

The Novels of Muhammad Laroussi Metoui

by Lora G. LUND

INTRODUCTION

1. The Writer

Mohamed Laroussi Metoui (1) (born Metouia, Tunisia, 1920) has pursued an active life of service to his country as teacher, statesman and writer. Although he is best known to Tunisian secondary school students as a novelist, his writings span a broad spectrum from historical and literary research to short story, novelette, novel, poetry, speeches and children's stories. M. Metoui's leadership as a scholar is shown by his receipt of the Qayrawani prize for his literary and historical studies. His scholarly works include studies which focus on historical periods such as *al-Hurûb al-salibiyya fî al-Mašriq wa-l-Mağrib* (The Crusades in the East and the West, 1954), works on particular geographical locations, *Sîrat al-Qayrawân* (History of Qairouan, 1981), historical and literary figures such as *Ġalâl al-Dîn al-Suyûtî* (1954), *Imrû al-Qays* (1955), *Hâlid ibn al-Walîd* (1981), and explanations of Islam, *Usus al tatawwur wa-l-tağdîd fî Islâm* (The basis of development and renewal in Islam, 1969) (2). His current research interest is the period of the Hafside empire in Tunisia (1228-1574). Beside his continuing contribution to historical research Laroussi Metoui was one of the pioneers in Tunisia in the development of the novel, a recent innovation which like many other western genres is not traditional in Arabic literature. His novels, *Halima* (named after his heroine, 1962) and *al-Tût al-Murr* (The bitter mulberry, 1963), were both recipients of the Prize of the Municipality of Tunis. Before

(1) This transliteration is the one used by the author for his name instead of Muhammad al-'Arûsi al-Maṭwi.

(2) For a published list of Laroussi Metoui's work through 1986 see FONTAINE's *Fihris tarihi lil-mu'allifat al-tûnûsiyya*, Tunis, Bayt al-Hikma, 1986, p. 206-207.

undertaking the long and difficult genre of novel Laroussi Metoui served his apprenticeship in techniques and themes in writing a number of short stories and a novelette, *Wa min al-dahâyâ* (And among the victims, 1954), which has in embryo many of the themes of the two later novels. He is one of the few Tunisian authors who have written more than one novel, but like others who have tried a hand at novel and novelette he has not persisted at this genre.

Although now retired Muhammad Laroussi Metoui continues to write and to take a leadership role in the literary milieu in Tunisia. He has been the leader of a number of literary clubs, the Abû I-Qasim al-Šabbî literary club, the Nādî al-Qalam literary club, and is still president of the Nādî of Qišša writer's club which publishes the literary journal *al-Qišša*, and the Tunisian Writers Union, which meets weekly, prose writers on one evening and poets on another evening to read and discuss their unpublished work. As editor of *al-Qišša*, Laroussi Metoui has had an important role in encouraging young Tunisian writers to publish. In the introduction to the 1988 collection of short stories by Rîm al-'Isawî *Limâda yamût al-'Asâfîr* (Why are the birds dying), published under the auspices of *al-Qišša*, he describes the salutary effect on young writers of the give and take of ideas in the meetings of the Nādî al-Qišša.

In addition to his contribution to Tunisian culture as a writer, Muhammad Laroussi Metoui has served his country in the foreign service, first as cultural attaché to Egypt, then in the Tunisian Embassy in Iraq from 1958 to 1959, as ambassador to Saudi Arabia from 1959 to 1962, and from April to August 1962 as ambassador to Iraq. In 1963 he returned to the academic world as secretary of the Faculty of Theology and Religious Law at the University of Tunis. He has been active both in his political party and in cultural affairs in Tunisia. From 1964 until 1975 he served as representative to the National Assembly where he combined his political and cultural interests as president of the Commission of Cultural and Social Affairs. He was also a member of the central committee of the Destour party, president of his local party cell, director of the orientation program for training leaders in the Destour party, and representative of the party at a number of international conferences. He has the additional political honors of being an officer of the Order of Independence and commandor of the Order of the Republic. It should not be surprising to discover that the novels of Laroussi Metoui show the same kind of political commitment that he has made to his country through his numerous politically active roles. Of his careers in teaching, politics and writing it is the career of teaching that Mr. Metoui looks back on as his favorite because of the

involvement with young people and the chance to guide developing minds.

Mohammad Laroussi Metoui is a many sided person. Like many Tunisians he knows both city life and country life. He was born in a village in the south of Tunisia near Gabes but has lived many years in Tunis, the capital, as well as in foreign countries. Village life provides the setting for his second novel, *al-Tût al-murr*, while his first novel, *Halima*, moves from village to city like the author himself. He says that the first part of *Halima* is indeed based on his memories of life in Metouia. Laroussi Metoui is also a family man : married at the age of 28, he has five children of whom two are in the teaching profession, and four grandchildren. His feeling for children is shown in his contributions to the genre of childrens' literature. Father, scholar, diplomat, patriot, teacher and writer, these are some of the facets of Muhammad Laroussi Metoui.

Laroussi Metoui's choice of modern standard Arabic throughout his novels (in contrast to some other North Africa novelists such as his fellow countryman Béchir Khraief, who used colloquial Arabic for dialogue) reflects his thorough classical training and his conviction that standard Arabic is more comprehensible for literary purposes even in Tunisia because of the fact that dialects are spoken, not written languages. He refers to words written in dialect by Béchir Khraief which he says are not understood even by residents of the writer's home region as a strong argument for the use of standard Arabic for the purpose of universal comprehensibility. Mr. Metoui himself is steeped in Arabic and islamic studies. His education began at the primary level with koranic schooling at the village kuttab and continued with secondary and higher learning in Tunis from 1935 until 1948 at Zaytuna University, that institution which helped to keep Islamic culture alive in Tunisia in spite of French rule and the spread of French instruction. Metoui received a number of degrees from Zaytuna : the *ahliyya* or competence diploma in 1940, the *tahsîl* in 1943, the *'âlamîyya* diploma in 1946, a law degree in 1945 and a degree in islamic studies in 1947. In 1948 at the age of 28 he became a professor at the same institution where he had spent fifteen years being trained as a scholar in the classical curriculum and remained at Zaytuna University until 1956 when Tunisia obtained his independence and he was at liberty to put his political views into practice in the service of the newly independent government. His political commitment and his religious education form the foundation of the novels of Laroussi Metoui and are expressed in his concentration on the drama of the national struggle against the French and the call for a brotherhood of Muslims.

