

The Countercultural, Liberal Voice of Moroccan Mohamed Choukri and Its Affinities with the American Beats

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Moroccan society throughout the twentieth century CE was fairly conservative and heavily influenced by Islamic tradition. A significant amount of literature – especially that penned in Arabic – published in Morocco in the last century manifested a tendency that avoided flouting, in any significant way, the social and religious norms prevalent in the country. A number of writers addressed issues of public concern, such as poverty; (illegal) immigration; corruption; the legacy of Franco-Spanish colonialism; Moroccan subjectivity, memory, and imaginary; and others. In particular, literature criticizing or responding to the former colonizers – especially the French – and the legacy of the colonial era abounded in Morocco post-1956. Moroccan writer Mohamed Choukri provides a curious case within this paradigm. His writing trajectory is characterized by rebellion, counterculture, and controversy. In his attempts to address the social ills within Moroccan society post-Independence, he produced a literature somehow different from that of his contemporaries, a literature that is audaciously non-conformist and highly controversial. Choukri's works broke many societal taboos within Morocco and beyond. In a very liberal way, his books – especially his autobiographies – explore in a rather crude way controversial issues pertaining to sex, masturbation, prostitution, drugs and alcohol, and religious critique. One is tempted to raise the following query: How and, more importantly, why does Choukri go about treating such controversial issues, given the conservative leanings of his Moroccan society? This essay attempts to answer this two-sided question. I want to underscore that any investigation of Choukri's works must be carried out through a profound and critical investigation of his life. One cannot fully understand and appreciate Choukri's works without a prior knowledge of the writer's personal life and the state of Morocco at the time he was writing. This essay thus follows a historicist approach.

I argue that Choukri's unusual upbringing in northern Morocco played a major role in shaping his philosophy of life and the world, in addition to shaping the way he portrays life in Morocco in his texts. From his early childhood, Choukri had to deal with hardships, including poverty, hunger, domestic abuse and violence, child labor, homelessness, addiction to drugs and alcohol, male prostitution, imprisonment, and so forth. It is important to stress that Choukri grew up in Tangiers at a time when the city was an international zone controlled by a panoply of Western powers, the US included. As an international zone, Tangiers housed a number of Western artists and literary figures, such as the writers of the Beat Generation, some of whom Choukri had the opportunity to meet and befriend. Even though Choukri developed his own writing style and produced literary works in his own way, we can still speculate about the compelling possibility of foreign influences on the Moroccan author's literary trajectory. Published in 1973, his first autobiographical novel *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* – translated as *For Bread Alone* by Paul Bowles – could arguably be seen as belonging to an ongoing, international, countercultural movement, and hence its broader significance.¹ Choukri, through *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* and other works, could be construed as venturing on a literary countercultural move in Morocco – and, by extension, in the Arab-Muslim world – a move that, in some ways, interestingly resonates with that initiated by Western figures associated with the Beat Generation in the United States and elsewhere. Generally, Beat literature was markedly non-conformist and countercultural; it questioned the status quo – notably the culture of normativity and capitalist consumerism – and most importantly modernist literature and art. In the Moroccan city of Tangiers, Choukri made contact with writers and artists associated with the Beat Generation such as Jack Kerouac, Allan Ginsberg, William Burroughs, Paul Bowles, Brion Gysin, and others. Also, Choukri was familiar with the works of some, if not all, of these writers and artists. An investigation of the countercultural aspects of Choukri's writings would bring forth interesting resonances and connections with the works of the above Western figures. I will discuss this point further later on in this essay. My critical intervention will attempt to account for the controversy surrounding Choukri by giving a detailed outline of the controversial subjects treated in his works, examining the author's upbringing in northern Morocco, and exploring the possibility of foreign influences on his works.

I will now proceed to provide a survey of subjects treated in Choukri's works that caused controversy inside and outside literary circles in Morocco. Choukri, as a writer, is a notorious taboo-breaker, at least within his home country. His writings in general incorporate the characteristics of a typical non-conformist and an iconoclast. He steps outside the mainstream literary milieu in his surprising, liberal treat-

ment of issues deemed immoral by societal standards, especially at the time when he started publishing in the 1960s. Choukri condemns the suppression of topics like sexual exploitation and prostitution from public discourse, and dismisses Moroccan society's attitude as hypocritical; he believes that society in general is aware of the fact that "immoral" and unacceptable acts are perpetuated by people on a daily basis and yet censors an honest and open discussion of this reality. In his various writings, Choukri refuses to submit to cultural dictates; he chooses instead to defy society's constraints by opening up an honest discussion of sexuality, homosexuality, masturbation, prostitution, drug consumption, alcoholism, and other societal taboos. In his three autobiographical novels, *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* (*For Bread Alone*),² *Zaman Al-Akhtaa* (*Streetwise*),³ and *Wujuh* (*Faces*)⁴ material pertaining to sexuality abounds. The author recounts in detail his own sexual experiences and those of his entourage. In particular, he relates his encounters and dealings with prostitutes in different cities in northern Morocco, especially Tangiers. Interestingly, most of his female characters are prostitutes, both Moroccan and foreign.

