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The picaresque, the abject body, and masculinity in Mohamed Choukri's autobiography "For Bread Alone"

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Abstract:
This paper discusses the form of masculinity called picaresque masculinity and how it is textually constructed in the autobiography of Moroccan author Mohamed Choukri, For Bread Alone *(1973). It considers the intersection between picaresque themes and masculinity, focusing on how Choukri's use of his physical body, the pains and the pleasures it gives him as a result of starvation, violence or lust, challenges the disembodied positions dominant in the canonized Arabic tradition of autobiography. The paper demonstrates how, by rendering the male body a visible element of masculine subjectivity, Choukri implements transgressive strategies of writing to problematize and destabilize the fixity of the male body. The article draws upon the Arab Islamic discourse of the body and picaresque narrative theory to demonstrate how Choukri weaves his body into the picaresque to dramatize the abjection and violence he is subject to as well as to construct his masculine subjectivity. Picaresque masculinity, it will be shown, is a self-conscious textual construction which exposes and inverts the hierarchies of the hegemonic and the subordinate.*

Introduction

At an early age, the author-protagonist of the autobiography *For Bread Alone* (1973/2010)[1] Mohamed Choukri is predestined to endure a life of inescapable agony and misery that the famine has brought to his native village in the Rif Mountains. As the situation becomes deadlier, his family moves to the city looking for a better life. Prior to setting off, his mother, to ease the little boy's pains of hunger and beatings of his father, promises him a life with enough bread in the city of Tangier.[2] Yet, once in the city, his hopes are met with disappointment as the promised bread does not materialize. When his parents abandon him in the house with his younger brother without any food, he goes outside to forage in the garbage of the prestigious districts where the foreigners and the elite of the city live, or to steal from those who are luckier. His life turns upside down when his outraged father kills his little brother. Abandoned, estranged, and hungry, the boy seeks to find ways to survive these early-age tribulations in that cosmopolitan world with colonial exigencies. This new world, he finds, is a chaotic social fabric where disparities between the poor and the rich, the literate and the illiterate, the old and young, the male and female are widely asymmetrical, and the boy learns the ways of ensuring survival and the values to adopt as he explores the milieu on his own. His biggest lesson is that he must depend on his guiles and wiles in order to make ends meet, and, as a strategy of survival, he embraces a life of roguery. Like Lazarillo, the protagonist of the very first picaresque novel, Choukri puts on the picaro's clothing, and sets out on a journey with its haphazard encounters and adventures. *For Bread Alone* echoes *Lazarillo de Tormes* (anonymous, 1554) in a number of ways, reinforcing the argument that Choukri's text deliberately adheres to the picaresque tradition, constructing within it a form of picaresque masculinity.

A key aspect of the picaresque narrative of masculinity is expounded by Gregor Schuhen who notes that "[a]s the picaresque novel . . . is on the whole waiving psychological depth, the construction of a male identity has to be analyzed rather from a praxeological point of view" (2018, p. 38). Schuhen further states that "[d]ue to the absence of psyche . . . we can observe an excessive depiction of corporeal motives" (2018, p. 38). Schuhen's insights apply to *For Bread Alone* as there is a striking depiction of the physical body, giving precedence to bodily needs, stemming, on the one hand, from the need to survive hunger and violence and, on the second hand, from desire to have a masculine identity. Choukri's autobiography diverts from the conventional ethics of (male) Arabic life writing which is, by and large, penned from the disembodied position. As Anishchenkova highlights, "[c]onventional autobiographers believed that the intellectual, rational,

and cognitive self, completely detached from any notion of the bodily, is the primary signifier of one's subjectivity" (2014, p. 22). The emblematic text of this tradition is the autobiography of the Egyptian Taha Husayn's *Al-Ayyam* 1926/1927 (The *Days*), which takes the form of the educational journey of its writer from a Quranic school to his university days in Egypt and France. Praised for the formal attributes of unity, coherence and well-plotted structure, it is established as a canonical work of modern Arab autobiography. *Al-Ayyam* provided a model and narrative template for autobiographical texts which centre on ambitious male protagonists and their journeys towards intellectual or artistic prominence, depicting exemplary lives to be emulated (Rooke, 1997, pp. 85-86). Such a narrative template sets up a linear assumption of masculinity by means of stabilizing a series of steps and stages that make up the process of acquiring masculinity (Reeser, 2010, p. 17).

Conversely, the episodic structure which characterizes Choukri's autobiography, typical of the picaresque genre, has a destabilizing effect on normative masculinity. Indeed, the centre stage granted to the body exposes established and fixed notions of masculinity to a disturbing ambiguity, if not to dissolution, through its lack of well-defined ends and goals. What is more, Choukri's text, following the picaresque tradition, depicts these bodily experiences, namely hunger, physical violence, sex, bodily excretions, that are not only atypical of the Arabic autobiographical tradition, but also transgress (masculine) gender norms. In other words, it makes visible these bodily experiences that the institution of masculinity wants out of sight.

The Arab-Islamic politics of the body, with which traditional Arab autobiography tallies, are shaped by the notions of *Awra* and *Tahara*. To begin with, Awra primarily refers to the genitals which must be covered through clothing. This perception can be linked to the interpretation of the Quranic story of Adam and Eve who, upon descending to earth, become aware of their "shameful parts" and immediately invent clothes to conceal their shame (Bouhdiba, 1975/2008, p. 10-11). As Fuad I. Khuri notes, "[i]n Islam the human body is a source of shame and therefore it should be concealed and covered" (2001, p. 3). Islamic jurisprudence distinguishes between the male and female Awra: the male Awra is the body parts between the knees and the navel which are designated for covering and concealing from others (Bouhdiba, 1975/2008, p. 37). The female Awra, on the other hand, is stricter and more complex as it extends to designate, more or less according to each theological school, the whole female body. Clothes, therefore, not only conceal nudity but also play the key role of marking the gender binary (Bouhdiba, p. 35). Furthermore, there is close attention paid to the potential encroachment of the gaze on the segregation of genders.

In this regard, Bouhdiba notes the equal importance of both covering one's Awra and refraining from looking at another's Awra; total nudity is only permissible between a man and woman within the lawful institution of marriage (1975/2008, p. 36-37).

