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Screening North African Irregular Immigration
In The First season of Lassaad Oueslati's TV Series *Harga* (2021)

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Dedication

I dedicate this work to knowledge, and to my parents.

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List of Abbreviations

ECHR	<i>European Convention on Human Rights</i>
EU	<i>European Union</i>
GCIM	<i>Global Commission on International Migration</i>
ILO	<i>International Labour Organization</i>
IOM	<i>International Organization for Migration</i>
UNODC	<i>United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes</i>
USA	<i>The United States of America</i>
UNHCR	<i>United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees</i>
ASBU	<i>Arab States Broadcasting Union</i>

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Abstract

The present research aims to explore the way irregular immigration is depicted in the Tunisian TV series *Harga* (Laassad Oueslati, 2021). This qualitative research analyses the visual data by exploring cinematography, mise-en-scene, storyline, literary themes, characters, symbols and sounds included in the episodes of season one. After giving a general overview of illegal immigration, the study argues that *Harga* presents the dark side of irregular migration by discussing the portrayal of migrants' conditions along the way to their assumed paradise on death boats. Then, the research examines the way immigrants are (mal) treated in the detention camp as they face abuses and racism. At last, the research contends that *Harga* is an interesting series that tells the viewers about illegal immigration and provides a relevant perspective on what it is to be an irregular migrants from North Africa who try to make a decent life.

Keywords

Harga, Illegal Immigration, Irregular migration, Migration, Maghreb, Smuggler, Stereotype, Tunisia, TV Series.

الملخص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى استكشاف الطريقة التي يصور بها الاسعد الوسلاتي في مسلسل "حرقة" ظاهرة الهجرة غير الشرعية. يعد بحثنا بحثاً نوعياً، يعتمد على تحليل البيانات المرئية من خلال استكشاف مقاطع الفيديو، الحوارات، سرد القصة والموضوعات الأدبية، الرموز، والأصوات المتضمنة في الحلقات. أولاً، تؤكد الأطروحة بان مسلسل "حرقة" يحلل الجانب المظلم للهجرة غير الشرعية باستخدام قوارب الموت. من خلال مناقشة تصوير المسلسل للظروف التي يمر بها المهاجرون غير النظاميين في طريقهم المزعم للجنة. تُوضح الأطروحة بعد ذلك، كيف ان المسلسل وصف المعاملة (السيئة) التي يحظى بها المهاجرون في مراكز الايواء الايطالية، اذ قد يتعرضون للعنصرية و التعسف. وفي الختام، تؤكد الأطروحة بأن مسلسل "حرقة" مسلسل مثير للاهتمام حيث يكشف للمشاهدين حقائق عن ظاهرة الهجرة غير النظامية و يوضح ماهية ان يكون احدهم مهاجر غير نظامي من شمال افريقيا و يحلم بعيش حياة كريمة في اوروبا.

الكلمات المفتاحية

حرقة، هجرة غير شرعية، هجرة غير نظامية، الهجرة، المغرب العربي، مهرب، صورة نمطية، تونس، مسلسل تلفازي.

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INTRODUCTION

1. Background of the Study

The genesis of this research can be traced back in 2022 when the researcher studied a course about American studies in which the professor showed students the way they analyze films and series as they revealed significant details about American culture and identity. Therefore, the researcher decided to analyze a TV series that she enjoyed watching during the holy month of Ramadan of 2021 and which tackles the sensitive issue of illegal immigration in the Maghreb region, namely *Harga* (Lassaad Oueslati, 2021).

So far, the director Oueslati stated his goal behind creating the TV series *Harga* and portraying the dangerous and tragic side of illegal immigration was mainly to shock the viewers by presenting the real image of this phenomenon. Also, it may lead youth to think before pursuing their dreams behind the sea.

Illegal immigration across the Mediterranean Sea, from Africa to the assumed European paradise is the main theme of *Harga*. Oueslati tried to portray the phenomenon as realistic as possible through the interviews and information he collected from real life of irregular migrants.

