrība* and Their Circulation in North Africa

The westward migration *or taghrība* of the Banu Hilal tribe in the tenth century led them first to settle in Egypt in the Delta and Sa‘id regions. They were then deported to Tunisia by the Fatimid caliphs in the middle to the eleventh century as a form of punishment after its leaders rebelled against the Fatimids and aligned themselves with the Abbasids in Baghdad. The arrival of the Banu

Hilal in the Maghreb is still a heatedly debated topic, since they are presumed to have changed the demographic and cultural landscape of the region. This idea was first started by the eminent historian Ibn Khaldun (d. 1406), who described the Banu Hilal in his *Muqadima* as a “cloud of locusts” invading the region (qtd. in Galley “Retracing” 62). They are largely viewed as the Arabizers of the major nomadic Berber tribes, the Zenata and the Hawwara, which until then had remained un-Arabized since the first Arab conquerors who had brought Islam and the Arabic language with them four centuries before they had settled in urban centres (62).⁹ In popular consciousness, the Banu Hilal are the ambivalent objects of both distrust and praise (63).

The history of the migration/exile of the Banu Hilal tribe, their battles, conquests, and love stories between the tenth and eleventh centuries constitute the core narrative of the epic *sīra* tradition, which is pan-Arabic and has circulated widely both orally and in written form while taking distinct local forms shaped by local languages and audiences.¹⁰ Therefore, there is not one fixed text of *taghrība* or *Sīra of Banū Hilāl* but, as Giovanni Canova puts it, a “wealth of a narrative material which goes from sung poetry to narration in prose, to handwritten or printed texts, in modest folk editions, characterized by a mixture of verse and rhyming prose” (vii). Historical evidence documents the performance of this *sīra* or *taghrība* from the fourteenth century onward, while a rich manuscript tradition emerged from the eighteenth century, supplemented by cheap chapbooks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and more recently a digital tradition of audio and video recordings of live performances from different regions (Reynolds “Problematic Performances” 157). North African versions share the common themes of migration, exile, famine, hardship, heroism, bride stealing, war, and more or less the same major characters and events, but are told differently depending on local context and audience.¹¹ Since in North Africa the *taghrība* is still a living oral tradition performed by professional story-tellers and singers, it is seen as “the national folk epic of the Arab Maghrib” (Norris 463).

9 See also Galley and Ayoub.

10 The circulation of this pan-Arabic popular epic extends across Saharan Africa, i.e. even in places the Hilali did not reach or settle in; Norris.

11 In his analysis of a Tunisian version, Norris for example claims that manuscripts of the *taghrība* differ in content and language. Mashreqi versions stress the constant warfare between the “Arabs” and “Berbers,” whereas “the Tunisian, and indeed, Maghribi, versions stress the final resolution of conflict, a division of the resources of the Maghrib between two kindred peoples” (465). The latter’s emphasis on resolution may be linked to the mixed Arabo-Berber ethnic makeup of Maghrebi nations and their desire for unity rather division.

Unlike other popular epics, the *Sīra* or *Taḡhrība of Banū Hilāl* is distinctive in the sense that it “recounts the elaborate interactions among a constellation of main figures rather than being primarily about the exploits of a single hero” (Reynolds “Abū Zaid al-Hilālī” 78). Its various narratives cluster around the life of Abu-Zaid Al-Hilali, whose noble mother gets thrown out of the tribe when she gives birth to the black skin Abu-Zaid, who though suffering from being an outcast and an outsider grows up into a fine man and comes back to the tribe as one of its best known warriors.¹² The *Sīra of Banū Hilāl* is also connected to other Arabic popular epics, and their mutual borrowing in terms of narrative elements, tropes, histories and characters suggests literary connectivity and intertextuality.¹³

Within the Arabic literary traditions, the *sīra* and *taghrība* are also linked to the genre of autobiography.¹⁴ The noun *sīra* (plural *siyār*) in Arabic derives from the verb *sāra* (present tense: *yasīru*), which can mean to travel or be on a journey. Thus, a person’s *sīra* is also their journey through life. This mixing of epic, travel or *riḥla*, and autobiography exemplifies how Arabic pre-modern genres are a discourse inevitably composed of multiple genres that draw on each other, but also suggests that the Arabic novel is a “palimpsest” shaped by these multiple genres (Ouyang “Fictive Mode”).

How have North African novelists reinvented the popular genre of the *taghrība* in their novels? Roger Allen argues that popular heroic sagas or *siyār* (*sīra*) such as that of the Banu Hilal were “excluded from the category of *adab* [literature] in the pre-modern era along with the *Arabian Nights*”; but “modern Arab novelists frequently refer back to their motifs and heroes,” particularly after the 1967 war, “when Arab intellectuals and creative writers sought different modes of identity by searching into the past” (52). Allen is right about the re-use of tropes from popular pre-modern genres like the *sīra* to critique the oppressive Arab states and their political regimes and, I would add, redefine “social and literary categories and hierarchies” (Selim “Translations and Adaptations” 130) so as to give the proletarian or peasant masses a voice. This seems true of Laredj’s and Toubia’s novelization of *taghrība* in the 1980s and 1990s but not of Lahbib’s, whose more recent novel moves beyond the confines of the postcolonial

12 Abu-Zaid Al-Hilali is a controversial hero; see Slyomovics for details.

13 Madeyesk argues that the *Sīra of Banū Hilāl* is linked to other epics/narrative cycles like the *Sīra of Antara*, the *Sīra of Al-Zir Salīm*, and the *Sīra of Dat Al-Himma*, and they reference and borrow from each; see Norris 465.

