

Introduction

Saadia was young woman from a small town whose widowed mother worked as a laundress. Completing her primary school certificate shortly after Tunisian independence in 1956, she was hired in an office in the capital. Scared as she left home and boarded a train for the first time, she was determined to support her younger brothers and improve her family's situation. Saadia begins to shed her provincialism by removing her *safsari* (pl. *safasir*) (a long piece of fabric worn over women's bodies that covered their hair and could be pulled across the face) on the instruction of her new boss to "lose the veil." She sends money home and spends her first paycheck shopping with her colleague, Leila. But Saadia struggles to fit in with her cosmopolitan peers and resist the pernicious temptations of the big city. She attends a party hosted by Leila's male friend Samir but is reluctant to dance and steps on Samir's foot when she tries; she recoils from an offered drink, but then accepts a glass of wine and drinks too much. When Samir drives her home, his car veers off a cliff, sending them both to the hospital. Saadia recovers, suffers memory loss, roams the streets, is briefly arrested, and ends up in sex work. Samir then reappears, asking for her hand in marriage, reassuring Saadia that she is worthy of his love. "The past no longer matters, for you and me, only the future should count. I am ready to confront the whole world for you. We will triumph," he promises. As an officer in the National Guard, Samir requests permission to marry from his superiors but they deny him. In an act of sacrifice and "payment for her weaknesses," Saadia commits suicide.¹

The story "Saadia," serialized in the Tunisian women's press in 1963 and 1964, offers a snapshot of the era and a particular configuration of women and gender roles. It evokes contemporary themes with which readers would have been familiar and that run throughout this book: rural poverty and internal migration, education as a path of

¹ Omar Khelifi, "Saadia: Roman photos" and "Saadia: Roman photos inédit," *Faiza*, February 1963–January 1964.

social mobility, and the ideal of companionate marriage based on love. These themes are entangled with global symbols of a consumer modernity such as clothing and cars. Centered on the eponymous female protagonist, it is a story about modern womanhood and one young woman's perilous quest to navigate its demands. Melodramatic turns of plot illustrate the high stakes of poor choices for young women; though Samir's car burst into flames as it drove off a cliff, he walks away unscathed, whereas the accident begins Saadia's descent into homelessness, incarceration, and vice. Her departure from "proper" womanhood is sexualized and her loss of virginity makes Saadia as ineligible for marriage as her personal shame makes her unworthy of the nation, represented by Samir's uniform. As a cautionary reformist tale, sex work symbolizes decadence while serving as a foil for Saadia's potential liberation through education, white-collar employment, and a marriage based on love.² This book argues that narratives and experiences of modern womanhood in Tunisia, like the story of "Saadia," can read in multiple ways; Samir is not only Saadia's potential savior, but the cause of her downfall. His unfulfilled promise of marriage and a modern future reveals the limits of masculine guidance and thus the limits of the nationalist commitment to women's rights when chaperoned by men. As a critique of state feminism that places Tunisia within established feminist scholarship on women and the state in the modern Middle East, this book exposes the myth of Tunisian exceptionalism and its faulty reliance on the separation between gender and politics, between women and men. Illustrating women's contributions to postcolonial state-building and the imagery of modern womanhood, the point is not to castigate state support of women's rights as wholly negative. Instead, I argue that it is essential to consider domestic, regional, and international politics informing state feminist policies; the cultural spheres in which these were articulated; and the limits of liberatory claims along class, regional, and other axes.

State Feminism, Nation-Building, and the Struggle against Underdevelopment

Marriage and the legal regulations surrounding it contributed to reshaping family life and modern womanhood in Tunisia as elsewhere

² Haytham Bahooora, "The Figure of the Prostitute, *Tajdid*, and Masculinity in Anticolonial Literature of Iraq," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 11, no. 1 (2015).

across the globe. Modern states from Argentina and Japan to India or Russia, according to Kristin Celello and Hanan Kholoussy, have “played a significant role in the production and promotion of certain kinds of marriage and families” whether as an instrument of governance, a key to social stability, or an aspect of nation-building.³ In much of the Middle East, the politicization of family life and of women’s status were overburdened with Orientalist legacies in which imagery of polygyny and harems sexualized conjugal life, presenting gender segregation as a sign of women’s inferiority and seclusion.⁴ Reformist intellectuals since the nineteenth century advocating for nuclear families and companionate marriage as a social good engaged with the same stereotypes that justified colonial occupation, reinforcing associations between family life, gender roles, motherhood and modernizing discourses.⁵ By the turn of the twentieth century, nationalists increasingly projected “the monogamous couple, their children, and the reformed modernized domicile [as] templates for discussing political transformation.”⁶ Family law, which was articulated as a distinct juridical domain, was based “upon the public-private divide so foundational to the secular political order, and upon a modern conception of the family as a nuclear unit responsible for the reproduction of the society and the nation.”⁷ It was “a critical issue” for postcolonial states turning marriage into a relation based on “companionship and the care of children” that reflected the nation’s sovereignty and economic

