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NATIONALISM, ISLAM AND WORLD LITERATURE

Sites of confluence in the writings of Maḥmūd al-Mas^c^adī

Mohamed-Salah Omri

Foreword by Tayeb Salih

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IN MEMORY OF MY FATHER

FOR MDELLA AND HER GARDEN
OF JONQUIL AND BASIL

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FOREWORD

Tayeb Salih

The great Tunisian writer, thinker and politician, Maḥmūd al-Masʿadī, who died in 2004 at the age of ninety-three, was truly one of the most important contemporary Arab writers and thinkers. Although he was well known in France, he remained almost totally unknown in the English-speaking world. It is therefore a great pleasure for me to welcome this lucid, learned and stimulating study by Mohamed-Salah Omri. It is, to my knowledge, the first ever extensive attempt to introduce al-Masʿadī to the English-speaking world.

Ever since I read his remarkable work *al-Sudd* (The Dam) in the early 1960s, I became captivated by al-Masʿadī's ideas and particularly by his style. He was in a class of his own as a practitioner of the Arabic language. He was both very classical and very modern. I was also lucky to have met and talked with him several times. To have met al-Masʿadī in person and listened to him talk in his characteristically husky voice, about a wide variety of topics, ranging from literature to religion to politics, was a real privilege.

Al-Masʿadī was, in my view, in the mould of the great Arab and Muslim scholars-statesmen of old, reminding me of literary and political giants of the Abbasid period; men like Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ, al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil and al-Ṣāḥib ibn ʿAbbād. These men put their scholarship in the service of their politics and politics in the service of scholarship. It is a tradition, which al-Masʿadī could be said to have established in Tunisia during the late President Bourguiba's years. His student and disciple, Moḥamad Mazālī, who went on to become Prime Minister, continued to edit and publish an important literary magazine (*Al-Fikr*) throughout his years in government.

I find the comparison that Omri draws between Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and al-Masʿadī very apt. Not only were they both scholar-statesmen, functioning in small countries with relatively no great cultural or political weight, but also they both, as Omri says '... applied their efforts and pens to make sense of modernity and forge an identity for their people.' Indeed, it is possible to make comparisons between Goethe's Weimar and al-Masʿadī's Tunisia, especially during the first twenty or thirty years of Bourguiba's rule. Both countries, thanks to the efforts of their geniuses, Goethe and al-Masʿadī, acquired influence and importance far beyond their weight.

Al-Masʿadī expressed in his literary works complex and original ideas – some of these have been interpreted by critics as bordering on the heretical – in an uncompromisingly classical language, which is traditional, but at the same time very new and modern. Omri's book on al-Masʿadī deserves to be widely read.

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Research for this book began as a PhD dissertation at the Programme in Comparative Literature at Washington University in St. Louis where I enjoyed the company and support of a vibrant group of scholars and students: the late William Matheson, Emma Kafalenos, Randolph Pope, Robert Weninger, Michel Rybalka, Ahmet Karamustafa, Cornell Fleisher, Daniel Mosquera, Mohamed Masad, Megan Ferry, Gavin Foster, Ann Craver and many others. My thinking about issues related to world literature and literary theory developed largely in classes, readings and discussions with them. I am particularly grateful to Peter Heath and Robert Hegel; the first for infecting me with his enthusiasm for all aspects of medieval Arabic culture; the second for constructive critique and unwavering support.

I am indebted to my high school teachers Fredj Layouni for introducing me to the writings of al-Masʿadī and Youssef Hamrouni for teaching me how to read against the grain from an early age. Early in my research, I had initial support from Taoufic Baccar and the late Maḥmūd Masʿadī. The novelist and academic Mahmoud Tarshouna continued to offer help throughout, not least by bringing to light unknown manuscripts and obscure references to al-Masʿadī. I owe thanks to Michael Beard, Sabiha al Khemir, Jim Morris, Abdel-Salam Hamad, Tim Whitmarsh, Ronald Judy and the editors of the Middle East Literatures series, particularly Roger Allen, for their comments on various parts of the work. Qaisar Iskander has provided much needed technical support and deserves my thanks. I am grateful to Nadje al-Ali for helping me sharpen some of the theoretical writing issues at the very last stages of the project, and for the music. Thanks also to Wen-chin Ouyang and Flo Martin for support. With help and input from these many people, any shortcomings in the book can only be attributed to my own failings.

A sabbatical term from the University of Exeter in the Spring of 2004 made it possible for me to finish the manuscript. I am thankful to Duke University Press and to Taylor and Francis for allowing me to publish material from two articles, which I originally published in *Modern Language Quarterly* and *Edebiyat*. I must also express my sincere gratitude to Tayeb Salih for writing a foreword to the book. His genuineness and modesty, legendary as they are among his numerous fans, still took me by surprise when I suggested the idea to him with trepidation and rather on short notice.

Several friends have supported me through this journey with their unfailing friendship and love: Lotfi, Behi, Zouhir, Abdelkerim, Tahar and their families; Bernadette, Ali, Farida, Kamel, Fatma, Farid, Bellisa, Abdel and others. My family in Tunisia has kept faith in the project despite their puzzlement as to why I was writing a book in a language they cannot read. In their turn, my English-speaking family has put their trust in this book to convey Arabic to them. Writing about Arabic literature in English is perhaps an attempt to unite these two sides of myself and, beyond that, a desire to take part in a more meaningful confluence of cultures and people.

INTRODUCTION

At its widest scope, this book is about the weight of necessity and the relentless human desire to transgress it, in art as in life. By necessity, I mean tradition, fate and, to certain extent, the modern colonial condition. The life and work of the Tunisian Maḥmūd al-Masʿadī (1911–2004) are the prisms through which I explore how the past elicits a dual response: allure and resistance, almost in equal measure. By the allure of the past, I mean the seductive power of the Arabic literary heritage and the *Qur'ān* on one side, and the canon of Western literature on the other. Part of the past is also the pressures of the dogma of religion and French colonialist attempts to erase Tunisian cultural identity. In literature, this appeal is resisted through a poetics, which engages the past by means of parody, performance, an original use of the language and idiosyncratic conceptions of the spiritual and the tragic. On the ground, al-Masʿadī applied his effort and pen to resist colonialism, make sense of modernity and help forge an identity for his people.

The book also engages the issue of authenticity, as a political and cultural construction and as a philosophical position or stance in life. In modern Arabic culture the debate about 'authenticity' (*aṣāla*) in culture runs parallel to the persistent argument about modernity and, in the same way, continues unabated today. Such debate has taken numerous political colours and manifested itself in areas as varied as school curricula and dress codes (pace the continuing debate about the relationship between *aṣāla* and curriculum, *ḥijāb* and even beards and moustaches). During the colonial period, conceptions of *aṣāla* (authenticity) were closely tied to the discourses on national identity and therefore part of the argument for national liberation. In Tunisia, al-Masʿadī has been an advocate for a particular conception of *aṣāla* and a symbol for it at the same time. There is, however, a paradox here: al-Masʿadī's conception of authenticity is different from the one he came to represent, as I explain in the course of the book. The other type of authenticity pertains to the stance of al-Masʿadī's characters towards issues of conduct in life and position in the world. Ghaylān, Abū Hurayra, Madyan, Sindabād and ʿImrān approach life with consistency and determination, or rather with determined consistency, that remain unwavering until the very end of their respective journeys. They follow their paths in life with the lucidity and the sense of purpose that came to be associated, in modern times, with the existentialist heroes of a Camus or a Sartre, but which also recall the search

for truth and the pursuit of the ultimate fulfilment of the individual self, which marked early Muslim Sufis.

