

CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Safae el Khannoussi

Oroppa

Presented by: Ingrid Hudabiunigg

The central themes of *Oroppa*, the richly layered debut novel by Safae El Khannoussi, are Morocco's "Years of Lead" (from the 1960s through the 1990s) under king Hassan II, transnational identity and Europe as a contested postcolonial space giving voice to the continent's invisible populations — the refugees, addicts, paperless migrants, and survivors of political violence. The novel's very title performs a decolonial act. "Oroppa" is the Arabic onomatopoeic rendering of "Europe"—a linguistic estrangement that immediately positions the continent as something foreign, imagined, and constructed from the outside.

Salomé Abergel is the gravitational centre of the novel. She is a Jewish-Moroccan artist and former political dissident, who built a new life in Amsterdam's Rivierenbuurt neighborhood.

The novel begins with Salomé in a life-threatening condition - leaving behind questions of whether she is dead, on the run, or staging one final disappearing act in a life already shrouded in mystery. Her disappearance then sets a network of searches and stories in motion. The search provides the loose narrative axis but does not tell this story chronologically. Instead of receiving Salomé's complete autobiography, the reader encounters her through other people's memories and interpretations. The result is less a conventional plot than a kaleidoscope of stories and network of interconnected biographies and memories. The content and the form reinforce each other: the novel's fragmented, polyphonic structure reflects the fragmented histories and memories of the people it portrays.

Salomé's experiences of imprisonment and torture become connected to the history of Yousuf Slaoui, her former interrogator in Morocco. This is where the narratology becomes especially challenging as one major section of the novel is narrated from the perspective of this perpetrator. At the end of his life he cynically remembers the persecution and torture of political opponents, including Marxists, students and Islamists. Salomé's rape by him had resulted in the birth of Irad, when his mother was still in prison.

The novel features Irad later in Paris, where he is running the bar "Le Souterrain", a shadowy place in Paris's Belleville neighborhood — a last refuge for the "brothers and sisters of the night" in the 21st arrondissement. As Paris officially has only 20 arrondissements, this place is an invention by the author as a space of drug addicts, outsiders, migrants, and socially excluded "unassimilable" people who remain invisible to mainstream society. This is where the novel becomes political, showing simultaneously a real and imaginary counter-space of social marginality in Europe while asking profound questions about power, identity, and what it truly means to belong.

Irad, Safae's estranged son, is also haunted by his mother's past and reluctantly returns in the end to Amsterdam to confront memories of his youth there that he has long tried to forget. In Salomé's house in Rivierenbuurt he meets Hind el Arian, a part-time waitress and full-time stoner who unexpectedly finds herself guarding Salomé's deserted house. In the basement, she had discovered extraordinary paintings that speak to her and keep her awake at night, showing visions of traumatic

experience. According to Salomé's last wish these paintings are finally all destroyed.

The author Safae el Khannoussi (born 1994 in Tangier) came to Amsterdam, where she now lives, at the age of four. She is a writer and teaches political philosophy. Her literary work is grounded in her PhD research on "political philosophy and prison abolitionism from a decolonial perspective". It sheds light on the intertwined post-colonial and migration histories of Europe and North Africa.

Her debut novel Oroppe was published in 2024. At the end of 2024, she was named literary talent of the year for 2025 by the newspaper de Volkskrant, while Het Parool chose Oroppe as the best book of 2024. In 2025 the novel won the De Boon Prijs and the Libris Prijs, awarded every year for the best Dutch novel.

An English translation is forthcoming from Penguin (scheduled for March 2027). Students at the University of Sheffield have worked on translating excerpts from the novel.

Sources:

Ebel, Martin: Safae el Khannoussi nimmt uns mit in die Abgründe. Debutroman über Europa. In: Tagesanzeiger. Ch. 17.02.2026.

<https://www.hkw.de/en/programme/contributors/safae-el-khanoussi>

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CENSORSHIP STATUS: