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El Haraga Read Through Maghrebi Literary Production

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Abstract

This essay analyses a sample of recent Maghrebi fiction to explore the Maghreb's evolving cultural understanding of the *Haraga*. The *Haraga* is theorized to require action from both the migrant and the *migrated-from*. While the grammar of the word *migration* masks this duality as it posits the migrant as the sole subject, the Arabic word *Haraga* articulates the *migrated-from* as the *mahroog* (the burned) and this figure's process of becoming so as the *inhirag* (the reflexive state of being burned). This analysis reveals that migrants elaborate their destinations multi-dimensionally and primarily through negation, indicating that they are repulsed from within more than they are attracted from without. Their migrations do not aim to traverse solely the physical space to Europe but also the symbolic space between periphery and centre along social, familial, and psychological planes. Due to the multifarious ways in which the migrant and the *mahroog* remain connected while spatially separated, the former's continuous migration necessitates the latter's continuous *inhirag*. As a result, the *Haraga* dissipates across Maghrebi society and shifts its conceptual centre towards the borderlands.

"O Traveller, where are you going? You'll exhaust yourself and return. How many naïve people have regretted their departures before you and me?"[2] So goes the chorus of Dahmane Harrachi's nationally cherished song, *Ya Rayah*, lining the halls of Maghrebi cultural heritage: adopted afresh by new artists decade after decade, never allowed to join its composer in death's long rest. Along with it in its state of forcedly drawn-out existence are countless other cultural artefacts of myriad form that also revolve around themes of migration, absence and alienation. This cultural tradition is reinforced by new waves of production that reflect upon and respond to patterns of migration in the globalized, post-colonial world. These works journey across time and space, bridging the past with the present and the destination with the point of departure. They orient themselves on the borderlands and displace the conceptual "centre" of Maghrebi culture.

This paper explores how clandestine migration across the Straits of Gibraltar is represented in a small sample of recent Maghrebi fiction. It puts theory, literature and global events in conversation, to offer a glimpse into the Maghrebi community's ongoing cultural negotiation of the *Haraga* – a phenomenon that continues to radically transform the inner and outer contours

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This is the winning article submitted to the MEDRESET Young Writer Prize contest.

2 Author's translation.

of its society. Analyzing and amplifying the Maghreb's own evolving self-understanding of this migratory trend brings forth an important counterweight to the regime of definitions and representations imposed on the figure of the Maghrebi migrant in European mainstream media. It introduces a crucial interlocutor in the politicized struggle over the symbolism of that figure. In response to unidimensional labels including *economic migrant*, *asylum seeker* and *refugee*, the paper paints a multidimensional image of the various contradictory and complementary currents that not only make the human a migrant but that make the migrant a human.

To this end, the essay selects as its primary sources the novels *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* by Laila Lalami and *Harraga*[3] by Boualem Sansal, and the novella *Sea Drinkers* by Youssouf Amine Elalamy (henceforth YAE).[4] Each of these is a work of Maghrebi fiction published within the last 20 years, that centres the *Haraga* in a unique manner. The works of Lalami and YAE orient themselves on a particular fictive crossing attempt so as to juxtapose the indiscriminate danger of the migrants' journeys at sea with the deeply rooted differences in behaviour, personality and circumstance that motivate their respective crossings. The crossing marks a physical intersection for trajectories that differ on multiple dimensions. In Lalami's work, the migrants' paths diverge again as they jump off of the *patera* near the shore of Spain; in YAE's, the migrants' journeys end together, swallowed by the sea. Sansal's work differs in that it orients itself not on migrants, but on one whom a migrant has left behind. With this framing, Sansal centres the complex socio-spatial effects that the *Haraga* produces for those who remain in the Maghreb. He uses the *Haraga* to occasion a critical reflection on the ways in which the Algerian state both produces and responds to this wave of outward migration. Reading from this earnest selection, this paper hopes to convey an *insider's view* of the Maghrebi cultural dialogue around the *Haraga*.