The book shows a marked concern with method, and this is where it is perhaps most experimental. It is about how better to approach the Arabic or Third World text, keeping in mind a global context and a specific linguistic situation. In other words, how to account for the specific national situation of the text, its language, its narrative repertoire and its communal concerns as well as the global perspective, both as a theoretical angle and as a pursuit by the writer; how to balance close reading and theoretical synthesis. From a methodological point of view, the study is an attempt to combine world literature and national literature or, in disciplinary terms, Area Studies and Comparative literature. Approaching the text from these two perspectives means allowing more than one entry to it while remaining aware of their intersection, even the tension between the two. The reader will find the ancient Arabic convention of *mu'āradha* (creative imitation) side by side with formal parody as understood by Bakhtin for instance, or references to Greek tragedy alongside the *Qur'ān*.[1] There will be extensive discussion of the concerns mentioned above throughout. At this point, however, and since the anthology of the study is al-Mas^cadī as writer and citizen, an ample introduction of this figure is needed.

Al-Masᶜadī: icon and enigma

Al-Masᶜadī passed away on 16 December 2004 at age 93, having experienced one of the most dramatic centuries in the history of Tunisia and the Arab world as a whole. His death came in the aftermath of a flurry of public activities related to his work and gave further momentum to interest in his life and writings. Indeed, the year before, 2003, was marked by the publication of his complete works in Arabic and in French, national and international colloquia around this and renewed interest among translators. After his death, numerous commemorative events took place, ranging from reading his work in daily slots on state television, to colloquia around the country, interviews with those who knew him closely, special supplements in newspapers and magazines and an outpouring of expressions of admiration from writers and poets.[2] Al-Masᶜadī's death was in reality the passing of an era. For some, it put an end to his dominance over Tunisian literary history, giving room for other voices to be heard. For others, it was the passing away of the last of the 'great Tunisians', an event akin to the death of the poet al-Shābbī seventy years earlier, hence calls to commemorate al-Masᶜadī's achievements in a museum, a library, literary prizes and even a dedicated website (*al-Ḥurriya* 2004: 2). But unlike al-Shabbī and the pioneer of Tunisian short story, ᶜAlī al-Dūᶜājī, who lived in relative obscurity and were honoured only after death, by 2004 al-Masᶜadī had been an icon for Tunisians for decades.[3]

Ten years earlier, an open letter addressed to the writer as a New Year greeting, which suggests how the writer fared in his own country, appeared in Tunisia's foremost daily newspaper *al-Ṣabāḥ* (*Al-Ṣabāḥ* 1993: 8). The letter also reveals how much its young writer, al-Ḥusayn Yazīd, is indebted to al-Masᶜadī in his style, and betrays the emotions he experiences in writing to his idol. Al-Masᶜadī's aura comes through

unambiguous and overwhelming. There are quotations from his work, a pastiche of his style, and numerous phrases familiar to his readers. For Yazīd, Tunisia and the writer are one and the same: 'Tunisia, our nation, our Tunisia, I love her and I love you. For you and she are synonyms, soul mates, twins'. But al-Masᶜadī does not appeal only to the young and the less established. Here is how the novelist and critic Maḥmud Ṭarshūna describes the effect of al-Masᶜadī's play *al-Sudd* on him personally and on his generation: 'The message of *al-Sudd* reached me at the age of twenty. Since then I put on Ghaylān's cloak and never took it off. I inherited it from two men: the first was Farḥāt, to whom al-Masᶜadī dedicates *al-Sudd*. The second was Farīd Ghāzī, who wore Ghaylān's cloak until his death' (Ṭarshūna 1997: 118).[4]

If these accounts are any indication, Tunisian readers and writers hold al-Masᶜadī in reverence. He commanded widespread respect among readers and within the anticolonial movement in the 1940s and never really lost it since. Yet, until recently he has remained a private man, giving rare interviews or commentaries on his work, entertaining very few visitors and avoiding journalists. When I met him in January 1994, however, al-Masᶜadī was again in the public eye. He had just been awarded the first Prix du Maghreb for cultural achievement (December 3, 1993) and everyone wanted a few words from him. In 1994 as well, a survey of intellectuals and writers voted him the most important cultural figure in the country.[5] In Tunisia, his work is studied more than any other living local writer; making a small cottage industry of at least 30 books, numerous articles and university theses. A number of writers belong to what may be called *madrasat al-Masᶜadī* (al-Masᶜadī's school).

My own first direct encounter with al-Masᶜadī at his house in a suburb of Tunis in 1994 was not unlike Yazīd's, although my aim was different. I felt a mixture of admiration for the writer, curiosity about the man behind the text and a desire to look for clues to a work I was trying to know more intimately as a student. I sought answers to issues that intrigued me in my research, such as the way he handles tradition, the origins of his unique style, how did he balance political activism with writing. The writer's relationship at that time with texts he had written fifty years earlier seemed a likely key to my questions. I asked:

> You introduce *al-Sudd* with the following statement: 'I wrote it in a period of solitude and meditation, and then put it to the test during years of life among people. I did not find it, in essence, alien to me nor did I reject it. Therefore, I decided to publish it in its shortcomings' (al-Maᶜadī 1985: 9). My question is: 'This was your opinion in 1955. Does it remain true fifty years on or has some of your writings become alien to you?'

He replied:

> I do not find anything of the sort in what I have written because I did not intend with my writings to lay out a philosophical doctrine that might become obsolete, or subject to revision, addition or deletion. What I wrote was the summary of the meaning of my experience in the world, of the

essential and related issues that occupied my mind, my heart and my imagination. These are the meaning and the responsibility, which are linked to being in the world, and which compel human beings to action, such as the duty to work and to create. Living (*wujūd*) requires us to contemplate the stages and dimensions of life, its meanings and the opening up (*tafātuḥ*) of its horizons. *Tafātuḥ* means the gradual opening up to the universe, which is an adventure like the one undertaken by Abū Hurayra.

The focus on shared human experience across time rather than specific instances of individual or communal history may be one secret behind al-Masʿadī's durability. The other intriguing issue for me had to do with how he actually composes his work, his method and his routine, the kind of puzzle that intrigues readers when they sense craft or genius in a text. During my interview, I appealed to the writer's own repertoire of influences by quoting the masterful Arabic prose writer ʿAbd Allāh ibn al-Muqaffaʿ (AD 724–759). I asked: 'When ibn al-Muqaffaʿ was asked about the reason behind his frequent pauses when he wrote, he replied: 'Speech crowds my chest so my pen stops in order to choose.'[6] My question is: 'How do you write?' Al-Masʿadī replied:

> Writing is like birth after long gestation. A text is like an embryo. It adapts like a human being and gradually takes its living shape, then appears by a sort of necessity. The birth itself is not easy, involving suffering and requiring care. The newborn needs considerable attention. The writer's work is revision. I have always treated what inspiration offered me with strict attention until I reached a point where I was satisfied that the final shape was a true expression of what was inside me. I have not put anything out to the public in its first or second or third versions. This may be what Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ had in mind.