Choukri gives the reader a detailed – almost pornographic – account of his life of promiscuity and alcoholism. In *For Bread Alone*, for instance, he details his first visit to a brothel, a visit that marks his first experimentation with sex. The kind of language he uses to describe that experience is deliberately crude and shocking, at least to the Moroccan sensibility. He writes that the prostitute he was assigned to "began to take off her clothes ... Then she turned her back ... and I unbuttoned her brassiere, my eyes on the sparse hairs in the furrow between her buttocks."⁵ He maintains this vivid, pornographic description of the scene as follows:

With agitation I unbuttoned my fly. My heart was pounding ... This one [the prostitute] will let me go into her the way a knife goes into living flesh. I am going to stab what is between her thighs ... She lay back on the bed like a pair of scissors and opened her / blades. It was shaved ... She seized my sex in her hand ... She wet her fingers on her tongue and moved her hand down to the other mouth [the vagina]. Put it in now ... Cautiously I entered her, sinking into her slippery mouth.⁶

Needless to say, the kind of language in the quotation is offensive to a Moroccan, Muslim sensibility, perhaps particularly in the early 1970s when *For Bread Alone* was published. In the quotation above, we note how Choukri curiously mixes crude sexual content with violent metaphors, thereby increasing the effect on the reader. He equates the act of love-making with that of stabbing "living flesh" with "a knife"; he imagines his penis as a knife cutting through the prostitute's vagina. He sees

the prostitute's thighs as "a pair of scissors" and her vagina as consisting of two "blades." The various metaphors Choukri chooses all connote violence; both male and female sexual organs are portrayed as sharp, potentially harmful, tools. One could say that the shock effect generated in the quotation is two-dimensional: the Moroccan reader is initially shocked by the very nature of the subject matter (i.e. sexual intercourse), and is shocked a second time by the violent metaphors embellishing the sexual activity being described. The second dimension of the shock might extend to readers even outside Morocco and the Arab-Muslim world because of the pornographic description and the disturbing nature of the metaphors employed. The violent connotations in Choukri's language may reflect his violent, rough life – both at home and on the street. Young Choukri was constantly abused, emotionally and physically, by his father at home and by adults and other boys on the street after becoming homeless. Violence was a daily reality with which he had to cope, and so it may not be a surprise that he depicts a sexual experience in violent terms.

Choukri recounts how his promiscuity intensified after he left Tetouan for Tangiers. In Tangiers, he started to mingle with male and female prostitutes, pimps, drunks, thieves, alcoholics, drug dealers, drug addicts, and so on. This entourage was anything but pleasant. As noted above, Choukri lived an extremely rough life, especially before he gained recognition as a writer. He lived on the margin of society and had to deal with the underworld of Tangiers for several years. To return to the sexual taboos in *For Bread Alone*, in one instance the narrator recounts having sex with one of his female roommates, who, not surprisingly, takes prostitution as a profession. Choukri remains faithful to his writing trajectory by offering the reader a very crude, pornographic description of the sex scene that again incorporates different metaphors:

I licked the hard nipples. Then with delight I began to suck on her right breast, filling my mouth with it ... Then with a smile she unbuttoned my fly. The blind dragon [the penis] rose up and stood rigid in her hand. She smoothed it briefly from its head to its roots, and set to work rubbing it against the lip between her legs. The hairs of the black triangle there are as rough as those on her scalp. The dragon feels the roughness as he scrapes his bald head on them.⁷

Despite the use of euphemisms, the language in the passage remains highly shocking to the Moroccan audience. The description of the sex scene is anything but romantic. Choukri seems to insist on incorporating crude sexual content in his works.

He does not feel inhibited in exploring topics his Moroccan society seems to insist on suppressing. In *For Bread Alone* still, Choukri even refers in passing to a scene of love-making between his parents; he writes that, on one occasion, he penetrated a prostitute and she, out of pain, cried “Ay, ay, ay! Not that way,” and then remarks that he remembered once his “mother telling [his] father: Not like that! Like this!”⁸ We should note in this regard that Choukri’s reference to his parents’ intercourse is provocative and offensive to a Muslim sensibility, a sensibility that holds parents’ status to be quasi-sacred. Respect for and obedience to parents are pressing injunctions in Islamic scriptures, and are therefore taken very seriously by the Moroccan, Muslim community. Few writers in the Arab-Muslim World would dare make such a countercultural move. Choukri’s allusion to his parents’ sex life paints him as a notorious, “shameless” – even insane – writer.

Two other related taboos which surface in Choukri’s texts are homosexuality and (male) prostitution. Even today, these two subjects are, to a large extent, not openly discussed by the Moroccan public. Choukri disrupts this paradigm. He reveals, for instance, that while young and desperate for money and food, he would prostitute himself. In *For Bread Alone*, we learn that, on one occasion, sixteen-year-old Choukri is being solicited for oral sex by an old Spaniard. This incident takes place when Choukri is a homeless vagabond, and, therefore, easy prey for sex predators. Choukri describes the incident with the Spaniard thus:

From a car an old man was signaling to me ... He opened the door and said to me in Spanish: Get in. I got in and sat beside him ... He stopped the car in a dark section of the road ... With a caressing movement he runs his hand over my fly ... he unfastened the trousers, and my sex felt the warmth of his breath ... He began to lick it and touch it with his lips, and at the same time he tickled my crotch with his fingers ... / He took out his handkerchief and wiped his mouth ... He gave me fifty pesetas ...⁹

In addition to highlighting the homosexuality taboo, the scene offers an interesting case of postcolonial critique. The old Spaniard represents Spain/Europe/the West. His sexual exploitation of young Choukri could be read as a critique of Europe’s colonial history and of colonial desire satiated through power. The scope and focus of this essay do not allow for pursuing this appealing subject of sexuality and postcolonial critique further, but it is worth mentioning in passing.