14 Reynolds’ edited volume *Interpreting the Self* presents the autobiography as an intertextual genre, “a discourse of multiple texts” that can be acts of historical “self-interpretation” or “self-translation,” in some cases written in the form of travelogues (3–9).

nation-state to suggest wider “significant geographies” of interaction and influence. Therefore, the novelistic life of the *taghrība* in North Africa needs to be historically and culturally contextualised, as I shall argue below.

3 Novelization and Localization of the *Taghrība*

3.1 *Laredj’s Nuwār al-Lūz and the Continuous Taghrība of the Postcolonial Algerian People*

We eat the ache of hunger while Abu-Zaid Al-Hilali makes peace with murders, and the kings of Najad, and the west [Arab west]. His poverty and black skin taught him nothing but to bow in worship to Prince Hasan Ibn Sarhān.

LAREDJ 41

In this quote, the main character Saleh, a modern descendant of the Banu Hilal tribe, uses the term “we” to refer to both the people of the *taghrība* and those in contemporary Algeria, blurring the distinction between them and pointing to the misuse of power in the past and present. In this section, I argue that Laredj’s novel de-romanticises the *taghrība* and its heroes are presented as usurpers of power so as to critique the contemporary rulers of Algeria.

Laredj encourages readers to consider his novel as a meta-text of the *Taghrība of Banū Hilāl* not only through the title but also through the two quotes that preface the novel. The first one addresses the reader:

Before reading this novel, whose language may be wearisome, step aside for a while and read *Taghrība of Banū Hilāl*. There you will certainly find a clear explanation for your hunger and misery. Prince Hasan bin Sarhan, Diab al-al-Zaghbi, Abu Zaid al-Hilali, al-Jazyā are still among us, up to the present time ... for from the time we were cast upon this dry ground until now the blade of the sword is still the one language we use to solve our interminable disputes.

LAREDJ 9

The author clearly connects the novel literarily and historically with *Taghrība of Banū Hilāl* and encourages the reader to “read” it before reading the novel, since it will not only shed light on the current malaise and continuous oppression and poverty of the Algerian people after independence from colonial rule, but will also help the reader understand the novel’s direct and indirect refer-

ences to the folk epic heroes from an Algerian perspective. It stresses that what “we” have inherited from one of the heroes of the *taghrība*, Abu-Zaid Al-Hilali, is violence and poverty. The Hilali heroic history is thus subtly critiqued and reframed here as a history of violence, which is still used to “resolve” political and social problems in contemporary Algeria.

The second quote is from the seminal book *Ighāthat al-umma fī kashfi al-ghumma* (*The Rescue of the Nation in Revealing the Source of Oppression*), in which the medieval Egyptian historian Al-Makrizi (1364–1442) details episodes of famine, oppression and violence suffered by the masses in medieval Egypt and which he attributes to the corruption and tyranny of the rulers and their monopoly of economic resources and power:

Anyone who muses upon this event, considering it from start to finish, and understanding it from its beginning to its end, will realise that people have been badly treated by their leaders and rulers who are indifferent to the interests of their subjects.

qtd. in LAREDJ 10

Laredj’s novel makes the same kind of criticism of the Algerian postcolonial rulers and their abuse of power and traces it back to the wider history of the oppressive and violent relationship between the rulers and the ruled in the Arabo-Islamic world. Moreover, in the novel Laredj reinvents the *taghrība* to stress the foundational myth of the postcolonial Algerian nation as one made of Arabs (descendants of the Hilali, whom as I mentioned are claimed to have Arabised the Maghreb) and Berbers, the indigenous population of Algeria. The protagonist Saleh, a Hilali descendant, cannot have children with his first wife, who is a Hilali like him (232–33), but after her death he falls in love with the Berber Lunja from the Kabyle region who conceives his much wanted child. In this way, the novel implies that only through the “unity” between Arabs and Berbers can Algeria reproduce itself and progress. We may read this as a critique of the competing Arab and Berber nationalisms in Algeria and the way they curtail a united opposition against the corruption of the postcolonial state.

Laredj’s novel can be read as a meta-text of the *Taghrība of Banū Hilāl* as it dialogically engages with its characters and narrative style, though from a subtle and ironical perspective that subverts their romantic and heroic deeds, and reframes the *taghrība* from the perspective of power and governance. It links the suffering of the poor and war orphans in the *taghrība* with that of contemporary Algerian masses, particularly the orphans of the war of Independence against the French, or “martyrs” as they are called in the novel. Saleh is a hero

of the war of independence but his “sacrifices” have never been recognised by the postcolonial state (256–74). In a monologue, he reflects:

What, Saleh, last scion of the Bani Hilal! You are falling apart, against your will. And all the beautiful things that were nourished in your heart by the martyrs and an eternity of sorrow are all now falling from your eyes. Your sole inheritance from Abu-Zaid al-Hilali is the sword that is never sheathed ...

LAREDJ 13

Saleh and the people living in the border town resort to smuggling in order to survive but are shot and killed daily by Algerian security forces and harassed by the police when they attempt to sell the goods in town. There are also episodes of mysterious assassinations of the local civil servants who reveal the corruption of the security forces and the ruling classes. Saleh, then, is the brave and chivalrous Hilali hero who protects the poor and destitute in their contemporary *taghriba* and who rebels against the misuse and corruption of power.