Al-Masʿadī's answer to my next question provides evidence of the care with which he approaches language and gives a striking illustration of what Ibn al-Muqaffaʿ meant by the painstaking choice of words. I added: 'Al-Mutanabbī writes:

> Restless as if riding the wind – Steering me South or North.[7]

Is this restlessness (*qalaq*) pertinent to your character Abū Hurayra?'

Al-Masʿadī's response was not so much in what he said, rather it was in the distinction he clearly set between the way he handles tradition and the way, I (and, I am sure, many modern writers) do it. My quote was a memorized line, out of context. It added elegance and some erudition to my question. This was a case where the critic is compelled to adjust to the writer, or work within specific expectations, a gesture not unlike Yazīd's style in his birthday letter. I would not have phrased the question that way had I been interviewing Naguib Mahfuz for instance. Al-Masʿadī's response was, in gesture and in substance, markedly different, something almost completely missing from the way the Arab contemporary writer has related to his tradition and language. First, there was the unmistakable reproach of a veteran teacher. He said:

> The image is poetic. We are in the realm of poetry, imagination and imagery. I would like to point out a matter of principle. A part severed from the whole loses the meaning it acquires by being in a relationship with a whole. Taken separately, the part seems cut off, which changes its definition and meaning. The poet experiences restlessness because he does not feel stability and settlement, hence the gestures of someone moved by wind. He who is moved by wind is an object who does not have control over his movement. Restlessness means being unsettled. I apologize! I do not write without a dictionary nearby.

Al-Masʿadī then got up, looked in one dictionary and then in another, and continued: '*Qaliqa* or *Qalaqa*. *Qaliqah* means, not in its proper place, as in *ʿibāra qaliqah*, as Arab rhetoricians used to say, that is, an expression which is not in its proper place in the discourse.' He opened the dictionary and read: '*Qaliqah*, out of place, as in *ḥijāra qaliqah*, a stone which is not in its proper place in a building.' After the reproach came the answer: 'In this respect, Abū Hurayra refers to Abū al-ʿAtāhiya's line:

> I sought residence in every land – But found settlement nowhere'

When the interview was completed, I realized that I had not asked any biographical or factual questions. Biographical detail seemed perhaps too mundane, if not frivolous or irrelevant after such a conversation. The writer himself did not volunteer any information. I still had to find out who Maḥmūd al-Masʿadī was, his intellectual background, and how he had come to gain the reputation he has.

Al-Masʿadī and his writings

The writer's current fame is largely due to his fictional writings, his reputation prior to the publication of extracts from his fiction in the late 1940s and *al-Sudd* in 1955 was the result of his role as writer of essays, editor of a journal, educator, and trade union and political activist. Critics provide sketchy biographical notes and the customary references to the life and times of the author. Yet, al-Masʿadī's role as a nationalist intellectual remains to be studied and information about him must be gleaned from various sources. His role as one of the instrumental figures in the emergence of a national culture in Tunisia during and after colonial occupation deserves explanation.

Al-Masʿadī was born in the small village of Tazarka in the North East of the country on 28 January 1911. His experience as a student gave him direct access to the most influential institutions of learning available at his time. He studied at the prestigious modern school al-Madrasa al-Ṣādiqiyya, founded by the reformer Khayr al-Dīn Pasha, between 1921 and 1932; the French school Lycée Carnot in 1933; the Zaytūna Islamic University and al-Khaldūniyya during his years at Ṣādiqiyya; and, in France, at the Sorbonne from 1933 to 1936, then in 1939, and in 1947.[8] These

institutions helped mould the leaders of the time and positioned al-Masʿadī to become prominent among such company. In addition, he had the opportunity and the challenge to affect these very institutions, first as a teacher at Lycée Carnot (1936–38) then at Ṣādiqiyya (1938–48), and later as the architect of Tunisia's educational policy between 1958 and 1968. Al-Masʿadī also taught simultaneously at the Centre d'Etudes Islamiques at Paris University (1947–52) and at the Collège d'Etudes Supérieures in Tunis (1948–55) where he became Chair of the Arabic Literature Department. Among his students were Mūḥammad Mzālī, the founder of the journal *al-Fikr* and former Prime Minister of Tunisia at the time when al-Masʿadī was Speaker of Parliament; ʿIzz al-Dīn Gallūz, the translator of al-Masʿadī's book *al-Sudd* (The Dam) into French, and Ṭāhir Cherīʿa, the filmmaker and founder of Carthage International Film Festival. Al-Masʿadī's colleagues in Tunisia included André Raymond and a number of academics who contributed regularly to *al-Mabāḥith*. After independence, al-Masʿadī became the first Director of Education and then Inspector of Secondary Education before he was put in charge of the 'Tunisification' and reform of the educational system in the newly-independent country as Secretary of State for Education, Youth and Sports, which lead to the conception and implementation of 'The Project for Educational Reform of 1958'.[9] His goals were universal access to elementary education in ten years, the development of secondary education and the establishment of a modern university system. Among the most prominent aspects of this reform were integration of the Islamic institution al-Zaytūna within the university system as a college for religious studies, and maintaining bilingual education in Arabic and French, two daring moves, which continue to be debated today.[10] He was also Minister of Cultural Affairs from 1973 to 1976 and Speaker of Parliament between 1981 and 1986.

As a scholar, al-Masʿadī benefited from the tradition of Islamic studies in France during one of its most brilliant periods. His mentors and teachers, many of whom would become his future friends and colleagues, included the eminent scholars Gaudefroy-Demombyne, Levi-Provinçal and more importantly, the French specialist of Islamic mysticism Henri Massignon and the Arabist Regis Blachère. Al-Masʿadī's own academic work bears kinship to this tradition. His complementary doctoral thesis, *Essai sur le rythme dans la prose rimée en arabe* (An Essay on Rhythm in Arabic Rhymed Prose), which was written in 1939 but was published as a book only in 1981, is a path-breaking meticulous study of rhythmic patterns in Arabic prose with focus on the *Maqāmāt* of Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī.[11] Other published research includes articles on the theory of knowledge of the mystic and theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111), the philosophical poet Abū al-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī (973–1058), the Sufi poet Abū al-ʿAtāhiya (d. 848), several pieces on literary criticism and cultural issues, and translations from French.[12]