The other concept of Tahara, meaning purity, is a correlative to Awra and represents a state which can be achieved after one covers and purifies "his" body. Purity is a precondition for performing certain religious acts such as prayer, which requires the purificatory act of ablution and the covering of one's Awra with clean clothes. Distinguishing purity from cleanness and hygiene (*Nadafa*), Bouhdiba argues that "purification has a meaning and that this meaning is to be sought in a transcending of one's own body" (1975/2008, p. 53). Bouhdiba summarizes the religious view of the body when he says:

> Islam is a constant attention paid to one's own body. A Muslim upbringing is a training that makes one permanently aware of the functioning of the physiological life. Eating, drinking, urinating, farting, defecating, having sexual intercourse, vomiting, bleeding, shaving, cutting one's nails. . . . All this is the object of meticulous prescriptions. (1975/2008, p. 54-55)

Bouhdiba's understanding of Islam is based on generalizations drawn from his own readings of the writings of several influential Islamic jurists. These writings not only have widespread influence, but they also represent the dominant, conservative Islamic exegetical tradition. Although Bouhdiba does not go into great detail about how these ideas are negotiated and expressed in everyday life, they do provide useful background on Islamic ideas about the body, specifically how it is perceived, contained, and regulated. Furthermore, Bouhdiba's ideas, while controversial, are especially relevant to the context of Choukri's autobiography, including its reception, as the excessive and explicit depiction of the body elicited aversive and repulsive emotions, which are the direct effects of an embodied language and writing style that goes against Arab-Islamic ethics and discourse of the body.

Furthermore, Bouhdiba's ideas are also relevant as they provide enough evidence to argue that the body in Arab-Islamic culture can be seen as an abject, which is at once an effect of the bodily experience and at the same time the effect of derogatory discourse which constitutes certain (non-normative) bodies as abjects, as in the case of Choukri. Indeed, paralleled to this discourse of

the body prevalent in the Arab-Islamic culture is the idea that bodily fluids are necessarily pollutant and require the performance of purificatory acts to get rid of this pollution. For Bouhdiba, this represents "the universal horror at the sight of any rottenness, putrefaction or defecation. The body's excreta are all impure and disgusting: gas, menstrual blood, urine, faecal matter, sperm, blood, pus" (1975/2008, p. 45). In effect, the body and its fluids are alienating, that is, they alienate the self from God.

In this cultural paradigm, the body, or at least parts of it, can be seen as an "abject" that nonetheless constitutes the normative body through its subjugation to a number of rituals in order to transcend and escape its presumed aversive, alienating effects. As Bouhdiba contends, "[w]hat might have been an unconscious, destructive drive both for society and individuals alike is transformed into ritual and myth, and thus loses its morbid, alien and supposedly dangerous characteristics" (1975/2008, p. 57). This perception of the body, including the fluids and solids it generates, resonates with Julia Kristeva's conceptualization of abject(ion), which refers, among other things, to bodily materials cast out as waste and pollution. More precisely, it refers to "all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies and, in particular, those aspects of bodily experience that unsettle bodily integrity: death, decay, fluids, orifices, sex, defecation, vomiting, illness, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth" (Imogen Tyler, 2013, p. 27). Moreover, the abject constitutes the subject by generating a distance between the self and the object deemed abject: "the place where I am not, but permits me to be" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 5). In other words, the abject "[enables] the constitution of an identity through disidentification with another: the 'that-is-not-me' function of aversive emotions" (Tyler, 2013, p. 26, emphasis in the original). Furthermore, Kristeva contends that the abject(ion) exposes pursuits of purity and identity to perpetual danger: "[i]t is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules" (1982, p. 4). To use Cecilia Sjoholm's words, "[t]he abject is waste, excluded from our culture and yet haunting it through the need for ritualistic purifications" (2005, p. 98). The abject in Kristevan materialism, like her other concept of the "semiotic", co-exists in a dialectical relationship with the symbolic rules and the masculine order: "The abject is related to perversion . . . The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or a law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 15).

It is part of the picaresque narrative to self-consciously disregard symbolic, cultural values and norms in the pursuit of survival. The picaro is not only motivated by his bodily needs, but he is also aware of the hypocrisies existing in the social world. He adopts the strategies of roguery as a mechanism for constructing his subjectivity, and in so doing turns the social order upside down and challenges the cultural production of abjects. Nevertheless, there is a double bind inherent in the picaresque narrative in the sense that the picaro himself is constituted as abject through what is called social abjection. In this regard, Tyler explores the experiences of "abjection as lived" (2013, p. 38). As she notes, "[d]isgust is not just enacted by subjects and groups in processes of othering, distinction-making, distancing and boundary formation, but is also experienced and lived by those constituted as disgusting in their experiences of displacement and abandon" (2013, p. 26). In this understanding of abjection, the abject is constituted through discursive practices of exclusion that are based on aversion (Tyler, 2013, p. 38).

In the remainder of this paper, I discuss the body as a site for the construction of picaresque masculine identity as well as a site of social marginalization in Choukri's *For Bread Alone*. Given the precedence of corporeal motives and sheer survival, the picaresque subject in Choukri's autobiography transgresses the Arab-Islamic norms of the body, which not only shape the picaresque nature of his autobiography, but also generates refusal and abjection both within the diegetic and the extradiegetic worlds. Thus, my analysis follows the generic features of the picaresque narrative which splits the picaresque hero into a literary character as well as a social critic. As Schuhen demonstrates:

> the picaresque novel creates a doubled perspective on masculinity, which is due to the genre's specific narrative structure. On the one hand, the pícaro as narrator and social critic . . . deliberately uses his marginalized position as well as his allegedly naïve voice to unmask the unofficial unethical values of the mighty . . . On the other hand, the pícaro as literary character demonstrates the male socialization as learning individual [*sic*], which means as an object that struggles each day for survival and social recognition by trying to avoid constantly social abjection. (2018, p. 43)

Choukri's autobiography is moulded along this double logic, deploying picaresque narrative strategies in order to construct a masculine identity while using the marginal position of its protagonist to unleash an attack on the institution of patriarchy and the ideals of masculinity.

Picaresque landscape and abjection

Claudio Guillén contends that the picaresque tale essentially presents, in an autobiographical form, the adventures of a (young) orphan who becomes a rogue in order to survive the socio-economic tangles and predicaments for which he is unprepared (1971, p. 77). Guillén's definition focuses on the socio-economic portrait of the picaro, the word from which the term picaresque is derived, as a key element throughout his study of the picaresque texts of the early 16th and 17th centuries, most notably *Lazarillo de Tormes*. *For Bread Alone* sets up this socio-economic tangle from the outset. Choukri's authoritative and abusive father deserts from the Spanish Army and remains jobless, while his mother struggles in the "men's world," taking over the father's role to provide for her children. Hunger and destitution drive the young Choukri to leave the house and look for food in the streets, which become the preparatory school wherein he acquires his knowledge of the mechanisms of survival. In this situation, the family ceases to play its role as an instructive institution to prepare the child for the outside world.