According to the official website of Statista, the Mediterranean Sea recorded as the most risky route for irregular migrants as it has the highest rates of deaths and missing cases of people. In a recent report entitled “Deaths of Migrants in the Mediterranean Sea 2014-2022,” it was estimated that 2,367 migrants died while crossings the Mediterranean Sea during 2022. Also, the statistics shows that 12 thousand people were drowned in the sea and never found between 2014 and 2018.

So here we are talking about tragic events that happen in our seas and therefore it will be interesting to examine the Tunisian TV series *Harga* which reports on the real situation in

the Mediterranean Sea. *Harga* is a successful TV series that deals with the phenomenon of North African irregular immigration, and it depicts it in an interesting way.

Oueslati narrates the story of different characters from different perspectives as they chose to illegally immigrate, and leave their motherland Tunisia. The series uses simple language and details to screen an honest portrayal of the Tunisian families' sufferings.

Harga was produced by Digipro Clean Film, and Etablissement de La Television Tunisienne. It is a drama that portrays the one-way journey by death boats, across the Mediterranean Sea to Europe. So far, the main actors of this TV series are Wajiha Jendoubi as Naama, Riadh Hamdi as Majeed, Mhadheb Rmili as Saroukh, Malek Ben Saad as Fares, Aicha Ben Ahmed as Hela, to name but a few.

The series was shot in Tunisia, Italy, and some scenes were filmed in the middle of the sea. The series obtained a number of national and international awards and was nominated to others. Additionally a symphony played as soundtrack in *Harga* season one was performed by Moscow The Bow Tie Orchestra and Choir. The songs composed by Riadh Fehri also gained the prize of the best soundtrack in 2021.

Reporting aspects of real life in Tunisia was the main thing that Oueslati did in his series *Harga*. He used the psychodrama, the power of pictures, and sounds to portray the complete image of that phenomenon, and consequentially he made the series viewers live and sympathize with the characters and feel their hopes and sorrows. It is expected that the TV series will be adapted as a movie with the partnership of UNHCR as mentioned by Oueslati to Arabi21 News.

2. Aim of the Research

This master dissertation aims at exploring the way North African irregular immigration is portrayed in the TV series *Harga*. The research investigates via the series the reasons that push thousands of people from Tunisia and Africa to take risks and go through the

Mediterranean Sea via the death boats, and how the director portrayed the difference between the dreams of irregular migrants and their reality.

The series *Harga* was a success, yet it has not been studied or analyzed. Tunisian university professor Oulfa Youcef commented on the series saying that it was one of the most outstanding Tunisian TV programs. Also the actor and director, Abdel Kader Ben Said stated that *Harga* has an international quality as it used an original script, in addition to well-known Arab actors, and cinematic techniques.

According to a report written on Tunisia-sat website article, the series achieved success as it gained thirteen national awards in Amag Ramadan Ceremony. Also, it gained the award of the best Arabic drama in the International festival El Ghadeer in its 13th edition in Iraq. Also, it won the prize of the best Arabic drama ASBU 2021 in Saudi festival of TV and Radio.

3. Research Problem

The research problem of this study involves investigating the way irregular immigration is portrayed in *Harga*, by examining the different strategies used by the series director Oueslati.

The researcher choose this TV series in specific to be analyzed because there is almost no research paper that examined it although it discusses a relevant topic, and portrays a socioeconomic issue that all Maghreb states are suffering from.

In this context, the research will provide an answer to the following questions:

- How is the illegal immigration portrayed in *Harga*?
- What are the main reasons filmed in the series that push youth to risk their lives and immigrate?
- How was the conditions of those irregular migrants portrayed in *Harga*?

4. Definition of Concepts

The researcher will define some concepts that will be frequently used throughout this dissertation. The aim in here is to develop a logical and a coherent conceptual framework.

