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# Moroccan subaltern voices narrated: the historical imaginary of race and the legacy of slavery in Rabbaj's *Le Lutteur* [The Wrestler] and El Hachimi's *Dhākirat al-narjis* [The Daffodil's Memory]

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## ABSTRACT

Nation in Moroccan historiography writings has traditionally been described as culturally, ethnically and racially homogeneous; an all-encompassing discourse that silences episodes about the historical legacy of slavery and racism in the country, and undermines multicultural Morocco. In fact, the history of Morocco's blacks of sub-Saharan descent remains fragmented, scattered and undocumented – partly because of the scarcity of archival sources. Recent years, however, have witnessed the revival of an 'African consciousness' in Moroccan history and in literature. This is also the case of Maghrebi (North African) and Arabic literature from the Mashreq (the Middle East) and the Gulf. In this paper, we consider how two recent Moroccan novels, *Le Lutteur* [The Wrestler, in French] by My Seddik Rabbaj (2017) and *Dhākirat al-narjis* [The Daffodil's Memory, in Arabic] by Rachid al-Hachimi (2018), deal with salient moments of trans-Saharan cultural connections. We argue that the historical and the geographical imaginaries connecting North and sub-Saharan Africa compel a discussion of the 'decolonial' as outlined by the Moroccan critic Abdelkebir Khatibi, and enforce a rebound on the concept of 'significant geographies'. In engaging with the narratives' concern about the construction of racial and cultural identities in Morocco, we consider how these works resonate with the recovery of the subaltern history of black Morocco, and how gender, rural and ethnic identity inform and imbue the texts with a knot of ambivalent discourses.

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## Introduction

North and sub-Saharan Africa have conventionally been viewed through a tunneled lens of racial and ethnic divide evocative of a binary opposition that constructs the continent into the northern 'white' – white but not quite (Bhabha, 1997, p. 153) – and the southern sub-Saharan 'black'. Despite trans-Saharan cultural, social, commercial and intellectual connections over centuries, and through various historical junctures, the bipolar division

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separating North and sub-Saharan Africa remains strong. This division is sometimes attributed to modern European colonial taxonomies, but the dichotomy between Bilād al-Sūdān (the lands of the blacks, in Arabic) and Bilād al-Biḍān (the lands of the whites) is centuries old. Such binary split and the accompanying constellation of images about racial identity and difference are found in old travelers' accounts, for example. The Fez-born scholar and diplomat al-Hassan al-Wazzān, *alias* Leo Africanus, offers a circumspective description that is suffused with images about the customs and traditions of the West Africa that he visited around 1512 (Roger, 1962). Likewise, the Tangier-born Ibn Battuta 'rendered many negative judgments on Malian society that reflected rather the point of view of a Moroccan Arabo-Berber centrist' (El Hamel, 2013, p. 126).

This binary division has also resulted in an image of sub-Saharan countries as intrinsically and authentically African; whereas the countries to the north are placed in a vestige position imbued with distinct racial, cultural and historical attributes given the geographical proximity and access to Europe and the so-called 'Arab world' through the Mediterranean. This constructed dichotomy has fostered a Maghrebi perception of sub-Saharan Africa as a separate zone that conjures up images of racial and cultural otherness. The binary has also led to the constitution of two divided, and disconnected, scholarly fields – MENA (Middle Eastern and North African) Studies, on the one hand, and African Studies, on the other (Aïdi et al., 2020). The increasing interest that the field of Mediterranean studies has recently gained in Europe and the United States is reinforcing the already well-established tendency of framing the Maghreb only, or prevalently, in relation to the Mediterranean and Europe.

Imbued in this artificial split between the northern and southern regions of the Sahara desert is also a longstanding Maghrebi 'culture of silence' around the issues of slavery and racism (Marouan, 2016). Postcolonial ethno-nationalist discourses in the Maghreb have obstructed the emergence of platforms to elaborate on both the history of slavery and the present legacies thereof.<sup>1</sup> In the last few decades, however, different social and cultural sectors have started to break such silence, and critically revisited the racial exclusions foregrounded by the postcolonial state nationalist discourses and policies (Ltifi, 2020, pp. 69–72). Since the so-called Arab Springs, the issue of racism against black Maghrebis has gained social and political visibility alongside debates on feminism, women's and queer rights. The discussions on racism which activists, scholars and journalists are leading have also converged with the increasing acknowledgment of the discrimination against sub-Saharan migrants (King, 2019). The roots of such 'anti-black racism' are being located within the – until recently unspeakable – history of trans-Saharan slavery and its legacies (Menin, 2016). The 2020 protests echoing the Black Lives Matter movement have continued to fuel these debates (Mzioudet, 2020), but as important as it is to make such transnational connections, it is equally necessary not to conflate them.

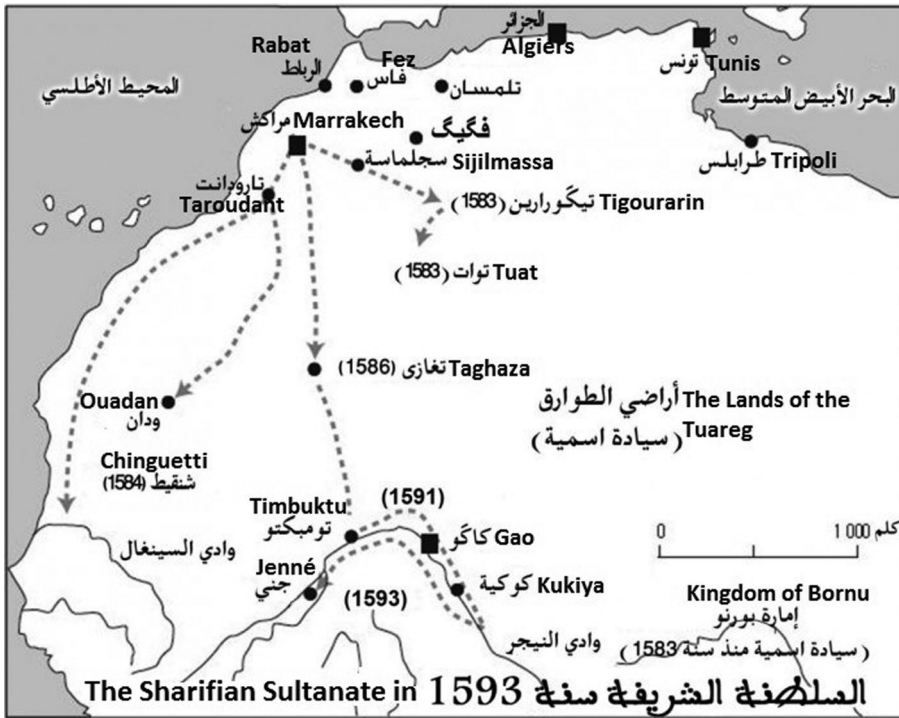
In this context, a new generation of Maghrebi and specifically Moroccan writers have started to deal with salient moments of trans-Saharan contacts, including the trauma of slavery and racism. Brahim El Guabli (2021) has termed this new trend the 'sub-Saharan African turn in Moroccan literature.' Works which make up this corpus include Miloud Benbaoui's 'عبد السودان ... أمبريك' [Ambrik ... Slave of the Sudan] (2018); Tahar Benjelloun's 'Le mariage du plaisir' [*The Pleasure Marriage*] (2014); Mustafa Laghtiri's 'ليلة إفريقية' [African Night] (2010); My Seddik Rabbaj's 'Le Lutteur' [The Wrestler] (2015); and Rachid El Hachimi's 'ذاكرة النرجس' [The Daffodil's Memory] (2018). In addition to these and other Moroccan literary texts (in different languages, as we explain below), Arabic literature from the

Mashreq (the Middle East) and the Gulf is also increasingly dealing with issues related to transnational racial connections, the experiences of everyday racism that both local and foreign black people experience, and the history of slavery. Tellingly, the second Arabic Novel Forum, hosted in Tunisia in March 2019, was dedicated to questions pertaining to racism and slavery. The guest of honor, Lebanese novelist Elias Khoury, affirmed these are 'often silenced' issues, and emphasized the role of literature 'in breaking taboos and tackling the real issues of Arab societies' (Khlifi, 2019).

This article considers two recent Moroccan novels which, in the transnational and post-revolutionary context outlined above, aesthetically voice out episodes of the silenced history of slavery and servitude: *Le Lutteur* [The Wrestler] by My Seddick Rabbaj (2015) and *Dhākirat al-Narjis* [The Daffodil's Memory] by Rachid al-Hachimi (2018). This essay attempts to reflect on how both works negotiate the shifting moments in the dynamics of cultural identity and difference. We argue that, in revisiting the history of trans-Saharan relations and slavery, and its legacy in the present (as in *Dhākirat al-Narjis*) or in the recent past (as in *Le Lutteur*), both novels fit into what 'Abdelkebir Khatibi (1983, p. 141) calls 'une écriture qui cherche ses racines' [writing that is on the quest for its roots].<sup>2</sup> They both blur the boundaries between fiction and fact, text and context, reality and imagination, and are set within the precincts of history, culture and human(e) experiences. These coalesce together to articulate intricate discourses on the representation of national identity, and on the construction of cultural 'routes and roots' as they pertain to Morocco's history and to the sub-Saharan consciousness.

Moroccan official history annals and historiography have almost eclipsed episodes about the historical legacy of slavery and racism in the country; a fact that disturbs one of the tenets upon which the multicultural fabric of Moroccan society is built. Yet the Moroccan liaison with sub-Saharan Africa is rooted in the centuries-long nomadic movements through the Sahara, in cultural connections among trading caravans and Muslim scholars, and in military contacts epitomized by the invasion of the Songhay Empire that the Sa'di sultan Mawlay Aḥmad al-Manṣūr launched at the end of the sixteenth century (see [Figure 1](#)). Historically, Morocco was a key site that connected the Mediterranean world to the gold resources and slave enclaves of West Africa, and huge numbers of uprooted black slaves crossed the region on their way out of the Sahara and into the Moroccan and the neighboring countries' slave markets and societies. Black slaves in Morocco tended to work in the domestic realm (especially women, as concubines and domestic workers), in the state bureaucracy (particularly men, as military soldiers and guards), and in the productive sector (in crafts but also in agriculture, particularly in southern Morocco) (Ennaji, 1994, 1999). These enslaved sub-Saharans, their worldviews and socio-cultural practices also shaped the history and the cultures of Morocco, other parts of North Africa, and the other Middle Eastern and Mediterranean diaspora locations where they settled (Hunwick & Powell, 2002).

Both *Le Lutteur* and *Dhākirat al-Narjis* allow us 'to enquire into and recover from history and literature those excluded voices of the marginalized or, in the term used by the Marxist intellectual Antonio Gramsci, the subaltern' (Richards, 2010, p. 23). Subalternity in these texts becomes a potential terrain that offers ample possibilities to go beyond the bracketed narratives of history into the subaltern ones and to restore the forgotten narratives that have been neglected by the official discourses – especially insofar as racial taxonomies and hierarchies are concerned. Both works are taken as texts which



**Figure 1.** Representation of the military expedition launched by Mawlay Aḥmad al-Manṣūr at the end of the sixteenth century. Names in Latin script and English translation have been added

explore Morocco's subaltern history as associated with the hegemonic structures laid by what Nashis Nandy (1983) calls the 'intimate enemy' with implicit inimical forces to nation and nation building.