Loneliness and solitude, frequently depicted in early picaresque literature, often result directly from orphanhood, as shown in the case of Lazarillo. Typically, the life and adventures of an orphan who becomes a picaro make up the picaresque plot, and the orphan status of the protagonist narrator is one of the defining features of the genre (as in *Lazarillo* de *Tormes* or Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders* [1722]). Unlike the latter eponymous protagonists whose orphanhood is explicitly established by the death/absence of one or both of their parents, Choukri's orphan status is not the result of being parentless, but of being a street urchin due to negligence and violence. He chooses the precariousness of the streets over the beatings of his father; thus, *For Bread Alone* presents the theme of orphanhood in the manner of Juyungo, the protagonist of the picaresque tale of the same name by Ecuadorian novelist Adalberto Ortiz (1943), who forsakes his quarrelsome father (Guillén, 1971, p. 87). When Choukri despairs of life at home, he – like Ortiz's protagonist – decides to sleep in the streets among other vagabonds. When a man approaches him to inquire if he is the son of Si Haddou, his father, he angrily denies it: "No. I'm not his son" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 70). This repudiation of the father, although it takes place at a later stage, serves to

make explicit the picaresque Choukri's orphaned status, rendering him a homeless, solitary and isolated young man confronting a cruel environment.

Because the picaro's most immediate and pressing concern is to find bread and to escape starvation and death, this latter is the primary force that drives and structures the episodes which make up the picaresque tale. The death of Lazarillo's father turns his life upside down and sets off his adventures in the quest for survival. *For Bread Alone* immediately opens with the protagonist mourning the death of his uncle: "Surrounded by the other boys of the neighborhood, I stand crying. My uncle is dead" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 9). Shortly after, on the way to Tangier, other people die and are buried along the road in a scene of a baleful exodus: "All along the road there were dead donkeys and cows and horses. When someone died along the road, his family buried the body there where he had died" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 10). The sight of dead corpses can be seen as an early form of abjection experienced by the protagonist to which his body reacts with tears; the corpse, moreover, establishes the border against which the protagonist's body is constituted, begetting the desire to survive, that is, to not become the corpse. Choukri's portrayal of the exodus not only establishes the desire to escape death as a driving motif for his narrative, but also sets the ground early on for the picaresque dominant theme – that of constant search for survival.

However, once in Tangier, the imagined paradise, the boy's hope of finding abundant bread, like his mother promises him, does not sufficiently materialize, setting up subsequent adventures in the quest of survival. Being a newcomer, the boy's first encounters with the city and its people inaugurate feelings of estrangement and solitude. When his mother sends him out to forage for rosemary with the other boys of his neighbourhood, he realizes that "[t]here was no friend among them" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 15). Later, he learns about the differences between himself and the other boys as he becomes subject to their scorn:

> He's a Riffian.[3]
>
> They're starving to death. They're all criminals.
>
> He can't even speak Arabic.
>
> The Riffians are all sick this year.
>
> The cows and the sheep they brought with them are sick too.
>
> We don't eat them. They're the ones who eat them. Rotten people eat rotten meat.
>
> If one of their cows or sheep or goat dies, they eat it instead of throwing it out. They eat everything. (1973/2010, p. 19)

This linguistic prejudice linked to ethnic origin sets what Ulrich Wicks calls "*the picaro-landscape relationship*" to refer to the kind of relationship that the picaros have with the insiders; that is, their quest for inclusion and their subsequent exclusion (1974, p. 245, italics in the original). Guillén terms this conflict-laden relationship by labelling the picaro as a "*half-outsider*" who neither belongs with his fellows nor rejects them (1971, p. 80, italics in the original). Afraid that the boys will hurt him, Choukri prefers to "stay well behind them" to avoid entrapment in a fight with them (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 16).

Perhaps, the most significant aspect of this relationship is how the protagonist is becoming aware of his position as abject. Indeed, he cannot help but notice the irony where his peers are also eating from the garbage, yet they get repulsed by the outsider he is. This latter finds himself in a new environment which already casts him as "rotten". Here, the protagonist is not singled out as an individual but is cast as a member of an ethnic group who come from the remote Rif where famine affects life and people more drastically. Thus, the boy Choukri is made abject through an already existing discourse of aversion which associates the Riffian with the impure. This analogy is well registered in the image of the Riffian as consumers of carrion, which is religiously forbidden on the basis of its impurity (*Najis*) as it is not properly slaughtered. In other words, the Riffian is categorized as inherently impure since many carrion-eating animals are forbidden for consumption. As Khuri notes, "[i]mpurity . . . moves from one dwelling to another through touch and contact, or eating and drinking . . . All impure animals, birds, and fish generate impurity" (2001, p. 5). This set of cultural norms are what inform and reinforce the constitution of the protagonist as abject. Indeed, prior to this encounter with his peers, the boy Choukri, out of severe starvation, finds a dead hen in the garbage and takes it home, so he and his hungry younger brother can survive on it. Although he tries to slaughter it "as I have seen grown-ups do it," his mother, upon hearing his scheme, snatches the hen away from him, saying: "people don't eat carrion" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 11-12). This incident contributes to the protagonists' internalization of his status as abject upon its reiteration by the other boys, furthering his stigmatization.

The conditions that govern the violent relationship of the protagonist with his male peers in the outside world already govern his relationship with his father at home. The boy Choukri receives many beatings from his father when he cries for bread. The first appearance of the father in the opening chapter of the text shows him battering his starving son. In the next appearance of the father, soon after the arrival the family in Tangier, he commits infanticide when he strangles the

protagonist's younger brother to death for calling for bread. Here, the boy Choukri learns about a different kind of death; one that is not caused by a natural phenomenon (drought-related famine), but by paternal violence, a phenomenon that invariably has subjective and social implications. To begin with, the infanticide signifies death for the protagonist – more precisely, it signifies his own death at the hands of the father. This undoubtedly signals the annihilating authority of the father and inscribes the boy's subjectivity in the symbolic realm of the paternal order through the fear of death/castration by the hands of the father. The boy must obey the father in order to survive and avoid the fate of his little brother. Additionally, the death of his brother, this traumatic event, exerts its own "authority" on the protagonist as well. The boy here comes into closer proximity with a corpse, which has lost all symbolic meanings and is therefore an abject (Menninghaus, 2003, p. 374). It is telling that the corpse is described using the word "litter" which is "dropped . . . in the wet hole" reinforcing its association with disposable waste (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 13). In relation to the authority of the abject which co-exists with that of the father, the sight of the corpse affects the protagonists' body, making it "cry and shiver" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p.13). This bodily reaction attests to the affective experiences of abjection, provoked upon seeing the abjected-object, i.e. the corpse of the little brother.