At the most material level, the term *Haraga* refers to the clandestine crossing of the Straits of Gibraltar from northern Morocco into southern Spain on little boats known as *pateras*. The practice emerged largely as a response to restrictions abruptly placed on migration to Europe starting in the 1970s. Confronted with a domestic economy that was unable to provide for them, a political system that refused to represent them and a legal system that decreasingly provided opportunity for migration, many Maghrebis chose to cross the Mediterranean into Spain illegally. From 2008 to 2018, over 135,000 migrants have illegally attempted to cross the 15–20km distance into Europe along this route; many have failed, and countless have perished.[5]

On a cultural level, the *Haraga* encompasses a great deal more. The name comes from the verb *to burn*. The act of *burning* functions on many levels: the burning of identification papers to conceal national identity from authorities; the burning desire to migrate; the burning of personal and social connections with the nation; and the parallelism with Hernan Cortez's and Tariq ibn Ziyad's burning of their respective boats. As such, it also captures a *tactic*, a *pathology*, an *estrangement* and a *historical continuity*.

3 *Harraga* is the plural of the subject who performs the *Haraga*.
4 Both Sansal's and YAE's works are originally published in French as *Harraga* (Gallimard 2005) and *Les Clandestins* (EDDIF 2000) respectively.
5 See Spanish Government 2015 and UNHCR website: *Operational Portal-Refugee Situations-Mediterranean Situation: Spain*, https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/mediterranean/location/5226. See also IOM 2019, UNHCR 2019b, UNHCR 2019a: 8.

To capture the full significance of the *Haraga*, this essay considers how it is experienced both by those who leave and by those who are left. The migrant's journey is distilled to the overlapping and interplaying sub-processes of *emigration–immigration–clandestinity*: to leave; to arrive; and to remain. To analyze the effects on those who remain, we define the concepts of the *mahroog* (the burned) and their *inhirag* (their process of being burned). The paper theorizes each of these ideas individually before reading them through the literature and putting them in conversation with one another to extract insights on the *Haraga* in its completeness.

The three-pronged decomposition of clandestine migration is derived firstly in accordance with Dr. Abdelmalek Sayad's injunction to differentiate between emigration and immigration. Sayad's proposition that "before he or she becomes an immigrant, the migrant is always first an emigrant" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 2000: 174) articulates the possibility of emigration as motion on non-physical planes such as those of emotion, identity and resolve. It also argues a chronological order to these processes, suggesting an interaction rather than a parallelism between them. This conceptual decoupling uncovers the drastically different practices through which these two sub-processes are lived and performed, adding much-needed nuance into analysis of the subjectivity and journey of the migrant.

This paper conceives of *emigration* as the negotiation of leaving and of *immigration* as that of arriving. The former only premises an initial location and is built on negation; it is a repulsion from *here*. The latter, by contrast, presupposes a destination and requires a positive assertion; it is an attraction from *there*. The push from one territory may reinforce but does not equate with a pull from another. Thus, though *here* and *there* are relative terms that can only be understood in opposition to one another, *emigration* and *immigration* are conceptually separate. In practical terms: *emigration*, as the negotiation of a departure, entails gaining and maintaining the resolve to physically detach from a territory and all that resides within it; *immigration*, as the negotiation of an arrival, entails identifying a destination and then gaining and maintaining the psychological, financial and social capital required to arrive there.

This destination is never conceived solely in cartographic terms. As articulated by Massey, migrants travel "not across space-as-a-surface [… but] across *trajectories*" (Massey 2005: 119). Therefore the migrant's journey entails crossing not only the *physical* space between Morocco and Europe, but also the *symbolic* space between Periphery and Centre which manifests along economic, cultural and myriad other dimensions. Until this space has been traversed, one's migration is not over.

Clandestinity, the final prong of the *Haraga*, is articulated as the perpetual state of being and remaining as an illegal immigrant. Trapped in her precariousness, the clandestine migrant must adopt a "social camouflage" (Brigden 2016: 343) to successfully navigate the "multiplicity of border" (Reeves 2014: 144) which is enacted in an intricate matrix of "interpersonal encounters" and "virtual checkpoints" (Brigden 2016: 343, 344). To avoid exposure, she must "improvise upon the cultural tells and social scripts associated with national identity", and live in a "world of disguise and concealment" (Brigden 2016: 346, 345). Reeves argues that the migrant's "deportability" amounts to an "existential reality" (Reeves 2014: 135), mirroring the framing which Fanon deploys in colonial Algeria: like the colonial subject, the clandestine migrant remains "in a permanent state of tension […] constantly on his guard […] always ready to change his role as game for that of hunter" (Fanon 2004: 16). So long as the immigrant remains illegal, his act of crossing the border is not over and his migration remains incomplete.