The novel contrasts the *taghriba* heroes like Abu-Zaid, who is portrayed as “brave but not chivalrous” (Laredj 85) to Saleh, who is both brave and principled. Unlike Abu-Zaid, Saleh refuses to “sell” himself and the people of the slums for power. In fact, he heroically protects the slum-dwellers from the security forces. Other well-known Hilali heroes of the *taghriba* such as Prince Hassan Ibn Sarhan and Diab al-Zaghbi, the leaders of the tribe in their wars against the Berber tribes of the Maghreb, are also presented ironically as power hungry, corrupt and unscrupulous. The only *taghriba* hero(ine) who is perceived positively is al-Jaziya, who in the novel appears as a symbol of the suffering poor. Though the daughter of the chief, she is also at the receiving end of violence at the hands of her princely father and brother; the protagonist Saleh addresses her in an imaginary dialogue saying: “The Hilali defended kingship and you defended rightness, orphans and the lost blood” (220).¹⁵

The novel draws heavily on the oral *taghriba* tradition in Algeria. Saleh claims that the story of Banu Hilal has been transmitted across generations in the form of “witnessing” (*shahāda*, Laredj 14) of the history of suffering and oppression of the poor. He states: “we have memorised the story of the Hilalis

15 In the *Taghriba*, al-Jaziya was given to marriage by her father to a rival tribe in Mecca, but when the feud re-erupted she was taken back and forced to migrate with the Hilali to North Africa, leaving her beloved husband and children behind. Al-Jaziya then mobilised the tribe in their wars in North Africa and stood up for the poor and the weak. In the novel she is a symbol of courage, eloquence, wisdom and beauty; see Laredj 215–24.

by heart from those who preceded us in testimony (*shahāda*) and from the mouths of storytellers” (85). In fact, the novel adopts the narrative format of the oral *taghrība*. The narrator begins with, “It is narrated, o kind people, and we are in the care of Sidi ‘Ali Al-Tunani [a local saint], that the tribe of the sons of ‘Amer was a source of trouble but also strength of the Hilali ...” (1). The narrator then goes on to talk about this faction of the Banu Hilal from whom Saleh supposedly descends and narrates their history of suffering and exile from the tenth century up to contemporary Algeria, where their descendants are still at the receiving end of violence and poverty (1–16). The *quwwal* or the story-teller narrates in the market episodes from the Hilali *taghrība* and other Arabic epics in spoken Algerian, changing and improving the stories according to the local audiences (76–8).

The novel also draws on the popular reverence for local saints – such as Al-Tunani – and uses popular songs in local dialect sung by the famous Algerian popular singer Sheikha Remitti: “O Saleh, o beauty (*al-zīn*), I like your black eyes ...” (Laredj 13); “O dark skinned one with black eyes ... I have had no news from you ...,” “me and my lover, his heart on mine ...” (143). The use of spoken Algerian in the dialogues can disorient the Arabic reader outside the Maghreb who is unfamiliar with this local language, which carries traces of *Tmazight* and French. Examples include *fantaziyya* (arrogance or excessive pride), *trabando* (illegal smuggling, from the French *contrebande*), *zirwata* (truncheon), *kash-kash* (hide-and-peek or playing a game on someone, from the French *cache-cache*, 72–3), *tfu* (I spit on you, 76), *kaloz* or *bendir* (a local musical instrument like a frame drum, associated with the Berber music, 76). To describe Saleh, the security forces use the French expression *élément très dangereux* (152, 274), which they take from the old colonial dossier compiled on him because of his anti-colonial activism (52, 274); *intouchable* (162) is used to describe a corrupt politician and businessman who is never held accountable. French words not only suggest how French is part of the linguistic make up of Algeria, but also invoke a specific legacy of colonialism that is still linked to the language.

Yet, as mentioned above, Laredj’s appropriation of the *taghrība* departs from that of the *quwwal* by de-romanticising Hilali male heroes. When the narrator holds them accountable for their excesses in power, he uses a high-register Arabic *Fusha*, combined in some instances with the spoken local colloquial. Some chapters stress the intertextuality between the novel and the *taghrība*, the written and the oral: The first two, entitled “Little details” and “The people of the slum,” show the slum dwellers as heirs of the Banu Hilal in their daily struggle against the violence of the authorities. The short dialogues in these chapters are conducted in local spoken Arabic or *Darija*. In the last chapter, entitled “The Neighing of Tired Horses,” the neighing of tired horses announces the end

of the narrative, though not necessarily of Saleh's *taghrība* in the sense of his alienation in his own land. Saleh continues to travel west to the border to sell his smuggled goods and ends up being arrested and imprisoned. In this sense, the *taghrība* – exile or alienation – of the historical Hilali who settled down in Algeria centuries ago in search for a better life in the Maghreb still continues for their descendants, not only in Algeria but across the Arab world, as Laredj's epitaph from Al-Makrizi suggests.

3.2 *Toubia's taghrība as a History from Below*

Majid Toubia's four volume *Taghrība of Banī Ḥaṭḥūt* follows successive generations of the peasant Bani Hathut family.¹⁶ Their *taghrība* starts in 1754 and extends to early twentieth-century Egyptian history. The quartet focuses on the history of Egypt's colonisation as lived by the lower classes, and reuses the *taghrība* to instil a nationalist awareness of the history of Egypt from the point of view of the peasants (*fellaḥīn*) – how they were forced to pay unfair taxes or to work unpaid in intolerable conditions for grand projects like railroads, irrigation canals, or the Suez Canal; how they had their lands confiscated or were used to fight various wars unequipped or unprepared. When asked about what audience he had in mind when writing the novel, Toubia replied that he wanted the quartet to play the role of a historian informing young generations about the history of Egypt, so that they would learn from it and be proud of it (Interview with Toubia). The quartet's geographical space centres on the river Nile in the Minya region and the village of Tella, where three generations of the Ḥaṭḥūt family return after each *taghrība* or forced migration to find their land, their mothers, and their family. Its local aesthetics draws on the heritage of *taghrība* in Egypt as a lived popular and oral tradition.