The abjection and the violence governing the protagonists' relationship with the other males in this social world shapes the doubled stance on masculinity. On the one hand, he develops the feeling of fear as a defence mechanism which enables him to survive the violence of the masculine order. On the second hand, he also develops the feeling of hatred, especially towards the father, which prompts his repudiation of the father and his critique of patriarchy. Such a relationship is what shapes the *picaresque masculinity* as embodied by the boy Choukri in negotiating the patriarchal symbolic system. To recall Schuhen's insight, the picaro is both a member and a critic of his society.

Picaresque masculinity: A deviant form(ation)

In his study of masculinities in the Spanish picaresque of the 16th and 17th centuries, Schuhen highlights the pervasive presence of abjection in the constitution of this type of masculine identity: Lazarillo's social abjection starts as soon as he sets out on his journey of survival in the service of a number of masters looking for food and social recognition, an attempt that is invariably met with deprivation, physical violence and abjection (2018, pp. 40-41). Choukri's journey of survival, on

the other hand, starts inside his own home, when his father ceases to be a parent, and announces himself as his master: "Food costs money in this house" he declares. "Unless you work, you've got no food or bed here" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 40). The boy's sheer existence depends on the conditions his father-master sets for him; consequently, he obediently goes to a nearby café to perform the work his father had plotted with the owner of the café. Yet, the boy discovers his father's schemes:

> Each month my father went and collected the thirty pesetas I had earned with my work. He was using me, and I hated him for it. . . . The man who runs the café uses me, too, since he makes me work longer than I should. (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 29)

At this stage, Choukri's journey echoes Lazarillo's: they both are under the pressure of surviving the threat of starvation under the conditions set by their respective masters. In order to survive, they resort to the strategies of roguery, which are stimulated by their bodily needs, as Lazarillo also recognizes: "hunger makes rogues" (*Lazarillo*, p. 34).

Faced with a similar condition, Choukri asks himself: "But what can I do?" and supplies the answer himself: "I can steal. I can steal from anybody who uses me . . . I began to think of stealing as a way of regaining that which had been taken from me" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 29-30). The tense shift in this passage, typical of the entire narrative, captures the protagonist's receiving advice and resolution from a second voice. This latter is but the voice of the narrator who is split into narrating 'I' and narrated 'I'. The narrative voice is at once auto-diegetic and at the same time homo-diegetic, blurring the lines between the protagonist-Choukri and the narrator-Choukri. This diegetic model is typical of the early picaresque narrative, imitating, for instance, the doubleness of the protagonist-Lazarillo and the narrator-Lazaro. This aspect, moreover, is linked to the novelty of the picaresque narrative in the historical context of the 16th century, setting itself apart as a "consciously written phenomenon" separating the narrator from the collective dominant epic values and heroes (Ruth El Saffar, 1987, p. 232). In other words, the picaro dissociates himself from conventional heroes by stylizing himself as a rogue. This disassociation constitutes a matter of life or death to the picaro, and it can be seen as one of the keys to what Giancarlo Maiorino calls the "art of survival" (2003, p. 5). The defence mechanism of the picaro is the claim that "individual responsibility cannot be assigned without also acknowledging the

collective guilt of society" (Maiorino, 2003, p. 5). The picaresque universe, then, makes it possible for its picaro to attain what he wants (being recognized as a subject) while counter-projecting his "ethical" responsibility onto his social milieu.

For this end, the picaro uses what is called "the rogue's mirror", which, according to Schuhen, is double-coded: on the one hand, it is a "mimetic mirror" through which the picaro transmits his life as a surviving "subject" amid the hegemonic masculine culture. On the other hand, it is an "ironic mirror" which zooms in and reflects that masculine world with its official and unofficial values and practices (2018, p. 37). The picaro is both a literary character and a social critic of his society; he narrates the story and at the same time reflects on it:

> The men in the café encouraged me to smoke *kif* [a type of hash] and eat *maajoun* [paste made of hash] . . . The café owner saw nothing strange about a twelve-year-old boy who got drunk and smoked *kif* . . . I knew that what interested him was making money. (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 30)

The boy embarks on a process of integration into the men's world, imitating the practices of men, and at the same time reflecting and criticizing his master for failing to consider his young age. For the picaresque narrator, the café is the perfect place for mirroring the hegemonic masculine world, with its practices which make one properly masculine. At the same time, the narrator also mirrors the unacknowledged yet embodied moral disengagement accompanying the prioritized materialistic values of these men in the café. In this sense, the picaro, by mimicking masculine hegemonic practices, ironizes and problematizes the ideals of masculinity which prevails in his society. At this point, the picaro displays his awareness of the moral hypocrisy that is inherent to the institution of masculinity and at the same time the need to reiterate established masculine practices in order to acquire a masculine identity.

Such awareness equally informs the negotiation of sexuality and the deprivation of sexual pursuits. As Maiorino argues, the picaresque hero "contend[s] daily with social disenfranchisement and physical deprivation" (2003, p. 1). Even the expressions of his bodily needs are met with abjection. As a boy entering adolescence, Choukri struggles with the fulfilment of his sexual desire: "I am bothered everyday by my sex" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 35). However, such a desire, since it can bring shame, is confined to the realm of taboos:

> I began to have pains in my chest, and mentioned them. They told me: You're growing up, that's all. I have a disturbing sensation in my nipples and in my sex, and when I squeeze the milk out of my sex, I feel as if I were being torn to pieces inside my body. (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 32)

The interrogation ensued by the adolescent protagonist about his physiological changes takes the subject in question to the domain of morality and abjection. By virtue of this interrogation, he uncovers and lays bare his body, that is, his Awra, thus breaching the symbolic norms of dealing with the sexual body. The inquiry is juxtaposed with an implicit aversion suggested in the euphemistic response and holding-back on a full exposition of the matter at hand, and this is partly the result of the aversive connotations it carries. As Bouhdiba notes, "[s]exuality . . . brings into play forces that have always appeared to man as alien, mysterious" (1975/2008, p. 56). Indeed, the repulsive effects that semen, metaphorically referred to as "milk", carries can engender a convulsion and an abstinence from talking about sexuality. This idea corresponds to a logic of dominant masculinity which keeps physicality and embodiment out of public view. Susan Bordo expounds the implications of this concealment saying that "the penis . . . insofar as it is vulnerable, perishable body – haunts the phallus, threatens its undoing. Patriarchal culture generally wants it out of sight" (1994, p. 267-268).