With the celebrity of the figure of the migrant, it is lost on many that migration is never the sole journey of the migrant alone. Humans intimately coexist in multidimensional networks wherein the relocation of one node – along any dimension – produces a dislocation for all nodes connected to it. This concept is masked by the grammar of the word *migration* which generates a verb (*to migrate*) and a subject (the *migrant*) but not an object. There is no term for the reflexive quality of having been migrated from. Cognizant of the constitutive nature of language, this paper suggests a new vocabulary deriving not from the word *migration*, but from the word *Haraga* (the *burning*) instead. The latter not only lends itself to the derivation of the object – the *mahroog* (the burned) – but also grammatically requires it. It further articulates the reaction to the *Haraga* as the *inhirag* (the reflexive state of burning). This latter term captures the *mahroog*'s navigation through the new social space produced by the migrant's relocation. One cannot fully understand the *Haraga* without interpreting both *what* was burned and *how* it burned.

With a theoretical model now established, the paper progresses to read the *Haraga* through each of the selected works. To do so, it decomposes the *Haraga* into its composite parts as elaborated above. Each is then consecutively analyzed within the literature and, where relevant, contextualized amidst a backdrop of global events. The depictions across the works are compared and contrasted to unearth emergent symbols, recurrent motifs and conceptual tensions. This staged conversation recreates in part the larger internal Maghrebi negotiation of the *Haraga*.

Per Sayad's chronological ordering, the paper will first analyze *emigration*. To do so, it explores the literature for depictions both of the forces of repulsion and of the ways they are experienced by the migrant. Two important trajectories surface: male flight from unemployment; and female flight from gender-based violence. Both are expressed as quests for life. The former flees from profound psychological disorder and languor; the latter literally flees from death.

Far from being solely a financial concern, male unemployment carries far-reaching impacts across multiple dimensions. It estranges a man from his family, whom he is unable to provide for; it locks him out of, or strains already existing, marriage; it emasculates him and shrouds him in shame – as put by Salah from *Sea Drinkers*, "You're not a man if you're out of work" (Elalamy 2008: 142). Imprisoned in an arrested, still life, the unemployed take to dreaming about movement and purpose, about what Reeves calls "belonging-through-mobility" (Reeves 2014: 102). The myth of the mono-dimensional *economic migrant* is dismantled by the literature which shows unemployment to breed profound social and psychological trauma most commonly grounded in *shame*, *estrangement* and *stillness*. The cases of Aziz and Murad from Lalami's work and Abdou from *Sea Drinkers* exemplify this.

For Aziz, emigration was articulated against "the prospect of years of idleness [...] of asking [his family] for money [...], years of looking down at his shoes or changing the subject whenever someone asked what he did for a living" (Lalami 2005: 83). He was estranged from his blood-family for whom he failed to provide and from his in-laws who constantly "[nagged his wife] about his joblessness" (Lalami 2005: 83). His days entailed "sitting idle at a coffee shop" imagining that one day he would have "a place to go" (Lalami 2005: 90).

For Murad, emigration was defined against invisibility. Despite his being the eldest child, six years of self-employment as an unofficial tour-guide pushed him to the margins of his family structure. His peripherality was revealed to him in an exchange with his widowed mother. He returned home from a slow day only to be informed by her, as she ironed his sister's work shirts, that she and his uncle had given his sister's hand in marriage. He yelled, "I'm the man in this family now" (Lalami 2005: 106), but failed to convince even himself.

For Abdou, emigration was a repulsion from inexistence. The severe psychological trauma that resulted from his "captivity" (Sansal 2014: 101) in a dysfunctional Moroccan capitalist system took form in a profound renouncement of self: "I may have been someone once, today I am nobody, I don't exist anymore." He mimicked others' socio-spatial trajectories of movement to live through participation in society, "following the crowd, even quickening [his] pace like somebody in a hurry […]. Somebody at least" (Elalamy 2008: 152). As time progressed, the "shame that [was] stripping [him] naked, a little more each day" (Elalamy 2008: 153) overcame his resolve, and he gave in to the allure of the ocean; he drowned in it shortly thereafter.