Though he draws on homosexuality and deals with homosexuals, Choukri’s autobiographies also describe a number of sexual experiences with female prostitutes. In *For Bread Alone*, we read that he would regularly have sexual dreams about girls.¹⁰

When we look into his revelations and fantasies with regard to sex, we note that throughout his childhood and adult life, Choukri continued to long for and have sex with females. However, there is one scene in *For Bread Alone* where Choukri manifests a homosexual tendency. He speaks of his desire for an Algerian boy; he admits that he tries to have sex with the boy by force:

The boy was handsome, and delicate as a girl. He wore shorts that came above his knees ... Then I persuaded him to smoke a cigarette and drink a little wine ... / We walked into a field of wheat. To be drunk is relaxing. His cheeks are pink, his lips bright red ... The wine ran through me, and I found myself trembling. My hand stroked his ... He made as if to rise. I seized his hand ... Before he could take his first step, I wrapped my arms around his legs ... I fell partially on top of him.¹¹

This scene might paint Choukri not only as a homosexual but also as a rapist. Yet we have to caution the reader not to make any quick judgements. In other places in his writings, Choukri states explicitly that he was not a homosexual. For instance, in his biographies of Western authors who visited or lived in Tangiers, Choukri – the adult, mature writer – reflects on the homosexual tendencies of figures like Ginsberg, Kerouac, Burroughs, Bowles, and others. Interestingly, he clearly distances himself from their homosexual practices; he writes:

They were writers and I still hadn't published my first story. I was immersed in reading the classics and Romantics, both Arabic and foreign. In the field of literature, I still had to sow my first seed, and I didn't share their tendency toward homosexuality. Later, I would realize that, in regard to his sexual orientation, Paul Bowles, like Jack Kerouac, is more discreet than the rest of them. But with Kerouac there was always the possibility that he would expose himself when drunk. Once, he stood up in a bar shouting, 'I fucked Gore Vidal.' In the forties and fifties, amongst writers and artists homosexuality was considered a kind of national sport, especially in the New York scene.¹²

While distancing himself from the homosexuality of the Beats, Choukri sought, sometimes with enthusiasm, their friendship and company. It is interesting how Choukri remarks that homosexuality was seen as a sort of “national sport” by the Beat writers. One might read this remark as offering some kind of justification for their homosexual leanings. Or it could be construed as an implicit critique. We're not quite sure how this remark is inflected.

A question must be asked: If Choukri so distances himself from those Westerners' homosexual tendencies, how are we then to account for his own desire for the Algerian boy in the previous quote? The scene described in that quote seems to complicate things because the passage hints at the boy's "feminine" posture: he is "delicate as a girl" and has pink cheeks and bright red lips. One might speculate that under the influence of wine and drugs, young Choukri might have imagined the boy an actual girl. By giving the boy attributes of femininity, Choukri seems to be implying that it wasn't his intention to have sex with the boy *per se*, and that the whole thing was a mistake. Greg Mullins affirms that a major task performed by Choukri's autobiography is "the consolidation of masculinity."¹³ Mullins shows that, within Moroccan society, this "consolidation of masculinity" plays out through sexually dominating females and males alike. Mullins notes that Moroccan men raping other men doesn't paint them as "gays," but rather demonstrates their sexual advantage, which consolidates their virility.¹⁴

The same quote sheds light on another major taboo within Moroccan society, namely alcohol consumption. Alcohol is typically shunned in Muslim societies, at least formally. For instance, the mere mention of alcohol could cause embarrassment and discomfort at a typical family gathering. Yet in both *For Bread Alone* and *Streetwise*, there are multiple references to alcohol and alcoholics. Relating his first experience with wine, Choukri writes: "I drank wine for the first time, and was immediately ill ... I had no trouble the second time I tried wine."¹⁵ Wine soon found its way into Choukri's daily life. Choukri and his friends would sit "around the table ... until five in the afternoon, mainly talking about the trouble in the streets as we drank our wine, smoked our kif ..."¹⁶ By incorporating scenes of alcohol/wine consumption, Choukri breaks a major taboo and defies a Moroccan sensibility against the mention of alcohol. By no means does Choukri invent those scenes; they spring from his vivid recollections of a childhood marked by hardship and roughness.

Choukri, the writer, adopts a writing trajectory in line with the social realism trend in literature; he depicts what is happening in Moroccan society, focusing on its underworld, a marginalized group he knows only too well. Choukri presents the reader with his life of misery, promiscuity, and addiction unedited, not heeding society's reaction or censorship. Moroccan society, its ills, and "hypocrisy" post-Independence constitute his main points of critique. This proposition, in a way, answers the second part of the question posed earlier in the essay: Why does Choukri present a crude, harsh, dark portrayal of Moroccan society, and why do his writings find their *raison d'être* in breaking social taboos? Being an active social critic, at least indirectly through literature, Choukri observes his Moroccan – Tangieran, to be

precise – society; sees how it harbors many wrongs; and decides to incorporate these wrongs in his works. In *Streetwise*, he avers in protest: “I wrote about everything that was wrong with the city [Tangiers]. I railed against it. The city’s splendours that had once enchanted me were now drowned in hubbub and din.”¹⁷ The gloomy picture Choukri paints of Tangiers, as well as his own feelings of frustration and desperation in this quote, permeates his works. Choukri stresses that he does not include “the immoral” and “the crude” for their own sakes, but rather has a constructive goal. In an interview, he states that in his *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi*, he “present[s] immoral scenes in order to look for morality and ideals.”¹⁸ He adds that his major concern is why people “lose their human values.”¹⁹ Choukri was credited by some critics, notably for his unusual writing trajectory. Ferial Ghazoul, for one, notes in his essay “When the subaltern speaks”:

The Moroccan writer Mohamed Choukri is an exceptional figure: victim of the famine in the Rif where he was born in 1935, migrant to occupied Tangiers and Oran as a child and adolescent, he survived to tell a tale that many would rather not hear, because it represents the unspeakable horrors of cosmopolitan cities in the Third World.²⁰

Drawing on cosmopolitan Tangiers, Choukri openly declares his crusade against the social ills he witnesses on a daily basis. He is utterly irritated by postcolonial Morocco and the state of Tangiers in particular. His accounts of the hardships of people, of prostitution, of alcoholics, of poverty, of inequality and social injustice, of hypocrisy, of politicians’ double standards, and so on demonstrate his commitment to partake in the socio-politico-economic affairs of the country. His second autobiographical work, *Streetwise*, interestingly opens with the following sentence: “As I got off the bus I was accosted by a dirty, barefoot kid who couldn’t have been more than ten years old.”²¹ Through this impoverished child Choukri gives the reader a glimpse of the troubles of postcolonial Morocco. It is a Morocco where ten-year-old children cannot afford shoes and clothes. The child in the passage looks dirty even to Choukri, the then twenty-year-old vagrant aspiring to start his schooling in the city of Larache and begging others for food and shelter. One might say that Choukri sees in this impoverished child a reflection of his own life of destitution.