Besides the engagement with the notion of subalternity, as a metaphor of reading and a methodology of exploration of the narratives, in this essay, we argue that the historical and geographical imaginary connecting North and sub-Saharan Africa compels a discussion of the 'decolonial' as outlined by the aforementioned 'Abdelkebir Khatibi in *Maghreb Pluriel*. In this insightful work, Khatibi (1983, p. 18) argues for 'une pensée plurielle qui ne réduise pas les autres (sociétés et individus) à la sphère de son autosuffisance' [a plural thought that does not reduce others (societies and individuals) to the sphere of self-sufficiency]. Concomitant with the *pensée plurielle* that would serve for the creation of a new cultural dialogue based on difference, Khatibi evokes decoloniality to question and problematize the inherent histories of subjugation emerging from the colonial period. We envision that the historical depth which transcends modern colonialism and the geographical breadth which goes beyond Europe in both *Le Lutteur* and *Dhākirat al-Narjis* is a powerful decolonial tool, as it enables a critical approach to historical subjugation that truly 'provincializes' European colonial powers (Chakrabarty, 2007). By writing novels that go beyond the postcolonial tropes of the relations between the colonizer and the colonized to delve into the legacies of trans-Saharan relations, including slavery and racism, the new generation of Moroccan writers, to which Rabbaj and al-Hachimi belong, open up the definition of multiculturalism that lies at the heart of North Africa. This, that is

'penser le Maghreb tel qu'il est – site topographique entre l'Orient, l'Occident et l'Afrique [sub-saharienne]' ['think[ing] the Maghreb as it is – a topographical site between Orient, Occident, and [sub-Saharan] Africa'], following yet again Khatibi (1983, p. 26), has an enormous decolonial potential, both politically and epistemically. We thus construe decoloniality in *Le Lutteur* and *Dhākirat al-Narjis* as a response to the cultural domination established from within by the totalizing ethno-nationalist discourses of knowledge.

Both works, we argue, invoke the longstanding historical amnesia perpetuated by the hegemonic structures which overshadow plurality and diversity, and summon the 'decolonial' as an alternative conceptualization to rethink difference in Moroccan subaltern identities, and they do so *despite* being written in different languages. Here, we build on recent critical perspectives with regard to the dominant reading practices based on linguistic determinism in the Maghreb (Dobie, 2003; El Shakry, 2019), and we take up 'reading together' (Laachir, 2016) the Francophone novel *Le Lutteur* and the Arabophone *Dhākirat al-Narjis* to 'she[d] light on the interwoven aesthetics and politics of Moroccan postcolonial novels of Arabic and French expression' (Laachir, 2016, p. 32). Rather than privileging language categorization, then, our comparative reading considers the shared historical, cultural, geographical, political and aesthetic interweaving(s) between Moroccan novels written in French and Arabic.

Through this entangled comparative reading, three main common features emerge. First, both novels bestow agency to Moroccan subaltern voices, as the title of this essay summons. In doing so, sub-Saharan Africa and the trans-Saharan geography emerge as central and as the main and shared world regions in these novels – and the emerging Moroccan, Maghrebi, and arguably even Arabic literary trend, as outlined above. In analyzing the interplay between the local and the global in these novels, we take up the concept of 'significant geographies,' an alternative concept to the generic meta-category 'world' as it is used in the field of world literature (Laachir et al., 2018), to signal the particular location, orientation, and the spaces and traditions which are relevant to both novels.

Another aspect the two novels share is that they (re)construct the discourse on the nation and national identity through the complex setting where the narrative events are set. We envision such complexity in the sense of plurality highlighted by Khatibi, and by the critic and geographer Doreen Massey (2005), who insists on conceiving of space as a site of multiplicity – of languages, of cultures, of trajectories and stories, and traditions. Critically, the privileging of the black subjects and their sub-Saharan origins does not lead these two novels to erase other cultural and social components of the Moroccan cultural mosaic, but on the contrary, it enhances their – more or less explicit – visibilization. As we shall show, both *Le Lutteur* and *Dhākirat al-Narjis* particularly highlight Amazigh (Berber) culture, language and identity as part of the Moroccan multicultural landscape. They do so by approaching Amazighness from a likewise complex, point of view: highlighting its subaltern position vis-à-vis Arabness, but also as representing whiteness, thus a higher position in the hierarchical racialized social puzzle, vis-à-vis black Moroccaness. Undoubtedly, ethnic identities are malleable thus we shall not incur in a strict and dichotomous separation between Arabness and Amazighness (see Gellner & Micaud, 1972). It is undeniable, however, that the pan-Arab nationalist movements and postcolonial state-building led to the subsuming of Amazigh language and identity, an issue which is recently being addressed by both state institutions and civil society (Boudraa & Krause,

2007). At the same time, as we mentioned above, early Muslim scholars and especially geographers, travelers and conquerors conflated Amazigh populations with whiteness, in opposition to black Africans (Lydon, 2005, pp. 295–296). Before them, the Berbers of Sanhaja also distinguished between a black-skinned person, called *Ahardan*, and a white one, *Amazigh* (El Hamel, 2013, p. 110). The references to Amazigh culture and identity to which we point in our analysis below are thus inscribed in an understanding of identities as relational, and of social positions as crisscrossed by intersectional power structures (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991).

Last but not least, both novels shed light on how gender and race coalesce together. As we show, *Le Lutteur* adopts moments of subversive attitudes towards gender constructs. The male protagonist is destabilized by fear and anxiety over the challenging concern of failing to carry out his ‘manly’ duties successfully. Feelings of vulnerability and frailty crack down the normative masculine ideals that pervade the template crafted for the patriarchal. In contrast, female characters in the novel are caught in situations wherein they are portrayed as brave, rebellious and defiant. The novel relocates traditional gender structures, reconfigures the conventional construction of women’s space and disturbs the male-dominated social and religious systems. In *Dhākirat al-Narjis*, gender is delineated in the matrilineal metaphors that the text mobilizes in the process of tracking back kinship through the female line. The female characters in the novel give their own version of power and authority beyond the constructed stereotypes of victimization and exclusion. The gender discourse in this work tunes up racial identity as it is narrated from a point of view that digs up into emblematic questions about ethnicity, origins, belonging and affiliations as they pertain to the construction of Moroccan cultural identity in its multifaceted constituents.

### **The outsider within: ethnic identity, racial affiliation and the negotiation of cultural difference in Rabbaj’s *Le Lutteur***

*Le Lutteur* [The Wrestler] by My Seddick Rabbaj (2015) goes back into history and adopts the subject matter of blackness and servitude as they pertain to sub-Saharan connections with Morocco. It attempts to reconstruct a pervasive episode in the history of the country marked out by tribal animosities and ethnic segregation, but these are also peppered by instances of solidarity. The novel starts with a story about a devastating war between two tribes, one of which is driven by a fervent desire to overpower the other. Soon, it shifts into a fascinating tale of a family on the quest for a safe and dignified world away from contending ethnic conflicts and tribal struggles. The very world the family discovers is as complex as the one they left behind – marked by intolerance and religious masks, but also by fellowship, resilience and affection.

The story opens with the Nbarch family from the Raytsoutes; a tribe of sub-Saharan descent and slaves of the Sa’dī sultan from Bilād al-Sūdān. Their story goes back to 1592 when they served in al-Manṣūr al-Dhahabī’s army to face the imperial powers of the time, the Portuguese and the Spanish (Rabbaj, 2017, p. 11). In return for their services, the Raytsoutes were granted a piece of land on the edge of the desert, which in the course of time they turned into a fertile oasis, and then into a sustained Duwar (tribal settlement), the lineage of which ‘a century later, after their deportation, would become the Al Boukhari Royal Guard of the ‘Alaouite Sultan, Moulay Isma’il’ (ibid, p. 13). These exiled dark-

complexioned Raytsoutes will soon trigger the enraged envy of the neighboring native tribe, the Tinirdens, renowned for their intolerance, cruelty and bloodthirsty self-indulgence. Inter-ethnic and inter-racial tensions grow intermittently between both tribes, but the Raytsoutes are almost impenetrable. Their tragic fall is plotted by the Tinirden Attouch, who pretends to be expelled by his fellowmen for his moral preaching and comes to seek refuge in the other camp. In an act of betrayal, he furtively poisons the wells, and the Duwar dwellers start to endure rampant disease (ibid, pp. 22–33). Weakened by the outburst of the epidemics, the Raytsoutes become easy prey to the Tinirdens who subsequently launch a victorious attack. During the raid on the Duwar, the Nbarch family loses the father but the mother and the three children manage to escape earlier on a donkey back. Driven by the force of circumstances, the family moves northward through a daring journey across the desert to settle in the southern part of Morocco within the confines of the Sidi Labyad Zawiya (lodge), whose followers are bound up by strict loyal ties to their spiritual founder.

Itto the mother, the eldest son Yahya and younger Fattoum and Housse become ‘God’s hosts’ at the Zawiya, refugees under the protective, commanding and watchful eyes of the Sheikh, who runs the religious community of the Zawiya and who, as a descendant of the Sidi Labyad mystic brotherhood, is endowed with political and spiritual powers. In the course of events, the sociable, physically built, and indefatigable Yahya becomes the outstanding wrestler who represents the athletic community during the yearly celebrations (*mawasim*, pl. of *moussem*) of the Zawiya. Wrestling ‘is part of the activities enacted during the *moussem* periods. To commemorate Sidi Labyad, festivities are organized around the shrine and last for a week. A wrestling competition between the gymnasts from the neighboring Duwars takes place. This is encouraged by the Sheikh in order to incite people to engage in a physical activity’ (ibid, p. 102).

Amid the twists of events and shifts in situations, and after daring acts of bravery in the Zawiya, the talented wrestler becomes member of the Sheikh’s army, engaged in waging war against the infidels. Fate has it that Oudda, one of the Zawiya’s girls, is enthralled by the wrestler’s heroic achievements. He falls in love with her, a fact that enflames his chivalrous battles and endorses his posture as a fearless warrior. This ‘Antar and ‘Abla epic in revival in the narrative is doomed to remain unsuccessful – at least until the very end of the story – given Yahya’s racial affiliations.<sup>3</sup> To abort the romantic love story that bounds up the two, Oudda’s uncle visits the Sheikh, who diagnoses her with the possession by a dangerous spirit. Accordingly, Oudda will be saved only if she weds an unknown man; any stranger that shows up at any time in the Zawiya. Since the unknown man fails to appear within the deadline given by the Sheikh, who is completely ignorant of the amorous relationship between Oudda and Yahya, the Sheikh takes it upon himself to exorcize the spirit by marrying her (ibid, pp. 196, 217).

Seized by an endless rage, Yahya sets off back to his natal village to take revenge for his father’s death. Almost trapped by the Tinirdens, he goes back to the Zawiya to accomplish his duty as a servant of God and a fervent warrior in the Sheikh’s guard. Against the course of events, the jihad war launched by the Sheikh against the Faucilles provokes the Sultan’s anger, who sends an army to attack the Zawiya. The Zawiya is ravaged and the Sheikh is killed. Yahya manages to save the pregnant Oudda from the crumbled building and joins his family. They set off altogether in a rainy evening on a donkey back when Oudda is seized by labor contractions mid-way. With the help of the mother, the delivery



is successful; 'it is a boy. He amazingly looks like Yahya, except that he is not as black as he is. A Raytsoute' (ibid, p. 287).