In volume one, we follow the family's life in their village in Upper Egypt where, like the other fellaheen, they suffer the harshness of Mameluke-Ottoman rule. These rulers are viewed as foreigners and colonisers – they extract exorbitant taxes from the peasants and torture and kill those who rebel against them. Amidst the chaos of Napoleon's invasion in 1798–1801, two of the Ḥaṭḥūt brothers, Mursi and Ḥaṭḥūt, are forced to migrate north to Cairo and Alexandria, where they are conscripted to defend Egypt against the French invaders. The other volumes follow the rise of Mohamed Ali Pasha, the Ottoman Albanian commander, and his dynasty from 1805 onwards, at a time when both the British and the French compete to colonise Egypt, monopolise

16 *To the Land of the North* (1987), *To the Land of the South* (1992), and the last two, *To the Land of the Lakes* and *To the Land of Sa'ad* (2005).

its market, and control its ports. Mohamed Ali's annexation of Sudan is the topic of volume two, when Ḥaṭḥūt and his adopted brother Shater are forced to migrate south and witness the horrific massacres during the invasion of Sudan by Mohamed Ali's army. Mohamed Ali is presented in the novels as Egypt's moderniser, who built an autonomous economic power by industrialising the country, creating a new education system based on science and technology, and sending educational missions to Europe to learn and transmit knowledge. But he is also criticised for his monopoly on land ownership and trade which further impoverished the *fellahīn* and for the violence that the army led by his sons unleashed when campaigning to conquer Sudan. In volumes three and four, we live through the rule of Mohamed Ali's children and grandchildren, who are presented as usurpers who enjoy a lavish lifestyle at the expense of the poor. Ḥaṭḥūt's grandson Amshīr is once again forced out of his village in Tella to migrate to both south and north Egypt to work without pay on the state's projects, and to fight wars in Sudan and elsewhere. The quartet ends with Saad Zaghloul's famous 1919 revolution against the British, an optimistic sign that the Egyptians have finally realised that "Egypt is for the Egyptians" (231). The three generations of Ḥaṭḥūt men, then, embody the exploitation but also the rebellion of the *fellahīn*, their refusal to pay taxes, escape from military conscription, civil disobedience, etc.

Like Laredj's novel, Toubia's quartet incorporates aspects of the narrative structure of the *sīra* and *taghrība*. It is told by a story-teller, but unlike Laredj's insertion of oral popular songs and folklore, Toubia uses a linear, episodic narrative with few dialogues and rhymed prose like that used by story-tellers or singers, as if the quartet is meant to be told rather than read. Each novel begins with a rhymed prose summary of the story that employs an archaic, eighteenth-century Arabic *Fusha*, as in the two quotes below:

Where there are epic tales (*malāḥem 'aẓīma*) and grave events (*ḥawā-dith jassīma*),
 And plunging into horrors (*khawḍ al-ahwāl*), and a state of utter confusion (*inqilāb al-aḥwāl*),
 And the mouse dominates the cat (*qqeṭ*) and the lion kneels before the monkey (*qerd*) ...

TOUBIA *North* 1

Where injustices (*jjūr*) are committed in the land of the Fur (*ffūr*),
 And vagabonds (*ṣaʿalūk*) rule over kings (*mulūk*),
 And human beings are sold (*bayʿa al-insān*) and ears severed (*qatʿa al-adān*),

And the colours of the shadows (*alwān aṭayf*) appear in the summer rains (*maṭār aṣayf*).

TOUBIA *South* 1

This style of rhyming prose also precedes each chapter, as if a storyteller was trying to keep the interest in the story going. For example, book two begins with:

Shoes were worn out in the sea of sand, feet slacked and days slowed down, the weeks became months and the months became eternity, and they were thirsty, hungry and lost between alleys besieged by the rocks of regret and the sands of loss.

TOUBIA *South* 3

In the preface to the first volume, the narrator announces that the novel is “a copy of a manuscript checked, verified and published for the first time” (Toubia *North* 3). This allows the author to use footnotes here and there to contextualize or explain battles and real historical figures.¹⁷ The quartet was clearly heavily influenced by the Egyptian historian of late Ottoman Egypt Al-Jabarati (1753–1825), whose well-known *Ajā'ib al-athār fī al-tarājim wal-akhbār* (*The Marvelous Compositions of Biographies and Events*) covers the history of Egypt from 1688 to 1821, particularly the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt and Muhammad Ali Pasha's rise to power. Al-Jabarati praised but also criticised Muhammad Ali for some of his drastic reforms like the new taxation, an assessment echoed in the quartet, as we have seen.

Whereas in Laredj's novel the Banu Hilal are viewed as part of the make-up of the modern Algerian nation and the historical heroes are criticised for their abuse of power, in Toubia's quartet, the Hilalis are equated to Egypt's foreign colonisers. When the French soldiers and General Desaix are listening to a professional *taghrība* singer with his *rubāb*,

Sarah [a slave girl from Sudan owned by Desaix] was amazed when she saw the young sultan Desaix himself listening patiently to the story of the *taghrība*. Idriss [a slave boy from Sudan] was even more astonished when he saw Denon [a French artist accompanying Napoleon's army] noting down in his own language what he heard, and he noticed Desaix's joy when he heard of the Beni Hilal tribe occupying green Tunis even though it was not their land. It was the land of the Tunisians and of al-Zanati Khal-

17 Though without citing his sources, unlike Lahbib's novel, see below.

ifa [the Berber king who resisted the Hilali invasion], whereas the country of the Beni Hilal was in the desert of faraway Najd. Before he slept, he was able to understand the secret [of Desaix's fascination]. Perhaps Desaix thought of himself as Abu Zaid al-Hilali. He had come across the great salty sea to occupy green Egypt and build a settlement there!