In addition to male unemployment, female emigration in response to gender-based violence is a prominent theme in each of these three works. The myriad forms in which the violence is performed in the literature reveal a multilayered structure that is grounded in familial, marital and social relationships. The books portray the violence in its physical, emotional, financial and psychological dimensions. They show it to be enacted by husband, mother, judge and imam, among many others. For Lalami, this trend is depicted through Halima; for YAE, Chamaa; and for Sansal, Cherifa – although the reader is told that her "story […] is played out a hundred times, a thousand times all over the country" (Sansal 2014: 114).

Halima emigrates from marital and familial violence. She is introduced arriving at her mother's apartment after being beaten again by her drunkard husband. In a brief encounter, her mother asks her to be "patient", shames her by recourse to the normative gender role – "A woman must know how to handle her husband" – and blames her for her own abuse: "This is why he beats you. You talk back" (Lalami 2005: 57, 58). This exemplifies Anzaldúa's assertion that "males make the rules and laws; women transmit them" (Anzaldúa 1987: 16). Halima tries to solve her problem legally by pursuing a divorce, but fails to navigate the hyper-personalized male-dominated encounter that the corrupt judicial system requires. With neither formal nor informal domestic solutions, Halima sees no choice but to leave the country.

Chamaa emigrates from the impending violence that will inevitably follow her extra-marital pregnancy. Fleeing death at home, she drowns at sea. The reader is told, "No word, no scent, no color, no music even can ever render [her] infinite beauty" (Elalamy 2008: 116).

Lastly, Cherifa emigrates from the familial and communal violence imposed on women in the hyper-religious context Sansal describes. With "*Emirs* prowling around slitting young girls' throats" and orders from her parents to "stay at home, to wear the hijab, to hide away", she flees. "That's no life for anyone," she explains (Sansal 2014: 89, 90).

Having analyzed the forces of repulsion that motivate an emigration, the paper now analyzes the forces of attraction that culminate in an *immigration*. In putting these two sub-processes in conversation, the paper stages the negotiation of *place* that produces the migration in its entirety. The process of immigration entails a continual negotiation between the allure of the

destination and the multidimensional practice of arriving there. It is the struggle between *there* and *getting there*. To capture this in the literature, the paper explores depictions of the migrants' destination, their draw to it, and their journey to arrive there.

It is striking that in all three works, the migrants' destination is primarily conceived as an abstract territory devoid of the forces that repel them from the Maghreb. There is very little *positive definition* of their destination. That is to say, the destination is appealing not for what it is, but for what it isn't. Perhaps this is best captured by the smuggler in *Sea Drinkers* who remarks, "They were all in a hurry to get there, without knowing where *there* was" (Elalamy 2008: 96). The authors give no explanation for why Zuheir, the mute, broke twenty years of silence to say yes he would like to migrate; nor for why Salah takes a gulp out of the ocean every day to drink up the sea so he can cross it on foot; nor for how Ridouane fell under the "spell" of the sea which was "clinging to his dreams, unwilling to ever let them go" (Elalamy 2008: 138). In a globalized economy in which, as articulated by Rouse (1991: 14), "transnational migrant circuits" increasingly bridge together cultures and locales, the absence of these positive assertions in the literature speaks volumes. It suggests that despite all that is known of Europe, the principal orientation of the movement remains articulated in relation to the *Maghreb*.

However the destination may be defined, the preparation for the departure is always a multidimensional process with financial, social and psychological components. Financially, the migrants must piece together the extortionary crossing-fees. To do so, they must sell possessions, take loans, leverage their social and familial networks, and more. Socially, they must both form a connection with a smuggler and *spatially* extricate themselves from the connections they wish to maintain. In YAE's and Lalami's novels, the smuggler is depicted as a manipulative and omnipresent figure who lures souls with "words that can be struck like a match" (Elalamy 2008: 163). This is illustrated by the smuggler who convinces Murad to migrate by: promising him safe arrival; assuring him of employment opportunities; and inspiring him with past success stories. This conversation is a direct inversion of the pleas made by the migrant's connections for him to stay, which emphasize the danger of the journey, the awaiting clandestinity and the past failures. Aziz's parents warned him of what lies in wait: "the best (a farm job for slave wages!), the worst (a horrible death!), and everything in between (a life of inescapable delinquency!)" (Lalami 2005: 83). Psychologically, the migrant must remain committed throughout.