Through the telling of an individual story, *Le Lutteur* translates the human drama of a subject caught within the cleavages of identity and difference circumscribed and inscribed within ethnic exclusion and racial hierarchy. Anchored in the evocative notion of the porosity of the boundaries and their potentialities in the construction of racial identity and cultural diversity, the narrative reveals significant moments in the connections that have been created over the centuries across the northern and southern parts of the Sahara desert. It narrates the life experience and agency of a black subject, descendant of sub-Saharan slaves, who has been driven by the forces of circumstances to battle for survival and transgress the boundaries of a cultural identity set at the intersection of history, race and status. The transgression of these boundaries enacts a narrative of cultural difference that keeps floating across racial and religious ideologies of power.

The text is informed by the will to restore fragments from the history of a Morocco at the crossroads of tribal enmity, religious extremism and racial discrimination wherein different cultural voices are hidden, concealed and obscured. Through the revival of a nomadic identity in constant quest for self-assertion, the narrative re-indigenizes its textual spaces with an excluded otherness that endures a forced exilic experience of racial alienation and dislocation. *Le Lutteur* symbolically attempts to '[include] in the history of the nation the histories of groups previously left out of it' (Chakrabarty, 1998, p. 473), and to revisit the suppressed (hi)stories and the subaltern identities that hegemonic history writing has consistently subjected to various forms of exclusion. The pervasive consciousness of exclusion on the grounds of ethnicity as a paradigmatic marker of identity and difference operates in the text along dyadic oppositions such as black and white, pious and impious, dominant and subaltern.

For Gyan Prakash, subaltern studies is concerned with the 'historiographical contest over representation of the culture and politics of the people ... it announce[s] a new approach to restore history to the subordinated' (Prakash, 1994, p. 1477). In fact, the subalternity discourse that informs Rabbaj's text is historically constructed and culturally endorsed through the aesthetic illumination of a figure with sub-Saharan origins that is at odds in forging a stable space because of racial and ethnic affiliations. Subalternity here becomes a coercive ontological condition that is delimited and circumscribed by the enunciations of race. The novel is also to be viewed within the revisionist theories that underscore the need to 'disclose that which is concealed' (Prakash, 2000, p. 180) in order to go beyond the mainstream narratives of history into alternative and silenced ones.

Through *Le Lutteur* Rabbaj brings to the forth the majorly eclipsed history of the sub-Saharan dark-skinned subjects who endured atrocious moments of subalternity, disintegration and racial discrimination. The first episode of racial intolerance starts with the tribal conflict. The Raytsoutes are rejected by the local Tinirdens, the neighboring tribe, and the occasional war waged against them is primarily ethnic and racial, although it is also triggered over land ownership. The Tinirdens' skillfully planned attack is meant to exterminate the Raytsoutes, to 'weed [them] out, like unwanted plants and throw them away' (Rabbaj, 2017, p. 35). In the process, houses are invaded and the children, the elderly and the disabled are killed; the survivors are chained and herded like cattle to be sold in the slave markets' (ibid, p. 39). Rabbaj does not only offer an intriguing

chapter that furnishes moments of confusion in the history of tribal animosities marked out by racial violence and zealous intolerance, but also lays bare the suffering experience of individuals living in the fringes of racial difference and cultural disintegration. It is through the thorny life led by the black-skinned Nbarch family that readers are forcibly taken into the little-known history of servitude and slavery in Morocco.

In *Le Lutteur*, it is mainly through music that the sub-Saharan genealogy and memory of the Raytsoutes comes through.<sup>4</sup> While the Raytsoutes are clearly aware of their sub-Saharan roots, they have also 'forgotten their origins and their language, their family and their customs, their celebrations and clothing, their dances and their songs' (p. 12). In the novel, music functions as a cultural marker of sub-Saharan identity and evokes Morocco's historical connections and interactions with the history of trans-Saharan relations and (slave) trade. In fact, through *Le Lutteur* we are exposed in varying degrees to the figurative textual rhythms and sounds of Gnāwa (Moroccan ritual musicians from the sub-Saharan diaspora) and the Tagnāwit (Gnāwa identity) that inform them. Yahya, like any member of the Raytsoute community, makes a musical instrument called *hajhouj*, following the wisdom transmitted from one generation to another (p. 104). The first time he plays it, Yahya becomes possessed by 'dangerous spirits' and, in his trance, 'incomprehensible words come out of his mouth' (p. 106). Yahya and his musical instrument, together with the trance-like seizure it produces, best incarnate the Gnāwa identity in the story (ibid, pp. 104–106). The Gnāwa, stigmatized on the basis of their dark complexion, are musicians historically known as former slaves whose musical rituals celebrate significant mystic figures from the Bilād al-Sūdān and involve trance and possession by various divine spirits that bestow their experience with spiritual dimensions (Simour, 2016, pp. 126–128). Their night ceremonies, known as *Derdba* or *Lila*, enhance a Sufi aura that venerates saints and people of sub-Saharan origins, particularly *Bambara*, *Lalla Mira*, *Chamharoush* ... In this text, Tagnāwit becomes a symbolic correlative of Moroccan identity constructed through the country's engagement with the history of slavery. At the same time, while music is the realm through which the descendants of sub-Saharan slaves maintain a black diasporic consciousness, such memory is encrypted to them. Although some Bambara words are still present in their songs, they are incomprehensible to them (pp. 60, 109–110). This issue problematizes the notion whereby historical black diasporic communities necessarily preserved a clear consciousness of their original cultural practices.<sup>5</sup> All in all, then, Rabbaj visibilizes, restores and reindigenizes the history of peoples of sub-Saharan descent in Morocco, while avoiding to depict it in a romanticized or essentialist way.

*Le Lutteur* brings forward the evocative concept of decoloniality as it pertains to cultural diversity and belonging to rethink racial and ethnic difference, and question the long-standing forces of oblivion that national hegemonic practices have preserved, consolidated and perpetuated. The decolonial possibilities that Khatibi projects constitute, in fact, an endeavor against essentialist and totalizing views of identity; a process of the decolonization of 'nationalist, racialized rhetoric' (Lionnet, 2011, p. 388). We argue that Rabbaj's narrative constructs an otherness based on racial difference from within to assert the permeability and fluidity of Moroccan racial identity and to sustain the sub-Saharan origins as an inevitable historical constituent of Moroccan identity formation. In addition to the sub-Saharan regions and cultures, which are the focus of our analysis and point of comparison of the two novels under review in this essay, we shall also

mention two important aspects that weave through the discursive construction of subalternity and decoloniality in Rabbaj's text, namely rurality and Amazighness.

*Le Lutteur* is punctuated by extracts that place rural areas in a heterogeneous subaltern position informed by multifaceted levels that unveil conflicting discourses about society, religion and culture. The text opens on the desert with hardly any geographical references; that is to say, the setting is not onomastically delineated. The events take place in an unnamed space; but defined according to a somewhat clear spatial and historical topography. It is set in a contact zone 'where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (Pratt, 1992, p. 4). The narrative journeys northward as the destitute family moves towards the Zawiya. Hereafter, the events are textually arranged to acquaint the readers with a particular spatial arrangement that enframes and divides the text into two distinct universes: the world left behind by the family members and the new countrified, rural setting that they embrace. The latter resonates with a deep-seated malaise, and with ambivalences incarnated by the spiritual figure of the Sheikh. The Sheikh's patriarchal overhand grip on the Zawiya is complicit and complacent with religious interpretations wherein the religious discourse, through his Friday preaching, is twisted to serve his own desires and ideological interests. This is clearly apparent in the Zawiya's war against the rebellious tribe of Fnouna, 'the enemies of God, an esteemed act and paradise rewarding' for refusing to pay taxes on crop sharing (ibid, p. 175). The narrative thus becomes entangled within an uncompromising precinct of racial and ethnic juncture that is mostly troubled by the exigencies of sovereign power relations, by inter-tribal struggles over land ownership and religious (mis)interpretations, and by the history of a forceful context of slave trafficking, as well as colonial encroachment. At this stage, inter-tribal conflicts together with the sporadic turbulences with the central government guide the narrative action. By the end of the novel, the efforts to counter foreign aggressions instill conflicts between different Moroccan societal sectors. With the endorsement of most of the surrounding tribes, and under the umbrella of Islamic reformist slogans, the Sheikh aims at countering the increasing power of both the foreigner 'enemies of God,' whose colonial scheme is becoming more and more real, and the Moroccan central state, has considered to yield to such encroachment (Rabbaj, 2017, p. 254).

Thus, rural Morocco emerges as a place of conflict, but also of solidarity, resilience and bounded human efforts that counter religious and racial fanaticism. In *Le Lutteur*, different populations and cultures make up the fabric of rural Morocco: the Raytsoutes, who conform to the sub-Saharan descendants to whom the Nbarch family members belong; the Tinirdens, who come through, as already mentioned, as 'savage mountain people' (*fierce montagnards*). This is a conceptualization that bears historical resonances with the way in which urban populations have traditionally viewed rural folk; the 'blue men' (*les hommes bleus*) and other nomadic populations, whose values – silence, simplicity, and relation to nature – are praised (ibid, pp. 52, 56). Rabbaj's text presents the southern rural part of the country as a multilayered space where cultural, social and political difference sometimes lead to violence, but neither only nor always. In that regard, *Le Lutteur* captures some of the latest conceptualizations of space as 'full of power and symbolism, a complex web of relations of domination and subordination, of solidarity and co-operation' (Massey, 2013, p. 265). In doing so, it problematizes oft-held views of the Moroccan rural world as static and 'traditional.' The rural Zawiya, in addition, represents not only a

religious locale that emphasizes spiritual mysticism and devotedness, but also knowledge. In fact, as soon as Yahya's siblings Fattoum and Housse join the Qur'anic school at the Zawiya, their deceased father's dream, namely that they become literate, begins to become true. The fact that the rural realm represents a center of knowledge and religious devotion is, yet again, a powerful image that problematizes some of the tropes that have historically – and historiographically – depicted the rural world as 'uncivilized.'

Moreover, along the gendered lines of the Zawiya, and against the patriarchal embodiments of authority and submission, the novel relocates traditional gender structures and foregrounds the historical contribution of women to religious knowledge through the figure of the *fqiha* who runs the Qur'anic school (ibid., p. 84). Rabbaj visibilizes this historical yet oft-erased scholarly figure and, thus, reshapes a realm that is purported as inherently men's concern in the Arabo-Muslim religious tradition. Ultimately, the *fqiha's* figure complicates the text further and destabilizes the (traditional) view about women that generates attitudes of seclusion, exclusion and mistrust (El Haitami, 2012). The narrative, hence, endows female religious leaders with intellectual rigor and religious authority, and challenges the male clergy's upper hand over the production of religious knowledge. Ultimately, the *fqiha's* figure reconfigures the conventional construction of women's space and enables a liberating discourse to thrive. The ingrained prejudice against women, likewise, is counteracted in the narrative by the overall progressive aura the Sidi Labyad Zawiya purports to instill through the text's figurative imbrications. In doing so, *Le Lutteur* narrates the history of the Zawiya in its intimacies and desires, reimagining its ambiguities and shifts and wrapping up its ironies and complexities.