³ Kristin Celello and Hanan Kholoussy, *Domestic Tensions, National Anxieties: Global Perspectives on Marriage, Crisis, and Nation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

⁴ Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986).

⁵ Elizabeth Thompson, *Colonial Citizens: Republican Rights, Paternal Privilege and Gender in French Syria and Lebanon* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 39–57; Kenneth M. Cuno, *Modernizing Marriage: Family, Ideology, and Law in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Egypt* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2015); and Omnia El Shakry “Schooled Mothers and Structured Play: Child Rearing in Turn-of-the-Century Egypt.” In *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, edited by Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1998).

⁶ Lisa Pollard, *Nurturing the Nation: the Family Politics of Modernizing, Colonizing, and Liberating Egypt, 1805–1923* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 5.

⁷ Saba Mahmood, *Religious Difference in the Secular Age: A Minority Report* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), 26.

development.⁸ The legislation of marriage and divorce coincided with regimes of women's rights in Egypt, Iraq, and elsewhere, while broader concerns about family life and morality, or what Frances Hasso terms a family crisis discourse, prompted state interventions that made women "further dependent on undemocratic states by the expansion of state power and influence over sexual and family life."⁹

Tunisian articulations of a modern womanhood grounded in the nuclear family constituted a political project and economic strategy of nation-building that bolstered the class and regional base of the ruling party and secured its diplomatic alliances. Proprietary claims over women's liberation were vocalized by Tunisia's first president, Habib Bourguiba (al-Habib Bourguiba) (1956–87), who played an outsized role in the postcolonial state. They began in 1956 with legal reforms related to family life known as the personal status code (Majalla al-Ahwal al-Shakhsiyya, or Majalla). Comparable to the ways colonial regimes had promulgated a process of codification of Islamic law to make it amenable to modern state power, Tunisia's new family law encouraged a new vision of the family by delaying marriage (establishing a minimum age of marriage for girls at fifteen) and encouraging monogamy (polygamy was penalized but not initially outlawed).¹⁰ In addition, divorce became a civil procedure, and matters of custody and inheritance became the purview of a centralized legal system. The law departed from majority interpretations of Islamic law in important ways (the provisions regarding divorce) but built on Islamic reformist precedents in others (the role of consent in marriage) and maintained an image of gender complementarity over that of parity in others (inheritance). These contradictions allowed the state to justify the Majalla in terms of Islamic jurisprudence invoking the legacies of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reformists such as Muhammad Al-Senoussi and Al-Tahir al-Haddad, who had called for women's education and the reform of marriage, while subordinating religious

⁸ Sara Pursley, *Familiar Futures Time, Selfhood, and Sovereignty in Iraq* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019), 187–88.

⁹ Frances Susan Hasso, *Consuming Desires: Family Crisis and the State in the Middle East* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), 13.

¹⁰ Souad Chater, "Les mutations de la condition de la femme tunisienne (1956–1994)," *Cahiers de la Mediterranee* 49 (1994): 38.

scholars within a judicial system that answered to the president.¹¹ This appropriation of religion in the name of women's rights contributed to state centralization while allowing the state to define Tunisian morals and values.¹² State discourse informed hegemonic understandings of gender roles; a plethora of official, semi-official, and nonofficial voices participated in this project, including those of women.

"The battle for building a modern nation," declared Bourguiba, was a "struggle against underdevelopment."¹³ In these terms, industrial expansion and the mechanization of agriculture became a national cause prolonging facets of the anticolonial struggle "into a second phase, that of national construction," described by Frantz Fanon in a trenchant critique of single-party regimes.¹⁴ There was significant overlap between Tunisia's ruling party and the state, with access to employment, free healthcare, or subsidized housing often dependent on party membership, while the language of "struggle" demanded sacrifice and unity to silence dissent. Despite the renaming of the Neo-Dustur or New Constitutional Party as the Dustur Socialist Party (Hizb al-Ishtiraki al-Dusturi), the Tunisian economy included elements of socialism and liberalism, in part due to US financial aid that by the mid-1950s followed a Cold War strategy prioritizing the expansion of capitalism and required access to local markets. While some in the administration, especially those with a background in labor such as

¹¹ Bourguiba departed from their readings of scripture and Islamic history. Julian Weideman, "Tahar Haddad after Bourguiba and Bin Ali: A Reformist between Secularists and Islamists," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 48, no. 1 (2016).