2° The Novels

One of the most noteworthy features of Laroussi Metoui's novels is his strong interest in politics. This is not atypical either of the classical tradition in Arabic literature or of the trend in contemporary North African literature. Arabic literature has been used for political ends from the early days of the pre-Islamic poets—urging their fellow tribesmen to greater *hamasa* or zeal in fighting their enemies and striking a blow themselves through their stinging words. Laroussi Metoui's novels carry on the theme of *hamasa* but on the national rather than the tribal level. Political commitment is generally characteristic of modern North African literature as a whole, as documented by critic 'Abd al-Kabir Khatibi, who goes so far as to describe North African novels as "camouflaged ideology" (3). It is therefore not surprising to find themes of nationalism an integral part of the novels of Mohammad Laroussi Metoui, a man committed to working for the independence and the welfare of his country. One may well question, however, whether the political commitment contributes to or detracts from their merit as literary artifacts. To what extent, one may ask, should his novels be considered political tracts, and to what extent should they be considered a cornerstone of the novel genre in Tunisian literature? The following pages will examine the structure and the characterization in the novels of Laroussi Metoui to discover how the political message is integrated into the novels and to judge whether it interferes with the literary merit of the works.

I. "HALIMA"

Halima the author's first novel, written in 1962, is now well known to all adolescents in Tunisia since it is part of the high school curriculum (4). The novel celebrates the struggle of Tunisia for independence from French in 1956. Everything in the novel is focused on the topic of nationalism. The protagonist is a woman but the subject of women's problems is absorbed in *Halima* by the theme of

nationalism. Halima becomes in fact a symbol of the resistance movement, the embodiment of patriotic virtues more than an individual or an advocate for women's problems as her personal life and her qualities as woman take a back seat to her consuming passion for her country.

1. Structure

The structure of the novel and the characterization both serve to reinforce the themes of abuses of colonialism and the necessity for all Tunisians to love their homeland to the extent that they will be ready to make sacrifices in order to obtain freedom and independence for Tunisia. The novel is divided into two parts representing the two parts of Halima's life. The first intitled "Migzal al-Sûf" (The spinning wheel of wool) is set in the village and, as the title suggests, centers on the life and preoccupations of women in a village as symbolized by the woman's work of spinning wool. This section contains some charming descriptions of the details of the woman's life, the trips to the well, the exchange of information there, the network of reciprocal obligations. It also gives a sense of the rootedness of Halima's character in village life, which is typical of most Tunisians who continue to maintain their ties to their home towns even in the 1980's after more than a generation in Tunis. The second part, "Haqibat al-hammâm" (The suit-case of the bath home), is set in Tunis and refers to the incident in which Halima demonstrates her political commitment and her value to the independence movement. 'Umar al-Imâm describes the structure of the novel as divided between the psychological part in which Halima's emotional struggle is critical and the political part in which the political struggle is paramount. He diagrams the book as equally balanced between the two parts, devoting the first six chapters to village life, the last six chapters to city life with a middle transition between the two (making chapter 7 a transition and adding chapter 8 to part II since in chapter 8 Halima is already in Tunis) (5).

The shift from the preoccupations of village life in part I to the overwhelming preoccupation with the resistance movement in part II seems to many writers overly abrupt. Mohamed al-Bardî complains about this split saying: "I cannot understand the relationship in the

(5) 'UMAR AL-IMAM, "Riwayât Halîma (dirâsa)", in *Qîṣaṣ* 67 (Jan 85), 57.

(3) Abd al-Kabir KHATIBI, *Le roman maghrébin*, Paris, Leroux, 1968, p. 112.

(4) At a visit to a Tunisian home in February 1989, I observed one of the younger adolescent children absorbed in reading from her older brother's textbook. She said that she was rereading her favorite story. At my invitation she proceeded enthusiastically to narrate the story of a girl whose father had been killed trying to pick a rose for her mother. It was Halima.

novel *Halima* between Halima's life in the village and in the capital" (6). Even stronger criticism is leveled by Abû Zayyân al-Sa'dî, who says that he cannot find a trace of a unifying idea (7). Though this criticism is justified to a certain extent, there are a number of foreshadowings in part I of Halima's *hamâsa* her high spirited courage, which make her sudden plunge in the nationalistic movement seem more understandable, even almost inevitable.

First of all, in part I the point of the story of her father's death is his martyrdom in resenting and resisting the French domination of his village. Creation of suspense by postponing revealing the truth about his death serves to give more importance to the event and to make of him a martyr rather than a sentimental fool. His death emphasizes the theme that the French are thieves who have stolen the Tunisian fatherland, and murderers who have ruined the lives of innocent men, women and children.