Very revealing in *Le Lutteur*, and alongside the exploration of the mythic intricacies of the Zawiya, Rabbaj insists on demystifying Morocco's plurality and the cultural hybridizations that construct its identities. Such plurality is visible enough through the textual struggle to revive and perpetuate bits of Amazighness in imagined onomastics and constructed diction. The text is replete with the symbolic use of the names of people and places that appear at irregular intervals according to the plot development. The text evokes words such as *Tinirden* (wheat owners in Tamazight), *Nbarch* (a derivative of Mbarek or Mobarek – a name usually given to slaves – in Moroccan Dārīja), *Itto*, *Fattoum*, *Housse*, *Oudda* (as names); *Assoukyine* (blacks in Tamazight) *Adrar* (plain in Tamazight), *Taghzounte* (as an Amazigh mythic name instilling fear), *Ait Izzou* (as a tribe in Tamazight), *oute* (meaning hit in Tamazight). These are all figments of imagination that attempt to restore one of the linguistic and cultural constituents of Moroccan cultural identity. Very revealing is how these words and many more imbue the text with a lurking discourse on Tamazight and its contribution to the construction of the overall meanings of the narrative.

Within the crisscrossing of multiple racial and ethnic boundaries, Rabbaj keeps thrusting further feelings of brazen subalternity on racial grounds. Our analysis now proceeds to a close reading of the novel's evocations of both the sordidness of a life lived by the sub-Saharan descendants in southern rural Morocco and the agency of the subaltern and invisibilized black-skinned Moroccans. Not surprisingly, the first contact of the Nbarch destitute family with the Zawiya is defined through racial hostility and categorization. A group of children is surprisingly scared at the sight of 'Asoukyine', the blacks (ibid, p. 77). Here the text captures a moment of revelation and contemplation whereby the protagonist starts to think about his blackness for the first time. In fact, 'his black color had never

been a problem for him. He had never been interested in it. All the Raytsoutes are black; moreover, he had never left his homeland before the battle' (ibid).

Upon arrival to the Zawiya, Yahya and his family, who are animated by a seemingly restless vocation to survive and thrive, are assigned roles according to the regulations dictated by the Sheikh. Soon, Yahya's prowess in wrestling and in the battlefields wins him the respect of the community and becomes a member of the Sheikh's guard. Interestingly, the condition of subalternity endows the narrative with a subversive terrain of agency and triumph over racial affiliation. Rabbaj offers shifting moments of a defiant ethnic identity as Yahya turns into the outstanding protector and savior of the Sheikh and, by extension, of the Zawiya's interests. He has managed to 'secure his place among the elites with whom the Sheikh shares his secrets' (ibid, p. 163). Even more interesting is the fact that it is precisely blackness which contributes to his symbolic social rise, attained through heroic achievements in the Zawiya's annual performances and during the tribal wars blessed by the Sheikh. In fact, Yahya's strength is linked to some supernatural forces which the locals attribute to black people. For example, when fighting the Aït Izzou, a member of that tribe shouts at the sight of Yahya: 'There is a demon among them, the [S]heikh has reinforced the ranks of his warriors with a black demon, avoid him, don't fight him, run, run, run ...!' (p. 180). Ultimately, it is the presence of the 'black demon' which enables the victory of the Zawiya. After the militiamen return home, Yahya's mother tells him: 'everyone is talking about your venture', and 'they say you became invisible!' (p. 183). The fear that Yahya has instilled in the enemies has turned, via oral accounts, into the superpower to become invisible, which bestows Yahya's deeds with even more grandiosity. As a result, Yahya and his family attain significant social rise and (the ability) to counter the racist attitudes they have faced hitherto. Yahya's siblings Fattoum and Housse cannot suppress their excitement, as their elder brother's achievement against the Aït Izzou means that '[t]he children at the *m'sid* [Qur'anic school] will no longer be disrespectful' to them, because Yahya is 'the undefeatable warrior of the tribe' (p. 183). Thus, the protagonist of *Le Lutteur* emerges from the confines of racial subalternity into a powerful emblematic figure associated with courage, glory, intelligence and self-assertion. Most importantly, he manages to unsettle the notion of blackness as exclusively indexing racial inferiority. His heroism and victorious accomplishments become enabling forces to transcend racial categorization and Yahya and his family members manage to counter longstanding disparaging ideas about blacks.<sup>6</sup> In fact, thereafter he asserts his racial dignity, power and pride; as do his younger siblings and mother. While signaling historically-inflected racial oppression, then, Rabbaj also highlights the agency of the descendants of sub-Saharan slaves in Morocco.

Against the course of events, the Sheikh terminates Yahya's love affair with Oudda to protect the racial lineage of the community. The threat of racial contamination is deliberately delineated through the abortive love affair between Yahya and Oudda wherein the need to monitor racial boundaries and reorder the Zawiya within a rigid discourse that resists racial mixing becomes pervasive and unconditioned (Simour, 2012). The interracial love affair between Oudda and Yahya reminds us of Shakespeare's Othello and Desdemona; or Eleazar and the Queen in Thomas Dekker's *Lust's Dominion or the Lascivious Queen* (1657).<sup>7</sup> These are individual stories in crisis because of racial and cultural stigmatization; cases that activate powerful images in defining and manipulating racial sexual encounters as being out of the ordinary and outside the realm of tolerable behaviors

(Chito Childs, 2005). Yahya becomes a sexual anxiety and a threat of miscegenation; a cultural fact that is appropriated by the Sheikh to protect the identity of the Zawiya against the dangers of the racial Other. However, what we would notice by the end of the story is that Yahya succeeds through the impregnation of Oudda to perform what Homi Bhabha calls a 'strategic reversal of domination,' whereby the subaltern Other enters the official discourse and disrupts its racial authority (Bekkaoui, 1998, p. 57). The outcome is an effective displacement of racial discourse, and a challenge to the unilateral construction of identity. Hence, Yahya – as is the case with Eleazar and Othello – is a figure that breaks through the codes of racial affiliation, and '[d]eftly reinvent, articulate and cultivate the subversive potentialities encapsulated within the mask of difference. By so doing, [he] actually manage[s] to achieve mastery and control [...] on the injurious stereotype and the prejudiced community which voices it' (ibid, p. 95). As we shall explain next, the reversal of domination is however twofold, as Oudda is a key figure in the transformation of Yahya. In addition to the subversion of racialized hierarchies, gendered ones add further intricacy to the micropolitics of power in the novel.

The protagonist's masculinity and its oppressive nature emerge from the very beginning of the narrative in *Le Lutteur*, given that Yahya's transition to manhood takes place through the process of exile. While on the one hand, such transition consolidates the savior character of the male protagonist via the prominent position that he cherishes within the community of the Zawiya, as already mentioned, the process itself, on the other hand, is illustrative of the constructed nature of normative manhood and of the possibilities of subverting it. On their way out of their homeland, Yahya feels 'afraid of being unable to keep up to his [deceased] father's expectations, he is afraid of being incapable of achieving his mission, of failing to save his small family' (Rabbaj, 2017, pp. 43–44). Similarly, before his position as the invincible wrestler is consolidated, the fact of having been chosen to represent the Zawiya by the Sheikh 'honors him and, at the same time, scares him. He is afraid of not being up to the expectations' (ibid, p. 141). The fears in Yahya's 'masculine trajectory' (Ghannam, 2013, p. 6) convey the burden entailed in becoming a man, insofar as the manhood ideal Yahya is expected to perform is endowed with the duty of protection of family and community members.<sup>8</sup> The remarkably vulnerable position of the exiled black family reinforces the oppressive nature of the normative ideals embedded in the performance of hegemonic manhood, because Yahya's fears have no room and he needs to lead the family despite being a young child who has just lost his father and who is troubled and disoriented. And yet, the envisioning of vulnerability and fear in the novel also counter the emotionally-detached type of patriarchal manhood. In this regard, Rabbaj's novel is key in subverting harmful caricatures on Arab and Muslim men as 'exceptionally brutal, irrational, even psychopathic, and their predispositions are fueled by a hyperzealous, extremist religion' (Inhorn, 2012, p. 31).

The female characters in the novel, for their part, are defined as brave, strong and exceptionally defiant and critical. Yahya's 10-year-old sister Fattoum and Itto, his mother, come through as determined and strong, while his beloved Oudda is a rebellious girl; a fact that unsettles the traditionally held images of women in Maghrebi literary writings. Oudda knows what she wants and is assertive about it. She is absolutely straightforward in letting Yahya know what she likes about him: 'you are not like the other boys who seek to approach me constantly, you are different in all respects. You are respectful, shy and physically strong; yes, you are strong, you have defeated the wrestlers' (Rabbaj, 2017,

pp. 169–170). Oudda is not characterized by the ambivalence and indecision that are oftentimes attributed to women, and she does not appreciate being sought insistently and disrespectfully. For that reason, the qualities that she values most in Yahya are the space he gives her, in addition to his respectful and shy character. Moreover, despite her initial cherishing of his physical strength, Oudda moves to challenge Yahya for his military role and the aggressive behavior demonstrated in his rage-inflamed fighting. Perhaps most importantly, Oudda ultimately manages to change the protagonist's upheld views and beliefs. In one of the couple's encounters, she tells him: 'Everyone talks about you, the ravaging, the black demon who sows fear, who kills with no mercy' (ibid, p. 184). When he responds by alleging that those he has defeated 'are the enemies of God, pillagers, we have given them a lesson', she claims that 'they are human beings and you have massacred them' (ibid). Oudda's position impacts Yahya to such an extent that he eventually embraces her way of seeing and doing things.

The female characters' ideas and relations in *Le Lutteur* complicate the Zawiyā's purported religious vocation, too. Through Oudda, the fanatic discourse visible in the Sheikh's preaching is resisted and subverted. While rearticulating the power dynamics embedded in the biased spiritual foundations of the Zawiyā's Sheikh, Oudda emerges from an oppositional site to incarnate the spirit of tolerance and coexistence that stands against racial hatred, ethnic rejection, and cultural exclusion. Oudda questions Yahya's behavior in spite of (or perhaps because) of her love for him. At the same time, her way of thinking is as odd as it is attractive to him: 'For the first time, Yahya hears a person who is able to question the Sheikh's orders' (ibid, p. 185). By the end of the book, Yahya admits that Oudda 'has opened [his] eyes' to a very large extent (ibid, p. 278). The novel thus posits the rebel girl as a source of moral inspiration, growth and maturity for the male hero of the tale. This represents the gendered reversal of domination in addition to the racialized one as encapsulated by their relation.

Moreover, the changes that Oudda's questioning has raised displace Yahya's violent character as the main source of collective prestige. Precisely, whereas the community learns to appreciate the black man for his strength in fight and the benefits that such quality brings to the Zawiyā, Oudda's love does not only transcend this fact, but pushes him toward a more humane and peaceful attitude instead. Oudda and Yahya's love story – the culmination of which is unachievable even at the open end of the book – ultimately transcends normative racial and gender dynamics. It challenges the monolithic discourse of identity construction and disturbs the race-based social boundaries. Her forbidden relationship with Yahya reproduces and negotiates the black and white divide of ethno-racial boundaries. She transcribes a particular version of identity where conventional criteria of difference such as race, culture and ethnicity are disoriented and destabilized as non-fixed boundaries to serve up human diversity and cultural multiplicity.