Should a migrant finish her preparation, she will be ready to take to sea. The dangers and tragedies of this journey are canonized in all forms of popular Maghrebi culture, ranging from music[6] to visual art; the works of Lalami and Elalamy are no exception. Indeed, *Sea Drinkers* is a tragedy. Shortly after departing, the *patera*, which the story revolves around, is tipped over by a wave and shattered. Its passengers cling hopelessly to floating planks of shattered wood; the sea "[rocks] them in her arms, to help put them to sleep. Once and for all" (Elalamy 2008: 120).

The personification of the sea is a common theme across the works but it is significant for more than just its artistic beauty. The western Mediterranean exists as a natural buffer-zone across the man-made and maintained divide of Europe and Africa. It has been utilized in vital

6 For example, see Raï superstar Khaled's track entitled *El Harraga*.

ways to preserve the image of Europe as a liberal, inclusive community. The sea is a mask that obfuscates the repercussions of the European regime of "differential inclusion" (Mezzadra and Neilson 2012: 67), which motivates these crossings by pitting insurmountable difficulties in the way of legal immigration. By declaring the deaths along this route to be the result of the migrants' underestimation of the terrain, the European community could posit itself as their saviour, thus providing itself with a humanitarian guise to further militarize and enforce its borders. This was but a pretext designed to provide the European bordering apparatus with greater freedom, rather than to help migrants. As Andersson (2012: 8) explains, the "Spanish patrols saw any migrant vessel as a virtual shipwreck". The precedent here is clear: the pretext would be deployed arbitrarily to police the borders with moral impunity.

In that sense, the case along the Gibraltar straits closely resembles that of the southern US border. In both instances, migration traverses similar socio-economic contours and a physically harsh landscape. Both bordered communities of destination, Europe and the USA, attempt to take advantage of the latter quality by channelling immigration through the austere landscape and then "[framing Nature] as a ruthless beast that law enforcement cannot be responsible for" (De León 2015: 43). According to De León, this policy of funnelling migrants into austere physical conditions, known as *Prevention Through Deterrence*, amounts to "a killing machine" (De León 2015: 3). In the European context, the same eventuality is achieved as increased maritime policing funnels migration along more dangerous routes; the sole difference is that the process isn't articulated in the same manner. Another difference lies in the extent of the adoption of the discourse of *humanitarianism*. In Europe, humanitarianism has enabled a "*migration of sovereignty*" (Andersson 2012: 8) characterized by a jurisdiction for European border-patrol that does not conform to the community's maritime borders and can even extend to the point of departure. Since the US and Mexico share a land border, this doesn't have so clear an analogue in the US context.

For those migrants who succeed in crossing, to arrive at the shore is only to embark on a new challenge: the sub-process of clandestinity – the continuous state of being and *remaining* as a clandestine immigrant. Without documentation, migrants remain confined to the underworld of society, vulnerable to anyone who purports to *embody the state*. The tales of Aziz and Faten in Lalami's work illustrate the precariousness of this position and the wretchedness it engenders.

Prior to departing, Aziz had arranged employment on a farm in Catalonia. Upon arrival, he faced what his parents had warned him of: exhausting labour for a meagre salary. Due to his precariousness, he was "too afraid to complain" (Lalami 2005: 148). He wanted to move to France, but feared crossing the border. He migrated inland to Madrid instead. This rural-to-urban migration posed new challenges: Aziz now had to adapt to being "followed around as if he were a criminal", and alternatively to have "eyes gaze past him as though he were invisible" (Lalami 2005: 155). With the help of his employer, he was able to naturalize, bringing his journey through clandestinity to an end.

Faten's journey was markedly different. After being apprehended by the Guardia Civil on the southern Spanish coast, she "saw one of the guards staring at her. She didn't need to speak Spanish to understand that he'd wanted to make her a deal" (Lalami 2005: 147). She, who had been a devout Muslim, had to renounce fundamental pillars of her faith as the "rate" (Reeves 2014: 134) needed to cross the border inhabited by the guard. Inland, she was thrust into sex-

work by her clandestinity, and her illegality multiplied itself. She dreamt of a day when she could stop "worrying about the police at every turn" (Lalami 2005: 138). Lalami captures Faten's socio-spatial peripherality in revealing that she "spent a lot of time on the street, yet she didn't know Madrid well at all" (Lalami 2005: 136).