¹² It sought to fracture extended family structures by reorganizing them around the conjugal family. Ilhem Marzouki, "La modernite: Pour ou contre les femmes?," in *La place des femmes: Les enjeux de l'identité et de l'égalité au regard des sciences sociales*, ed. Ephesia (Paris: La Decouverte, 1995). The autonomy of religious scholars at the Zaytuna mosque-university was curtailed by their incorporation into the national education system. Malika Zeghal, "Public Institutions of Religious Education in Egypt and Tunisia: Contrasting the Postcolonial Reforms of Al-Azhar and the Zaytuna," in *Trajectories of Education in the Arab World: Legacies and Challenges* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 111–24.

¹³ As Bourguiba continued, this quest was "as serious as when we undertook our action to unite the Tunisian nation against colonization in order to reconquer our sovereignty." Habib Bourguiba, *Our Road to Socialism; (Address Given before the Nation's Cadres at) Sfax, 19th April, 1964* (Tunis: Secretariat of State for Cultural Affairs and Orientation, 1964), 4, 12.

¹⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Les damnés de la terre* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, (1961) 1991), 127.

Ahmed bin Salih, were partisans of collectivizing the means of production and distribution, Bourguiba rejected class struggle and viewed “the hazards of Marxism” as inimical to national unity.¹⁵ Large landowners were an important constituent of the ruling party who prevented land redistribution, with the proponents of agricultural reform persecuted when the program was abandoned in 1969. Despite these limits, the “struggle against underdevelopment” remained a powerful construct informing political initiatives, economic planning, and social transformations that accompanied state-building efforts intersecting with state feminism and the reform of family life in important ways.

Colonial legacies of deindustrialization and the underfunding of education represented significant hurdles to Tunisia’s economic prospects in 1956. French rule had restricted Tunisia’s manufacturing to building materials, food processing, and chemical production such as phosphate derivatives.¹⁶ Settler confiscation and colonial land policies contributed to the concentration of landholding, leaving 83 percent of farmers with only about one-third of the land, forcing much of the rural population into wage labor, unemployment, or migration to the cities.¹⁷ The first major economic plan, the ten-year plan of 1958, inaugurated a period of state-led development based on agricultural collectivization, the mechanization of crop production, increasing national control over mineral resources, and light industry. It outlined an expansion of education including technical training, specialized institutes and the founding of the nation’s first university, and the standardization and centralization of primary education shifting the language of instruction to Arabic (though French continued to dominate the classroom at the secondary level). Young women and men joined the expanding bureaucracy to fill professional gaps left by the departure of much of the European settler community.

Tunisian women were recruited into the state apparatus through the National Union of Tunisian Women (Union Nationale de la Femme Tunisienne [UNFT]; al-Ittihad al-Watani al-Mara’a al-Tunisiyya), established in 1956. The volunteer-based organization brought together

¹⁵ “We have everything to gain by keeping our ranks closed so that we form one single family, united in good fortune or misfortune,” he noted at the end of a lengthy section on the problems of Marxist dogmatism. Bourguiba, *Our Road to Socialism*, 26–31; Habib Bourguiba, “Destourian Socialism,” *East African Journal* 3, no. 5 (1966).

¹⁶ Charles Issawi, *An Economic History of the Middle East and North Africa* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982), 156–60.

¹⁷ Mouldi Lahmar, *Du mouton à l’olivier* (Tunis: Cérés éd, 1994), 149.

women who had been involved in the anticolonial struggle under the aegis of the state with Bourguiba appointing its presidents.¹⁸ Though women had also been active with the Tunisian communist party, it was forced to disband, making the UNFT the only legally recognized women's organization for much of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁹ As common among women's movements of the era, the UNFT consisted of primarily urban, middle-class, and educated women. This positionality meant they were more likely to benefit from new legal codes and public opportunities, becoming the face of state sovereignty and a modernized gender ideology. Yet the UNFT was more than a symbol of the regime. In the years after independence, the women's union contributed to the work of numerous state ministries reaching women from less privileged strata: they provided vocational education, ran artisanal workshops, trained rural social workers, and sponsored literacy classes, children's clubs, after-school programs, and a women's dormitory at the university.