The following night, while Idriss was listening to the succession of events described in the story of the *taghrība* for the second time, he wished that al-Zanati had been victorious and hated the corrupt daughter who had betrayed him and loved a man from the enemy camp, opening the gates of the city to the enemies, so that they entered and killed her father. He sat cursing her for her betrayal of her father, her family and her people, and he hated Desaix for his smug disdain of al-Zanati.

TOUBIA *North* 202

Idriss feels sympathy for the Berbers of North Africa in their resistance to the Hilali invasion. In the novel's recasting of the *taghrība* as the suffering of people alienated and exploited by foreign rulers, this moment marks the transformation in the popular imaginary, when a slave like Idriss, who represents the masses, comes to realise that Egypt should be ruled by Egyptians – a moment not realised historically till the 1950s when Egypt would be ruled by a “native son,” Gamal Abdel Nasser. In the quartet, then, the *taghrība* marks the rise of the Egyptian nationalist conscience, which culminated with the end of colonisation and the hopes aroused by Nasser's socialist and pan-Arab regime. However, one may argue that Toubia's quartet, written in the 1980s–2000s, is also, like Laredj's novel, a subtle critique of the derailing of the democratic project of the postcolonial Egyptian state after the 1960s.¹⁸ Toubia's *taghrība* offers a collective memory of the repression of the masses by unjust rulers, a memory that can teach younger generations a collective and united identity of “Egyptianness” to push for a better future.

3.3 *Lahbibī's Taghrība, Riḥla and the Construction of an Arabo-Islamic Imaginary*

The most recent re-use of the *taghrība*, Lahbibī's *Taghrībat al-'Abdi* (2013), also deals with the nineteenth-century crisis of the Arabo-Islamic world faced by the colonial threat of a powerful Europe. The novel presents a manuscript travel narrative by Al-'Abdi, a minor religious scholar perturbed by the colonial threat

18 Although the Egyptian masses were offered free access to education and other social benefits in the 1950s and 1960s, the complex process of social, economic and political reforms derailed and the postcolonial state remained authoritarian; see Salem 434–44.

and the decline of the Arabo-Islamic *umma* at a time when neighbouring Algeria has already been colonised by France (in 1830) and the northern Moroccan city of Tetouan has been captured by the Spanish (in 1860). We hear about his early life and education in the coastal town of Safi, his migration to Fez to continue his studies, and his decision to leave his homeland in search of knowledge. Al-'Abdi's *rihla* extends from 1859 to 1895; he travels to south Morocco, then to Timbuktu and Djenné (in today's Mali) where he settles for a few years. He then travels further east of the Sahara, then to Mecca, Medina and Cairo, where he settles and marries before eventually returning to Morocco, though his journey ends with him stranded in a ship in Gibraltar with other pilgrims because of a cholera quarantine.

Lahbib uses the *taghriba* in order to create multiple historical and spatial imaginaries, relating contemporary Morocco (the time of the frame narrative) to the wider imagined and real nineteenth-century geographies that connected Morocco to Saharan Africa and the Arabic Mashreq. The two narrative voices of the travelogue – al-'Abdi's and the researcher/editor's – also enable the creation of an imagined literary community, on which both al-'Abdi and the editor draw to map their belonging to the Arabo-Islamic cultural and political field.

Unlike the novels previously discussed, Lahbib's *Taghriba of al-'Abdi* does not refer to *Taghriba of Banū Hilāl* or its characters but is rather inspired by the *taghriba* as a journey of exile. Leaving one's homeland in search of knowledge, self-growth, and inspiration are all characteristics of travel literature in the Arabic tradition, particularly in the Maghreb. Within Moroccan literary traditions, the genre of *rihla* refers to different kinds of travel – like the *rihla hijaziyya* for the sake of pilgrimage to Mecca and in search of knowledge with *ulama* in Mecca, Medina, and other important centres such as Damascus, Jerusalem, and Cairo;¹⁹ or the *rihla sifariyya*, linked to the official trips assigned to notable scholars by the sultan of Morocco to free Muslim captives in European hands and establish good relations with European countries.²⁰

Al-'Abdi's *rihla* resembles that of the fourteenth-century Ibn Battuta, who settled and married in Damascus and was appointed to high offices in India and China. Like Battuta, al-'Abdi offers detailed descriptions of the lands he

19 The genre of *rihla* thrived in Morocco, and more broadly in the Maghreb and al-Andalus, from the ninth century onwards because of their geographical location at the far west of the Arabo-Islamic world; journeys enabled connection with the wider Islamic *umma*.

20 This genre flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; although the ambassadors were on official missions, they reflected in their travelogues on European progress, norms and values, technological and military power, and compared them with the weakness and backwardness of their homeland. One of the most important is by Mohamed As-Safar, translated and edited by Susan Miller as *Disorienting Encounters*; see also Matar.

visited and their norms and values, particularly those he perceives as “different.”²¹ Abdelfattah Kilito writes about the Moroccan Mohamed As-Saffar’s nineteenth-century *riḥla* to Paris (which *Taghrība of al-‘Abdi* also refers to) that his “ordeal of the stranger” (*mehnat al gharib*) produces a “critical reflection on one’s homeland [that] recreates As-Saffar’s awareness of himself and his homeland” (39). This is also the case with al-‘Abdi, who at the end finds his unique Moroccan voice amid the collective of Muslim scholars in the Mashreq, a point I will return to.

