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**The 2011 Radical Imagination Through the Panopticon of Hip-Hop:
The Promise of a Better Democracy in Tunisia**

The question of imagination is laid bare in the Tunisian model, particularly in a culture where radical imagination pushing the political envelope can be embodied in hip hop culture and rap music. Visionary and critical, the hip hop scene emerges both as a space of musical nurture and unconditional disclosure of socio-political realities. This is where radical imagination seeks to dismantle, restructure, decipher and encode the national duress.

Rap The Kasbah: Between Hope and Reality

Tunisian hip hop and rap musicians have been able to capture it all with sensitivity and sharpness towards the status quo. With each social or political episode, the genre roots itself deeper in youth culture, The way music speaks to a society is a political act and an exercise of imaginative enterprise to visualize and perform as radically as possible. In the musical instances below, the socio-political themes indicted are as follows: rallying against the regime and state institutions (e.g. the police, the parliament), successive electoral success of Islamit Party Ennahdha, the multiple interests of political parties, the gradual deterioration of economy and the marginalization of civil society, particularly in popular neighborhoods; those who actually caused and realized the revolution.

Re-imagining Reality: Radicalism and Defiance

In recasting the troubles of Tunisian society, hip-hop succeeded in imagining a different set of art within. To demonstrate this wavering between international influences and local music and culture, a small number of musicians is considered: performers from Erkez Hip Hop and Bab el Beat Projects. The choice of the projects more than solo artists rests exactly in the values collectivism and sharing that the collaborations among the musicians bring about.

Erkez Hip Hop

Erkez Hip Hop, a production by Tunisian artists' collective DEBO, gathered artists from different styles. "Erkez;" is to set a firm foot, here the culture. The musical blend resonates perfectly in local terms speaking to a young audience who listen to each one of the genres: rap as a means of resistance, mezwed as a traditional music and oriental tunes being brought up and exposed to it. The background preludes and ends with mezwed folk tunes invoking improvisations on Tunisian Maqams (Isbaain, Mhayer Iraq), then come the rapping sessions performing in beats and poetry, modelling as such a hip-hop style with a Tunisian traditional dash. Peculiar in the musical

patchwork is the performance in local dialect. The words are political and resistant, depicting in clarity the social conditions:

Tigga Black'na sings in *Hwita (Little Fish)*:

Koolni Neklek, Ennidam Hkom

Ena wayek classés ml Abed Imkantra....

Génération jdida kolha mkhaddra wala mwaddra bl ghadra

Hne yzid lahdid wl akaker lkoll fl hwem metwafra

Fighting each other, the system has ruled

Me and you are classified as smugglers...

A whole new generation is drugged or drowned in betrayal

Here there's more bodybuilding and all the drugs in the hoods are provided

The portrayal of the myriad of poor neighborhoods is clear-cut. The word “drugs” is double-edged. The trend of muscle building among youth is accompanied not only with proteins and complementary pills but with drug abuse. Whereas laws and legislations on the selling and the use of drugs are implemented with coercivity, the availability of drugs in poor neighborhoods raises a suspicious question on the aim of the system in turning its back on its distribution on the one hand, and on the sudden execution of the laws on the other hand. Also, the fact that they are all into sports and drugs strategically keeps them out of being conscious cognitively, and more substantially in terms of political consciousness.

Tiga Black'na perform *Khamisa Li laagou bl Jorra (The Five who Chased after Him)*:

Wel maktoub likteb reet el khayen khayef yejri ydheb mn biid yseb

Ey naam yseb

Ghalta lwarka laab, msh bessehel

Ey naam yseb

La khyr felly yakraw lktobb

La khyr felly hokmoona wel dhalem gleb

And fate had it, you saw the traitor scared and escaping from far away, cursing

Yes true he curses

He played the wrong card

Not so easy for him, the fire in his heart is burning more and more

Yes true he curses

There's no good neither from those who read books

Neither from those who ruled us and the unjust has fled

By the same token, the chorus reiterates a Tunisian folk song that begins with:

Khamsa Li laagou bl Jorra

Melk lmoot yreji

W lahgou moola laarka lmorra

L Mash'hoor el Daghbegi

The five who ran after him

The angel of death is awaiting

And they caught the leader of the bitter battle

The renown Daghbegi

The opposition between the first stanza performed and the chorus is extremely ironic. In imagining a political traitor running away after a hard fall, there's a clear attack on the elite (who read books) and implicitly on the Nahdha majority (reading the Quran) who failed at providing justice. By contrast, the song evokes a Southern folk tune and poem about Tunisian Hero Mohamed Daghbegi during French colonization. He bravely resisted the French in his hometown before fleeing to Libya, getting caught and sentenced to death. The battle between him and the colonizer had been hard and violent; for, between heroism in effect and self-proclaimed heroism is a great disparity. Lyrically, the political in this disparity lies in the ironic stance and in reprimanding of the politicians' betrayal of the civil society's hopes. The two escapes-one imagined and one historical-is a conscious scathing take on the current politics in urgent need for change.