Indeed, one significant intent behind the imperative of concealing the body, i.e. the Awra, prevalent in Arab-Islamic culture is to regulate the expression of sexual desire within the "lawful" which, in turn, reinforces and preserves the patriarchal structure and the heteronormative order. As Bouhdiba stresses, "satisfaction and legitimate pleasure may take place only within the framework of *nikah* [lawful marriage]" (1975/2008, p. 30). Lacking access to this sexual pleasure, the boy Choukri resorts once again to "thievery" to attain it; that is, the picaro basically "steals" his sexual pleasure which would otherwise be branded transgression if exposed. The orchard is conspicuously both the place where he steals food to fill his stomach and at the same time the place where he transgresses sexual codes in order to satisfy his sexual appetite and attain pleasure (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 32). Choukri channels his sexual desire through different transgressive acts, including auto-eroticism, zoophilia, voyeurism and scopophilia. What these practices have in common is the satisfaction of desire outside the lawful, which plunges him into a life of sin and social transgression. While the boy is simply following the example of the areligious and immoral

adults around him, the very act of narrating these transgressive acts constitutes him as deviant. This aspect is evident in the blurring of the boundary between the secrecy in which these acts take place by the explicit style of writing with which they are narrated. In other words, while the protagonist carefully avoids being seen while indulging his desires, the narrator does not shy away from publicly claiming them. This narrative choice forces the reader to grapple with the unsettling reality of his deviance, blurring the lines between victim and perpetrator, and illuminating the complex interplay between individual culpability versus social responsibility.

At the level of the narrative, notwithstanding, the boundaries between proper and deviant are candidly pushed aside as the narrator chronicles the protagonist's "doing" and "practising" of picaresque masculinity, separate from official discourses of proper masculinity. The significance that Mikhail Bakhtin attaches to the function of this kind of picaresque naivety, enabled by the rogue's mask that an author puts on, is pertinent to Choukri's negotiation of masculinity in his autobiography. As Bakhtin notes, the rogue's mask "grant[s] the right not to understand, the right to confuse, to tease, to hyperbolize life … and finally, the right to betray to the public a personal life, down to its most private and prurient little secrets" (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 163). It is through this mask that Choukri is able to carve a distinct path for his masculinity, disregarding in a naïve fashion the codes of autobiographical writing by overt depiction of his sexual life.

Choukri's voyeuristic and scopophilic indulgences, where he watches the daughter of the owner of the orchard swim naked in the water tanks unaware of the peeping boy, represent a direct transgression of the discourse of Awra (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 32). Here, Choukri not only violates the intimacy of the girl's body by allowing himself to look at her Awra, but he also trespasses the limits of his gaze. Indeed, there is a close connection between the visual and the sexual denoted in the lexicographical meaning of the word Awra, which signifies the "loss of an eye or the performance of a base act" (Malti-Douglas, 1991, p. 126). It is this very meaning of the word that informs the imperative of abstinence from looking at the Awra of others, as this base act is said to cause a symbolic blindness. However, such strict imperative, as Bouhdiba notes, inevitably leads to, rather than prevents, voyeurism (1957/2008, p. 38). Thus, Choukri's voyeurism, that is, his "unlawful look", represents a refuge to satisfy his sexual desire. Although Choukri's act is still inscribed within the heterosexual paradigm and exhibits phallic power through the objectification of the female body, its significance lies in exposing this paradox about the discourse of Awra.

Perhaps, the utmost of Choukri's transgressions occurs during his zoosexual experiments with non-human animals. The protagonist reveals that:

> Each day the sight of certain living creatures produced great excitement in me: hens, goats, dogs and calves. Many hens died as a result of my experiments. I would have to muzzle a dog, or tie up a calf, but there was no need to take such precautions with a goat or a hen, and these were more satisfactory. (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 32)

Although the nature of the sexual act is not revealed in this vignette, it is clear enough that a form of sexual contact – complex since it involves harming the creatures – is practised by the protagonist in order to satisfy his desire. In addition, it can be useful to mention the portrayal of this vignette in the original Arabic text, for it makes it clear that it is the sexual desire that is aroused by these living creatures, specifically by the female ones whom he considers his "females", that is, women substitutes. Choukri's experiments can be understood, as Joanna Bourke notes, as "a passing phase or . . . as substitutes for heterosexual human relationships" (2020, p. 16). However, within the socio-cultural perception, which is by large informed by religion; it is an act of bestiality that constitutes a deviation from the "natural order" of the sexes. In this regard, Stuart P. Green states that Judeo-Christian ethics consider bestiality as a "rupture in the natural order of the universe" and as an "abomination" (2020, p. 329). Discursive Islamic ethics appears to have adopted a similar paradigm in its understanding of bestiality – and of all other sexual deviations – as it considers it a "'disorder', a source of evil and anarchy" (Bouhdiba, 1975/2008, p. 30). Seen in this light, Choukri's experiments not only deviate from that naturalized heterosexual paradigm of desire, but also attest to the "semiotic authority" of the libidinal in producing his excitement and "queering" his sexual desire. Here, the use of the term "living creatures" is significant, for it blurs, rather than reinforces, the distinctions between the human and the animal which form the foundation that informs the prohibition of such sexual activity under the rubric of bestiality. The image of the male human body in contact with the non-human, even if it is only a passing phase of the young Choukri, is extremely disruptive of the conceived sexual imaginary of the natural order based on the harmony of the (human) sexes. Therefore, it is not only the modality that is transgressed, but the whole logic of (human) sexuality.