The tales of Aziz and Faten round up this paper's analysis of the journey of the migrant through *emigration–immigration–clandestinity*. To adequately capture the importance of the *Haraga*, it is necessary to explore the effect that it has on those left behind. To this end, the paper now turns to exploring depictions of the *inhirag* in the literature. In each of the works, this phenomenon is best embodied in the form of a female tied to a male migrant by familial or marital bonds. This gendered framing reflects the gendered practice of migration as surfaced above, wherein male and female migrants seek radially opposite movements in socio-familial spaces: the former migrate to attain *centrality*; the latter for *peripherality*. It also gives rise to a new cultural symbol: she who is left behind – the *mahrooga*. For YAE, she takes the form of mother; for Lalami, wife; and for Sansal, sister. This analysis aims to uncover the hidden work of navigating the socio-spatial transformations produced by the *Haraga* and to dispel the notion that the migrant is the *Haraga*'s sole actor.

The mother of Louafi is delivered news that her son has drowned and that his corpse has washed up. She is overcome by denial as her feet and hands carry her "down that invisible line leading to her son" (Elalamy 2008: 109). She walks slowly, "to live a little longer" before "all the days ahead, pretending to breathe, to live [...] pretending to sustain a body that is and is no more". She traverses a physical distance as her son sought to do – only whereas he did so to live, she does so to "[die] for good" (Elalamy 2008: 105).

Zohra's *inhirag* unfolded very differently. At the start, she actively reinforced her husband Aziz's *Haraga*. She aided his immigration socially, financially and psychologically, supporting him all the way to the *patera*. They had planned for him to return after three years, to move together to a new house in Morocco and to start a family. In his absence, she worked harder than ever to survive and take care of his widowed mother. He first returned five years after migrating with a drastically changed personality. A panic-inducing sexual encounter and Aziz's insistence that Zohra move to Spain revealed how large the gulf between them had become. For Zohra, Aziz's *Haraga* bred estrangement, exhaustion and unfulfillment.

Lamia's *inhirag* differed from the above in that it responded to silence and uncertainty. Her brother Soufiane left their home suddenly and journeyed without communication. Confronted with an unexplained absence, Lamia searched Algiers, visiting governmental agencies and gangs of would-be *harragas*. Though her physical search soon subsided, she was confined to an indefinite "constant torment" with "the same haunting questions" (Sansal 2014: 5, 104): What had become of Soufiane? Would he return? In hopes of answering these questions, she began to contemplate the Algerian society that produces so many migrants – "a bathtub that sprung a leak" (Sansal 2014: 162). Answers such as unemployment, corruption, religion were insufficient. Only through a sustained conversation with Cherifa, a *harraga* herself whom Soufiane had met in the Oran smuggler underworld, could Lamia understand: the *harraga* leave "searching for a life and in these parts we can only talk about death" (Sansal 2014: 272). Her reflection ends with the declaration that one day, "we too will be *harragas*" (Sansal 2014: 275).

In taking as its subject matter Maghrebi literary production, this paper attempted to provide a glimpse into the Maghrebi understanding and portrayal of the *Haraga*. It put three recent literary works in communication with one another so as to stage the conversation happening at a cultural level, surfacing themes, ideas and symbols within it. Doing so centred a narrative that has for the most part been excluded from the discussion over the meaning of the Maghrebi migrant – a discussion that is largely taking place in Europe. Analyzing the works draws light to the intricacies of migration – for those who depart as well as for those who stay – that are actively effaced by politicized misrepresentation of migrants. As this paper showed, there is no mono-dimensional migrant nor any mono-actor migration. To frame its analysis, the essay theoretically abstracted the *Haraga* to three constituent sub-processes of *emigration*, *immigration* and *clandestinity*. Each was read through the literature, and where relevant, contextualized with the global events that largely determine it. In bringing theory, culture and global events together, this paper aimed to paint a comprehensive picture of the ongoing cultural negotiation of the *Haraga* within Maghrebi communities.

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