With such a profile, al-Masʿadī became a major player on the cultural scene before and after independence. In the colonial period, his most significant impact was during the crucial years when he was Editor in Chief of *al-Mabāḥith* (1943–47), the most important Tunisian journal of its time. The journal, which I study in more detail in Chapter 1, was the forum for a collective academic project to construct a national

culture in Tunisia. Al-Masʿadī's most involving anti-colonialist activities were in the arenas of labour unionism and politics. He was President of the Teachers Union in Tunisia and Member of the Secretariat General of the International Teachers Federation from 1951 to 1955 and Assistant Secretary General of the powerful General Union of Tunisian Workers since its foundation in 1948. When the Union leader, Farḥāt Ḥashshād, to whose memory al-Masʿadī dedicated his book *al-Sudd* (The Dam), was assassinated, the writer was put in charge of the Union. But as a result of a crackdown by the French authorities, he was exiled to the south of the country from September 1952 until May 1953. In the political field, he played an important role as member of the Neo-Constitutional Party of Tunisia from its founding in 1934. He participated in the negotiations with the French that led to self-rule in 1954 and was reportedly instrumental in keeping Tunisia out of the Axis alliance during the German occupation of the country in 1942.[13]

Outside Tunisia, al-Masʿadī is the country's best-known cultural figure. He was Tunisia's representative to the UNESCO for ten years (1958–68) before becoming a Member of its Executive Council in (1977–8) and (1980–5). In this capacity, he contributed to several UNESCO studies on education and culture including *Cultural Development: Some Regional Experiences* (1981), with the essay, 'Cultural Development in the Arabic Cultural Region'. Until his death, he was Member of *Lijnat al-Ḥukamāʾ* (Advisory Board) of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization (ALECSO); of the Editorial Board of the Syrian project *al-Mawsūʿa al-ʿarabiyya al-kubra* (The Great Arabic Encyclopedia) from 1978 and of the Jordanian Academy of Arabic Language from 1980.[14] Al-Masʿadī was also the spokesperson for Tunisian writers and often represented them abroad.

As far as literature is concerned, it appears that al-Masʿadī had written most of his fiction in one burst of creativity between 1938 and 1941.[15] He later added rare chapters or occasional stories such as the recently collected *Min Ayyām ʿImrān* (The Days of ʿImrān) and the aphorism in Arabic and in French published for the first time in 2003. It is, however, hard to detect a difference between earlier and later writings in outlook or in style. Al-Masʿadī's fiction will be studied in detail in the course of the book. Here, I will only point out, without analysing them at this stage, a number of striking features in his writing. His linguistic and stylistic creativity is evident in the names of gods, to cite only one instance. The writer invents names that evoke various connotations and symbols. Ṣāhabbāʾ in *al-Sudd* is a combination of barrenness and nothingness (*habāʾ*) and aridity and fire (*ṣahbāʾ*). Salhawā in *Mawlid* refers to a combination of consolation (*salwā*), obliviousness (*sahw*) and desire (*hawā*). Al-Masʿadī's metaphors and similes are both idiosyncratic and unusual. For example, he writes: 'We took to the water. The man would dive down and slither across near the bottom of the sea like a snake, then re-emerge like a memory' (al-Masʿadī 1979: 203). In *al-Sudd*, we read: 'Imagination is a cannibal' (*al-khayāl min akalati al-bashar*) (al-Masʿadī 1992: 48).

The endings of narratives are rather intriguing. *Al-Sudd* ends with the character Ghaylān ascending into the sky carried away by a storm. But it is his choice to ascend: 'We shall rise and open up for our heads a door in the sky' (149). Abū Hurayra

chooses his death in '*Ḥadīth al-baʿth al-ākhir*' (The Last Awakening). He seeks 'The Call' and responds to it in poetry and by 'a cry like that of joy' (al-Masʿadī 1979: 232). Only Madyan in *Mawlid*, who seeks a scientific cure for transience, finds repose and unites with the universe for a brief moment before he succumbs to death. The treatment of creation in *Mawlid al-Nisyān*, where the humankind is made of beauty, is symptomatic of the writer's interest in abstract and metaphysical issues. Typical of the philosophical thinking and expression embedded in the texts are statements such as 'And I said: I have nothing left except to seek my absolute self and my identity, to shun temporariness, complementarities and attributes (*al-maḥmūl wa al-lāḥiq wa al-ʿāriḍ*)' (al-Masʿadī 1979: 202).

These examples give an indication as to why al-Masʿadī's work inhabits the memory of his readers. His unique phrases, titles of resounding effect (*Ḥaddatha Abū Hurayra Qāl*, *Mawlid al-Nisyān*, 'al-Sindabād wa al-Ṭahāra'), characters that stand out (Ghaylān, Maymūna, Abū Hurayra), and carefully built texts written with remarkable conciseness, all appear to affect his readers. For a great many Tunisians who read at least one of his books at the final year of their secondary education or at the university, al-Masʿadī's words reverberate like no others, lurking in their memories, just like verses they learned as children and thought long forgotten. Such phrases are not totally comprehensible and yet are not entirely without meaning, significant phrases, cherished for their opacity as well as for their expression and rhythm, as several studies have demonstrated. Is language the reason why al-Masʿadī's work has survived the test of time, as Roger Allen suggests (Badawī: 1983, vol. 4: 190)? Has the 'Masʿadian word' managed to survive because of this very oddity, the puzzling grip of a past made relevant to the present? Does this mean that reworking tradition is the ultimate source of originality? At the same time, isn't this same attitude towards language what lies behind claims that al-Masʿadī's influence was limited?

What is al-Masʿadī's role in the development of modern Arabic literature? What does he represent? Is he responsible for the pattern of development of the novel in Tunisia as suggested by Benslama (Misaddī 1997: 16)? To what extent can he be credited with 'poeticizing' the Arabic novel, a role critics assign to Proust in the French novel? How can we account for his fame and endurance beyond the factors of distribution, networks of publication and personal influence? Does al-Masʿadī's case offer an answer to the problematic relationship the Arabic novel has entertained with the Arabic literary and cultural tradition (*turāth*)? Is he the missing link between both moments of Arabic literature, the pre-modern and the modern, as Bürgel suggests (Smart 1996: 182)? How does he tackle the controversial issues of Sufism and tragic thought in literature? What does his case tell us about the position of the *Qur'ān* in modern Arabic writing? In the course of this study, I explore some of these questions. It may not be possible to provide all the answers but these are questions the case compels the critic to ask.

Al-Masʿadī has rarely been the subject of critical consensus. Since his work tackles the sensitive issues of human will, religious doubt and the extent of human freedom in an Islamic context, there is great disparity of opinions among his critics. As Tawfīq Bakkār put it in his introduction to the 1979 edition of *Ḥaddatha*, al-Masʿadī

provokes the reader to question his or her own beliefs and challenges all sense of intellectual complacency. The absence of a clear lineage between the writer and his Arab contemporaries begs an interpretation of the Masʿadī 'phenomenon'. Students of Tunisian literature almost invariably set aside a special, and often separate, place for him. Scholars of modern Arabic literature as a whole almost as frequently pay a nod of recognition. Like his compatriot, the poet Abū al-Qāsim al-Shābbī, al-Masʿadī is often their token Maghrebi writer, a puzzling exception often noted but rarely analysed or interpreted.