### **Moroccan Blackness and the restoration of memory in El Hachimi's *Dhākirat al-Narjis* [The Daffodil's Memory]**

*Dhākirat al-Narjis* [The Daffodil's Memory] (2018) by Rachid El Hachimi is an intriguing narrative about the figurative rendition of blackness in its myriad and intertwined connections with other cultures that permeate the ethnic and racial difference of Moroccan

identity. As the narrative progresses, one of the novel's protagonists states: 'do you love me *Nu'mān*, even though I am black and ugly? Promise that you will never leave me no matter what happens' (El Hachimi, 2018, p. 29). With such audacious confession that is overloaded with meanings whereby lines of skin color demarcation in Morocco are heavily drawn, the author delves into the subject matter of black identity in the country. His work remaps the contours of an unremitting condition marked out by the predicaments of existence and identity-affirmation in a society of racial and ethnic contrasts. El Hachimi's text addresses the social, historical and cultural subalternity of black Moroccans, and sets Morocco within both the historical genealogy that goes back to the enslavement of sub-Saharanans and the particular located structures and meanings of its legacy in postcolonial times.

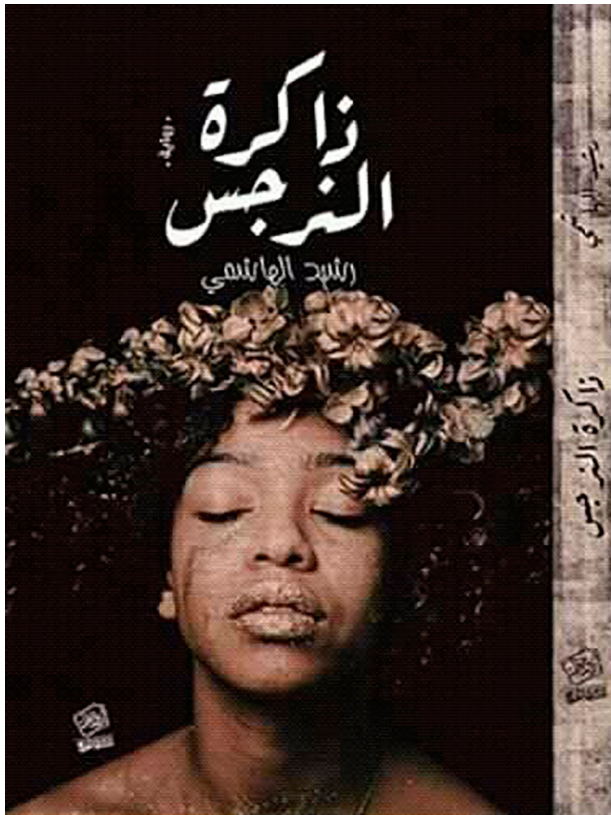
At the same time, *Dhākirat al-Narjis*, while offering moments of reflection over the significance of 'differences in human coloring' (Aidoo, 1977, p. 12), maps out the plurality of the Moroccan racial imaginary and shows the multilayered nature of the social, historical and cultural worlds constituting the country where the events of the novel are set. We take up such nuanced portrayal and the knot of complexities and ambivalent desires the narrative embeds within the precincts of its discourses as concomitant with the theorization of the 'decolonial' as envisioned by the above-mentioned Khatibi. We contend that in foregrounding blackness as a racial issue permeating the construction of the discourse on national identity, El Hachimi's novel is textually and discursively anchored at the crossroad of sub-Saharan Africa, the Atlantic, the Mediterranean and the so-called Arab world.

Before going further into the analysis, it is interesting to underline the critical importance of the visual vocabulary on the front cover in El Hachimi's work and explore its significance in light of what Gerard Genette calls the 'paratext'; that is, elements that adorn and accompany the main text, such as the author's name, the title, the preface, or illustrations. The paratext is a 'fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text' (Lejeune, 1975, p. 45). In Genette's conceptualization, it is 'a zone not only of transition but also of *transaction*: a privileged place of a pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that [...] is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it' (Genette & Lewin, 1997, p. 2). Indeed, the title of El Hachimi's work in Gerard Genette's theoretical undertaking of the paratext is powerful enough as to the construction of an understanding of the whole text. In fact, the image on the front cover (Figure 2) features a symbolically revealing and a visually thought-provoking image replete with signifiers that create meanings in direct terms, and which fall within the overall thematic concern of the text. The image shows, in what looks like a moment of reflection and meditation, the face of a black-skinned woman crowned with a bunch of flowers that surround her head, with closed eyes and a slightly open mouth. Her face bears two noticeable scars that probably stand as markers of tribal belonging. Discomfort and unrelaxed facial traits are visual indications that are mostly symbolic in recreating the emotional and metaphorical horizons of expectations in the story, and in projecting the reading experience that the book promises to provide. Reading this paratextual element in light of the discursive implications it purports allows the book's visual imaginary to enhance the narrative's texture and create a dialectical relationship between the text as pretext and the paratext as context.



From the outset, the title of *Dhākirat al-Narjis* is suggestive of a straightforward concern that the stories in the novel hold for the readers. It is deliberately set forward to proclaim, through the incorporation of the word *narjis* (daffodil), a figurative and symbolic indication of an enigmatic world in the Greek tragedy whereby a man by the name of Narcissus who was so charmed by his physical beauty drowned in a river while trying to capture his own reflection in the water. The daffodils that soon grew along the riverbank became associated with Narcissus and took on his name, owing to the splendor of the image they projected in the water. Far from the vanity and self-absorption purported in Greek mythology, the daffodils coupled with memory in *Dhākirat al-Narjis* stand for the revival of old times, sensations, awareness, inner reflections, and reconciliation with the past. They echo the craving desire of the protagonists to recover an almost eclipsed history; the history of slavery and servitude as lived and endured in Morocco. In El Hachimi's work, these resonate with unrequited love, life and death, loss and hope, being and becoming. They are suggestive of the social paradoxes experienced by individuals in quest for origins. The novel suggests that it is through restoring the characters' own history, and their ancestors', that the collective history of enslaved sub-Saharanans in Morocco shall be recovered.

The title literally and figuratively reverts on the constraints that encompass the promises of a meaningful life in a heavily racialized context. If the white characters in the text



**Figure 2.** Cover of *Dhākirat al-Narjis* (2018) by Nur Islam.

are pushing the narrative events further without being embarrassed by their past, the black ones are thrashed by the violent condition of racial affiliation and are in constant attempts to overcome the damaging stereotypes of blackness and the burdens of the racialized reality they are caught in. One of the protagonists is obsessed with the deciphering and the interpretation of a historical manuscript to discover her roots and identity, and overcome the injustice that history has inflicted on her sub-Saharan descendants. In contrast, the other protagonist is tormented by an amnesic condition because of his enslaved origins and due to the self-protection mechanism that he has developed in order to deal with the violence of racism he endured as a child.

Blackness and racial affiliation, the main thematic concerns of *Dhākirat al-Narjis*, arise from the juxtaposition of two radically independent stories with seemingly different historical junctures; and yet set within the same racial geography and ethnic boundaries. These stories explore racial identities and attempt to recover voices which resonate with identity malaise in postcolonial Morocco. The story of al-Ḥura Razāqī bent al-Garāb, on the one hand, follows a linear narrative construction of events; and that of al-'Abdī's, on the other, is based on the flashback technique and on the polyphony of the narrative voice. The digging exercise that the protagonists of both stories perform is twofold, because the retrieval of their personal and family memory is also the search and restoration of collective history – that of the sub-Saharan populations who 'arrived successively' (*tawāfadat*) and 'established home in' (*istawṭanat*) Morocco (El Hachimi, 2018, p. 90). This is the narrative's overall orientation; it foregrounds a silenced episode in Moroccan history that is ultimately to be uncovered in order to apprehend the complexity of the country's social and cultural fabric.

The novel opens with the story of al-Ḥura, a 40-year old dark-complexioned History teacher who has been entangled in endless emotional states of alienation before she discovers a manuscript dating back to the fourteenth century, owned and secured by her grandmother, Ma-Ḥna. The manuscript is hidden in the underground granary of the family's old-medina house that neither Ma-Ḥna nor the previous generations of grandmothers had dared to open. Al-Ḥura hopes that the discovery will lead her to unveil the historical truth about the origins of her black ancestries. She states, 'ever since I laid my hand on the old manuscript, I have felt that my life has turned upside down, as if fate had blessed me with a wonderful twist of coincidence that made me turn in a short time my sadness into a great joy' (ibid, p. 11). Access to the underground granary has always been a matter of concern to al-Ḥura, holding fast to the hope that she will get rid of the frantic questions that have overwhelmed her ever since her girlhood. She was brought up to believe, based on her mother's incessant warnings, that the granary is 'owned by a wicked spirit [...] an adventure with perilous consequences' (ibid, p. 12).

Digging the underground granary of the family's house to recover the mysterious manuscript is also an archival endeavor in the narrative, especially since al-Ḥura is a historian and a History teacher, and it points out to the signifying practice of retrieving the voices that have been eclipsed by Moroccan mainstream forms of historiography. It is also a salient moment about a daring journey into the quest for the roots where 'a living history that perpetuates and renews itself through time, and permits the recovery of many old currents that have seemingly disappeared' (quoted in Bastian, 2009, pp. 117–118) is activated. Such activation is delineated through the figurative authority of the

manuscript as a 'shifting material artifact' that 'contributes to the evolution of a sense of identity' (Brown, 2013, p. 90).

The forbidden manuscript, as the text states, has been passed down by the generations of the family's grandmothers 'who never knew about its content because they were illiterate. Nobody has ever been allowed to leaf through it except the women who belong to the family's pedigree' (El Hachimi, 2018, p. 16). Al-Hura ventures and digs further to discover a box of decayed leather manuscripts with a daffodil fragrance, the same smell she had discovered in her grandmother's wooden box serving as wardrobe; she gently feels the yellowish objects and the warmth of the stolen centuries from her ancestors (ibid, p. 18). In fact, the manuscript is not just worthless yellowish leather leaves, but a thread of hope that will lead her to discover her origins and escape the racial reality levied by her dark skin color. The manuscript, as she wonders, may go back to

our *Sijilmassi* grandmother, the al-Hura whose untold yearnings have been detailed to me by my grandmother. The black slave was bought by one of the Banū Hilāl's noble men from a Jewish merchant, and when she had been redeemed after many years in bondage, she wandered in God's lands with our Sudanese grandfather until they settled in Essaouira, where they started the family's progeny, which I am, in the end, an extension of (ibid, pp. 18-19).