The suspense about the story and about Halima's reaction to finding out the truth about her father further serves to draw parallels between Halima and her father preparing the way for Halima's own, if more conscious dedication to the same cause. There are several pretexts for putting off the complete story about Halima's father, each contributing to the preparation of Halima's subsequent involvement in the resistance movement. At first Halima's mother postpones telling the child the truth because she is afraid of spoiling Halima's chances to complete her schooling, knowing the high-strung, strong-willed Halima might insult the French school personnel if she knew that the French had caused her father's death. Khadija's decision is important because it is based on two factors : an event at the school and Halima's temperament. The event - the dismissal of a boy from school and imprisonment of his father because the school boy had in his possession a page from a book with the phrase "long live the martyrs of April 9" - serves to illustrate the bigotry of the French colonial administration even at the village level. At the same time Halima's temperament is revealed as her mother recalls how even early in life Halima stood up fearlessly for her rights or beliefs event to those with power and authority over her. The explanation of the father's death is finally made in chapter six of the eight chapters in Part I, when Halima is seventeen, a mature young woman who has mastered her mother's craft of

spinning and weaving but who goes beyond village life in her habit of following current events in the newspapers. The truth of the matter is that when Khadija was eight months pregnant with Halima she conceived a craving for a rose from the walled garden of the French mayor of the village. Her husband Ahmad became angry with the guard for refusing to let them have one rose out of all the flowers in the garden and furious with the French for taking the land of his fathers. When Ahmad returned to ask again for a rose he was shot in the head by the trigger-happy colon and subsequently died, maligned as a thief. His story, whose importance is emphasized by its prolongation through most of Part I, shows not only the abuses of colonialism but also that Halima is only following in her father's footsteps when she joins the struggle against the French. Asmad has bequeathed her his temperament as well as a personal reason for resenting colonialism.

A third incident in Part I illustrates Halima's courage and thus makes her involvement in the underground more acceptable. When Halima was eight years old she went with a crowd of villagers to hear the first radio in the village, brought by the French mayor. A boy in the crowd pointed a revolver at Halima. She defied him and grabbed the gun, which went off. The case demonstrates that even as a child she did not shrink from confrontation in the face of danger with someone with tyrannical power over her.

These three examples from Part I help to prepare for Halima's role in the resistance movement. Part I also emphasizes Halima's education, which put her in the role of mediator of outside news and culture with the villagers when she is still young as she reads the newspaper to them, and gives her an opening to the outside world even before she moves in the city. Part I serves to suggest Halima's potential and set the stage for her marriage and move to the city, a more likely place for resistance activities.

Part II focuses on Halima's involvement in the resistance movement, ending in the success of the movement, the triumphal return of Habib Bourguiba from exile and the granting of Tunisian independence. Just as Part I ends with the festivities of the marriage, Part II ends with the celebration of freedom by the crowds in Tunis. The wedding represents the successful completion of the love theme and the celebration of independence the successful completion of the political theme.

The second section of the novel is divided into five chapters which trace Halima's progressive involvement with the resistance movement. The first chapter tells of her discovery that her husband, °Abd al-

(6) Muḥammad al-BARDI, "Al-sard al-wāqī'i fi talat riwāyāt tūnusiyya", in *Qisas* 72 (April 1986), 44.

(7) ABU ZAYYAN AL-SA'DI, *Min adab al-riwāya fi Tūnus*, Tunis, STD, 1988, p. 77.

Hamid, is already involve secretly in the underground. Because of the close, trusting relationship shared by the two, who at the opening of Part II have already been married for some time and have discussed the country's political problems as equals, Halima realizes that 'Abd al-Hamid is concealing something. When Halima asks 'Abd al-Hamid about what is bothering him and he evades her question, Halima knows that something is wrong and puts her clever mind to work immediately to discover what it is. After a sleepless night and much searching thought she remembers finding a puzzling message some days before in 'Abd al-Hamid's pocket. She realizes that the piece of paper had told in French the time and place of a rendez-vous and the sign by which to identify someone. Halima forces 'Abd al-Hamid to admit his involvement in the underground by pretending she thinks he has been meeting a French woman. The first step in Halima's involvement in politics is this admission from her husband. The second step is to get her husband and his group to allow her, a woman, to participate by demonstrating that she is courageous and trustworthy. She convinces them that the resistance movement is not just mens' work and that even her veil can be useful. She is ready for anything, even death, in the service of her country (8). Hearing a speech by the patriot and labor organizer Farhat Hached adds to her *hamasa* and her enthusiasm for the chosen work. Her abilities are then put to the test when she is given a suitcase which she believes to be full of weapons to carry to a delivery point at the *hammam* (hence the title of Part II). Halima's successful completion of the job earns her acceptance as a full-fledged member of the resistance in the second chapter of Part II (chapter 10), working with 'Abd al-Hamid and the others transporting weapons and explosives.

(8) In fact in Tunisia as in Algeria women were active participants along with men in the resistance movement, although Tunisian women did not bear arms. Mr. Metoui is careful to point out. After Tunisian independence in 1956 women reaped their benefits of taking an equal role with men in terms of change in their status. Within six months after Bourguiba's taking the presidency polygamy had been outlawed. The 1960 civil code revised the laws on divorce and custody of children giving more protection and equality to women. See Mary Neville Blair's M. A. thesis, *Equal in war, forgotten in peace: the changing status of Algerian women*, American University, 1985, for the parallel but contrasting case of women resistance workers in Algeria. Mrs Blair describes Algerian women as having briefly experienced the equality and freedom which they were promised as a result of their participation in the liberation struggle. The Algerian government, unlike the Tunisian government, has not kept its promises, however; womans' status in Algeria is more restricted now than under French colonisation.

In chapters 11 and 12 Halima again demonstrates her courage and, a little too conveniently, finds a new field for her patriotic activities. When she is wounded at a demonstration she tries to keep her wound a secret so that 'Abd al-Hamid will not put an end to her political activities, but she ends up in the hospital. Then she tries to convince the other women in the hospital of the principles of the political struggle for independence. The theme of the evils of colonialism is further expanded by the story of an old man who has also been wounded by the French and who expresses his patriotism most fervently. Halima has an additional opportunity to serve her country by donating her veil and slippers to help a wounded political prisoner to escape from the hospital disguised as a woman.