The social ills in postcolonial Morocco would eventually alienate Choukri and push him to seek a life of isolation, seclusion, and bachelorhood. Reading Choukri’s works, particularly *Streetwise*, one notices a double discourse of social bonding, on the one hand, and a quasi-rejection of society and relationships, on the other. Choukri’s

position towards love of women, for instance, is highly skeptical. After reading about the notion of love in the writings of such well-known Arab writers as Al-Manfalouti, Khalil Gibran, and Mai Ziadeh, he found out that “love was always tinged with death, or endless suffering, or obsession.”²² After drawing on these Arab writers, Choukri relates a scene with a prostitute to corroborate his pessimism and skepticism towards love, which speaks to his frustration with the state of his country. Choukri watches that prostitute sleeping; observes her body; and reflects deeply:

I sat at her feet on the edge of the bed and lit a cigarette. I watched her as she lay there, her breath shallow, lost in an alcoholic haze. Now her beauty was that of a dead woman, the kind of beauty that appealed to the Babylonians and the ancient Greeks. I no longer found her in any sense attractive. The glory was gone ... Now she was free of all human artifice.²³

The passage includes the rhetorical figure of oxymoron: The woman/prostitute being described has a kind of beauty that is already dead, and yet is still desired, at least by “the Babylonians and the ancient Greeks.” To contradict this contradiction even further, Choukri asserts that she is hardly seductive. This rhetorical figure, in a way, shows Choukri’s uncertainty, confusion, and doubt regarding love of women. Towards the end of *Streetwise*, Choukri states his views of love in clearer terms: “I’d never allowed any emotion to betray me. I’d always lived in a kind of state of emergency. I only loved what was fleeting. Love, in fact, didn’t interest me unless it was big and fantastic, like in a book. I spoke about it without touching it or embracing it.”²⁴ Choukri remains faithful to his double discourse on love. He is indeed charmed by “fantastic” love; yet this kind of love has no real, tangible existence for him. It exists only discursively, in poems, short stories, and novels; love remains elusive, beyond his embrace. In his autobiographies, Choukri seems convinced that his ideal woman is a mirage, a fiction, an imaginary notion he can indulge only in fantasies and fleeting poetic lines. It’s important to point out that, throughout his life, Choukri remained determined to lead the life of a bachelor. He did not believe in marriage, and instead adamantly cherished and clung to his solitary life. In a biography of Choukri, Hassan Al’achaab – Choukri’s life-long friend and former teacher – writes about Choukri’s rejection of marriage. Al’achaab states that his own marriage alienated Choukri from him.²⁵ Choukri’s distrust of marriage, women, and society at large influenced him to adopt a life of bachelorhood, isolation, and even despair. This is a consequence of his utter frustration with Moroccan society. His negative take on love speaks to the ills and troubles surrounding the domestic life of a large portion of

the population. He makes a number of references to married men and women engaging in adulterous relations. From a historicist point of view, Choukri's bachelorhood and sexual experiences with various women/prostitutes help us better understand the sexual taboos that constantly surface in his works. His life of seclusion, on the one hand, and promiscuity, on the other, overshadow his oeuvre.

Nonetheless, Choukri's works have a social dimension, as noted earlier. In *Street-wise*, we learn that, while experimenting with literary writing, Choukri had the chance to meet with the well-established Moroccan writer Mohamed El-Sabbagh, who would read Choukri's writings and provide corrections and suggestions as to the kind of writing trajectory the novice Choukri was to adopt. Choukri, however, was aware of the fact that whatever writing he might produce would be markedly different from El-Sabbagh's, for the simple reason that the two men had lived different lives and came from different social backgrounds. Choukri documents his first visit to El-Sabbagh's house in these terms:

I came out from his house wishing that I had a refuge like that. He went through my writings and corrected them, using words that were finely sculpted, transparent – but he was clay of one kind and I was clay of another. He didn't have to eat the garbage of the rich. He didn't have lice like me. His ankles weren't sore and bleeding. I wasn't capable of writing about the milk of small birds and touches of angelic beauty, and grapes of dew, and the paralysis of hunting dogs, and the songs of nightingales ...²⁶

Choukri is by no means critiquing El-Sabbagh's literary trajectory or his choice of diction; he is only showing his divergence therefrom, albeit with a touch of humor. Choukri implies that his own literary diction has no place for "finely sculpted" and "transparent" words. His crude, blunt, offensive language mirrors the harsh reality surrounding him, his family, and his circle of friends and acquaintances. He would rather write about the poverty that haunts him and his family than about "the songs of nightingales." As stressed earlier, Choukri – the writer – is a social realist rather than an idealist or a romantic. Choukri is aware of his literary trajectory; he states: "When I said that my autobiographical *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* [*For Bread Alone*] is more of a social document than a work of art I meant that I actually attempted a semi-documentary endeavor about a social group that included myself and my family."²⁷ In a study of Choukri's *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* (*For Bread Alone*) and *Zaman Al-Akhtaa* (*Street-wise*), Ariel Sheerit locates the two works within the modern Arabic autobiographical tradition.²⁸ She asserts that this tradition has two major characteristics. First, the center of focus is on a collective entity, rather than the individual – and in this it stands

in stark contrast to the autobiographical tradition in the West. Second, the Arabic autobiographical tradition has “porous generic boundaries”; in other words, it has a tendency to blur genres, which contributes to its rich mode, bordering “on the novelistic, and often incorporat[ing] other genres, such as letters, journal entries, poetry, and the short story.”²⁹ Sheetrit stresses that Choukri’s two autobiographical novels are characterized by these two tendencies. Interestingly, Choukri chose to end *Zaman Al-Akhataa* with a poem dedicated to the city of Tangiers to show his profound love for the place despite its social and economic troubles. Needless to say, Choukri’s writings draw on the Moroccan collective, not just on the author’s individual life despite his personal leaning toward seclusion and bachelorhood.