Al-Hura's experience of the quest for origins embodies a discursive example where the taxonomy of Moroccan racial discourse is overturned. It epitomizes a discursive instance where cultural and racial difference in the country is contested and dismantled on historical and archival grounds. Accordingly, she brings the issue of slavery and servitude back to their national location and geographical setting: Sijilmassa, which during the Middle Ages became the linchpin of the western trans-Saharan trade, and Essaouira as a noticeable juncture in the transatlantic and African slave experiences (see Figure 1 above). She turns these historical cities into sites of numerous spatial experiences, of global intrigues and cultural transgression (Edwards, 2005, p. 123); a liberating space that 'holds out [...] the promise of an engagement with a broader experience of community' (Khayati, 2005, p. 22). The excavation process in the case of al-Hura's story seeks material and substantial grounds upon which links between history and nation, race and gender, text and space could be revealed and illuminated.

Very revealing in the opening story of the novel is the issue of matrilineality as a process of tracking back kinship through the female line. Inhere, the female lineage defines, sustains and promotes racial affiliation and consciousness. The manuscript is handed over by the *Sijilmassi* al-Hura, the freed slave who started the family's pedigree. It is secretly secured over the years by the grandmothers until the history teacher who has eventually taken the first name down the family arborescence discovers it. The archival turn of female voices in El Hachimi's text as speaking subjects of history has discursive ramifications on gender and power in al-Hura's account. As a female voice and speaking subject, al-Hura together with her grandmothers give a very different conception of such ramifications: they are women who exercise their act of narration on history and give their own version of power beyond statements of victimization and subordination. The patriarchal figure or the male line and kinship is concealed in this episode to allow a double wounded consciousness to emerge from the palimpsest of the text where gender and race are powerfully inscribed. Gender in the text is constructed in relation to the matrilineal dimension that the narrative enhances through the manuscript's

itineraries. The patriarchal template traditionally crafted for gender relations in Arabo-Muslim societies is challenged in the text by the centrality that matrilineality holds in the protagonists' main endeavor to recover their ancestral belonging and restore black memory and history.<sup>9</sup>

The discussion of the quest for origins in al-Hura's case compels another discussion of Edward Said's (1983) filiation/affiliation conceptual paradigms as they pertain to cultural identity. A filial process, as Said talks about it, is 'held together by natural bonds and natural forms of authority involving obedience, fear, love, respect, and instinctual conflict', while 'the new affiliative relationship changes these bonds into what seem like transpersonal forms – such as guild consciousness, consensus, collegiality, professional respect, class, and the hegemony of a dominant culture. The filiative scheme belongs to the realms of nature and of 'life,' whereas affiliation belongs exclusively to culture and society' (ibid, p. 20). Thus, filiative associations denote natural ties of belonging held by natural bonds (blood ties, kinship, ancestors ... etc.); whereas affiliative ones, almost as a matter of conscious preference, involve processes of responding to the dominant cultural power (Ashcroft et al., 2007). *Dhākirat al-Narjis* illustrates a situation in which affiliation and filiation are ultimately interwoven. For al-Hura, matrilineality is a space of filiation, though in a country laden with racial essentialism and social determinism; and the voyage into time through the manuscript is an act of affiliation based on a conscious choice for self-determination and will to power. This process of becoming turns her into a subject position in transition whereby the filial sense of belonging and affiliating modes of becoming undergo moments of anxiety and tension between the lost and the would-be retrieved throughout the whole narrative.

The would-be retrieved in the narrative is anchored in the history of the country's racial otherness and its silenced sub-Saharan connections, as well as in the secrets which permeate the archives but also the characters' stories as (un)told by their families. In spite of her relentless research, al-Hura cannot fully unveil the history of the black enslaved populations in Morocco. Yet, through the senses and through that consciousness she accesses through affiliation she can achieve the so-longed healing of the pain produced by the silenced history of her lineage, and that of the Moroccan descendants of the enslaved sub-Saharans: 'I imagine the body of my grandmother *Al-Hura* beside me. It talks to me. It erases the pain I have been carrying for years' (El Hachimi, 2018, p. 174). 'In the end,' she has already warned us at the beginning of the story, the old al-Hura is 'but an imaginary legend invented by one of our grandmothers' in order to escape 'the painful questions faced by those who ignore their origins' (ibid, p. 35). El Hachimi points at the unconscious, the sensorial and the imaginary as ways to restore memory, access knowledge and dismantle power. The smell of the daffodil, which travels from one generation to the other, as a perfume stored in the manuscript and used by her mother, is linked to the ancestral lineage which seems to be untraceable otherwise.

In thinking through the decolonial turn as envisaged by Khatibi, *Dhākirat al-Narjis* calls for a decolonial return to revisit the country's past through the archiving process in order to document the historical episodes that have been overlooked by history and historiography. As al-Hura puts it, 'there are wonderful things that never die. History has long been silenced, but here is this manuscript that denounces it' (ibid, p. 59). Through the revival of Moroccan black identity, and the revisiting of Morocco's sub-Saharan affiliations,

the author emphasizes al-Ḥura's desire to go beyond the existing postcolonial reality as shaped by racial and ethnic disjuncture and ruptures. Such textual world is dismantled through the incorporation of the sub-Saharan component in Morocco's cultural identity, which adds salient complications to the narrative. The powerful presence of sub-Saharan identity in Moroccan culture is delineated through the textual interplay of intricately woven stories that blur and unsettle the boundaries of racial and monocultural discourses. This issue is also clearly set in the narrative through al-'Abdī's story.

Very revealing about al-'Abdī's account is that it starts with a complicit and complacent textual relationship between the author/narrator and the protagonist. This symbolic attachment unsettles the narrative development through the unexpected intrusion of the author/narrator in the story. Such writing strategy, invasive as it purports to be, is meant to create an intimate connection between the author and his character, and by extension with his writing zones of comfort. Albeit momentary, the move into such intimacy in narrating al-'Abdī's story adopts a transitory distance that prevents the narrator/author from fully subscribing to that relationship in the course of the events. In the episode titled 'the author', the unusual crowd of people closer to the house of al-Wazzānī Lakḥal (meaning al-Wazzānī the black) distracts the narrator/author (ibid, p. 75). The 10-year old al-'Abdī has run away and with no apparent reason, except that he has always been subject to mockery by his school mates because of his skin color (ibid, p. 76). This episode, which describes and inscribes temporal and spatial movements of various characters and their interactions following the sudden disappearance of the young boy, involves the powerful presence of the author/narrator who shares moments of confusion, anxiety and concern over the plight of the runaway. In addressing the author, al-'Abdī states: 'How intriguing you are! You plot to trap me in your world, plan the right moment to meet me, and then you keep asking where I was as if you were not aware of it at all. You would even pretend that our meeting is nothing but a coincidence' (ibid, p. 78). The permeable boundaries between fact and fiction are, hence, blurred and disturbed. Al-'Abdī is perfectly aware that he already exists in the author's imagination; he knows his whereabouts and he is mercilessly manipulated. Al-'Abdī has left his Duwar for good but dwells fictionally in a narrative that resurrects him in a different setting, with a different name and with different people without losing the traits of his blackness. Symbolically, the retrieval of this subversive voice/character from the palimpsest of the narrative instills the text with intricate discourses that permeate the construction of racial and cultural identities in Morocco.

Al-'Abdī's sorrow and process of racial consciousness is different to al-Ḥura's, and yet similar. It is by using the disparaging expression 'son of the *ḥarṭāniyya*' that al-'Abdī's schoolmates' harassment materializes (ibid, p. 240). The expression signals the long-run stigma carried by the *ḥarāṭīn*, blacks from the southern Moroccan Draa region (see El Hamel, 2002). The deep pain he has been inflicted with since childhood has led al-'Abdī to lock his own history and memory as belonging to the *ḥarāṭīn*. The violence of the racism he faces makes the young al-'Abdī 'ac[t] as if [he] didn't hear anything, as if [he] didn't see anything, as if nothing happened' (ibid, p. 240). Silence, the novel shows, is not only stored in the archives but in the life histories of the subaltern characters and the family secrets which keep emerging throughout the narrative; it is also a way to cope with the systemic violence of slavery and its legacy – up to the present postcolonial times. Due to the self-protection mechanism al-'Abdī develops, he loses his identity and,

with it, part of himself dies (ibid, pp. 230–231). It is only toward the end of the novel that he manages to unlock such memory and to restore ‘his name, his old memories, and some of the pain which he would not accept’ before (ibid, p. 232). In this case, silence and memory erasure emerge as bastions of agency and resilience in the face of systemic violence; and memory restoration can only be pursued after time has passed and the experiences and encounters with different people have set the grounds for facing the suppressed pain. Yet, ‘the daffodil’s memory,’ as the title goes, has been present in al-‘Abdī’s life throughout the years of neglect about his belonging. During the erasure of his black roots, the daffodil has been a channel for al-‘Abdī’s expression of love, yearning and deep pain. Madame Marie, his adoptive mother, is a regular recipient of daffodils, and is well aware of the ‘extraordinary relationship between him and the daffodil’ (ibid, p. 95). She dies before al-‘Abdī delves into the neglected part of his memory and history, and into the ancestral recovery which the daffodil has *secretly* embodied for decades.

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If the narrative of *Dhākirat al-Narjis* is striving to restore the forgotten history of the black Moroccans through the iconic return to the authority of the manuscript in the process of demystifying mainstream history, the textual fabric evokes the ruptures pervading the construction of a homogeneous cultural identity, both with and beyond the sub-Saharan element – just like in *Le Lutteur*. Al-‘Abdī’s story represents El Hachimi’s portrayal of Morocco as shaped by numerous geographical and cultural spaces as well as, fairly well, by historical layers. Al-‘Abdī is adopted by Madame Marie, a French lady who was once married to an Algerian man and whose father was a Christian from Beirut; after the adoption, al-‘Abdī becomes Yūsuf, after Madame Marie’s Lebanese grandfather Yūsuf Ḥussayn. Al-‘Abdī feels the name does not suit him, as it ‘invokes the handsome boys who charm girls in the blink of an eye, not the ugly black-skinned ones like him’ (ibid, p. 82). Yet, he buries his old name of al-‘Abdī – literally, the slave – and his whole identity as a member of the *ḥarātīn*, blacks who labored the land in southern Morocco and the Sahara. Yūsuf completes his higher education in Marseilles, where he meets Mamadou, a Senegalese doctorate student who is an activist for black rights and culture. It is through Mamadou that Yūsuf ends up unlocking the blocked memory of his black enslaved origins and returns to his original homeland, in Tafilalt, site of ancient Sijilmasa, ‘surrounded by history on all sides’ (ibid, p. 227).

Al-‘Abdī, as does al-Ḥura, systematically faces racism at school, his social and work entourage. Racism also permeates the discourses of religious authorities, political representatives, cultural institutions and knowledge production. In demystifying the ‘epistemic violence’ levied against the black characters, the novel traces the tragic plight of individuals in ‘black Morocco’ caught between the constraints of racial transcendence and the aspirations for covalence and coexistence – at times romanticized through the evocative trope of Andalusī ‘convivencia’ (peaceful coexistence) (ibid, p. 107).<sup>10</sup> More than that, El Hachimi also demystifies ethno-nationalist conceptions of identity rendering, and in *Dhākirat al-Narjis* Morocco emerges as hybrid and syncretic, as related to and co-constituted by the ‘significant geographies’ (Laachir et al., 2018) of sub-Saharan Africa, as well as the Mashreq (especially Lebanon) and Europe (especially France and historical Iberia or al-Andalus).