In the final chapter of Part II the scene broadens from Halima's personal struggle to the wider struggle. Halima is released from the hospital in time to witness a general strike in the capital which tells her that the movement has become universal. It is a time of sadness and worry for her as she discovers that 'Abd al-Hamid has been imprisoned while she has been in the hospital, and then a time of happiness and victory as her third son, Tawfiq (meaning success, peace making, reconciliation, prosperity), is born on the eve of independence. Part II has followed through the life of Halima the sudden growth and success of the Tunisian independence movement. Her story becomes the story of the nation and she herself of the nation as she gives birth to "success". As a child is born to her, a new nation is the child of the independence movement.

2. Themes

The theme of nationalism is expressed primarily through the action of the novel, through the structure which makes Halima's life run parallel to the independence movement, but also through the rhetorical technique of repetition of the vocabulary of nationalism. Part II is full of words such as *al-hizb* (the party), *al-dustur* (the name of the Bouguiba's political party), *al-isti'mar* (colonialism), *al-muzahara* (demonstration), *al-sa'b* (the people), *al-muqawama* (resistance), *al-hurriya* (freedom), *al-istiqlal* (independence), *al-watan* (the nation), used both in the narrative and in the dialogue. Halima preaches nationalism to her relatives and acquaintances on three occasions. First is her impassioned attempt to persuade her husband that resistance can be womans' work. Second is her harangue to the other women in the

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hospital in which she tells them to forget their personal problems, such as how to handle a husband who has taken a second wife, because those problems of women are unimportant when the independence of the nation is at stake. Third is her speech to her mother upon her release from the hospital in which she scolds her mother for her faint-heartedness and lectures her on her duty to the nation. 'Abd al-Hamid's letter from prison contains the same sort of nationalistic rhetoric that Halima uses. He hopes to see her next, for example, in the "era of freedom and independence" (9).

Nationalism is expressed not only through the vocabulary of nationalism and through the action of resistance movement in Part II, but also through the glorification of the resisters, both historical and fictional figures. Farhat Hached, the eloquent speaker who arouses his countrymen to join in the resistance movement; Habib Bourguiba, returning in glory from exile; Su'ad, the nurse in the hospital who protects Halima and engineers the escape of a wounded political prisoner; 'Abd al-Hamid who keeps up his courage and that of others in prison; Halima, wounded for the sake of her country but ready to conceal her wound so that she will not have to give up the struggle even though she is pregnant; Halima's father, martyred for standing up for his rights against the French major; and the man in the hospital who lost his leg when he came to the defense of his elderly wife and resisted the French police burning down their little house. This man not only provides an example for the message of the misery caused by colonialism in Tunisia but also provides an occasion for the author to recount the history of the independence movement with greater historical depth as the elderly man reminisces about his participation in a workers' strike against the French in Bizerte in 1924. This old man is so fanatic about independence that if he should die before independence is attained he wants his children to come to his grave as soon as the country becomes liberated and tell him.

The political theme itself has two aspects which are reflected in the structural division of the novel. The political theme of the injustices of imperialism under the French Protectorat is portrayed principally in Part I through the story of Halima's father's death and the unfairness of the school personnel, and to a lesser extent in Part II through the story of the old man who lost his leg defending his wife and home. The theme of injustice and abuse of power provides the motivation for the

second aspect of the political theme which is fully developed in Part II, namely that all Tunisians are members of the people, and that all, women as well as men, must serve their country by resisting the invaders.

3. The characters

In Halima the author does not attempt to develop a full state of characters or to fully describe society but concentrates on the heroine. The other characters are static, fixed, one-sided, or exist as little more than a name. Halima is the only character in whom some sort of development takes place. Even so her growth from a child to a resistance worker at times seems overly contrived and abrupt even though foreshadowed in the early pages. At one moment she is in the village facing the obstacles of the examinations and the difficulty of finding a husband in a society that forbids young men and women from getting to know each other and in a fatherless family which cannot provide much bride wealth. In the next moment she is in Tunis, a mother of two children, pestering her husband until he lets her join the underground. Her maternal side is never developed. There is only one extremely brief conversation between her and one of her children: "Where is Daddy? He was with you, why didn't he come?" "Daddy will come, dear. He has gone far away and when he is near he will return" (10). The children themselves are never described, they are symbols. Tawfiq, success of the revolution, a convenience for the political symbolism. Halima's qualities as a wife are scarcely more developed than those as a mother. She greets her husband affectionately upon his return from work, fixes him lemonade, bids him a warm goodbye as he departs again for work. She is treated as equal by her husband, contrary to usual custom and with no explanation of why they are intellectual partners other than the fact that she has received a primary school education. Many of her qualities seem more masculine than feminine, such as her assertive actions in face of danger, but she shows something of the craftiness associated with women when she persuades her husband to divulge his secret about the resistance involvement by making him think she believes something worse.

Halima's role as a daughter is described only in a simple way. In

(9) *Halima*, p. 131.

(10) *Halima*, p. 128.

Part I, she appears in the role of dutiful daughter when she shows her concern for her mother's feelings in her reluctance to bring up the painful past, but in Part II she reverses roles with her mother and lectures her as one might a child about her duty to her country, representing the younger generation leading the way in introducing new ideas. There is no real development of Halîma's as a wife, daughter or mother.

Halîma is more a symbol of the Tunisian resistance movement than a standard character in a novel. As Belhaj Naser puts it: "Halîma... est un personnage révolté, contestataire, qui symbolise la solidarité de la femme tunisienne avec l'homme pour tenir tête et faire face à l'envahisseur" (11). All qualities are submerged into this one feature. All other conflicts - between the sexes, between the generations, for money, land, power - are relegated to second place beside the political conflict. The love story is not developed but merely solved as speedily and expediently as possible as a marriage partner is found at the end of Part I, freeing Halîma for the political intrigue. The problems of women and Halîma's qualities as a woman are given equally short shrift. There is only one woman with whom Halîma sympathizes, a poor bedouin woman whom Halîma meets during the harvesting and pities because her husband had disappeared ten years before leaving her barely able to eke out a living gleaning after the harvesters (12). But Halîma has no patience with another unfortunate woman in the hospital who tells of her husband making a servant out of her after taking a second wife. The function of the incident is to put personal problems in proper perspective beside problems at the national level. The novel is focused not on personal or social problems but on nationalism alone.