Choukri's deviation is further accentuated by the expression of homosexual desire which has a similar function to his zoosexual acts. When Choukri is taken to work in Oran, Algeria, he befriends a boy, whom he finds "handsome, and delicate as a girl" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 66). Choukri's attraction to the boy, who is a little younger, culminates in using force and raping the boy in order to satisfy his sexual appetite. After his scandalous actions are discovered by his aunt, young Choukri states that he feels "ashamed", but in a brief soliloquy where he imagines conversing with his aunt, he also reveals his strong drive for these prohibited desires:

> I imagined saying to her: What should I do to behave myself, Aunt? How?
> And I imagined her answering: Don't do things you know are wrong.
> Then I would have said: But I have to. I like everything that's wrong. Those are the best things. (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 67)

Once again, Choukri, in picaresque fashion, uses his split voice to point to the limits and repressive function of the gender order. Here, it is the voice of the older narrator that surfaces in order to defend the younger protagonist who is too indulged in shameful transgressive acts. However, this drive towards the prohibited is not, strictly speaking, a repressed desire, but, as the multiple sexual ventures demonstrate, it is a reality that is enabled by crossing the boundaries of the proper male sexed body. It can be said that there is an excessive obsession with sexual gratification driven by a sexual drive that is partially, if not completely, blind to social norms; an excess that points to the grotesque aspects of the picaresque genre. Choukri's body can be described as a grotesque body that combines aspects of normality and abnormality in his quest of proper masculinity but through improper practices. Indeed, the sexual ventures are well informed by the dominant heterosexual discourse, but they do not necessarily follow that paradigm. Hence, Schuhen's description of the picaro as the "inverted man" (2018, p. 37) applies to Choukri, for what is being mirrored is not sexual inversion per se, but the discontinuities that are inherent or interpolated by the picaro into the presumed harmony of the world based on the division of sexed bodies. After all, Choukri is candidly imitating what he has seen grown-ups do, and that is indeed part of the mechanism of self-defence offered by the picaresque genre.

It can be said that the strategies of roguery do provide the picaro with mechanisms of escaping physical deprivation and of becoming a subject who is able to satisfy his basic bodily

needs. However, his roguish and deviant state of being is a reminder that he is a subject that is merely striving for survival, while, on the other hand, the picaro as a social critic unravels the myth of ideal masculinity by mirroring the hypocrisy and immorality of those who preach and embody it. The picaresque form and themes add an important element to the autobiographer's story of survival in that they offer him a space for transgression, creating a subject who does not fully escape the masculine hegemonic culture, yet who does not fully subscribe to it either. If the male subject's ultimate resolution to the Oedipal conflict is identification with the father, and its subsequent hegemonic masculinity (Toni Jefferson, 2002, p. 77), picaresque masculinity, as reflected by Choukri, is one that resides and survives at the edges of such a law.

Semiotic dispositions: The body and its fluidity

Such a conclusion, however, immediately raises the questions that attend the idea and strategy of subversion. The ambivalent nature of the picaresque masculine subject makes it difficult to establish the argument that the picaro subverts gender norms (Lickhardt Maren et al., 2018, p. 7). Indeed, the complex nature of the picaro has intrigued critics of the picaresque since its inauguration. Guillén for example, tellingly closes his analysis by stating that "the *picaro* remains what he has always been: the coward with a cause" (1971, p. 106 italics in the original). One possible way of reading the picaresque tale is through the suggestion that the picaresque text relies on the (implied) reader to decipher the devices of irony separating the plane of action from that of narration. As Edward H. Friedman observes, picaresque discourse is "ultimately a metadiscourse. Its messages function on diverse, and interdependent, planes" (2000, p. 126).

Looking at the reception of *For Bread Alone* in the Arabic world, the criticism levelled at the text seems to replicate the strategy of abjection within the realm of narrative language.[4] Choukri's style has been labelled "coarse", "obscene and repulsive", while other readers have called it "candid" and "non-literary" (Nasalski, 2016, p. 20). Thus, he was condemned both for being a "pornographic" writer (Nasalski, 2016, p. 19), and even for being "illiterate" (Civantos, 2006, p. 24). It is the explicit presence of the physical body as a "modality of autobiographical transmission" (Anishchenkova, 2014, p. 3) – which breaks with the tradition of masculine idealist and disembodied literature – that can be claimed to constitute the act of subversion in *For Bread Alone*, given that bodies, as Shirley Neuman points out, are "far more apt to make an appearance

in the private genre of the diary than in the avowedly public and cultural genre of the autobiography" (2001, p. 138).

In Choukri's autobiography, notwithstanding, there is a tropological investment in the material, the instinctual and the bodily. In other words, it is a counter-investment which is prompted by the author's living conditions, that is, the violence and the abjection he is subject to. The investment in the corporeal can be seen in the very first action of crying performed by the protagonist in the fragmented opening vignette of the autobiography, where Choukri describes the dreary life in his native village. Here, the word "cry" is repeated several times:

> Surrounded by the other boys of the neighbourhood, I stand crying. My uncle is dead. Some of them are crying, too. I know that this is not the same kind of crying as when I hurt myself or when a plaything is snatched away. (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 9)

Moreover, the act of crying points both to the vocal, nonverbal aspect of language and to the formulation of a self-awareness of being a perishable body facing death. The use of the present tense here not only serves to blur the lines between the author and narrator but also to indicate the abjection experienced in the presence of death, which is so strong that it has a heightened presence in the author's memory, reinforcing the dominant presence of the theme of survival in the text.

The theme of survival, on the other hand, cannot be separated from social abjection. As Sjoholm asserts, "[t]he language of abjection is less caused by an inherited fear . . . than imposed by a culture of violence". In this sense, the act of crying also reflects an exposure to masculine violence:

> When my father came in I was sobbing, and repeating the word *bread* over and over. Bread. Bread. Bread. Bread. Then he began to slap and kick me, crying: Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! If you're hungry, eat your mother's heart. I felt myself lifted into the air, and he went on kicking me until his leg was tired. (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 10)

While the sheer pain of starvation makes the boy sob, the pain gets intensified by the arrival of the father who uses violence in an attempt to silence the noises emitted by son's sobs. The symbolic implication of this violent encounter is evident: the sobbing functions as a reminder for the father, the head of the family and its breadwinner, of his failure to perform this role as a father. Thus, the sobbing carries a pressure which has an emasculating effect discharged through the use of violence as a defensive manoeuvre that submits the son to the authority of the father.