In continuing to explore the interplay between the global and the local in El Hachimi's novel, al-'Abdi's story shows the nascent interest of the topic among Arab intellectuals. This fact attests very well to the emergence of substantial discussions of race and the silenced history of slavery in both the post-Arab Springs' Maghreb and the Middle East and Gulf regions, as mentioned above. By the end of the novel, al-'Abdi attends an international conference on 'black identity' (*al-hawīyya al-zinjīyya*) which his friend Mamadou has organized in Dakar (ibid, p. 203). Several Arab intellectuals who conduct research on black Arabs meet there; among them is the Palestinian poet and translator Reem Ghanayem (b. 1982) (ibid, p. 222). Both al-Ḥura's mentioning of the American interest in excavating history and the reference to Ghanayem, whose work focuses on African-American authors, point at the connection between the black diasporas in Morocco, the Middle East, and the American continent, where 'the slipperiness and elusiveness of slavery's archive' (Hartman, 2007, p. 17) has likewise constituted a significant burden for many generations of African-Americans. *Dhākirat al-Narjis* thus also signals the American 'black diaspora' as a 'significant geography' to the Moroccan endeavor to restore the memory of the black diasporic populations in Morocco and in the larger Arabic-speaking world.

A similar connection is made by al-Ḥura, when she challenges the dominant and totalitarian accounts of history writing instigated by the national bourgeois elites – represented in the novel by the civil servant enacted by the school's director. When al-Ḥura meets with him to suggest a list of history books for the school's library, he shows indifference and total disinterest in all that is history (ibid, p. 45): 'These history books that you're asking for will not afford your loaf of bread. They are just senseless' (ibid, p. 46). In wrangling about the urgent need for a collective consciousness about the country's history, she answers back: 'no good returns to expect from a nation that is unaware of its history; even the Americans that you're bragging about spend millions of dollars to investigate and document their history. History smells our ancestors, whom we are at last nothing but an extension of in this world' (ibid, p. 46).

In transposing the textual backgrounds with the thematic concerns of the narrative through metatextual insights wherein the characters are caught up in the recitation of other texts, and in foregrounding the sub-Saharan identity as a racial issue pervading 'significant geographies', the Somali poet Nuruddin Farah (b. 1945) (ibid, p. 221) and the African-Canadian poet Maxine Tynes (1949–2011) (ibid, p. 217) are also mentioned as significant intellectual references in *Dhākirat al-Narjis*. This is a fact that detaches sub-Saharan Africa and the American diaspora as merely related to the past of enslavement and the protagonists' almost completely lost ancestral belonging. Rather, sub-Saharan Africa is part of what has shaped the complex history of Morocco as well as part of the present multilayered Moroccan and global culture and society. Other intellectual references mentioned in the novel, and which continue to map Morocco as shaped by myriad cultural and geographical influences à la Khatibi, include the romantic Syrian poet Nizār Qabbānī (1923–1998) (ibid, pp. 87–88), whose poems are actually recited by the Senegalese Mamadou, and the Persian polymath Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī (1207–1273) (ibid, p. 216). This constellation of references in the narrative points to a cultural cross-pollination that includes the persistently excluded sub-Saharan Africa within the Moroccan past as well as present social and cultural worlds; *together with*, rather than instead of, Mashreqi Arabic and Islamicate referents and elements.

Not least, the local Moroccan multicultural and multilingual dimension in *Dhākirat al-Narjis* includes two other important constituents: the Amazigh and the Andalusi. In al-Ḥura's story, the association of blackness as a token of racial marginalization with Amazighness is suggestive of another facet of ethnic marginalization and exclusion. Amazigh cultural heritage and identity is summoned in the text through the school's celebration of the Amazigh New Year: 'In front of the school's gate, we [al-Ḥura and Meriem] were greeted by a couple of students wearing authentic Amazigh outfit. Their heads were tightened with red and yellow garments; their necks embellished with *louban* [amber resin] necklaces and beads. They were holding couscous dishes and were there to welcome us in. They said 'Happy New Year' (*askās amāinū*)' (ibid, pp. 51–52). The celebration of the Amazigh New Year is not fortuitous in the text, nor is the use of Tamazight by both the characters in the novel and in the text.<sup>11</sup> Amazighness, de-emphasized by the circumspective forces of Morocco's post-colonial nationalist ideologies and visible enough through the sudden outbreak of ethnic unrest during the school's festivities (ibid, pp. 53–54), is revived in the text to shed light on the cultural divide that permeates Moroccan identity. For Clifford Geertz (1973, p. 302), this distinction 'partly cultural, partly linguistic, partly social, partly a kind of ethnopolitical myth, a traditional, almost instinctive way of perceiving group differences – between Arab and Berber remains an important, if elusive, factor in Moroccan national life.' The Arab-Amazigh distinction that deliberately floats in the narrative through the ideological confrontation during the school ceremony enhances the revolting voice of the author himself against racial and ethnic exclusion and marginalization in the country.

Such distinction based on the politics of exclusion is also raised in the text through the evocative metaphor of the little-known story of Mrīrīda n'ait 'Atiq (El Hachimi, 2018, p. 55). Mrīrīda ūt-'Atiq, as is locally known, is an Amazigh popular female troubadour and singing poet who has been brought to oblivion by the enunciated forces of history, by the circumspective limitations of gender and by the 'epistemic' violence of ethnic affiliation. She was a traveling poet and a courtesan whose physical wanderings and nomadic experiences in the mountainous villages and valleys of Tasaout and Azilal are retold in her oral and aural poetry (Euloge, 1986).<sup>12</sup> The revival of Mrīrīda's voice and poetic legacy through Zainab, al-Ḥura's schoolteacher who was refused to be named Amazighly as Mrīrīda by the authorities (El Hachimi, 2018, p. 55), forces itself into El Hachimi's narrative. Once again, it is through the female characters that the Moroccan multilayered cultural fabric can be retrieved. Through Zainab, the historical erasure of Amazigh culture, literature, and language becomes visible; as does the resistance to such erasure: 'When [Zainab's] father went to the council to register his daughter with that name [i.e. Mrīrīda] they refused and asked him to give her a different name, and yet her family continued to call her after Mrīrīda' (ibid, p. 56). Zainab/Mrīrīda is also a key mentor for al-Ḥura. In fact, she can be seen as stimulating not only the latter's subsequent professional path as a History teacher, but also her archival venture aiming at retrieving her family and the larger history of black Moroccans: the teacher bestows the schoolgirl' al-Ḥura's 'revolutionary journals and stories about the great heroes [...] a novel on a black kid and some red books which spoke to me in a great deal' (ibid). Racial subjectivities and ethnic division are inscribed and coalesce together to produce an intricate association of complex discourses that weave through the characters' individual, collective and national experiences in *Dhākirat al-Narjis*.



The characters are actually caught in a Morocco shaped by diverse cultural formations and historical contexts that resonate with profundity of covalence. The narrative enhances such fully endorsed diversity and multiplicity of identities through the evocative liaison of Morocco with al-Andalus. Nu'mān, al-Ḥura's youth boyfriend, nourishes and nurtures the permeability of Moroccan identity in its convergences with the historical legacy of al-Andalus and its fall. Nu'mān is of the Moriscos pedigree, and his presence in a text discussing blackness adds a knot of intricate discourses about the plurality of Moroccan identity and culture. Al-Ḥura meets Nu'mān in a protest when they both are in High School and fall in love with each other (ibid, pp. 25–29). However, al-Ḥura's and Nu'mān's amorous relationship remains unbalanced in the text because of their different skin colors. Nu'mān is white-skinned and al-Ḥura is dark-complexioned. This racial difference often raises the prejudiced curiosity of the passersby. Once, as they were walking publicly hand in hand, 'someone yell[s] directly behind [al-Ḥura's] back: get away from him you 'azīya [nigger]' (ibid, p. 30) in an act of denouncing their relationship. Such offensive gesture resonates with salient moments of an undeclared threat to the dominant racial order in the eyes of a community that is not colorblind. The narrative imaginary of the novel enhances the discursive negotiations of interracial contacts in local settings wherein the encounter between black and white countenances in Morocco becomes a productive space that unravels the hidden workings of the racist discourse in Moroccan society.

The novel shows that 'the issues that interracial unions bring to the surface – such as racialized and sexualized stereotypes, perceptions of innate racial differences, familial opposition, and lack of community acceptance,' as Erica Chito Childs (2008, p. 2773) contends, 'are not individual problems but rather reflections of the larger racial issues that divide society.' Indeed, the taboo of mixed relations – likewise found in *Le Lutteur* – marks other characters in *Dhākirat al-Narjis*, too. In al-'Abdī's story, for example, a black man who is prevented from marrying a white woman asks the *imām*: 'Is it forbidden (*ḥarām*)' to which the religious leader responds: 'It is not illicit, but it contravenes decorum' (El Hachimi, 2018, p. 236). By so doing, *Dhākirat al-Narjis* challenges essentialization, and shows that the defiance to the maintenance of racial lines is socially constructed as immoral beyond specific religious parameters. Another telling example of the taboo of mixed relations is found in the story of one of al-Ḥura's relatives in the countryside, who 'counter[s] the custom' (*khālaf al-'āda*) when he chooses his own bride (ibid, p. 169). However, what really 'add[s] fuel to the fire' (*zād al-ṭīn bala*) is that he is a black man marrying a 'white Amazigh woman.' El Hachimi's text thus complicates the depiction of Amazighness and blackness as distinct and stable categories: although Amazigh culture and language come through as (historically) marginalized in the context of urban Essaouira, as mentioned above, the context of the southern Moroccan countryside, with its own social patterns, dynamics, and meanings, positions Amazighness above blackness. The taboo which the latter mixed couple is contravening is thus double: it defies color lines, and the ethnic line dividing Arab and Amazigh: 'it is well known,' we are told, 'that there is a big difference between the customs of Arabs and the Amazigh in the region' (ibid.).

Not least importantly, El Hachimi's narrative sets off to lay bare the effects of colonialism. After Nu'mān and al-Ḥura's relationship ends, the descendant of the Moriscos leaves to Marseille, in southern France, to complete his studies. Years later, when he comes back,

he starts business and soon rises to prosperity in the city and becomes known as ‘the Octopus’ – ‘he was nicknamed so because he has lots of influential connections in the country. He can get to anything he desires in a blink of an eye’ (ibid, pp. 40–41). Nu‘mān has inherited fortune from his father, who used to be a *protégé* of the French during the colonial era. The Western-educated bourgeois Nu‘mān and his father incarnate the social spirit of the Moroccan neo-colonial bourgeoisie who came to power immediately after the demise of European colonization. They both stand as emblems of an intricate situation of the ‘neo-colonial episteme’ as theorized by Michel Foucault (2005). The episteme as concept incorporates an all-inclusive system of cultural, social and political influences that prevail in a specific period of history. It derives its significance from power-bound and knowledge-encompassing discourses. Knowledge and power in the case of Nu‘mān are constructed through the colonial past and through the ambivalent power relations of the neo-colonial order, wherein ‘the national bourgeois steps into the shoes of the former European settlement’ (Fanon, 1963, p. 152) and replicates the colonizing practices of the former colonizer, a fact that is not ‘in the service of a higher unity’ (ibid, p. 38).