There are numerous political readings of the writer's fiction but a remarkable lack of interest in his role as an intellectual or his cultural politics during the colonial period in particular. The writer's political career is at best used to shed light on his literary writings. Likewise, the fiction is sometimes used to justify or condemn his politics. In all cases, however, critics are at pains to reconcile both sides of al-Masʿadī. The Moroccan Francophone writer Abdelkabīr Khaṭībī notes a puzzling split between al-Masʿadī's writings and his nationalism. He observes that the relationship between the historical and the imaginary in al-Masʿadī's fiction is completely embroiled by a symbolism that rejects any systematic comparison with reality (Khaṭībī 1968: 87). He finds this surprising since the writer is known for his heavy involvement in Tunisian nationalism. Al-Masʿadī's 'Tunisianness', not to speak of his specific politics, I would like to argue, are difficult to deduce from his fiction. There is a systematic erasure of locale in his literary writing. The text does not re-present anything specifically Tunisian or particularly historical. This puzzling split bothers more than al-Masʿadī's critics. It puts to the test some of the most influential theories of and approaches to Third World literature as a whole.

Third World literature, literary theory and *Weltliteratur*

In literary scholarship, Third World literatures have been studied under the rubrics of 'world', 'general', comparative or, more recently, postcolonial literature.[16] Literary theory is not readily associated with Third World literature. No Third-World text has enjoyed the privileges theory has conferred on books such as James Joyce's *Ulysses* or writers like Marcel Proust or William Shakespeare. The theory of Third World literature is largely a Western reflection on the literatures from the area known as the Third World. And when theorized, Third World literature has been linked to ideology more closely than to literary theory. As a result, political, social, or cultural information has been the dominant areas and purposes for which Third World literature is studied. There is either a political aim or an ethnographic desire at work. At the level of discipline or field, they are linked to the limitations (and the relative potential) of Area Studies. In the case of Arabic literature, for instance, the main paradigms remain the politics and history of the region or its societies, mirroring interest in the area either as a political hotspot or as an unknown other.

Fredric Jameson's 1986 essay, 'Third-world Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' is an influential contribution towards the formulation of a theory of

Third World literature and the elaboration of an argument for its relevance to literary studies in North America in particular. Jameson starts from the premise that there is a 'radical difference' between Third World and 'First World' literatures. The preoccupation with the personal, which permeates the latter is almost absent from the former. He says:

> Third-world texts, even those which are seemingly private and invested with a properly libidinal dynamic – necessarily project a political dimension in the form of national allegory: *the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society*. Need I add that it is precisely this very different ratio of the political to the personal which makes such texts alien to us at first approach, and consequently, resistant to our conventional western habits of reading?
>
> (Jameson 1986: 69)

Jameson argues for an overarching interpretive theory for all Third-World texts. He says: 'All third-world texts are necessarily, I want to argue, allegorical, and in a very specific way: they are to be read as what I will call *national allegories*, even when, or perhaps I should say, particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly western machineries of representation, such as the novel' (Jameson 1986: 69).

Jameson's theory led to a famous intra-Marxist exchange with Aijaz Ahmad who contends that Jameson bases his conclusions exclusively on *realist* works available in *European* languages. Ahmed points out that the specific texts Jameson singles out to illustrate his point are two realist novels, one from China and the other from Senegal. Ahmad writes: 'Now, I am not sure that realism, which appears to be at the heart of Jameson's characterization of "Third World Literature" in this passage, is quite as universal in *that* literature or quite as definitively superseded in what Jameson calls "first-world cultural development" (Ahmad 1992: 112). The surrealism of the Caribbean writer Aimé Césaire and the realism that permeates contemporary North American writing are cases in point. With regard to allegorization, Ahmad points out that the advent of capitalism and the creation of an urban bourgeoisie in Third World societies can justify the focus on individual rather than communal issues in this literature. It should be expected therefore that 'there must be texts, perhaps numerous texts, that are grounded in this desolation, bereft of any capacity for the kind of allegorization and organicity that Jameson demands of them' (107). He states that in India several narratives deal with issues other than nationalism and colonialism. They address questions of femininity and propriety, for instance. Ahmad asserts: 'I cannot think of a single novel in Urdu between 1935 and 1947, the crucial year leading up to decolonization, which is in any direct or exclusive way about the experience of colonialism and imperialism' (118).

Yet Ahmad's own work on India in the chapter 'Indian Literature: Notes towards a definition of a category' confirms at least three of Jameson's main arguments. For

one, Ahmad notes in his nuanced essay, the lasting effect of the encounter between Indian literature and realist fiction. In his words: 'Most other forms came and went, but realism remained . . .' (270). Secondly, both essays stress the fact that concern with the self in literature is to be seen as a feature of writing born under capitalist conditions. Ahmad argues that since capitalism is 'a shaping force' within Third World formations, the separation between the public and the private, characteristic of what Jameson calls the 'first-world', must have occurred there as well. He writes: 'With this bifurcation must have come, at least for some producers of texts, the individuation and personalization of libidinal energies, the loss of access to "concrete" experience, and the subsequent experience of the self as an isolated, alienated entity incapable of real organic connection with any collectivity' (107). A third issue common to the work of Jameson and Ahmad, as well as to critics of Arabic literatures, is the privileging of the novel form over other types of narrative. This proposition leads to the replication of the history of the novel in Europe in a Third World context.[17]

Franco Moretti who attempts to chart the spread of the novel from Europe outwards and in the context of world literature, nuances the binarism of Jameson by introducing a third element in the rapport between the novel and its Third World manifestations. While Jameson sees the novel as a compromise between foreign form and local matter, Moretti adds local form to make a triangle of relations (Moretti 2000: 60). One key contribution here is to set the debate firmly in the area of form. (Ultimately, Moretti and Jameson agree since both understand forms to be, in the final analysis, abstracts of social relations.) It is through this third element that variation occurs. The most discernible manifestation of local form is related to narrative voice. For instance, Moretti points out, novels in China at some point show how the narrator is uneasy as to how to handle the novel form (Moretti 2000: 62–3). Mostly by moral prerogative, it tries to dominate the plot and often looses control of it. In the Arabic context, an example of this would be al-Muwailiḥī's *Ḥadīth 'Isā Ibn Hishām* (1907), where the narrator is clearly anxious to keep the narrative under control, hence his framing of events, commentary on characters and even outright didactic interventions. I will say more about the book in Chapter 2. Moretti recognizes the difficulty facing Comparative literature to study this element since close reading requires linguistic and cultural competence in the specific national tradition, an expertise that is often lacking among comparatists. The relationship between the global and the local is not one-dimensional either. Using the theory of the tree employed in philology, Moretti sees national literature as a tree with branches. The novel, however, is like a wave, an idea he borrows from genetics and archaeology: 'Think of the modern novel: certainly a wave (and I've actually called it a wave a few times) – but a wave that runs into the branches of local traditions, and is always significantly transformed by them' (67).