First we need to make a clear distinction between the concepts immigration and migration. The book *Glossary on Migration* provides the following definition for the word immigration, “a process by which non-nationals move into a country for the purpose of settlement” (49). On the other hand, the word migration is defined as “the movement of a person or a group of persons, either across an international border, or within a State. It is a population movement, encompassing any kind of movement of people, whatever its length, composition and causes; it includes migration of refugees, displaced persons, economic migrants, and persons moving for other purposes, including family reunification”(63).

Basically, the highlighted difference between the two words ‘migration’ and ‘immigration’ lies on whether it is a permanent stay on the pursued non-national country or not. Usually, immigrants are those who go for a permanent residency in another country while migrants are those people who move in groups from a region to another one, and it can happen within the same country.

For instance, we may have migration movements from south to north in a certain country and we call it internal migration, and if the migration movement includes crossing borders, it is called an external migration. Generally, migrants return to their country after duration of time whether it is long or short that depends on their needs. While immigration is the relocation of a single person or a family, migration is done on a larger scale of people.

Another important concept one needs to define is illegal immigrant. According to the Online Cambridge Dictionary, an illegal immigrant is “someone who lives or works in another country when they do not have the legal right to do this.” The definition provided by the book of *Glossary on Migration* adds that “it is preferable to use the term irregular instead of illegal because the latter carries a criminal connotation and seen as denying migrants

humanity.” An irregular migrant is defined as “a person who, owing to unauthorized entry, breach of a condition of entry, or the expiry of his or her visa, lacks legal status in a transit or host country lawfully but have stayed for a longer period than authorized or subsequently taken up unauthorized employment (also called clandestine/undocumented migrant or migrant in an irregular situation).” For example, people from the Maghreb who cross the Mediterranean Sea to reach Europe illicitly are paperless and therefore they are called irregular migrants.

In the Maghreb countries there is a common word used to address this community, which is the word “Harraga”, and they call the illegal immigration process “Harga.” The word in our context means ‘burn’ that is because illegal immigrants before they reach Europe, they burn out their identification papers like passport, so that even if they get caught by European police, they will soon after release them since there is no evidence.

Also, migration is defined by the Council of Europe as “a process of moving, either across an international border or within a country, encompassing any kind of movement of people, regardless of the causes.” According to the European Committee of Migration, the term migrants is used to refer, depending on the context, “to emigrants, returning migrants, immigrants, refugees, displaced persons and persons of immigrant background and / or members of ethnic minority populations that have been created through immigration.”

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) defines migrant as a term “to cover all cases where the decision to migrate is taken freely by the individual concerned for reasons of ‘personal convenience’ and without intervention of an external compelling factor.” The above two definitions reflect the conventional distinction between voluntary and forced migrants. In the case of voluntary migration, people leave their home of their own choice, mainly because of so-called “pull factors”, such as better career opportunities, even though their options to choose from are sometimes very limited. Forced migration is mostly the

result of “push factors”, such as persecution, or war or starvation, when people flee violations of their fundamental rights. However, there is always a mix of push and pull factors present.

Many migrants leave their country for both economic reasons and to escape human right abuse. Even economic migrants may be considered forced migrants, when they flee situations in which their economic rights are violated.

A smuggler, according to Cambridge dictionary, is someone who takes goods or people into or out of a country illegally.

The last concept to be defined is series. It is defined by the Online Cambridge Dictionary as “a set of television or radio broadcasts on the same subject or using the same characters but in different situations.” In this thesis, we will use at the same time the words: drama, series, TV program to refer to the artistic work *Harga* directed by Lassaad Oueslati.

5. Literature Review

The researcher examined the state of the existing literature and searched for scholarly books, dissertations and theses that have dealt with *Harga* (2021), and studies that were held about illegal immigration.

A number of movies portray illegal immigration like: *Harraga* (2009), *Fire At Sea* (2016), *The Golden Dream or La Jaula De Oro* (2013).