When the researcher in *Taghrība of al-‘Abdi* is asked to identify the genre of the manuscript, he is quick to state that it is not a text of theology, rhetoric or history but a literary text (*naṣan adabīyyan*) that belongs to “travel literature” (*adab al-raḥalāt*) or autobiography (*sīra dhatiyya*, Lahbibī 15):

The manuscript is a narrative, an autobiography, a journey, and the epic of a man from the masses who wanted to transmit it to the common people, and so he denied his name and obscured his address, because he did not want any elevation (*rifʿat*) or supremacy (*suʿdad*); [the manuscript belongs to] important books whose authors were never known, with *A Thousand and One Night* at the top of the list.²²

LAHBIBI 25

Al-‘Abdi’s manuscript belongs to what the narrator calls “our Moroccan and Arabic literature” (Lahbibī 25) and draws on the genres of *riḥla*, and *sīra*. In particular, for the unnamed narrator/researcher al-‘Abdi’s *riḥla* subverts the nineteenth-century *riḥla ḥijāziyya* which, for him, no longer responded adequately to the challenge mounted by the Arab reform (*Nahda*) because it framed Islam, reform, modernity (*ḥadātha*), and the clash with Europe through tired and unreflexive notions of civilizational decline due to the weakness of religious faith and the neglect of Islam (Lahbibī 29). Instead, al-‘Abdi’s *riḥla*, he claims, presents a creative perspective that questions and critiques one’s own

21 There are many cases when al-‘Abdi finds the social norms – particularly regarding male-female relationships – too progressive. For example, upon becoming friend with Sherifa, an aristocratic Moroccan lady who is married and settled in Djenné, he claims, “a few days after this incident I discovered that the women of this town and throughout the land are allowed to have foreign male friends and companions. Men can have foreign female friends as well. A man may find his wife with a male companion and not repudiate her” (Lahbibī 88).

22 This reference to the *Arabian Nights* is significant as it is a work that has circulated widely beyond the Arabian Peninsula and its tales were composed in various geographical locations outside its confines.

civilisation in order to find answers as to “why are we behind while the others have progressed?” (Lahbib 69). Moroccan critics al-Yarubi and Kilito have each claimed that *rihla* is significant as a pre-modern precursor for the Moroccan novelistic tradition, especially as reinvented in early twentieth century when it found place in Moroccan journals (Al-Yaburi 13–4, Kilito 39). Kilito also states that it is difficult to separate the genre of *rihla* from that of *sīra dhatiyya* (autobiography) because both use episodic narrative elements that are linked, as in most pre-modern Arabic genres.²³

Lahbib claims that his is not a historical novel but uses the technique of the “found manuscript” to map Morocco’s nineteenth-century “significant geographies” extending to Saharan Africa, the Mashreq, and Europe.²⁴ This map finds its most arresting form in the references and sources that form the footnotes or meta-text of the narrative. These draw on a wealth of literary and non-literary texts, from medieval to contemporary, including other travelogues, philosophical and religious works, chronicles, but also modern ethnographies, sociological works, poetry, novels, and an orientalist art book.²⁵ This rich amalgam of sources – some of which, like Al-Tahtawi’s Parisian travelogue and many classical poets including Al-Mutanabbi, feature within the manuscript itself, while others are in the footnotes – complement and explain al-‘Abdi reflection on the norms and values of the societies he visits as well as historical events in the Arabo-Islamic world.

23 See also Reynolds *Interpreting* 3–9.

24 Interview with Lahbib in *Ashaarq al-awsat*. In the novel, the researcher/editor states that in editing the manuscript, he is following the methodology of canonical researchers in Morocco and the wider Arab world (Lahbib 25–6).

25 These include medieval Arabic travelogues such as those of Ibn Battuta, Hassan al Wazan’s (known as Leo-Africanus) *Description of Africa* (1550), and the Spanish Luis del Mármol Carvajal’s *Description of Africa* (1573–1599); modern Arab travelogues such as the Egyptian Rifa’a al-Tahtawi’s *Journey to Paris* (*Takhlīs al-ibrazīz fī talkhī Bārīz*, 1826–1831) and the Moroccan Mohamed as-Saffar’s *Journey to France* (*Rihlat as-saffar elā faransā*, 1845–1846); Arabo-Islamic thinkers such as Abbasid Al-Jahiz’s *Kitāb al-Hayawān* (*The Book of Animals*) and *Kitāb al-Bayān wa al-tabyīn* (*The Book of Eloquence and Demonstration*); and the North African Ibn Khaldun’s *Al-Muqqadimah* (1377). Other sources include two nineteenth-century historians: Moroccan Ahmed al-Nasiri’s *Al-Istiqsa’* (*The Investigation*, 1835–1894) and Egyptian Abd Al-Rahman al-Jabarati’s *Mazhar al-Taqdīs* (*Demonstration of Piety*, 1801); as well many contemporary French and Arab ethnographies as well as social histories of nineteenth-century Moroccans, Africans and Middle Easterners. Arabic Novelists mentioned include the Egyptians Najib Mahfouz, Jamal Al-Ghitani, Sonallah Ibrahim, Bahaa Tahir and Khairy Shalabi; the Libyan Ibrahim al-Kuni, and the Moroccan Mohamed Zafaf. Paintings from Lynne Thornton’s *Les Orientalistes: Peintres Voyageurs* (1993) are used extensively to describe scenes in the African Sahara and the Hajj in Mecca.