The specific ways in which metropolitan and Third World literatures interact reveals a complex picture. Mary Layoun's *Travels of a Genre: the Modern Novel and Ideology* (1990) explores the ways the novel has, in her term, 'travelled' to countries like Japan, Greece and the Arab World. In Third World cultures, much like the concept of nation itself, the novel has emerged as the dominant narrative genre but not the only one. Layoun writes: 'While the novel was not a particularly indigenous

literary genre in the "third" or non-Western world, it quickly predominated as a privileged narrative construct. And yet *on the site* of that hegemonic narrative form, there emerged counter hegemonic opposition as well' (Layoun 1990: xii, my emphasis). Yet, in her words, 'oppositional narrative practice challenges but does not necessarily refuse the novel' (Layoun 1990: 11).

Michael Valdes Moses suggests in *The Novel and the Globalization of Culture* (1995) that the advent of modernization and the destruction of traditional communities, as a global experience, have led to a 'narrowing' of human possibilities. He writes: 'Modernity is not merely a transient or provincial Western phenomenon, but instead it has become the universal and perhaps permanent condition of humanity and therefore the inevitable subject of any literature that would represent contemporary existence' (Valdes Moses 1995: xii). Within this globalization, '[c]ontemporary postcolonial and Third World literatures are not radical alternatives to global modernity but distinctive and significant reflections of its rise and diffusion' (Valdes Moses 1995: xiii).

In the context of Arabic literature, Sabry Hafez establishes a similar link between the new conception of the self and the nation on the one hand and, on the other, the rise of the narrative (novel, short story and drama). He writes:

> The genesis of narrative discourse in Arabic culture is (...) synonymous with the genesis of a new way of rationalization and perception of both the self and the other. As a process, it is inseparable from the emergence of the new social and cultural experiences which gave rise to a new perception of national identity (Hafez 1993: 22).

Forty years earlier, Ṭāha Ḥusayn, arguably the most prominent Arab intellectual in the twentieth century, wrote with great enthusiasm in praise and appraisal of the novel in Arabic literature: 'It will be the great privilege and honour of the contemporary Arabic writers to have literally reinstated this genre by making it the most important form in the realm of modern prose' (Ḥusayn 1989: 253).

The foregoing overview demonstrates that the study of Third World literature and Third World conceptions of modernity has been guided by the determining role assigned to global phenomena, such as colonialism, nationalism, or the novel. The exclusive focus on particular manifestations of the novel in the Third World is due, not in small part, to a theory of Third World literature and a conception of Comparative literature that take Europe as their frame of reference. Scholarship on Third World literature has been subjected to the erroneous assumption that a Third World text is knowable, if not already known, since it can presumably be traced to a familiar source or because it is readily classifiable under an overarching paradigm, such as nationalism. It is perhaps convenient, but no longer tenable to think that any national literature can be accounted for exclusively in relation to the concerns of the particular nation or that the demonstrable presence of a Western intertext constitutes definitive comparative study of Third World literature in its world context. Third World literatures cannot be properly interpreted if they continue to be considered copies, minor versions, an offspring of 'First World' originals.

Third World literature challenges literary theory to be genuinely global, more flexible and more self-critical. It challenges comparative literature to live up to its own claim of being the discipline properly equipped to address literature on a global scale. It is in this new awareness that the concept of *Weltliteratur*, first proposed by Goethe in the 1820s witnessed a simultaneous revival and revision. Before looking at these revisions, I shall discuss the idea itself. The origins of *Weltliteratur* have direct bearing on the present study for two reasons. First, accounts of Goethe's idea tend to neglect or minimize the role of Islam and Arabic literature in the very genesis of his interest in world literature. The second reason has to do with the striking similarity between some of al-Masʿadī's ideas on literature and Goethe's concept, as I explain in due course.[18]

Goethe offers no shorthand definition of *Weltliteratur*. Fritz Strich, who devotes a book to the idea, draws on all the passages where Goethe mentions the word (21 in total) to define the term, which covers a set of ideas and activities in which the German poet was involved particularly in the last 20 years of his life. Goethe's practice of world literature took the form of translations, reviews of foreign literature, and turning his house into a meeting place for foreign writers. The ideas of exchange, respect of difference and the service of a common aim constitute the core of *Weltliteratur*. Goethe writes: 'We must repeat, however, that the point is not that nations should think alike, but that they should become aware of each other, and that even where there can be no mutual affection there should be tolerance' (Strich 194: 13). Dialogue and the free exchange of ideas are the foundations of world literature.[19] Strich concludes: 'This is the highest task that Goethe assigned to world literature: to foster the growth of a common humanity in its most perfect and universal form: to advance human civilization' (13).[20]

Strich, however, ignores the key role Islam and Arabic literature play in the formulation of Goethe's idea of world literature, insisting on the European dimension only. While Goethe clearly recognizes and even recommends knowledge of Arabic literature and Islam, as I note below, Strich is adamant, in his prejudiced language as in his argument, that Goethe had no more than a vague and exotic encounter with the 'Orient'.[21] Katharina Mommsen, on the other hand, argues that the German poet's relationship to Arabic literature and Islam was much deeper and more significant in his career than critics have been ready to admit.[22] It provided him with inspiration and renewal of poetic energy, and expanded his horizon beyond Europe especially during the years when he developed *Weltliteratur*. Mommsen traces the presence of themes, forms and ideas from Arabic poetry, the *Qur'ān* and other Islamic sources in Goethe's entire work. She reveals Goethe's readings and conversations, his effort to learn Arabic and a fascination with Arabic literature and the Islamic faith.[23] Goethe claims to have found in Arabic a special case where unity between language and thought or feeling can take place. He wrote in a letter dated 23 January 1815: 'There is probably no language other than Arabic where the thought, the world and the letter converge in harmony in an authentic manner' (Mommsen 1995: 50). Goethe even spoke of an Arab poetic talent: 'the global view of things; the ease in [poetic] composition; the enjoyment; a natural inclination of the nation to symbolism and

metaphor; and the resulting capacity to solve mysteries' (Mommsen 1995: 104).[24] In sum, Goethe practiced in his work (*The East–West Divan*, in this case) as well as in his life a type of world literature based on mutual respect and recognition of the other and on dialogue. In more recent times, his ideas have been taken up most prominently by Eric Auerbach in the 1950s in philology, and later by Jameson and Armando Gnisci in the context of Comparative literature.

Auerbach is attached to the ideal of a common dialogue between cultures and writers contained in Goethe's initial elaboration of *Weltliteratur*. But he concedes that something essential has happened since Goethe's time, which warrants a revision of the term. Auerbach suggests: 'The conception of *Weltliteratur* advocated in this essay – a conception of the diverse background of a common fate – does not seek to affect or alter that which has already begun to occur, albeit contrary to expectations; the present conception accepts as an inevitable fact that world-culture is being standardized' (Auerbach 1969: 7). Globalization is now such that 'we must return, in admittedly altered circumstances, to the knowledge that pre-national medieval culture already possessed: the knowledge that the spirit [*Geist*] is not national' (17). At the level of research, Auerbach calls for a philology of *Weltliteratur*, a survey of human history made possible by changes in the world and the availability of sufficient sources. He recognized the fact that 'our philological home is the earth: it can no longer be the nation' (17). He admits that this practice is 'less active, less practical, less political' than Goethe's project. So, where Goethe saw opportunity, Auerbach sensed danger. According to him, the triumph of standardization, whether the Euro-American model or the Russian model, would lead to a situation where the 'notion of *Weltliteratur* would be at once realized and destroyed' (3). There is a danger that the diversity, which led to the construction of our humanity, would no longer be possible.[25]