The Algerian movie *Harraga* (Merzak Allouache, 2009) was displayed in Dubai International Cinema Festival, and in Valencia Cinema Festival. Also the Algerian TV series *Babour Louh* (Nacer Eddin Shili, 2021) tackled the phenomenon of illegal immigration from Algeria to Europe. It narrates the miserable conditions of some Algerians that lead them to pursue their happiness behind the sea as they flee poverty and joblessness. The Algerian TV series *Babour Louh* presented also the human trafficking mafia that works along the Maghreb states (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia), and profits from the irregular migrants dreams to reach the other side of the Mediterranean Sea.

The article entitled “Illegal immigration: Policy Perspectives and Challenges” by Alessandra Casarico, Giovanni Facchini, Tommaso Frattini examines the combination of the increasing rates of irregular migration with the restricted laws in borders control, and provides an overview of the mechanisms behind forming the migration policies and how policy makers limit the pressure of this phenomenon. Also, it studies how government deals with the undocumented migrants.

The book *Migration Policymaking in Europe* by Giovanna Zincone analyzes how Italy faces the inflow of immigrants and policies that were adopted. Also, it provides an accurate data of the large scale number of irregular migrants that are entering Italy illicitly after the United Kingdom, Germany, and France closed their borders to immigrants due to the oil crisis in 1973.

Reginald Williams wrote a paper entitled “Illegal Immigration: a case for residency” which argues that illegal immigrant laborers in the United States should be granted permanent residency if they contributed to its economy for a certain period of time.

The scholar Huda El Kafi reviewed the series *Harga* and noted that it made a huge attribution to drama production in Tunisia.

Bichara Khader wrote a paper entitled “Europe and the Maghreb: 1957-2015” which studies the history of EU-Maghreb relations from 1957 to 2015. It provides the economic policies made by the European Union with the five Maghreb states. The paper notes that the economic relationship is a failure due to the gap between the expectation and performance. In addition to the strategies of the EU that lack long term vision.

Robert Press published an article entitled “Dangerous Crossings: Voices from the African Migration to Italy/Europe” which provides a bold contrast to the rosy image of illegal immigration. It presents the real and fresh experiences of irregular migrants as it was based on sixty interviews made with the African migrants during three summers (2014, 2015 and

2016). Also, the article provides a real description to the migrant-reception camps in Calais, France and southern Italy where the author stayed there for three days collecting information.

Although there are many research papers written previously on immigration as a phenomenon or/and studied its portrayal on certain movies and TV series, no researcher worked on the TV series *Harga*, and this is mainly the gap that this research tries to study and answer.

6. Method of the Research

The method used in this research is visual data analysis. The work engaged in a reflection on the way illegal immigration is portrayed in the series *Harga*. The researcher analyzed several episodes of season one of the series, and focused on examining cinematography, mise-en-scene, sound, lexical items, and dialogues from the script. The researcher, also, paid attention to the reception of the series by relying on several reports written by critics.

7. Primary and Secondary Sources

Concerning primary sources, they include the episodes of the TV series *Harga* in addition to the interview of the director Oueslati on channel YouTube Nawaat with Thamer Elmaki. Similarly, the researcher will examine the director's statements given to Mosaique fm Broadcast.

Secondary sources include several books and articles about irregular migration from many different perspectives. Moreover, the study examines a number of papers written by some researchers to better understand the actual factors behind the phenomenon of immigration in general, and illegal immigration in particular.

The study used Edward Said's prominent article "reflections on Exile" (2002) and his autobiography *Out of Place* (2000). Also, the article of M.G. Melchionni entitled "Europe and the Maghreb" was very helpful in certain aspects.

In addition, the researcher examined a number of studies and reports conducted by the United Nations agencies which deal with irregular migration across the Mediterranean Sea.