Al-ʿAbdi travelogue presents us with an imagined scholarly community of mid-nineteenth century Arabo-Islamic world, whose geography of circulation includes centres of knowledge such as Fez, Cairo, Mecca and Medina but also, most significantly, the African Sahara and Timbuktu. Al-ʿAbdi shows his appreciation of the learned traditions of this part of the Islamic world, an appreciation that stems from the continuing links between West African empires and the Maghreb, especially Morocco (Mazrui 71, Lahbibī 64–78). This reinvention of sub-Saharan Africa as a fundamental component of the culture and history of Morocco and the wider Arabo-Islamic world points toward a less-told “significant geography” of the Islamic *umma* predating the modern nation-state and marked by connectivity and interdependence.²⁶ However, as the *rihla* of al-ʿAbdi moves out of Timbuktu and Djenné into the eastern Sahara, the novel turns to an orientalist “textual attitude” or citation style that reproduces past knowledge tainted with colonial stereotypes that view this region as backward and primitive (Lahbibī 103–26, 127–50). Most descriptions of the African tribes encountered by al-ʿAbdi and footnoted in the novel are taken from medieval travelogues such as Ibn Battuta’s, the Andalusian/Moroccan Hassan al Wazan’s *Description of Africa* (1550), and Luis del Mármol Carvajal’s *Description of Africa* (1573–1599). The novel draws on them to describe the region in the mid nineteenth century, as if sub-Saharan Africa has not changed in three centuries, reinforcing the stereotype of a static and unchanging Africa. As Al-Mughiri notes, the use of textual knowledge to convey information on countries that were never visited was common among writers in medieval times to fill gaps in their travelogues: “Whether the source is checked or not, or the original text was restored literally or concisely,” plagiarism was seen as a way of fostering “the knowledge of the classics and their affiliation to a specific culture and community” (57). In Lahbibī’s case, this socio-textual community extends beyond the pan-Arabic one to include French textual as well as visual sources. While this arguably opens the boundaries of the socio-textual community, it is not un-problematic when reproducing stereotypes about Africa.

Throughout the manuscript/travelogue, Europe casts a long shadow as a colonial threat but also as a model of social, political and scientific progress:

26 Mazrui argues that “The triumvirate cities of Islamic learning – Cairo, Timbuktu, and Fez – were, in medieval times, interdependent. There were scholars from Timbuktu who taught at Al-Azhar and in Fez – and vice-versa. New forms of scholarly interdependence were emerging in these academic exchanges of the ancient world” (71). Dunn also shows how Arabo-Islamic scholars in the late middle period crossed paths as they travelled across various Islamic cities looking for knowledge.

“behind this sea [the Mediterranean], there are sciences, arts and industries of which we are in dire need if we excel in learning them the way our ancestors did with the Persians, the Indians, and the Greeks” (Lahbib 32). Europe is therefore also part of the spatial geography of the text although al-‘Abdi does not travel there, because the continent is also seen as a source of ideas that can help revive and reinvent the *umma*. As al-‘Abdi’s *rihla* progresses, his individual quest becomes a collective one: from Timbuktu to Cairo, Mecca and Medina; he debates with local scholars and others coming from the Levant and Yemen the problems underlying the decay of the *umma* confronted with the progress and power of Europe. He distinguishes himself from the other scholars by not subscribing to their complete rejection (and forbidding) of whatever comes from Europe as “*diyār al-kufr*” (the land of infidelity, Lahbib 66) and not seeing jihad against Europe as the answer to the decline. Instead, al-‘Abdi thinks that there is a lot to learn from Europe. Moreover, his *taghrība* to the eastern Arabic world, a reversal of the traditional westward *taghrība*, is significant as this journey takes him back to the Maghreb when he cannot find answers in the “east.” This may be read as a subtle critique of the centrality of *mashreqi* narratives of the *Nahda* and reform that consider the Maghreb as peripheral.

Finally, from the outset, two things attract the researcher/editor. First, the locality of the manuscript and its distinct Arabic *Fusha* in Moroccan handwriting style: “The Moroccan script was carefully carved, and despite the effects of time and lack of conservation and maintenance it was still clear and vivid” (Lahbib 10). This highlights the locality of the manuscript and its rootedness in particular Moroccan literary traditions. Second, the verses of the Abbasid poet al-Mutanabbi’s written in large Moroccan script at the front of the manuscript clearly indicate that its author, like the researcher, is a huge admirer of the poet. The researcher/narrator states, “Whoever knows al-Mutanabbi must belong to his family and literary community” (Lahbib 9). In this way, he claims affiliation to “a literary community” that includes both the anonymous author of the manuscript and the famous Abbasid poet. In fact, the novel is inspired by the *sirā* or biography of al-Mutanabbi, who claimed to be a prophet (hence the nickname al-Mutanabbi or “would-be-prophet”) and was known not only for his dazzling and innovative poetry but also for his philosophical outlook and political ambition to become a leader, which never materialised in his turbulent journey across the tenth-century Arabo-Islamic world, particularly through Iraq, Syria and Egypt. In Lahbib’s novel, the narrator/researcher exalts his and al-‘Abdi’s love for Al-Mutanabbi’s biography and poetry (*sīra* and *shīr*, Lahbib 9). Al-‘Abdi further links his own travels and biography to Al-Mutanabbi’s *nubuwwa* (prophethood) and failed ambition – neither of which can

realise their dreams of becoming leaders of their people.²⁷ What instigated Al-‘Abdi to leave his home town Safi and then Fez, the centre of religious learning in Morocco, was his feeling of alienation or becoming a stranger (*gharīb*) in his own homeland (Lahbibi 32–5). This is echoed in one of al-Mutanabbi’s verses al-‘Abdi cites:

My stay in the land of Nakhla [a town in today’s Lebanon] is like nothing

If not the stay of Christ among the Jews

I am among people – May God set them right –

A stranger, like [the prophet] Saleh among Thamud.