Jameson tackles the issue from the perspective of cultural studies in North America and the field of Comparative literature. His argument is that American scholarship must recognize the difference of other national cultures: 'Today the reinvention of cultural studies in the United States demands the reinvention, in a new situation, of what Goethe long ago theorized as 'world literature' (Jameson 1986: 68). Comparative literature, which for Jameson is the 'real meaning of Goethe's concept of one "world literature," is inconceivable without proper consideration of Third World literature'. He adds: 'Any conception of world literature necessarily demands some specific engagement with the question of third-world literature' (Jameson 1986: 68). It must recognize and articulate what he calls the 'radical difference' of the Third World text (65). In Jameson's argument, Third World literature, World literature and Comparative literature converge, resulting in a redefinition of the scope of the latter. He, however, takes as his point of departure the crisis of Comparative literature in North America and says nothing about the relevance of this to the discipline in the Third World. In Jameson's formulation, as was the case with Goethe, *Weltliteratur* is not merely an approach to world literature but also a politics of literary studies.

These active, practical and political aspects of *Weltliteratur* are at the core of the direction proposed by the Italian comparatist Armando Gnisci. He suggests in

'La littérature comparée comme discipline de décolonisation' a shift in Comparative literature from its focus on the study of world literature to a 'world literary discipline'. He says: 'La littérature mondiale - celle qu'en 1827 Goethe nommait *Weltliteratur* – est restée un rêve de la culture des lumières et de la culture du Romantisme. Aujourd'hui on travaille plutôt autour d'une *discipline littéraire mondiale*. Pour les raisons que je viens d'énoncer, on peut volontier continuer à nommer cette discipline "littérature comparée"' (Gnisci 1995: 23). Gnisci calls this kind of Comparative literature a '"confederative" form of knowledge and instruction which allows dialogue from the perspective of the common good' (25). For the countries in the process of decolonization, this practice represents a way of understanding, studying and bringing about decolonization. For Europeans, Comparative literature is the discipline of 'self-decolonization' (26). It is time, he claims, for 'the critique of cross images', for listening to how the others view us. Gnisci advocates a theory of Comparative literature where scholarship is directly involved in issues of mutual understanding and dialogue between cultures. Comparative literature is seen as a cultural practice with political and social agendas rather than a 'purely' academic undertaking. In this, Gnisci lives up to the ideal of his predecessor Goethe.

Measured against such ideals, scholarship on Third World literature remains seriously inadequate. There is, I agree with Ahmad, a problem of location. Ahmad's argument that Jameson is laying out a theory for a literature he does not know or that Said's work on literature and imperialism comes from someone concerned primarily with metropolitan culture and who prefers 'metropolitan location' find meaning in this.[26] Nevertheless, I suggest, Jameson and Said are important specifically because they are critics of metropolitan culture and scholarship. Their work plays a part, pioneering roles in fact, in what Gnisci calls the de-colonization of metropolitan scholarship.[27] The postcolonial factor in the metropole, first at the social level and now in theoretical discourse, participates in this on-going project.

Pivotal, and even foundational, to postcolonial theory and to the reflections by Jameson and Said on Third World culture is the work of Frantz Fanon. In fact, the study of colonialism and nationalism cannot be properly understood without reference to this intellectual who formed his ideas around French colonialism of North Africa and on whose thought rests much of postcolonial theory as a whole.[28] Fanon's conceptions of national culture and of the role of the 'native intellectual' under colonialism are key to al-Masʿadī's career and ideas. Fanon argues that national culture rests on a number of parameters, most notably inclusiveness, the process of the development of national consciousness, the national territory, freedom from colonialism and the audience of national cultural production. He defines national culture as 'the whole body of efforts made by the people in the sphere of thought to describe, justify and praise the action through which that people has created itself and keeps itself in existence' (Fanon, 1995: 233). (Al-Masʿadī echoes this understanding of national culture in his essays, as I argue in Chapter 1). National culture is therefore cumulative and all-encompassing, incorporating changes in culture and does not limit itself to written or 'high' cultural production. Fanon adds: 'National culture is the sum total of all these appraisals; it is the result of internal and external tensions exerted over

society as a whole and also at every level of that society' (245). Because national culture pertains to the very existence of the nation, in the colonies it is necessarily tied to freedom from colonial rule. Fanon in fact puts national culture at 'the very heart of the struggle for freedom' (233). Both are the result of a process and a struggle. For this reason, Fanon places national culture at the very last stage of development in national consciousness.

The first stage is characterized by the 'assimilation of the culture of the oppressing power'; the second is dominated by recollection of or 'immersion' into native culture, in particular the revival of its past, while the third or 'the fighting phase' is marked by the mobilization to liberate the nation from colonialism (222). The audience of national literature and art changes depending on the phase. Addressing the native people is characteristic of the last phase. Fanon explains: 'While at the beginning the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether with the intention of charming him or of denouncing him through ethnic and subjectivist means, now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people. It is only from that moment that we can speak of a national culture' (240). All the efforts of the producers of culture must be channelled to one goal, the battle for independence from colonialism. For without an independent existence there can be no national culture as such. Here Fanon establishes a tie between the control of national territory through a national state and national culture. He writes: 'The condition of existence of a national culture is therefore national liberation and the renaissance of the state. The nation is not only the condition of culture, its fruitfulness, its continuous renewal and its deepening. It is also a necessity. The fight for national existence sets culture moving and opens up to it the doors of creation' (244).

The agent of national culture is the native intellectual – Fanon also uses the terms native man of culture, intellectual, writer and artist to refer to the same thing. It is perhaps within this framework that Jameson's argument for an inevitable link between the Third World text and national concerns should be understood. If the 'Third-World text is necessarily' an allegory of the nation or the community, then the writer is 'necessarily' involved in national concerns. Fanon speaks interchangeably of the writer and the 'native intellectual'. In a colonial context, then, the native writer is necessarily a native intellectual. Can a writer under colonialism be anything but 'native intellectual'? This question is key to the case of al-Mascadī. In the course of the study I explore the writer's career as intellectual and his role in the rise of national culture in Tunisia but also show how he himself, as a writer, was aware of and rather uneasy about this 'predicament'.

Methodological considerations

How does the foregoing discussion affect methodology? Comparative and World literature are routinely accused of being dismissive of close reading, leaving this task to national literature specialists. The linkages of Comparative literature with cultural studies or literary theory have a lot to do with this, as comparatists have pointed

out.[29] Specialists of national literature are, in turn, often judged parochial and narrow in perspective. Moretti has argued for a compromise to bridge this disparity by suggesting a 'global division of labour', which would allow the study of literature in its global as well as local contexts. He argues that both disciplines need to move away from their past and open up to each other. Area Studies, which are born out of Cold War conditions, carry that baggage with them, as I mention earlier in the case of Middle East Studies. Goethe and Marx hoped for a world literature based on equality; it was an ambition, tied to a wide social project in the case of Marx, and to humanist impulse with regard to Goethe. For Auerbach in the 1950s it was time for humanist conversation again and world literature fit within that frame of mind. Close reading and theoretical perspective complement each other; the first is the prerogative of national literature, the second pertains to comparative and world literatures. On his part, al-Mascadī understood world literature as a humanist conversation, but with an important proviso. According to him, the marginal literatures, such as Arabic, have to be part of this ambition or conversation. He contends that the centre should not remain European or American, or even socialist as other key Arab writers of the 1950s and 60s believed, as I explain in Chapter 1.