Halîma's mother is the only other character who receives much attention. She provides a bit of humor as she arrives in Tunis sounding very provincial in her wonder and amazement at all the new sights that she sees, repeating exclamations of astonishment. Her concern for her daughter serves to underline Halîma's value as a person. Halîma's

mother also acts as a foil to Halîma. Her timidity emphasizes Halîma's courage and enthusiasm for the sake of her country in times of difficulty.

As Halîma gains in strength and purity as a symbol of national fervor she loses in complexity as a well-rounded, fully developed character. In the same way as the novel gains in intensity by concentrating on a single theme it loses in complexity and literary merit. When approached from the perspective of novels in the western tradition which focus on character development and description of society in all its complexity, this novel seems simplistic in its viewpoint and techniques, a celebration in narrative form of the birth of a new republic.

II. AL-TÛT AL-MURR

Al-Tût al-Murr, Mohamed Laroussi Metoui's second novel, is longer and more complex than *Halîma* and gives a fuller development to the same sort of themes as *Halîma*. There are again two major elements in the novel, a story of romantic love, and a story of a nationalist resistance movement, this time a miniature version of the national struggle and located in a country setting rather than the city. The love story and the political intrigue are both given equal weight in this novel and continue to be intertwined throughout the book rather than being treated sequentially.

1. Themes

The theme of nationalism is expressed in three ways. First through the words of old Shaykh Miftâh, a man of Libyan origin, who is aroused on two occasions to express his sentiments of anti-imperialism. He talks longingly of his *waṭan* Libya, the native land from which he has been expelled by Italian conquerors, and of the friends and family that he lost there; and he remembers bitterly how the Italians drove out

(11) Abdelkader Balhaj NASER, *Quelques aspects du roman tunisien*, Tunis, MTE, 1981, p. 95.

(12) Belhaj Naser sees this story along with that of the old man as a parallel to Halîma's father's story presenting one of the three types of reasons for revolt against colonialism: murder, mutilation, and in the case of the woman's husband, disappearance. Belhaj NASER, *op. cit.*, p. 95.

the Libyans, separating family members and burning their homes (13). On the second occasion Shaykh Miftah is asked his reasons for leaving Libya. He tells about his father fighting the Ottoman Turks and about his own *hamāsa* in defending his country against the Italians, he relates how the Italians had taken the city of Masrata, had killed the inhabitants and laid waste the city. Although the subject of Miftah's bitterness is not French imperialism but Italian, the effect is the same : a strong feeling of the evils of imperialism. The offense of taking a country by force and victimizing the inhabitants is parallel in the case of Italians in Libya and the French in Tunisia. The essence of Shaykh Miftah's message is to hate imperialism and to love the *waṭan*, which country referred to is less important than the intensity of the feelings and the reader has no trouble in applying the example to the French Protectorate in Tunisia.

The theme of nationalism is expressed in a second way in the novel through the story of the formation of a small resistance movement which calls itself the organization for the salvation of the young people - *ḡam'iyya inqād al- šabāb* -, for the purpose of opposing the use of hashish. The reasoning of the group is that the use of hashish is forbidden in France but is encouraged by the French for Tunisians because the French want to destroy the will to resist of the Tunisians and do lull them into a lethargic, contented state. 'Abd Allah, the organizer of the movement, says that if there is to be a revolution as is rumored then the people must be at their best. 'Abd Allah's concern becomes focused on hashish after a trick is played on him by one of the members of his circle of friends in the coffee house. Muḥtār, who is the group's specialist in brewing tea and an occasional user of hashish himself, puts hashish in 'Abd Allah's tea for a joke. The friends are amused at 'Abd Allah's uninhibited behavior and by his fears that the shadow of a palm tree is really a huge snake, but 'Abd Allah is greatly ashamed the next day about his behavior at the coffee house and about eating a pound of clay upon his return to home, mistaking it for meat. 'Abd Allah is a young man concerned about virtue : his own virtue, his friend's, his country's. He is jolted into action by this incident and directs his efforts toward eliminating hashish and reforming his

(13) 'Abdallah Quwayri interprets the story of Shaykh Miftah as an attempt to create a tie between the two neighboring brother peoples of Tunisia and Libya (*Tahūna al-šay' il al-Mu'tad*, Tunis, MTE, 1971, p. 160). I see it rather as a generalization of the theme through the parallel experience of the Libyans since there is no attempt on Laroussi Metoui's part to push Libyan Tunisian brotherhood.

countrymen. The implication is that if a group can work together for one specific purpose such as opposing hashish, it can work together for another purpose, such as combatting colonialism. In fact some members of the group are fearful lest the French authorities pursue them for this very reason. 'Abd Allah first job is to convince his own friends that hashish is harmful and to persuade them to stop using it themselves. This takes some argument because one of the group, Ibrahīm, is getting married and the others do not wish to offend him by refusing to smoke at his wedding, where hashish will probably be offered. After the circle of friends has been won over they become enthusiastic about their mission. They set out to destroy the marijuana plants in the various gardens of the village, organizing so as to do the job all in one night without anybody being aware of what is happening. When 'Abd Allah has cold feet about carrying out the conspiracy against hashish for fear of the repercussions from the authorities, the other young men, by this time equally convinced as he of the rightness of their objective, persuade him not to back down. Still he worries until each man reports back safely that his mission has been accomplished.

