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## Book Review: *The Italian*

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Shukri Al-Mabkhout. *The Italian*. (Beirut: Al-Tanweer, 2014). 344 pp. ISBN 9789938886481

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Shukri Al-Mabkhout's first novel *The Italian* is a political narrative par excellence. A linguist by profession, Al-Mabkhout ventures into Tunisian contemporary political history via the Marxist militant Abdennaser (nicknamed "the Italian"), a controversial character that won him the 2015 Booker Prize for Arabic Literature. Abdennaser is a self-deceptive Tunisian Marxist who starts off his journey as a hard-nosed activist in the leftist General Union of Tunisian Students (UGET), and later an influential member in the Tunisian Communist Party (PCT). Owing to the changing political climate after the 1987 November coup against President Habib Bourguiba, he suffers both moral and ideological decline. Al-Mabkhout enmeshes Abdennaser in a morass of incidents that reveal the inability of Marxism–Leninism to keep its ideological promises.

Abdennaser is an ardent defender of the proletarian cause during the 1970s and 1980s, but due to financial hardship and marriage difficulties, he decides to serve the Ben Ali oligarchy. After the November coup, he divorces his wife and comrade Zina and commits to a carefree life where he turns into a "depraved" womanizer (221–29); he then compromises his Marxist principles by accepting a post in the neoliberal regime's organ (295–300). In the novel, Abdennaser's changing disposition is revealed through Zina's character. Zina is a pluralist Marxist who is in sharp conflict with the radical Tunisian Marxists who, according to her, are "extremist" and "professional partisans" (54) incapable of grasping the revolutionary moment and the difference between revolutionary consciousness and trade union consciousness (55–56). Al-Mabkhout attributes Zina's revolutionary spirit to an eclectic Marxism that rests on a

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curious marriage between Gramsci's historicism, Luxemburg's anti-centrism, Kautsky's reformism, and Lenin's hatred of syndical consciousness (55).

Al-Mabkhout's judgment of the role of Tunisian leftists in contemporary Tunisia is wanting in rigor, particularly when it comes to Zina's criticism of Abdennaser and his comrades. While he curiously projects a pluralist Marxist reading of Tunisia via Zina, he seems to miss the point that the crisis of the left in the late 1980s had to do with the disillusionment with Soviet-type socialism rather than the failure to adopt a neo-Marxist approach. A whole generation of Marxist militants was demoralized by the (American) unipolar moment whose devastating political effect on Tunisia was far reaching. However, despite the impact of the collapse of socialism, most militants of the left in Tunisia chose to confront the oppressive apparatus of the neoliberal regime. In *The Italian*, Al-Mabkhout dismisses the impact of the international order on Tunisia and proposes a surreal reading of the late 1980s; he critiques the role of the radical left by referring to the passive role of the PCT (1956–93) in the aftermath of the November coup. However, he curiously leaves unmentioned the key role of radical Marxist parties such as the Communist Workers' Party (PCOT) and the Democratic Patriots' Party (WATAD), which, despite the debilitating post-Cold War order, had stood up to both the Bourguibist autocracy and the Ben Ali oligarchy. The deployment of Zina as a representative of an eclectic Marxism, characteristically Eurocommunist, reduces the accuracy of the narrative of *The Italian*. The use of Abdennaser (as well as Zina) to articulate the fallibility of the Marxist project amounts to an abuse of Tunisia's political historiography.