LAHBIBI 9

Al-‘Abdi and Al-Mutanabbi seem to both share the feeling of being strangers among their own people. When al-‘Abdi gets lost in the Sahara, he recites al-Mutanabbi poetry, and before drifting to unconsciousness he exclaims, “and it was poetry that was my book and al-Mutanabbi my companion and my spiritual guide to the kingdom of heaven” (Lahbibi 113). Later he asks al-Mutanabbi for advice when he is besieged by troubles (177). Through the classical Arabic poetic tradition, Lahbibi’s novel re-imagines the language of a nineteenth-century religious scholar, an elegant *Fusha* shot through with Quranic imagery, classical poetry and occasional traces of the local spoken languages of the lands in which he travels, such as local Moroccan *Darija*, *Tmazight* languages, and Egyptian *Amiya* (or spoken Egyptian).²⁸

27 In the manuscript, al-‘Abdi claims that he is travelling to seek *imāma* or leadership; he meets a holy man who tells him that he can see “a man from whose eyes radiates prophethood even though he is not a prophet” (Lahbibi 253). Al-‘Abdi forms a religious *zāwiya* or *ribāt* in an eastern Saharan town and becomes the spiritual leader of a large number of followers, but this causes local rulers to resent his influence and prompts his escape to save his life (Lahbibi 151–79).

28 Traces of other languages are present throughout the novel, for example in *Darija* words such as *zemita* (dried wheat, 36), *salka* (memorising the Quran, 40), *lhdar* (mosque, 40), *gans* (foreign nationality, 51); in *Tmazight*, words such *arakas* (postman, 56) or *tasrghint* (plant perfume, 82); when al-‘Abdi reaches the lands of the Berber Tuareg in the Sahara, we encounter words such as *abiji* (wolf, 134) *mula* (bird 134), etc., and in Egypt *Amiya*, expressions such *bakshish* (221), *tinbāk* (tobacco, 223), “*di hekaya tawīla ba’a*” (it’s a long story) (223), etc.

4 Conclusion

The reinvention of the pre-modern Arabic sub-genre of *taghrība* (interlinked with *sīra* and *riḥla*) in the novels of Laredj, Toubia and Lahbib takes different forms depending on their national/local locatedness, the positionality of the authors, and their engagement with local contexts, debates as well as with local narrative traditions and orality. I argue that even within the pan-Arabic literary field these authors inhabit different worlds despite their commonalities. Laredj subverts the traditional *taghrība* and reframes it as a history of violence linked to the oppressive politics of governance in contemporary Algeria. His novel adopts the narrative format of the oral *taghrība* and draws on Algerian popular culture using a multilingual mixture of *Fusha* with spoken Algerian, *Tmazight* and some French expressions and words, which not only attest to the orality of the Arabic novel but also the “multilingual local” (Orsini) within the Maghreb. Toubia’s remapping of Egyptian history in his quartet as one of alienation from one’s homeland or *taghrība* constructs a national historical awareness from the point of view of those that are usually silenced in official histories: the peasants and their enduring exploitation at the hands of oppressive rulers. The novel’s local aesthetics draw on the cultural heritage of *taghrība* in Egypt as a lived oral tradition. Toubia’s use of rhymed prose in an archaic, eighteenth-century Arabic *Fusha* reminiscent of story-telling gives the novel the quality of an oral narrative and suggests the oral genealogy of the Arabic novel. Lahbib’s novel uses *taghrība* in the form of *riḥla* to create multiple historical and geographical imaginaries connecting Morocco to Africa, the Mashreq and Europe as a way to reflect on nineteenth-century Arabo-Islamic intellectual dilemma of the *Nahda* and what to take or reject from Europe. Lahbib’s novel draws heavily on classical Arabic poetic traditions and creating connectivity and intertextuality with an imagined pan-Arabic literary community. Its elegant *Fusha* is infused with Quranic imagery, classical poetry, and occasional traces of local spoken languages of the lands in which al-‘Abdi travels and which, like Laredj’s novel, shows the “multilingual local” of Maghrebi novels.

I suggest that location in the novels of Laredj, Toubia and Lahbib can be understood in three ways: (a) as local/national location (Algerian, Egyptian or Moroccan) since these novels speaks to local debates; (b) as locality linked to transregionality, invoking connectivity within the pan-Arabic literary field beyond the Maghreb-Mashreq divide; and (c) as location as a strategy to re-orient debates on Arabic literary modernity and world literature. In examining the literary life of the *taghrība* in North Africa, I argue that its novelisation is historically, culturally and politically contextualised and localised. I show how the re-use of this pan-Arabic cultural heritage offers Arab novelists in

North Africa a way of “being in the world” that is both transregional yet speaks from a national location or a local one embedded in particular aesthetics and politics. In other words, they present us with examples of texts with located politics and aesthetics while embedded in wider geographies of literary circulation and debates. Therefore, if we take these case studies as world literature in Arabic that speak from a localised aesthetics and politics, we need to, first, redefine and expand Arabic literary modernity and its novelistic traditions beyond the *marshraqi* dominant paradigms to include the diversity of national and regional genres and traditions within the diverse pan-Arabic literary field, such as those of the multilingual Maghreb. Second, we need to shift the dominant understanding of “the world” in world literature beyond “world-system” macro-models that assume a universally shared set of literary values and tastes with Europe and the US at the centre.²⁹

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²⁹ There are, of course, a few notable exceptions to this dominant trend including, among others, the works of Orsini, Mufti, and Allan.

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