As far as methodology is concerned, then, three key observations must be borne in mind. In the first place, I believe that reliance on the paradigms of Area Studies has resulted in reductive critical approaches to the study of Arabic literature in the modern period, with undue emphasis on ethnographic information, political themes and social content. On the other side, exclusive basis in Western poetics, particularly practical criticism, has severed this literature from its intellectual situation, ignoring local interpretive models and shying away from global theory. Expertise in a national literature, which I understand to mean more than knowing the national language, should bring knowledge of the national tradition to bear on the illumination of the text. In the present case, Arabic poetics is used alongside Western critical theory. (For example, I use *taqiyya*, Barthes, Aristotle, intertextuality as understood by Arabic poetics, Sufi terms, Bakhtin's formal parody). In this, I practice a form of comparatism which attempts to go beyond cataloguing and indexing influences and intertextual references. It brings in paradigms not readily available to a practitioner of comparative literature, namely, Arabic poetics. It is through this practice that the elements constitutive of al-Mascadī's text can be accounted for, as I demonstrate in the course of the study.

A second issue, related to Area Studies as well, is the tendency to conflate text and context or writer and writing in a reading which privileges context and biography, and largely ignores literature as such. In the present study, I disentangle al-Mascadī the 'native intellectual' from al-Mascadī the fiction writer. The focus on cultural politics as such will allow more judicious analysis of the writer's essays and political activities, which is the thrust of Chapter 1. The attention given to his fiction will, even in a limited way, free it from the politics of nationalism, in particular nation-state building, and open it up to poetics. It does so while remaining alert to ideology and politics throughout, without allowing either one to dominate or to skew the 'literariness' of the literature studied, to use a term from poetics.[30] The study attempts to construct a specific poetics to articulate the difference that al-Mascadī's text presents

us with. It heeds Jameson's call for recognizing the difference and the importance of the particular 'situation' of the Third World text. At the same time, my work on one specific case challenges Jameson's theoretical claim that the difference of Third World literature resides in the fact that it 'necessarily projects a political dimension in the form of a national allegory'. Moreover, the present project attempts to establish that al-Masᶜadī's text is so imbued with the literary, linguistic, and intellectual conventions of the Arab and Islamic traditions that any approach that does not elucidate how this tradition works in the text will ultimately fail to articulate its difference. This is what Moretti terms the third element in the equation, i.e. local form. The pursuit of aesthetic goals by writers and artists is too complex and too fundamental to literature and art to be dismissed as capitulation to an existing order, betrayal of national needs, reactionary elitist obsession or nostalgia to bygone cultural glory. It may be that, ideologically interpreted; but the business of the critic, at a first level, is to express that difference, to make visible the literariness in its complexity. In this regard there is no reason why we should make a distinction between the high modernists Eliot, Joyce or Kandinsky on the one hand and Third World writers like al-Masᶜadī, on the other. Cultural and literary theory, even at its most radical manifestations, has clearly privileged Western canonical writers. The present work seeks to question that privilege.

Local form is understood by Moretti, because he focuses on the novel, to mean almost exclusively narrative voice. But the construction of a narrative voice is a complex matter, which involves narrators as much as it does the language and other culturally relative devices such as irony or humour. For example, when al-Masᶜadī proceeds to rearranging the order of words in his sentences, using a *Qur'ānic* technique, we hear the voice of the *Qur'ānic* authority. But inserting this style in a parodic context *inscribes* the transgression of *Qur'ānic* authority at the same time, as I suggest in Chapter 3. Local form in this case is understood in the wider sense of the term, to mean linguistic, stylistic as well as narrative devices. Chapter 2 makes the issue of form even less straightforward by focusing on the ways Arabic narrative tradition works in al-Masᶜadī's fiction.

At the same time, al-Masᶜadī's writings do engage Western culture in significant and profound ways, and Chapter 3 explores the confluences of these sources in his work. Instead of focusing on what influences the text is subjected to, I seek an elucidation of the confluence of all these elements and how the text mediates these differing impulses. This is analytically more challenging, but methodologically more rewarding as it addresses the ways in which all these sources – not just one of them – work in, and are worked into, the Masᶜadian text. My argument is that if attention of the kind described above is given to the text, the ensuing or subsequent ideological or sociological interpretations become necessarily more complex. Within the logic of Jameson and Moretti, but reversing their point of departure, the complexity of social relations should impel us to pay attention to the complexity of the text or the form. As in the Bakhtinian model, social and political analysis would take into account the polyphony of the languages and styles as well as their orchestration in a text, rather than proceed by assigning allegorical meanings to characters and plots

mechanically and as a given. In the Third World, these social relations because they are a mixture of global and local networks and interests, are simply too complex to be accounted for by the type of allegorization described above.

A third point has to do with the reluctance on the part of critics to recognize and consider properly the spiritual elements in modern Arabic writing. This attitude in fact goes beyond Arabic literature, as Victoria Holbrook has successfully argued in her work on Ottoman poetry. She notes that 'separation of the sacred from secular literature, legion to modernity, has relegated texts categorized as "spiritual" to marginal status isolated from those deserving serious intellectual and artistic attention' (Holbrook 1994: 10). I would go even further by suggesting that such texts have been interpreted in ways designed to make them fit the nationalist paradigm and the modern 'secular' imperative in an exclusive and often dismissive manner. Sufism, for instance, as a way of thinking modernity and as a form of writing rarely gets mention. Chapter 4 of the present study brings in both elements to read al-Masᶜadī's work. The various parts of the book, therefore, reflect the observations and concerns outlined above. Since none of al-Masᶜadī's texts have been translated into English, I provide in the Appendices translations of key short extracts that are subject to frequent reference in the course of the study. These are intended also to provide the English-speaking reader with direct access to al-Masᶜadī's style of writing and thought. Appendix A is a key article written in 1951, which shows in its style and in its content the writer's political thinking at a critical moment in Tunisia's history. Appendix B is a translation of the chapter from *Ḥaddatha Abū Hurayra qāl*, which is analysed in detail in Chapter 2. Appendix C is the translation of a scene from *al-Sudd*, which I study in Chapter 3. At the end of the book, the reader will find a bibliography of al-Masᶜadī and a complete list of works cited. The transliteration system adopted here is used in the publications of the Middle East Studies Association of North America (MESA). North African names are usually spelled according to a French convention by which, for example, Maḥmūd al-Masᶜadī is spelled Mahmoud Messadi and appears thus in official and French sources. For the sake of consistency, I have adopted a systematic transliteration of all names following MESA guidelines, unless the spelling occurs in a quotation originally in French.