Choukri’s forays into the social ills of Morocco/Tangiers post-Independence unfold in his countless references to the taboo of drugs. His autobiographies detail his addiction to two narcotics: *kif* (a mixture of tobacco and chopped pieces of marijuana) and *majoun* (cannabis mixed with other ingredients). *Kif* and *majoun* are actually Moroccan-native drugs. In *For Bread Alone*, we learn that Choukri became addicted to *kif* and *majoun* when he was yet a teenager. When young Choukri started experimenting with drugs, he did so in secret: “I smoked in secret. The first time I ate a piece of *majoun* I fainted. Later I vomited what looked like moss. I went on being sick for several days, and life looked strangely different during that time.”³⁰ Alongside *majoun*, Choukri also experimented with *kif*. He tells us that while working at a café he was encouraged by adult “men ... to smoke *kif* and eat *majoun*” and that at “[d]ay-times it was *kif* and work, but at night it was *majoun* and fun.”³¹ Choukri’s everyday life revolved around the consumption of *kif* and *majoun*. It seems shocking and disturbing to see a twelve-year-old child become an addict of such strong drugs as *kif* and *majoun*. This explains why Choukri, the adult writer, finds it ludicrous to write about subjects like “the milk of small birds,” “the touches of angelic beauty,” “grapes of dew,” and “the songs of nightingales.”³² Choukri has very little faith in themes pertaining to the realms of beauty and sublimity. The Arab poet and critic Muhyiddine Alladhiqani, in his introduction to Choukri’s *Ghiwayat Al-Shahrour Al-Abyad* (“The Lures of the White Blackbird”) states that “[t]he smoke of chimneys and the fume of cars and the dust of roofs where the homeless Choukri used to sleep painted him in black – and covered his face with ash and dust”. And that’s how he earned the title “the black sparrow.”³³ In these unpleasant and harsh conditions, the innocence and beauty of childhood are irrevocably crushed.

Choukri’s revelations with regard to his addiction to drugs at an early age are doubly shocking to a Moroccan sensibility influenced by religion. One might argue, as stated above, that Choukri’s goal was to uncover the bitter reality that children

in northern Morocco do become drug and alcohol addicts and lose their innocence. By writing about these disturbing issues, Choukri wanted to demonstrate that he was not the only child lost in the dirty circle of addiction; others had similar, or even worse experiences. In *Streetwise*, Choukri recounts how as an adult he continued to consume drugs and alcohol. Even after he became a teacher and started publishing, he continued to spend his nights in bars, consuming alcohol and drugs. Choukri relates that one night he got completely drunk and “made public [his] physical and spiritual bankruptcy.”³⁴ This bankruptcy of Choukri’s is compatible with the vicious cycle of addiction and promiscuity that marks the underworld of Tangiers, which our writer knows to the core.

It is not surprising that Choukri’s first published book – *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* (*For Bread Alone*) – was immediately banned after its publication in Morocco. The autobiography was perceived as disrupting mainstream Arabic literature in addition to posing a challenge to religious clerics in Morocco and the larger Arab World. It was no surprise when Muslim clergy in Morocco petitioned the Secretary of the Interior at the time to ban its publication. The ban was imposed and remained intact for almost three decades. And its suspension was declared only shortly after King Mohamed VI succeeded his father, King Hassan II, to the throne. Despite the ban, a number of Moroccan and Arab intellectuals showed great respect for the work of Choukri. Ferial Ghazoul praised the book, as noted earlier. The distinguished Moroccan novelist and critic, Mohamed Berrada, devoted an entire chapter to Choukri’s *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi*, in which he “refuted the accusation that the work is a *succès de scandale*,” adding that he “consider[s] *Al-Khubz al-Hafi* an important achievement in the field of Maghrebi literature because it concretely shows a set of issues which constitute common concerns for writers and critics.”³⁵ Alladhiqani’s introduction praises Choukri’s work and sees in it “a depth rarely found among contemporary Arab authors.”³⁶ Abdellatif Akbib, a Moroccan academic and short-story writer, celebrates the “great genius of Mohamed Choukri, whose death is a loss that is as keenly felt today as it was a year ago”; Akbib adds that “Tangier is honored to have produced an artist who ranks with Chekhov, Joyce, and Hemingway.”³⁷ Tennessee Williams describes Choukri’s *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* as a “true document of human desperation, shattering in its impact.”³⁸ The book indeed had a tremendous impact and gained international acclaim through Paul Bowles’ English translation.