State feminism was more than a series of laws, however patriarchal and unevenly applied. It was a project of social transformation, political engagement, and cultural renewal in which women, including the UNFT, participated. Its leaders were incorporated into party structures by holding offices, appearing at official events, and becoming important diplomatic interlocutors and representatives of the state. Their focus on social and economic domains expanded women's education and employment, encouraging social change. They were not as focused on the legal advocacy of women's rights, which I argue was strategic considering their location within a single-party state that restricted the political engagement of both women and men. At times conflicting with the singular nature of Bourguiba's nationalist ideology and political strategy, the largely bourgeois elite did not position themselves as dissenters. Instead, they were committed nationalists

¹⁸ Bourguiba ignored the results of its first internal election and the consensus behind the leadership of Aicha Bellagha and Asma Rebai as president and secretary general, imposing his preferred candidate. See her description of this event as foreshadowing Bourguiba's tight grip on the ruling party in Radhia Haddad, *Parole de femme* (Carthage: Editions Elyssa, 1995), 103–19. See also the interview with Radiyya al-Haddad in CREDIF, ed., *Mémoire de femmes: Tunisiennes dans la vie politique, 1920–1960/Nisa' wa-dhakirah: Tunisiyat fi al-hayah al-'ammah, 1920–1960* (Tunis: Média Com, 1992), 84–85.

¹⁹ A small number of women remained active with the communist-affiliated Union des Femmes de Tunisie (Union of Tunisian Women, or UFT) until it was outlawed in 1963. See the interview with Nabihah ben Miled, who had been president of the UFT since 1952, in CREDIF, ed., *Mémoire de femmes/Nisa' wa-dhakirah*, 33–42.

who, in striving to actualize the goals of postcolonial feminism, proposed alternate routes to their realization.

Economic Inequalities

Opportunities available to women in postcolonial Tunisia were largely structured by regional disparities and educational hurdles similar to those faced by Tunisian men, with a few important divergences. First, employment in the public sector and industrial workforce was located predominantly in the nation's capital (approximately 60 percent of manufacturing jobs were in Tunis, which was home to the largest port in the country, averaging three million tons of traffic by 1960, including 500,000 tons of imports, namely, manufactured and consumer goods). State-run industrial production focused on light industries such as dairy (Société Tunisienne des Industries Laitières [STIL]), cotton textiles (Société Générale des Industries Cotonnières de Tunisie [SOGICOT], operating under the National Textile Office), beet sugar (Société Tunisienne du Sucre), and salt (COTUSAL). Private entrepreneurs with government encouragement produced car batteries, shoes, and furniture. Women's employment and disposable income contributed to sustaining nascent state industries thanks to family ideologies where purchasing fish or milk was part of children's healthy diet and a facet of modern motherhood.²⁰ Second, in the rural interior, agricultural collectivization employed local men, but was carried out by state-appointed managers from the capital who tended to disregard the insights and concerns of local farmers. Production was further weakened by repeated droughts and poor harvests from 1964 to 1968.²¹ Third, Tunisia's political independence was negotiated at the sacrifice of economic autonomy, as Bourguiba preserved trade and customs agreements with France. Agriculture remained export-oriented

²⁰ "Qu'est-ce que la Société Tunisienne du Sucre," *Faiza*, December 1961, 60 ; "Cotusal," *Faiza*, October 1962, 14.

²¹ For one of the earliest and most trenchant critiques of collectivization, its structural flaws and political limits, see Abdelkader Zghal, *Modernisation de l'agriculture et populations semi-nomades* (The Hague: Mouton, 1967). Similar arguments have been reiterated in much subsequent scholarship, for example, Mira Fromer Zussman, *Development and Disenchantment in Rural Tunisia: The Bourguiba Years* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1992); Joel Beinin, *Workers and Thieves: Labor Movements and Popular Uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015), 20–23.

and increasingly dependent on global markets, a position reinforced by a diplomatic alliance with and economic assistance from the United States. Finally, while colonial-era education had been abysmal all around, it was particularly so for girls, emphasizing handicraft production and artisanal skills. Even these opportunities were limited and at independence literacy rates among women stood at 4 percent.²²