On the other hand, this authoritarian abuse of power is contrasted with several external manifestations of abject (grotesque) bodily forms that serve to challenge this authority. To begin with, tears are a disturbing body fluid that masculinity contains by rejecting and projecting into the feminine, but this childish provocation disturbs this symbolic treatment of the abject. Choukri's oozing body, in this sense, is in a state of dissolution, encroaching on the borders of masculinity and femininity. Furthermore, the deformed body is used to render masculine violence visible. Choukri makes use of the scars of physical violence marking his body to pin down its visibility by providing a graphic description of his father's beatings:

> My body was covered by bleeding welts and one of her [his mother's] eyes was swollen shut. It was many nights before I could find a comfortable position to sleep in . . . my wounds hurt, my bones ache, and I can feel the fever burning in my head. (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 36)

Here, these bodily investments assume their centrality within the narrative through the verbalization of physical pain. As Elaine Scarry notes, "[p]hysical pain has no voice, but when it at last finds a voice, it begins to tell a story" (1985, p. 3). The voice of abjection in this instance is heard in the horror of paternal abuse. Undoubtedly, Choukri's abused body renders the physical body the very site where paternal (ab)use of power is put into question.

Moreover, Choukri's sexed body magnifies the challenge to the paternal function. The instance of finger-sucking which is mentioned in the opening vignette is already suggestive of a link that can exist between hunger and sexuality: "I had sucked my fingers so much" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 9). Although finger-sucking primarily conveys the severity of hunger, it also calls to mind an aspect of infantile sexuality. In *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, Freud points out that while it undoubtedly evokes the taking of nourishment, thumb-sucking also represents the first

manifestation of infantile sexuality from which children proceed to masturbatory practices (1905/1962, pp. 45-46). Indeed, as the narrative develops, Choukri gives vent to his sexual experiments through several transgressive acts he engages in as he reaches puberty.

The investment in sexual drives is yet another textual strategy which functions to challenge the paternal order as Choukri himself declares: "My father's rough treatment of me always served only to increase the rage of my desire" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 36). The libidinal charges brought to the fore can show how idiosyncratic the narrator is in challenging and subverting socially established notions of morality and purity as this instance of onanism can indicate:

> I am bothered everyday by my sex. I scratch it slowly with my fingers as if it were a pimple not yet ready to burst. Then it fills and grows hard, until it is sweating and panting. Unless I reach pleasure during my reverie, I feel pains like two stones. (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 35)

In this passage, the narrator shows a propensity for embracing abjected bodily fluids. The act of onanism would typically provoke a sense of convulsion and disgust in the other(s) as well as in the self; however, preconceived notions of the clean and pure body seem to play no part in the portrayal. There is no alienation or estrangement in the encounter with the penis and the fluids emitted from it, but, on the contrary, reconciliation and appeasement. Choukri's body is in a state of flux and release, uncontained by cultural codes; he draws a line between his own body and the discursive politics of the body, giving pleasure, rather than sacrifice, the utmost importance. The "rough treatment", that is, the social abjection that is exerted by the father on the boy, is resisted by giving up the sacrifice demanded by the paternal order. This reconciliation with the abject is constitutive of picaresque masculine subjectivity, functioning, to use Sjoholm words, as the "the resistance through which subjectivity makes itself known, irreducible to those social constructions of identity [and] gender . . . through which individuals are being designated in the symbolic" (2005, p. 22).

The role of the narrative act is coextensive with this idea, for, as Menninghaus puts it, "[l]iterature 'perverts' the symbolic, sets it vibrating, and breaks through resistances" (2003, p. 379). In this sense, literature allows for a post-oedipal return of the repressed abjects. This idea is explicit in Choukri in the attack on the institution of patriarchy: "He hits me and curses me aloud,

and I do the same to him secretly. Without my imagination I should have exploded" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 53). The imagined, or rather repressed, "hitting-back" in the diegetic world is released in the act of writing; that "imaginary trigger" which he imagines pulling to kill his father within the diegetic world (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 86) is released in language where repudiation of the language of the father is the main mechanism of that resistance. In effect, the narrative bears traces of the shattering effect of the fluidity of the abject on it.

In addition, the structure of Choukri's text itself embodies the encroachment of the abjected body in the sense that it is the body that shapes the unfolding of the narrative. When, for example, Choukri escapes his family house, it is the demands of the body that directs his adventures in several ways. First of all, in true picaresque fashion, his moves are determined by basic bodily needs apparent in the search for food and sexual satisfaction. On the other hand, his body also becomes an object of desire, or at least of lust. In the streets he is subject to numerous attempts of rape by older males, who see him as a "gazelle" and as a "handsome" boy, and the subsequent need to escape (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 73). In some cases, he uses his body as an asset, for instance, when he prostitutes himself to a Spanish man after his attempts to find a job and secure food from begging have all failed. His penis is used as a source of pleasure for the Spanish man, but for the boy it is a "new profession to add to begging and stealing" (Choukri, 1973/2010, p. 98-99). In these instances, the body has a central role in shaping the boy's life, determining his fears, desires, and motives that consequently direct the shape of the autobiography.

The episodic structure of Choukri's autobiography, typical of the picaresque model, is inseparable from the violence of the father or father-like figures, with the body serving as the medium between the episodic structure – or rather the lack of any overarching structure – and the violence, in that the narration follows a bodily rhetoric as it is the body that bears the marks of violence. The scarred body produces and manifests itself in the fragmented and episodic narrative structure of Choukri's text. Indeed, in spite of its chronological trajectory, the narrative does not follow a linear, vertical logic, but – in true picaresque fashion—a repetitive one (in each episode, the picaro has to exercise his wits to survive a certain predicament). The end of the text might be said to annul what Brooks calls, in his book *Narrative Desire* (1984), "the anticipation of retrospection" simply because there is no specified trajectory of events and hence no meaningful closure, in the typical narratological sense of the word, from which to make sense of all that which precedes it. Indeed, Choukri's text begins with death and mourning and finishes in a cemetery,

amidst unidentifiable graves – alluding to a sense of loss and an uncertain future. The ultimate impact of the early abjection experienced in the encounter with death, especially with infanticide, can be seen in the resistance of narrative closure. This abjection is not unlike trauma and its effects, for, as Menninghaus highlights, both the abjected and the traumatized oscillate between "confinement" in the feelings of abjection/trauma and their "reintegration in the symbolic", resulting in a "narrative logic [that] obeys a discontinuous line of leaps, repetitions, and zigzags, of long latencies and manic as well as depressive episodes, of unclear goals and uncertain progress" (2003, p. 395). The autobiography's lack of a linear, coherent trajectory underscores the impact of early abjection and trauma which the protagonist has endured, leading to a narrative that resists conventional closure and reflects a discontinuous, repetitive pattern.