The significance of this method of combatting the French is that the young men form a brotherhood and work together for the good of the nation. Their goal is not to benefit themselves but to work for something outside of themselves, greater than themselves. The group has a moral, almost religious tone. The movement is successful, their membership grows to twenty-five young men, and older people, even two hashish addicts, abstain from using hashish, at least in public because of their influence. 'Abd Allah is conscious of success in an endeavor for the benefit of others, a real first in his experience. As a moral as well as political endeavor the movement for the salvation of young people is characteristic of Islamic nations where there is little or no separation of religion and the state. Even with the Tunisian government following a French model after independence the Tunisian president has always been a moral leader as well as a political leader. Setting a moral tone is also seen as an appropriate function of literature.

The superstitious beliefs of the villagers aid in the fight against hashish as the villagers take the seemingly miraculous destruction of the marijuana plants as a sign that their guardian angels are protecting them or else as a sign of a curse on hashish and hash-smoking. Word spreads that the imam of the Sidi Mahriz mosque in Tunis had set a curse on hashish. Resistance to hashish is further fostered by a *qaṣīda*, a poem composed by an old woman who is considered to be a *darwīša*. The poem becomes very popular thanks to the efforts of the members

of the brotherhood in spreading it. From the preislamic era the tradition of poetry has been put to use in the service of the tribe. Here the author draws on this tradition of early Arabic literature but applies it to service to a larger unit, the nation, and at the same time reminds the reader of the roots of Tunisian culture in the Arab cultural heritage.

A third dramatization of the theme of nationalism is an offshoot from the Rashish resistance movement but is a personal struggle for Ibrahîm, one of the members of the group, rather than a joint effort. Ibrahîm's father had fought with the French in World War II (and had even lost a leg in combat) and is still pro-French. Ibrahîm discovers one night that his father is the village informer for the French. This is the first time the father has been unable to provide the French administration with the information they want because the secrecy of the brotherhood has been so tight. Ibrahîm's father is also the only merchant in the village who is authorized to sell hashish (presumably a reward for his collaboration). He is corrupt on two counts, passing information and selling the harmful substance to his countrymen. Ibrahîm is torn between his obligation to his nation and his duty to his family. Ibrahîm decides that he must prove himself worthy to his companions by teaching his father a lesson about keeping the honor of his homeland by destroying the hashish shipment. Unable to gain entry to the hashish inside his father's store Ibrahîm sets fire the whole building, completing the destruction of all the final source of hashish. Just as Halima lectures his mother, so Ibrahîm lectures his father about stopping his betrayal of his own people to the French. It is the younger generation in both case that is given the task of defending the new values of the nation.

2. Development of the love story

The first major strand of the novel is the linking of nationalism and opposition to hashish. The other major element in *al-Tût al-Murr* is a love story. It begins in a rather conventional way through hearsay of an intermediary as 'Abd Allah listens to his sister, Fatîma, telling about hearing strange songs from the garden next door and seeing a grown girl crawling there on all fours. That night 'Abd Allah sees the girl's face in a dream, a dream in which he is playing cards, as he had been all evening with his friends at the coffee house, but instead of Muhtâr his partner in the winning hand is the girl, 'Aïša, whom his sister has described to him. He becomes tremendously curious to see if his dream

vision is like the reality. Next 'Abd Allah sees 'Aïša at a distance with Fatîma under a mulberry tree combing her long black hair. There is still an aura of mystery about the girl because her face is hidden by her hair. This technique of using suspense to heighten the interest of the reader is reminiscent of the suspense about Halîma's father. Suddenly 'Abd Allah remembers the words of a song about an 'Aïša which haunts him all evening. That is the same evening that Muhtâr plays his joke with the hashish. 'Abd Allah who had objected all along to the endless stories about love told by his companions to the point that they had nicknamed him "the rock" because he seems so resistant to love, sings about the song about 'Aïša and even composes his own verse to it, referring specifically to 'Aïša and her affliction. 'Abd Allah's secret love is thus revealed and his friends are amused by his seeming inconsistency. His objection has been, however, to the stories about love and unseemly talk, not to love itself. He is virtuous on the subject of women just as he is virtuous on the subject of hashish.

Finally 'Abd Allah encounters 'Aïša in her garden when visiting her father, Shaykh Miftah. She had heard from Fatîma the story of his strange behavior while under the influence of the hashish and she wants to try hashish too so that she can be transported away from reality to a world where she can walk. 'Abd Allah is shocked that she should ask him precisely for the thing he despises most, and he feels pity for her infirmity and responsibility for her desire for hashish. He resolves to find a better way to help him. His love for her has a rational, practical aspect as well as a romantic dreamlike aspect.

'Abd Allah determines to marry 'Aïša and no one else because he thinks that she will be unable to find any other man who would want a woman who cannot walk. Unable to surmount his parent's opposition to the marriage by his arguments or his earnestness and unable as an obedient son to go against their wishes, 'Abd Allah withdraws from reality, stops eating and grows pale and sick in the fashion of the traditional *mağnûn* lover. He becomes so ill that his father fears for 'Abd Allah's life, and giving in to his wishes rather than lose his son, goes to šayh Miftah to make the marriage request. 'Abd Allah's mother remains stubbornly unreconcilable. She does not want a lame woman in her household.

Miraculously the last obstacle to happiness is overcome, the family is reunited, and 'Abd Allah's choice is vindicated when 'Aïša regains the use of her legs after the birth of their first child. The malfunction of the legs had been caused by a trauma during her early childhood associated with lightning striking close by. She had had a nervous

convulsion and had been close to dying. Apparently her paralysis, if that is what it is, is psychosomatic. In any case 'Abd Allah is the catalyst who by his faith and love restores her to health and happiness just as he is the cause of the successful attack on hashish.