Let us now move on to answer the other part of the two-sided question posed at the opening of this essay – i.e. *How* and, more importantly, *why* does Choukri go about treating such controversial issues, given the conservative leanings of his Moroccan society? After having addressed the *how*, let us now treat the *why*. Several factors

may present themselves as good answers: a) Choukri's extraordinarily harsh life, b) his familiarity with foreign works, and c) his personal encounters with Western writers in Tangiers, particularly the Beats. Choukri did grow up in an environment of extreme poverty, starvation, and neglect. Kenneth Lisenbee, an American blogger who met Choukri while in Tangiers, states that eight of Choukri's siblings died of hunger, malnutrition, and negligence.³⁹ American expatriate writer Paul Bowles, who lived in Tangiers for almost half a century and translated Choukri's *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* into English, notes that the conditions of poverty under which Choukri grew up were "excessive even for Morocco."⁴⁰ Choukri speaks in detail about his harsh life. Hunger was his constant enemy; he writes: "One afternoon I could not stop crying. I was hungry. I had sucked my fingers so much that the idea of doing it again made me sick to my stomach."⁴¹ The pain of hunger made young Choukri opt for extreme ways to seek food: "One day when the hunger had grown too strong, I went out to Ain Ketiout to look in the garbage dump for bones and ends of dry bread."⁴² Young Choukri suffered a great deal of humiliation, for his experience of eating from the garbage would haunt him throughout his life. And he was honest and brave enough to record these events in his writings.

Another hardship young Choukri had to cope with daily was his father's tyranny. Indeed, the child abuse theme surfaces in various of his works. His father treated him, his siblings, and his mother violently. Choukri recounts how one day he was starving and started crying for bread, only to receive slaps and kicks from his father, who would then shout: "Shut up! Shut up! Shut up! If you're hungry, eat your mother's heart"; Choukri goes on to add that "[he] felt [him]self lifted into the air, and he [the father] went on kicking [him] until his leg was tired."⁴³ We learn further that this abusive father even beat Choukri's brother Abdelqader to death. We read in *For Bread Alone* that the father seized Abdelqader's neck and twisted it around, and "blood ran out of his mouth."⁴⁴ Choukri records his reaction to this scene of filicide: "He killed him! Yes. He killed him. I saw him kill him ... He twisted his neck around, and the blood ran out of his mouth. I saw it. I saw him kill him! He killed him!"⁴⁵ This shocking murder obviously cut deeply into Choukri's psyche. He felt that he was under threat to suffer the same destiny and lived in constant fear and hatred of his father.

Choukri's father would not only beat him but would also force him to do all sorts of labor and take his wages. Choukri relates that he used to work "from six in the morning until after midnight" and that "[e]ach month [his] father went and collected the thirty pesetas [he] had earned with [his] work."⁴⁶ Having no money, Choukri developed a habit of stealing; he would steal primarily from those who used

him, like the café owner.⁴⁷ Young Choukri also worked at a brick factory, “pushing a wheel-barrow full of clay or bricks back and forth for eight or nine hours a day.”⁴⁸ Choukri kept moving between different manual jobs; he worked at a pottery kiln, polished the shoes of passers-by, and hawked “the daily [Spanish] paper *El Diario de África*.”⁴⁹ He also helped his mother sell vegetables and fruit at an open market; his task was to shout “in a strident voice at the passers-by.”⁵⁰ In the meantime, his father’s violence so intensified that young Choukri finally decided to run away from home, only to end up sleeping “in the alleys along with other vagabonds.”⁵¹ In the streets of Tangiers, Choukri mingled with prostitutes, pimps, drunks, drug dealers, addicts, thieves, and the like.

It is important to mention that Choukri’s parents never managed to send him to school. Only when he was twenty did he begin to think seriously about gaining literacy. Choukri tells his reader how one day he “bought a book that explained the essentials of writing and reading Arabic.”⁵² With the help of a Mr. Hassan, Choukri decided to go to school, a turning point in his life.⁵³ At the age of twenty, “Choukri – thief, small-time smuggler, male prostitute – managed to procure a place at a school in the ... town of Al-Ara’esh [Larache] where he finally learned to read and write.”⁵⁴ On his first day at school, Choukri “felt wretched and guilty.”⁵⁵ He eventually adapted to the school environment, though not without difficulty, and became enamored with reading and writing, which “had become a sleeping and waking obsession.”⁵⁶ He would shut himself away so that he could read as much as he could.⁵⁷ His passion for reading lessened his addiction to drugs and alcohol.⁵⁸ He was in the midst of an experience of “enlightenment,” liberation, and rebirth. Literacy would indeed transform his entire life and grant him access to a fascinating and unusual literary career. Alladhiqani notes that Choukri excels at describing his harsh life in his works, providing thereby guidance, inspiration, and a path to “salvation” for his former friends and for all those living on the margins of society wherever they may be.⁵⁹ Needless to say, Choukri’s achievement is worthy of respect.

Such an overview of Choukri’s life gives insight into Choukri’s leaning towards incorporate issues deemed controversial and immoral within the Moroccan framework. One could say that he felt compelled to give his reader a sense of the harsh experiences he – and others like him – had to deal with, notably during his childhood. Choukri saw (literary) writing as a precious medium to record the gloomy aspects of life around him, both major and minor. Indeed, his recording of everyday life, to a larger extent, provided a cure for his life of isolation and addiction; by writing about what he saw and experienced daily, he gave some significance and purpose to his life and offered a keen critique of the ills of Tangiers and Moroccan society at large, a soci-

ety he saw was secretly – and sometimes publicly – indulging in all sorts of immoral behavior, and yet refusing to bring these issues to the public discourse. Choukri decries the state of contemporary Arab thought; he sees the state of Arabic literature, art, and literary criticism as only striving for cultural and religious conformity at the expense of “real creativity.”⁶⁰ Choukri lashes out at one of his critics, who wrote that he [Choukri] was a “cursed figure of contemporary Arabic literature,” a position also espoused by Muslim clerics.⁶¹ In his work of criticism, Choukri praises such well-known Western writers as Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and William Faulkner, for “the human being in their works imploringly feels his skin and flesh ... in an attempt to dispose of the banal traditions that dictate his life.”⁶² A number of remarks by Choukri show his implicit – and sometimes explicit – critique of tradition and religion. In terms of content, Choukri’s works seem to have more affinities with Western literary figures of the twentieth century CE than with their Arab counterparts.