Economic planning centered predominantly on the male workforce and male employment, following a male head-of-household model. Decrees passed between 1950 and 1956 regulated women's employment, including maternity leave and equal pay. However, additional provisions defined certain types of employment as "detrimental to the health or morals, or beyond the strength of women." Women and girls were prohibited from working in certain sectors (mines and quarries) and were paid lower salaries in others where a minimum "of not less than 85 percent of men's wages is permitted."²³ In villages near the nation's Mediterranean coastline, women also found work in the expanding tourist sector, especially in services such as laundry and housekeeping.²⁴ Women were hired as low-paid factory workers, including in the textile sector, but despite the participation of some in labor unions, they were underrepresented and distanced from positions of authority. From its early years, the national labor union agreed with the state's prioritization of full male employment. This protected its class base but translated to a "policy of ignoring and even opposing the employment of female workers."²⁵ Thus, even with women in the artisanal sector, domestic service, and factories, the overwhelming majority of working women were agricultural laborers (over 90 percent by some estimates).

²² Julia A. Clancy-Smith, "Envisioning Knowledge: Educating the Muslim Woman in Colonial North Africa, c. 1850–1918," in *Iran and Beyond: Essays in Middle Eastern History in Honor of Nikki R. Keddie*, ed. Rudi Matthee and Beth Baron, 99–120 (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda Publishers, 2000).

²³ Kitabat al-Dawlah lil-Akhbar wa-al-Irshad Tunisia, *Women of Tunisia* (Tunis: Secretariat of State for Information and Tourism, 1961), 29–30.

²⁴ Waleed Hazbun, *Beaches, Ruins, Resorts: The Politics of Tourism in the Arab World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 10–14.

²⁵ Eqbal Ahmad, "Politics and Labor in Tunisia" (PhD dissertation, Princeton University, 1967), 219; Hafidha Chékir and Khédija Arfaoui, "Tunisia: Women's Economic Citizenship and Trade Union Participation," in *Making Globalization Work for Women: The Role of Social Rights and Trade Union Leadership*, ed. Valentine M. Moghadam, Suzanne Franzway, and Mary Margaret Fonow (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011).

However small, women's professionalization was essential to economic planning and state-building. As soon as they finished law school in the late 1960s, women were appointed judges, positions of symbolic significance even when they were few in number.²⁶ By the mid-1960s, there were thousands of women teachers to meet the goal of universal elementary education. The first ten-year plan required women nurses and administrators, so the number of salaried women doubled every two to three years from independence through the 1960s.²⁷ Women's professionalism depended on and contributed to increasing numbers of girls in school at all levels; while there were 385 young girls at the university in 1956, this increased nearly three-fold by 1966, as had the number of girls enrolled at the secondary level.²⁸ These gains are significant but the national literacy rate for women stood at 17.6 percent in 1966, a success that was concentrated in urban centers with illiteracy rates almost twice as high in the rural interior.²⁹ Overall, women constituted less than 5 percent of all government employees and worked primarily as secretaries and typists, and only about 1 percent of women in the workforce were professionals.³⁰ The minority of educated urban women in white-collar careers represented the potential of social mobility and the dawn of a new era, solidifying the urban middle-class base of the ruling party while providing an alibi to the marginalization of workers and peasants.

The Political Landscape of State Feminism

Women leaders from the UNFT, professional women, and political wives played a visible role in state affairs with a position in proximity to the state that sanctioned and limited their political activities in ways

²⁶ Sana Ben Achour, "La féminisation de la magistrature en Tunisie entre émancipation féminine et autoritarisme politique." *L'Année du Maghreb* 3 (2007): 55–74.

²⁷ Arlie Hochschild, "Women at Work in Modernizing Tunisia: Attitudes of Urban Adolescent Schoolgirls," *Berkeley Journal of Sociology* 11 (1966): 32.

²⁸ There were 21,849 in secondary schools and 1,195 young women at the university during the academic year 1965–66 according to "Les filles dans l'enseignement depuis l'indépendance," *Faiza*, April–May 1966, 67.

²⁹ CREDIF, *Tunisian Women and Men in Figures*, 28.

³⁰ In 1966 there were over 7,600 professional women including 3,600 teachers and over 100 civil servants; Kitabat al-Dawlah lil 'Alam Tunisia, *Tunisia Moves Ahead* (Tunis: Ceres Productions, 1976), 228. There were 827 women in government in 1958, then 2,515 in 1960 and 4,459 in 1963. Hochschild, "Women at Work in Modernizing Tunisia."