3. Structure

The structure of *al-Tût al-Murr*, which uses the love story as a frame for the political action, seems more successful than the sequential arrangement of love story and resistance movement of *Halîma* in maintaining interest in the love story throughout the novel. Postponing the resolution of the obstacles to 'Abd Allah's and 'Aïša's happiness until the end adds to the importance of the love story by keeping the reader in suspense, the same technique used in *Halîma* to heighten the impact of the death of Halîma's father. The two stories within *al-Tût al-Murr* are linked by the subject of hashish, the person of 'Abd Allah, and by the title. Hashish is involved in the love story because it causes 'Abd Allah to disclose his secret love to his companions, and because it arouses 'Aïša's interest in 'Abd Allah and emboldens her to speak to him. 'Abd Allah's concern over 'Aïša's desire for hashish provides additional impetus to his resolve to enlist his friends in a campaign against the substance and represents a further link between the love story and the political intrigue. The title connects the two parts of the novel because the "bitter fruit" refers both to the beautiful young girl who is spoiled by the inability to walk and to hashish, bitter to the taste in 'Abd Allah's glass of tea and bitter to many others in the novel by leading them to an unhappy end of economic and physical ruin and isolation from society. The unraveling of the two strands in *al-Tût al-Murr* also coincides in the happy conclusion which combines the success of the youth movement against hashish with the happy marriage and healing of 'Aïša. The romantic love of 'Abd Allah for 'Aïša provides a balance to the political message of the need to combat corruption within in order to resist the menace from without.

4. The characters

Whereas *Halîma* is dominated by a single character, *al-Tût al-Murr* has a larger cast of characters, especially a collection of portraits of the young men in 'Abd Allah's circle of friends, as well as more

complexly drawn characters. Nûr al-dîn Ibn Bilqâsim points out that 'Abd Allah, like the main characters in *Halîma*, is altruistic in his motivation to dedicate himself to helping others. Ibn Bilqâsim justly criticizes the character of 'Abd Allah for the sudden change which takes place in him from one who knows nothing about what is happening outside the village to one who seems very well informed about imperialism (14). 'Abd Allah is similar to Halîma in this regard but with even less preparation of the reader for his sudden commitment to the nationalistic cause and the linking of hashish with imperialism. 'Abdallah Quwayrî points out that the technique of presentation of the characters is principally through dialogue in which the words of each person convey his or her portrait (15).

'Aïša, the heroine, is shown from many angles. On the one hand she is a young girl who has a great ability to enjoy the little pleasures of life, particularly getting out to visit her friend Fatîma and eating good things in Fatîma's home. Because of her infirmity 'Aïša is freed of many household obligations and can play and go visiting like Halîma and Miryam in the earlier novel. 'Aïša has another side too, a conscience. She shows remorse at having been too exuberant in her happy description of the menu at Fatîma's house when she thinks she has offended her sister Mabrûka who has no share in the good things. Behind 'Aïša's enjoyment of life is a painful, hidden desire to be like other girls and to be able to walk. She is a person gnawed by unhappiness who seizes what moments of pleasure she can. Through 'Abd Allah's eyes 'Aïša is also an idealized portrait of Woman. For him her infirmity lends her an aura of mystery, charm and strangeness. The air of mystery is introduced by his first vision of 'Aïša in a dream and by a scene under a mulberry tree in which her face is hidden from him by her black hair.

Mabrûka, 'Aïša's sister, is similar to the older son who stays behind in the biblical story of the prodigal son. She is dutiful to her father, busy from dawn to dusk helping him in the fields, taking care of the house, fixing his meals and his tea, caring for him in a multitude of ways. She looks after 'Aïša and works hard while 'Aïša plays. She is mother, grandmother and sister to 'Aïša. She is responsible for safeguarding 'Aïša's honor and so is indignant when she hears from 'Aïša the story of 'Abd Allah and the hashish. She wants to make sure

(14) Nûr al-dîn IBN BILQASIM, "Al-qissa wa al-riwâya 'inda al-'Arûsi al-Maṭwi", dans *al-Fikr*, febr. 1972, p. 42.

(15) A. QUWAYRÎ, *op. cit.*, p. 160.

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that 'Aīša does not return to the evil influence of such an immoral environment. Mabrukā has a philosophical side and a pessimistic side too: she anticipates the cold of winter and feels its pain in advance. She feels her poverty and her lack of possessions and position as a stranger in a strange land. She is darker, more self righteous and less appealing than her sister 'Aīša, but she is a convincing character.

Šayh Miftah, 'Aīša's father, is an old man with his mind drawn to the past, to the incursion of the Italians into Libya and to the circumstances surrounding the birth of his children and the death of his wife, to happier days gone by as well as to the bitterness ever present in his memory. He is a good neighbor who helps out 'Abd Allah's father, Ḥağğ 'Alī, by watering his garden for him when it is Ḥağğ 'Alī's turn to water at night because Ḥağğ 'Alī cannot see very well. Besides his preoccupation with the past Šayh Miftah demonstrates another characteristic of an old man: he falls asleep easily. Like 'Aīša he appreciates the little pleasures in life, for him his glass of tea. His portrait is a gentle one but at the same time a strong case against colonial abuses. He is perhaps another example of the "bitter fruit" of the title.

'Abd Allah's parents are well drawn, though fitting the stereotypes for male and female. His mother is emotional, easily upset by something before she hears the full story. When 'Abd Allah has a quarrel with his employer at the grocery where he works his mother fears the worst right away and worries about how she will be treated by the other village women if her family has been dishonored by her son. She also becomes very upset when 'Abd Allah tries to tell her about his love for 'Aīša. She shrieks, curses, calls him names, and forbids him to ever say her (the mother's) name again. She is also superstitious, blaming the trouble with the grocer on the evil eye of some jealous person. In contact with the exaggerated emotionalism of the mother, the father, Ḥağğ 'Alī, is cool-headed and slow to become angry and upset. He has confidence in his son rather than fearing the worst about him immediately as his wife does. He waits until he has heard all sides to a story before he makes his own judgment. He is flexible enough to give up the principle of opposition to an unsuitable marriage when it becomes clear that he can maintain the principle only by sacrificing his son's health, and possibly his very life. His portrait is a most sympathetic one.