Bound up with the idea of colonialism, al-Ḥura’s story hammers on the history of colonial armed resistance and its unwritten episodes through her grandfather’s unacknowledged anticolonial fight. She declares,

as soon as the colonizer crept into the country, he loaded his rifle and headed towards the mountains [...] he was a high-minded fighter who fought alongside with ‘Abdelkrim Al-Khat-tabi for years [...] he died in torture prisons only after he had refused to denounce his fellow fighters. His grave is forgotten in this city [...] a martyr like him should have had his grave preserved in the best location of the cemetery with his name written in golden scripts. (pp. 62–63)

*Dhākirat al-Narjis* therefore sets off to unravel the ambivalent and contradictory terrains upon which the post-colonial condition is grounded. It does so, not only in relation to the distant past of slavery which al-Ḥura – and al-‘Abdī – embody, but also through the delineation of subjects who are ‘entangled in a postcolonial situation which is a continuity and reproduction of a state of subjugation, inferiority and injustice’ (Rddad, 2007, p. 130). Al-Ḥura’s grandfather is said to have fought alongside the leader of the epic Rifian resistance to Spanish colonialism in northern Morocco, ‘Abdelkrim al-Khaṭṭābī (Ayache, 1981; Madariaga, 2009). Yet, what El Hachimi’s work denounces is the lack of acknowledgement of the struggle fought by the nameless anti-colonial fighters in national representations of the country’s past. The bourgeois elite left behind at home that is interested solely in securing its interests, as is the case with Nu‘mān and his father, endorses suppressive modes of exclusion towards the people outcast by unequal power relations and unequal wealth distribution. Al-Ḥura portrays such postcolonial condition as a latent ‘colonialism in which you feel that no foreign regimes are forced on you, and yet most decisions which are tightened up by invisible handcuffs are made to exclusively serve the interests of the powerful’ (El Hachimi, 2018, p. 42).

However, Nu‘mān’s privileged position also transcends the legacy of modern colonialism as embedded in his Morisco affiliation. The descendants of the Andalusis and the Moriscos, who fled Iberia as a result of the Catholic Kings’ expulsion decrees, happened to constitute a significant portion of the urban elites in early modern Morocco, and

especially in cities like Fes, Rabat, Salé and Tetouan (El Mansour 1990), and the larger Maghreb (Epalza Ferrer & Slama-Gafsi, 2010). Historically, then, Andalusi descent was born with an aura of refinement, culture, and urban ‘civilization,’ and thus operated as a category of difference within the precolonial Moroccan social landscape. For the one thing, then, this situates Nu‘mān’s privileged affiliation beyond the legacy of modern colonialism and within a long historical genealogy. For the other, precisely because of that hierarchized cleavage, the contrast between Al-Ḥura and Nu‘mān is even more radical: Al-Ḥura’s – and al-‘Abdī’s – ancestry bear a longstanding stigma and shame, and a legacy of violence as represented by racism and historical as well as historiographical erasure. Nu‘mān’s ancestry, on the contrary, bears a heritage endowed with pride, a privileged social status and political power.

*Dhākirat al-Narjis* is anchored in significant localities that stand as intriguing sites of memory in the narrative. This site of memory is textually and discursively activated to inscribe meanings about the construction of the discourse on the nation. The discourse on the nation and national identity is defined through the complex setting where the narrative events are set. The settings are loaded with multilingual and multicultural meanings; a realm of multiple trajectories and stories, cultures, languages and traditions that permeate Moroccan national identity. The events are set in distinct locations that delineate Morocco as located at the crossroad of sub-Saharan Africa, the Atlantic, and the Mediterranean; and which stands as intriguing labyrinths of infinite multilingual, multicultural and multiracial experiences wherein ‘countless diversities converge’ (Magrini, 2003, p. 19). Nation in the narrative inscribes and circumscribes historical memory visible through the symbolic remnants of Sijilmasa and Essaouira as an all-encompassing space of sub-Saharan roots and routes. Hence, the spatial arrangement of the narrative and El Hachimi’s version of the nation clearly reflects Morocco’s intricate historical and cultural affiliations and entangles the country within memory restoration in the face of historical amnesia, colonial intervention and postcolonial ethno-nationalism.

## Conclusion

Adopting a cultural studies approach animated by the discussion of conceptual paradigms that inform postcolonialism as metaphor of our reading strategy, this article has explored recent literary production and debate on the disruptive discourses underlying identity formation in multiracial and multicultural Morocco. This study has been concerned with the reading of *Le Lutteur* [The Wrestler] by My Seddick Rabbaj (2016) and *Dhākirat al-narjis* [The Daffodil’s Memory] by Rachid al-Hachimi (2018). Both works deal with significant moments of sub-Saharan cultural and racial connections with Moroccans, and both attempt to restore episodes from the little-explored history of slavery and servitude in a country caught within conflicting discourses about racial hierarchies, ethnic exclusion, and cultural (dis)integration. Both narratives also invoke sub-Saharan Morocco with reference to the long-standing human experiences in their complex history of mobility across ambivalent racialized geographies. These experiences across ‘significant geographies’ have produced countless cultural diversities, connections and collisions, contaminated by the convergences and divergences of national, religious and racial identities.

Through the exploration of the historical and the geographical imaginary crisscrossing North African and sub-Saharan divide; through the restoration of the subaltern history of

black Morocco, and through the negotiation of slippery moments of difference and sameness in human coloring, both works set out to unravel the discursive intricacies underlying cultural identity and racial difference in Morocco. These issues construct an overall expressive thematic signification of these narratives and resonate with various conceptual paradigms about gender disruptions, racial ambivalences, and decolonial manifestations. Significantly, the evocative concept of 'significant geographies' adds an interesting dimension to the reading of these narratives.

Both *Le Lutteur* and *Dhākirat al-narjis* demonstrate how 'significant geographies' are constructed through shared histories of racial difference in intricate manners. They also show, and in varying degrees, how local histories continue to be shaped and refashioned by in relation to the shifting forces of the global. The revival of the memory of the trans-Atlantic and trans-Saharan black identity in these narratives instigates the compelling demand for a plural Moroccan identity whereby the vibrant cultural legacy of black Moroccans is restored, and wherein Morocco's rich racial contact with sub-Saharan Africa is avowed. The cultural plurality that stems from these novels also includes Mashreqi Arabic and Islamicate referents that mingle with, rather than instead of, the sub-Saharan, the Amazigh and other indigenous and diasporic populations (the 'blue men' in *Le Lutteur*, the Andalusi in *Dhākirat al-narjis*); referents that, on the other hand, construct complex discourses about nationhood and cultural identity in Morocco.

The real and imagined 'stories and trajectories' that are recovered in these narratives are suggestive of the cultural 'overlapping networks' that have contributed to the construction of Moroccan identities. They are indicative of the shifting localities encompassing geographical boundaries where gendered subjectivities are constructed according to racial, ethnic and cultural attributes; but they are, above all, indicative of symbolic revisionist endeavors that call attention to the need to go beyond the grand narratives of history into alternative and silenced ones. Both works resonate textually and discursively with demystifying and dismantling the often-overlooked cultural connections of Morocco with Sub-Sahara. They both draw on the narrative imaginary that builds up its texts on the restoration of memory as it pertains to the eclipsed historical and cultural junctures of Moroccan and Sub-Saharan cultural and racial contacts.

## Notes

1. Nationalist historiography has also been markedly state- and male-centered. Abdallah Laroui (1977) is perhaps the most paradigmatic example of the state-centered and teleological view of history. For fictional works which explore Moroccan nationalist history through an engagement with cultural identities in colonial and postcolonial Morocco, see Chraïbi (1954), Al-Bū'anānī (1963), Ghallāb (1965, 1966) and Rabī (1979). Feminist criticism of androcentrism in Moroccan society and culture include Binmas'ūd (1994, 2006), Ghurram (2009) and Kaddū (2014).
2. All the translations from this book and from the narratives originally written in French or in Arabic are ours unless stated elsewhere. The transliterations we have adopted are from the *Index Translationum* of UNESCO (Organization des Nations Unis pour l'Éducation, la Science et la Culture).
3. 'Antar Ibn Shadād al-'Absī, a black poet and warrior, is famous for his chivalrous achievements in pre-Islamic wars. He is mostly evoked in Arab *ghazal* poetry for his aborted romance with 'Abla because of his origins and skin color. Through one of his poems, he asks his lover 'to overlook his blackness and to see into his moral qualities. 'Antara boasts about his many moral qualities,

- hoping that 'Abla will see his prowess and heroism and not just his blackness: 'Let me strive to the heights in the search/And attain a goal distant from the ranks/Perhaps Abla will appear and be pleased/With my blackness and erase anger's image'. See Khannous (2013, p. 76).
4. This is also the realm in which historical and anthropological works on the blacks and their descendants have focused most in both Morocco and other parts of the Maghreb and the Muslim Mediterranean. See Kapchan (2007) and Jankowsky (2010).
  5. In his socio-anthropological study of African diasporic practices of Islam, Curtis (2014) discusses the African-descent Ghawarna community in the rural Jordan Valley and affirms that their traditions 'have more to do with their rural, gendered, and largely local Jordanian and Palestinian roots than with any sub-Saharan African connection' (pp. 23, 40–49).
  6. A similar depiction of the function which local racist conceptions can play in subverting the position of a fictional black character can be found in the Tunisian historical novel *Barg el-Lil* by Bachir Khreyf (2020). See Goikolea-Amiano (2021).
  7. *Lust's dominion or the lascivious Queen*, attributed to Thomas Dekker, was first published in 1657. *Lust's dominion* focuses on Eleazar, the Prince of Fez. 'Several years before the opening of the play, King Philip has conquered Barbary, has killed King Abdela and captured his young son, Eleazar. The orphaned Prince is brought up in the Spanish court, and is eventually converted to Christianity, marries the daughter of a Spanish nobleman and turns into a crusader against the Muslim Turks. Nonetheless, the alien warrior is constantly exposed to the hostility and racial hatred of the white community, which stigmatizes him for his colour and denounces his amorous relationship with the Queen of Spain' (Bekkaoui, 1999, p. x).
  8. Recent studies on masculinities in the Middle East and North Africa are challenging the prevalent approaches to men as if they were a-gendered, and critically engaging with non-binary frameworks and identities. For a literature review on the most recent approaches, see Hasso (2018).
  9. And yet, the narrative produces a gendered and patriarchal discourse of the city both with Essaouira (p. 145) and Sijilmasa (pp. 164–165). This might be linked to the new 'eroticisation of the nation' in modern Arabic narrative as argued by Ouyang (2012, p. 105).
  10. Although 'convivencia' is not referred to as such, the trope is encapsulated in the mentioning of the peaceful coexistence of 'all religions' in the city of Córdoba 'before it was taken by the [Christian] enemies' (ibid, p. 107). For the colonial and contemporary use of *convivencia* in Morocco, see Calderwood (2018).
  11. As with the expressions and words in Darija (Moroccan Arabic) and French, El Hachimi keeps the Tamazight original in the text and translates it into standard Arabic in footnotes.
  12. The often-scornful audiences in the public markets where Mrīrida performed never got interested in her poems until she met with Euloge, the French instructor, who spoke the local dialect, taped the poems, translated them into French and documented them in *Les Chants de la Tassaout*.

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