An important proposition this essay puts forward in its attempts to account for Choukri’s controversial writings relates to foreign influences on our Moroccan author. When Choukri first became enamored with reading, he was introduced to a range of Western authors who left an enduring impact on him:

I discovered Heinrich Heine before I discovered Rimbaud, Verlaine, Nerval, Baudelaire, Shelley, Keats and Byron. I knew Heine’s ‘I love, therefore I live’ before I learned about Descartes’ ‘I think, therefore I am.’ Then Sartre came along and planted another concept in me: ‘L’enfer c’est les autres.’⁶³

Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s *Confessions*, in particular, influenced Choukri, who admits that Rousseau’s *magnum opus* “[t]aught [him] how one can gain consolation in the appreciation of the small things that others neglect.”⁶⁴ Choukri was widely read in Western literature. His familiarity with – and sometimes admiration of – Western works might explain why his works are not aligned, in a number of ways, with the mainstream Arabic literary tradition. His works are innovative, liberal, and audacious; as noted earlier, they pose a challenge to religious and social norms. With regard to their countercultural dimensions, one could say that Choukri’s works have a Western feel.

The city of Tangiers was an international zone during the first half of the Twentieth Century CE, and as such housed a number of American and European writers, some of whom Choukri had the chance to know, befriend, and work with. These writers include the French Jean Genet; the British Brion Gysin; and the Americans

Paul & Jane Bowles, William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Allen Ginsberg, Tennessee Williams, and others. These figures feature in Choukri's biographies: *Jean Genet in Tangier* (1974),⁶⁵ *Tennessee Williams in Tangier* (1979),⁶⁶ and *Paul Bowles in Tangier* (1997).⁶⁷

The counterculture movement of the 1960s in the US and elsewhere was partly influenced by the various writings of the Beat Generation. Johnston states that the Beats demanded "an immediate release from a culture in which the most 'freely' accessible items – bodies and ideas – seemed restricted."⁶⁸ Johnston adds that the Beat movement was a "reaction to conservatism and McCarthyism," among other things.⁶⁹ Interestingly, Choukri's works resonate with those of Jean Genet. Choukri often refers to his reading of Genet's works, especially *Le Balcon* (*The Balcony*)⁷⁰ and *Le Journal du voleur* (*The Thief's Journal*).⁷¹ One particular passage from *Le Journal du voleur* has special value for Choukri: "My clothes were dirty and pitiful. I was hungry and cold. This was the most miserable time of my life."⁷² Genet's revelations are reminiscent of Choukri's in *For Bread Alone* and *Streetwise*. Also, we learn that Choukri, the budding author, would regularly seek Genet's advice on how to improve his writing. Choukri had so much respect and admiration for Genet and his writings and indeed wanted to emulate his successful career.

Choukri was also familiar with William Burroughs' notorious *Naked Lunch*, which was conceived and written in Tangiers.⁷³ Choukri refers to the book on various occasions in his *In Tangier*. He reveals that Burroughs wrote it in the "Munirya Hotel" in Tangiers and that Ginsberg and Kerouac helped him in the writing process.⁷⁴ Choukri provides some curious details about Burroughs' homosexual practices and consumption of drugs and alcohol, which constantly surface in the writings of this major Beat figure:

Only when he [Burroughs] was clinging to his lover Kiki's body was he truly euphoric. They would smoke kif and have sex. One of their erotic embraces, he claimed, lasted for sixteen hours. Burroughs was aware that Tanjawi society was going through a period of starvation, so he wasn't stingy with Kiki. In exchange for his body, he gave him almost two dollars a day ...⁷⁵

Scenes of homosexual practices, alcohol consumption, and experimenting with different kinds of drugs abound in Burroughs' *Naked Lunch*, a vanguard, countercultural work par excellence. The publication of *Naked Lunch* was generally shocking to the American readership, because of its blatant defiance of social norms and taboos. This makes for an interesting case of comparative study with Choukri's works, notably *For Bread Alone*. Burroughs is a key figure among the Beat Generation, a so-

cial and literary movement which, according to Allen Johnston, is characterized by “alcoholism, drug addiction, mental illness, and petty thievery,” which speaks to its “reaction against a seemingly aggressive and stifling social ethos.”⁷⁶ Burroughs’ various references to drugs are actually recollections of real life experiences. Burroughs interestingly draws on his experiences with *majoun* and *kif* while in Tangiers. To introduce Moroccan drugs to his Western audience, Burroughs writes that the “gum is called *majoun*, and the leaves *kief*. Good *majoun* is hard to find in Tangier,” and that “*Kief* is identical with our marijuana, and we have here an opportunity to observe the effects of constant use on a whole population.”⁷⁷ In Tangiers, Burroughs, as an American, was both an observer and a partaker in the gatherings of *majoun* eating and *kif* smoking, gatherings reminiscent of Choukri’s accounts in *For Bread Alone* and *Streetwise*. Indeed, the key figures of the Beat Generation – Burroughs, Ginsberg, and Kerouac – as well as their life and works, were proximate to Choukri. In his biographies, Choukri observes the Beats observing Morocco and keenly reflects on their various works. It is not far-fetched to suggest that Choukri’s proximity to the Beat writers in Tangiers and his familiarity with their works might have influenced his writing trajectory, one way or another. Choukri witnessed the unfolding of the Beat epoch in its literary, cultural, and social incarnations and was by no means hostile to the Beat literary trajectory. His liberal treatment of social taboos within Morocco resonates with the Beat style. Like the Beats, he was critical of religious/cultural conservatism and the dictates of tradition. Choukri strove to liberate the “Arab mindset” of the constraints of religion, customs, and cultural heritage, notably within the field of literature. This is a key message in his illuminating work of criticism, *Ghiwayat Al-Shahroure Al-Abyad*.