Although Fatima, the last member of 'Abd Allah's family, receives scanty treatment, many of the group of friends have important roles and are better developed. Muhtar is especially appealing. He is illiterate but full of ideas and enthusiasm. Once involved in the campaign

against hashish it is he who thinks up a name for the group and composes an oath of secrecy to be signed by the members. He is fun loving and mischievous, clever and tricky. He slips hashish into 'Abd Allah's tea as a practical joke to make 'Abd Allah loosen up. He silences the watch dogs in a village garden in order to get in to destroy the marijuana plants by feeding them sausages stuffed with hashish. It is fitting method, he thinks, to combat hashish. He is able to joke even in trouble or about his troubles. Muhtar's light-heartedness is a pleasing contrast to the seriousness and intensity of the protagonist 'Abd Allah. He provides a bit of comic relief in the novel.

Ibrahim is another of the group of friends who is especially developed. He demonstrates his courage by volunteering for a difficult job when another of the brotherhood cannot accomplish the assigned task. He is reported to be sensitive on social observances. At his wedding, for example, the others are worried about offending him by not doing the expected and by waiting outside too long discussing the hashish problem. They decide to postpone the abstinence from hashish until after the wedding festivities so that they will not hurt his feelings. As narrated above, Ibrahim turns into a fanatic patriot: in the conflict between father and fatherland he chooses the nation to the detriment of his family, sacrificing his father's shop and the family livelihood in the fire that he sets to destroy the hashish shipment. He is terribly troubled by his father's collaboration with the French and though he scolds his father for his treachery and burns down his shop he loves his father very much. Like 'Abd Allah he becomes physically ill over the conflict within his family in spite of his wild and fanatic behavior, however, Ibrahim is generally cautious and practical. He counsels restraint when Muhtar lets on that he is planning to play a trick on 'Abd Allah at the coffee house. He also wants to be sure the group understands the potential consequences of a resistance movement. He knows from his father's loss of a leg in World War I resisting the Germans that there are dangers involved. Ibrahim is an important character because he has given the problem of having to choose between the old values of family honor and the new values of putting the well-being of the nation above family matters. Like Halima in the earlier novel he has the duty of instructing the older generation in the new values.

Mahmūd has the role of peace-maker, stopping 'Abd Allah from punching Muhtar and helping them to talk out their differences. He takes care of 'Abd Allah after the other man becomes intoxicated with hashish and sees him home safely. He stands behind 'Abd Allah on the question of hashish, a stalwart friend and supporter. It is Mahmūd who

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offers the wise counsel that the group behave as usual after the sabotage of the marijuana plants, continuing to spend their evenings in frivolous games at the coffee house in order to camouflage their serious intent and to deflect suspicion from the group of young men.

The three other members of the group of companions, Ahmad, Hemaïyis and 'Abd al-qâdir, are not described in enough detail to warrant discussion. It is evident, however, that there are a number of characters in this novel who are described sufficiently to make them more than stock characters. With the larger cast of characters Muhammad Laroussi Metoui is able to create a fuller picture of village life, the social relationships among the young men of the village and their leisure time activities, the relationships between family members, some idea of the economic functioning in a southern town with its oasis, system of water supply and sharecropping, petty jealousies, quarrels and resolution of quarrels, and superstitions of the villagers.

To return to the question of whether the political theme interferes with the literary merit, it is clear that in *al-Tût al-Murr* Laroussi Metoui conveys the same message of the needs to struggle against colonial rule but in a less didactic, more subtle way than in *Halîma*. The characters are more realistic and interesting, the plot more complex. It still seems at times that the author is using characters as mouthpieces for his own doctrine, particularly for the theory that hashish is been used by the colonial power to subjugate the conquered people, but there is less speech making and more complex action integrated with the love interest and relieved by occasional humor. In his later novel Muhammad Laroussi Metoui is more successful at integrating political themes with the love story line so that the novel stands as a more complex and integrated whole. The details of life in the village, the recreations of the young men and the mutual help of the older generation in agricultural pursuits also help to situate the action and the characters in their geographical and societal context and recall Tunisia's agricultural, small town origins. Nûr al-dîn Ibn Bilqâsim also concludes that the second novel is more satisfying. He finds that *Halîma* seems to be cut short and its ending ineffective in contrast to the powerful ending of *al-Tût al-Murr* mingling deep sadness with great happiness (16). Muḥtaṣ Ḡannat agrees that one of the strengths of *al-Tût al-Murr* is its ability to stir the feelings of the reader (17).

Muhammad Laroussi Metoui says that his aim in writing *Halîma* and *al Tût al-Murr* was simply to present a period of Tunisian history

that he lived through and the events that he witnessed. Since Tunisia shares with other North African countries a common heritage of subjugation to colonial powers it is natural to find in works of literature of North African writers at the time of gaining national sovereignty the theme of the struggle for independence and the search for a national identity separate from that of the colonial power. The excitement of the birth of a new nation was part of the historical period depicted. Both *Halîma* and *al-Tût al-Murr* convey to the reader a strong feeling of national identity stemming from the sense of rootedness in village life and activities, the excitement of dedication to the resistance movement and the celebration of the successful launching of a new nation. The inclusion of historical figures and historical events important to Tunisia's independence also contributes to the sense of identity. In *al-Tût al-Murr* there is the additional element of a brotherhood with a moral purpose appropriate to a people for whom Islam is an important part of their cultural heritage and an active force in contemporary life. If the political commitment of the novels detracts from their artistic merit it is clear nonetheless from my chance encounter with a Tunisian teenager that their romantic elements and passionate appeal to national loyalty continue to give the novels of Muhammad Laroussi Metoui a dedicated following among young Tunisian readers and to fill a need in the psyche of a young nation.

(16) N. IBN BILQASIM, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

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