Conclusion

The narrative structure modelled on the prerequisites of the body is emblematic of the picaresque nature of the masculinity constructed in Choukri's autobiography. The significance of the ambiguity that typifies this form of masculinity lies not so much in the question whether it is a positive or negative model of masculinity, but in the destabilizing effect that it has on the discourses that found normative and dominant masculinities. The picaresque stands in contrast to the conventional narrative model of the *Bildungsroman*, a structure that serves as the blueprint for most 20th-century Arab male autobiographies. In doing so, Choukri's *For Bread Alone* invests in a counter-project to that of modern Arabic autobiography, breaking the alliance between the Arab-Islamic body politic and the practice of traditional autobiography that prioritize and emphasize intellectual and moral development which produces normative masculinity.

The picaresque masculinity constructed in Choukri's narrative relies on the depiction of bodily experiences of hunger, violence and sexual desire and the episodic narration of these experiences. Moreover, the narrator/protagonist functions as both character and social critic, exposing social hierarchies and critiquing them from his marginalized position. While the themes of hunger and violence are coextensive with the picaresque narrative strategies, it is clear that Choukri's text diverges from the early picaresque (notably the Spanish picaresque) in its explicit depiction of sex and sexuality. As Schuhen notes, while the borders of his body are not rigidly constructed, the Spanish picaro is not "sexually motivated," keeping his body veiled and ungendered. On the other hand, as we have seen, *For Bread Alone* does not shy away from

unveiling the male sexed body. The audacity that characterizes Choukri's text is coextensive with the tendency to explore the themes of sexuality by many North African writers in the last decades of the 20th century. As the Moroccan novelist Benjelloun argues, "literary depictions of transgressions, especially sexual ones, serve a political purpose by deploying sexuality in a critique of the prevailing sociopolitical order in postindependence Maghrebian societies" (quoted in Hayes, 2000, p. 8). However, it should be borne in mind that Choukri's text is significant from the perspective of the autobiographical genre in which it is written. Massad notes how "[t]he kind of censorship exercised over writings with truth claims and over the visual entertainment industry do not operate in the same way on fiction, even though it faces its share of censorship" (172). Thus, Choukri audacious autobiographical writing should be acknowledged for defying, not only socio-political constraints, but also for engendering an alternative model for Arab autobiographical literature.

It remains true, however, that Choukri's depiction of his sexuality is restricted to his young and adolescent self, a restriction which maintains a distinction between his embodied and unstable early life and the presumably more stable, disembodied adult life. It is clear that Choukri's sexual experimentations become increasingly stabilized and confined to brothels as the narrative develops, suggesting ascension to a heteronormative masculine identity. This aspect, interestingly enough, becomes more evident in the second and third volumes, *Streetwise* (1992) and *Faces* (2000), of Choukri's autobiography, which are characterized by a faint presence of the author's sexuality. On the other hand, in *For Bread Alone*, the role of the narrative act should not be taken for granted as it represents a conscious counter-investment in the bodily contra the silence on bodily issues, especially sexual ones, that engulfs Arab autobiographical discourse. In this regard, the Moroccan novelist Abdelhak Serhane notes that "[t]he weight of sexual taboo is without a doubt the most insurmountable even at the discursive level. Not speaking about them is proof that society does not suffer from any deviations. Silence in the service of social hypocrisy" (quoted in Hayes, 2000, p. 8). It is the picaresque themes and narrative strategies that are featured and deployed in the autobiography that breaks that silence on matters sexual, suggesting a way out of the social hypocrisy. Choukri's experience is particularly significant as it has marked a new direction in Arab autobiographical writing, where authors are open about their embodied experiences beyond the veiling that is offered by fictional literary mediums such as the novel. The Moroccan gay writer Abdellah Taïa, as a case in point, asserted in his autobiography *Salvation Army* (2006) the influence

of *For Bread Alone* on his literary career as an Arab Muslim author who writes openly about his gender and sexual difference.

Choukri's text, to use Roland Barthes's words, "unsettles the reader's historical, cultural, and psychological assumptions, the consistency of their tastes, values, and memories, bringing their relationship with language to a crisis" (1975, p. 14). Unlike texts that "come from culture and do not break with it" (Barthes, p. 14), which stage the "father" through a vertical narrative and lead to "Oedipal pleasure" (Barthes, p. 10), *For Bread Alone* exposes the hidden, dark side of social institutions and the failures of the proclaimed functions behind them. The institution in question is in particular patriarchy, within which the father, and men in general, assume divine rights and are protected by discourses of purity and morality. Choukri deploys textual strategies that challenge and subvert dominant discourses of morality, normativity, and sexuality by means of corporeal graphic depictions woven into the picaresque logic. Indeed, the body is the main site of that challenge; it opens and ties the timeless and symbolic notions of Awra and Tahara to a history and a culture of violence and abjection through which masculinity assumes its empowering factor. Choukri's body is thus also a terrain where that history is made visible. It can be said that the strategies of Choukri's narrative are based on the realization that the picaresque is the *par excellence* literary genre of the abjected and the marginalized forms of masculinity.

Endnotes:

Choukri's *Al-khubz al-hafi (Bare Bread)* was translated into English as *For Bread Alone* by the American writer Paul Bowles (1973). The English translation preceded the publication of the original Arabic manuscript because the text was written at the request of Bowles, and because Mohamed Choukri could not find a publisher for his Arabic version. In 1982, Choukri managed to publish the work at his own expense, but it was censored, at least in Morocco, until 2000. It should be stressed that the textual reading in this article is based on Bowles's English version, specifically the 2010 reprint.

[2] While Morocco was split, with the Spanish colonial occupation in the north and south, and the French in the centre, Tangier was an International Zone from 1925 to 1956.

[3] Riffian refers both to Choukri's ethnic origin (the Rif mountains in northern Morocco) and the variation of the Amazigh language – a native language of North Africa – spoken in the Rif. For an ethnic-based reading of *For Bread Alone*, see Natalie Khazaal (2013) "Re-evaluating Mohamed Choukri's Autobiography *Al-Khubz al-Ḥāfi*: The Oppression of Morocco's Amazigh Population, the Ṣaʿālīk, and Backlash" In: *Middle Eastern Literatures*, vol. 16, no. 2, 147-168.

[4] I am referring here to the reception of the original Arabic text which has been not only rejected for print by Arabic publishing houses but also censored across the Arab world after being published at the author's expense.

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