Bab el Beat

Bab el Beat is a project initiated by journalist and producer Thameur Mekki. It relies on sampling Tunisian music and integrating it into underground rap, boom bap beats along with oriental maqams. "Beb el" (Gate of) is a reference to the Gates in the old towns built at the entrance of each town (Beb Bhar, Bab Bnet); *Beb el Beat*, a project in progress, opens to new ventures in hip hop with a purely Tunisian trace. While *Erkez Hip Hop* relies on Tunisian dialect, *Beb el Beat* blends the dialect with standard Arabic.

Rapper WMD rises well above the imaginative side of hip hop. His words are poetic in nature but salient. Targeting politicians, he sings in *Gloob Faydha (Pouring Hearts)*:

طغوا، النفاق سلاحهم ...
أنذال يناقشون وضعنا الكاسد
جالسون بين الفاسد و الفاسد فاسد
أخي، راقب السياسي وقّه تكذيبا
كاد السياسي أن يكون إبليس...

*They dominated, hypocrisy is their weapon ...
Bastards are discussing our dire situation
Sitting between the corrupt and the corrupt another corrupt
Brother, watch over the politician, and loyally respect him through lies
For the politician had almost been the devil....
No leadership will last, no immunity will last*

Released in February 2021, just a few months before the May-June riots initiated by Tunisian youth, the segment is a blasting indictment against the political class, particularly the one prevailing in the parliament (and whom he cites their names specifically in the track). He attacks corruption around the political scene and the abuse of power reinforcing the domination of parties' leaders. A glimpse of intertextuality is present in WMD's performance: "watch over the politician, and loyally respect him with due lies/ For the politician had almost been the devil." The verses are inspired from the poet Ahmed Shawki who writes in the same rhyming pattern about the teacher: "Rise to the teacher, pay him your due respect/ For the teacher had almost been a messenger." Therefore, rather than the people-electors watching over the politician's lies, it is the politician who manipulates the people in satanic-like ways. Equally interesting is the flowing confidence in the lyrics in that not only did the artist condemn political deeds but he was also able to foreshadow and remind them of the time when all these acts of deception will no longer be justifiable and those who carried them out will be hiding. In addressing politicians and legislators, standard Arabic is the accurate choice for sustaining the level of officiality of professionalism that should have been pursued.

In this context, imagining a radical reform is illustrative of what Marcuse conceptualizes of radical imagination as "constantly being held open and one that 'comes back' to us in the present to shake up our thinking" (Haiven, IX). The catalyst effect imagination triggers is a pressing factor for resistance. Hip hop embodies this faculty of imagining the radical and beyond it. In the contested scene in Tunisia, such tracks are only project samples of a bigger hip-hop political project to give voice to a personal struggle fused with the socio-political fight. For Haiven and Khasnabish, radical imagination is that "rich, complex, agent-driven and ongoing working-out of affinity" (III). The genre reflects such attributes in affinity and complex composition that shocks, unsettles. It does so by "speaking in a language of metaphor, myth, allegory and poetry as often as clever, cutting, bawdy and satirical political commentary" (XXI).

Hip Hop Watch Dogs: (Un)fulfilling the Revolutionary Promise

In the process of redrawing political lines, the cultural zeitgeist still provided commentary on the

stagnation of the revolution's inner-city blues. In *Nebni (I build)*, the track flows with WMD:

أرسم ملامح حاضري، لا أنتظر إعانة
انتهاك حرمة الممكن، حيث الممكن إستحالة
دسائس لا تنتهي، حيلهم لا تنظلي
تأجج في ظلام ليل لا يريد أن ينجلي

*I draw the traits of my present, I don't wait for any help
I violate the sanctity of the possible, for the possible is an impossibility
Machinations that don't stop, their twists don't get bought
Feel the flames in the darkness of a night that is not fading away*

*Empire adds to the statement:
Khobbila West el Khitabat shkoon bsh nesmoos'
Shay mayji bessehl ena ezzhar taa'lamt nasnoos'
Lfouk yharkou lkhyout, louta shaab sheded lhyout
Hoony tkhaf rak tmoot, nheb mkhakh blesh hdoud*

*Lost between the discourses, who do we listen to?
Nothing comes easily and I've learnt how to make luck on my own
Up there, they are moving threads,
Down here the people are standing against walls
Here you get scare of dying, I want boundless minds*

Nebni uses an ironic tone to reflect on the state of disillusionment dragging on for ten years. WMD speaks of the endless deceits and treacheries happening around politics, and which, none of them are rescuing the country from the havoc. He defies the status quo by evoking the force of imagination, and the extent to which its role plays for his interest. He can defy the possible that has become impossible to reach; ironically, this alludes to the fact that basic rights have now become hard to access. "I draw the traits of my present " is a powerful declaration of the radical. If reality is not satisfying enough, it can be recreated in order to be transformed for what is hoped for. More to that, "في ظلام ليل لا يريد أن ينجلي" ("in the darkness of a night isn't fading away") is a poetic allusion to poet Abul Qasim Chebbi's verse "لابد لليل أن ينجلي", "The night must fade". In other words, what brought the Revolution after the oppressive gloom, has not been achieved yet. To these declarations, an unwavering stance between hope and reality, Empire portrays the political scene full of confusion as to whom and to which discourse the people can believe in to keep going. The metaphor of a puppet-show in which the state controls their threads, while the ordinary citizens are still being manipulated. Giving voice and giving hand to the audience, his

advice is to reimagine one's own luck and get one's mind "boundless" for inspiration and realization of change.