Notes

- 1 Mohamed Choukri, *For Bread Alone*, trans. Paul Bowles (London: Telegram, 2006).
- 2 Mohamed Choukri, *For Bread Alone*, trans. Paul Bowles (London: Telegram, 2006).
- 3 Mohamed Choukri, *Streetwise*, trans. Ed Emery (London: Telegram, 2007).
- 4 Mohamed Choukri, *Wujuh* (Beirut: Dar Saqi, 2006).
- 5 Choukri, *For Bread*, 44.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 44–45.
- 7 *Ibid.*, 125.
- 8 *Ibid.*, 45.

- 9 Ibid., 98–99.
- 10 Ibid., 34.
- 11 Ibid., 66–67.
- 12 Mohamed Choukri, In *Tangier*, trans. Paul Bowles et al. (London: Telegram, 2008), 167–168.
- 13 Greg Mullins, *Colonial Affairs: Bowles, Burroughs, and Chester Write Tangier* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2002), 131.
- 14 Ibid., 131–132.
- 15 Choukri, *For Bread Alone*, 30.
- 16 Ibid., 121.
- 17 Choukri, *Streetwise*, 149.
- 18 Mohamed Choukri, “Being and Place: An Interview with Mohamed Choukri,” *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 6 (1986): 67–78, 68.
- 19 Ibid., 68.
- 20 Ferial J. Ghazoul, “When the subaltern speaks,” *Al-Ahram Weekly Online* 18–24 Feb. 1999. Web. 13 March 2012.
- 21 Choukri, *Streetwise*, 7.
- 22 Ibid., 54.
- 23 Ibid., 56.
- 24 Ibid., 180.
- 25 Hassan Al’achaab, *Mohamed Choukri Kamaa ‘Araftuhu* (Cairo: Ru’ya, 2008). 69–70.
- 26 Choukri, *Streetwise*, 120.
- 27 Nirvana Tanoukhi, “Rewriting Political Commitment for an International Canon: Paul Bowles’s *For Bread Alone* as Translation of Mohamed Choukri’s *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi*,” *Research in African Literatures* 34.2 (2003): 127–144, 131.
- 28 Ariel Moriah Sheetrit, “For Water Alone: A Comparative Analysis of Tawfiq Abu Wa’il’s Film *‘Atash* and Muhammad Shukri’s Autobiographical Novels *Al-Khubz Al-Hafi* and *Al-Shuttar*,” *Arab Studies Quarterly* 29.2 (2007): 17–35, 19.
- 29 Ibid., 19.
- 30 Choukri, *For Bread*, 30.
- 31 Ibid., 30.
- 32 *Streetwise*, 120.
- 33 Muhyiddine Alladhiqani, “*Al-Shahreure wa Ghiwayatuhu Al-Markaziyya*,” in Mohamed Choukri, *Ghiwayat Al-Shahreure Al-Abyad* (Tangier: Slaiki Brothers, 1998), 8.
- 34 Choukri, *Streetwise*, 150–151.
- 35 Ghazoul.
- 36 Alladhiqani, 9.

- 37 Abdellatif Akbib, "Bankruptcy in Mohamed Choukri's *The Flower Freak*," in *Writing Tangier: Currents in Comparative Romance Languages and Literatures* 169 (2009): 47–58, 48.
- 38 Ghazoul.
- 39 Kenneth Lisenbee, "Mohamed Choukri: Biography and Works," *The Authorized Paul Bowles Website*. PaulBowles.org, n.d. Web. 28 April 2011.
- 40 Bowles, "Introduction," 6.
- 41 *For Bread*, 9.
- 42 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 43 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 45 *Ibid.*, 14.
- 46 *Ibid.*, 29.
- 47 *Ibid.*, 31.
- 48 *Ibid.*, 40.
- 49 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 50 *Ibid.*, 43.
- 51 *Ibid.*, 69.
- 52 *Ibid.*, 210.
- 53 *Ibid.*, 210.
- 54 "Mohamed Choukri."
- 55 Choukri, *Streetwise*, 27.
- 56 *Ibid.*, 41.
- 57 *Ibid.*, 54.
- 58 *Ibid.*, 55.
- 59 *Ibid.*, 10.
- 60 Mohamed Choukri, *Ghiwayat Al-Shahroure Al-Abyad* (Tangier: Slaiki Brothers, 1998), 60.
- 61 *Ibid.*, 87.
- 62 *Ibid.*, 46.
- 63 Choukri, *Streetwise*, 150.
- 64 *Ibid.*, 150.
- 65 Mohamed Choukri, *Jean Genet in Tangier*, trans. Paul Bowles (New York: Ecco Press, 1974).
- 66 Mohamed Choukri, *Tennessee Williams in Tangier*, trans. Paul Bowles (San Francisco: Cadmus, 1979).
- 67 Mohamed Choukri, *Paul Bowles in Tangier*, trans. Gretchen Head and John Garrett (Paris: Quai Voltaire, 2010).

- 68 Allan Johnston, "Consumption, Addiction, Vision, Energy: Political Economics and Utopian Visions in the Writings of the Beat Generation," *College Literature* 32.2 (2005): 103–126, 103.
- 69 *Ibid.*, 107.
- 70 Jean Genet, *The Balcony*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove, 1966).
- 71 Jean Genet, *The Thief's Journal*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (New York: Grove, 1964).
- 72 *Ibid.*, 24.
- 73 William Burroughs, *Naked Lunch* (New York: Grove, 1990).
- 74 Mohamed Choukri, *In Tangier*, trans. Paul Bowles et al (London: Telegram, 2010), 170.
- 75 Burroughs, 174.
- 76 Johnston, 104.
- 77 William S. Burroughs, "From Interzone," *Word Virus: the William S. Burroughs Reader*, ed. James Grauerholz and Ira Silverberg (New York: Grove, 1998), 121–148.