8. Structure of the Research

The study is organized in a plan divided into two main chapters based on the researcher's own interpretations of the TV series and the different strategies used by the series director to depict irregular immigration.

Chapter one provides a general overview of illegal immigration and the series *Harga*. Chapter two is devoted to analyzing how the director Oueslati portrayed illegal immigration in the series. Chapter two is divided into two main sections. The first section investigates the way Oueslati depicted irregular migrants conditions by referring to the smuggling process, poverty as a major reason for irregular migration, and lastly, the conditions of migrants on boats. The second section studies the portrayal of the maltreatment received by irregular migrants in the detention camp as they face exclusion and discrimination.

By the end of this research, it will be emphasized that watching *Harga* (2021) informs viewers about the dangerous aspects of irregular immigration.

Chapter One: General Overview of Irregular Immigration and the Series *Harga*

“This problem with illegal immigration is nothing new. In fact, the Indians had a special name for it. They called it ‘white people’.” Jay Leno

“Despite the efforts of main receiving countries, the number of illegal migrants is still significant. And if we consider this question on the global scale we will find that such migration is more likely a rule than an exception.” The Resolution of the 59th Session of ILO 1974.

This chapter is devoted to some definitions and related studies that tackle irregular immigration in many aspects, including its meaning, history, and cultural significance. Also some statistics of the number of irregular immigration will be presented to illustrate the importance of the issue discussed here.

First, a clear and a concise definition of immigration in general and irregular immigration in particular will be provided in this chapter. Then, the researcher will give a brief summary of irregular immigration happening across the Mediterranean sea from the Maghreb region to European countries. By the end of chapter one an overview of the Tunisian series *Harga* that portrays irregular immigration from Tunisia to Italy will be presented by focusing on the storyline, characters and several technical details about the series.

1. Defining Irregular Immigration

Generally, when searching for the meaning of this expression we find many relevant terms and expressions such as: undocumented, paperless, illegal, unauthorized, people with an irregular status, irregular, clandestine, to name but a few. The entire concepts can be used interchangeably to refer to illegal immigrants.

The Online Cambridge Dictionary states that an illegal immigrant is “someone who lives or works in another country when they do not have the legal right to do this.” Similarly, the Online Merriam-Webster Dictionary uses both “illegal alien” and “illegal immigrant” to refer to “a foreign person who is living in a country without having official permission to live there.” From the two dictionary definitions it can be said that illegal immigrants are people who violates the law as they choose to live in a foreign country illegally.

The International Organization for Migration published the second edition of its *Glossary on Migration* (2012) which includes some key definitions related to immigration. For instance an irregular migrant is “a person who, owing to unauthorized entry, breach of a condition of entry, or the expiry of his or her visa, lacks legal status in a transit or host country.” (Perruchoud and Redpath-Cross 54) The *Glossary on Migration* adds that:

The definition covers inter alia those persons who have entered a transit or host country lawfully but have stayed for a longer period than authorized or subsequently taken up unauthorized employment (also called clandestine/undocumented migrant or migrant in an irregular situation).

The term “irregular” is preferable to “illegal” because the latter carries a criminal connotation and is seen as denying migrants’ humanity. (54)

It becomes clear, therefore, that when we address an immigrant who is staying in an unauthorized way in a given country, we do not use the concept “illegal immigrant” to avoid denying them their humanity. This idea is asserted by the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 3449 (Measures to ensure the human rights and dignity of all migrant workers (9 December 1975)). One of those measures was to “request the United Nations organs and the specialized agencies concerned to utilize in all official documents the term ‘non-documented or irregular migrant workers’ to define those workers that illegally and/or surreptitiously enter another country to obtain work.” The decision came as to defend the human rights and the dignity of migrants who are in an irregular situation because referring to a person as an ‘illegal’ is inaccurate and holds criminal perspectives about him or her.

As a consequence, the term ‘illegal migration’ was dropped out of use and replaced by the term ‘irregular migration’. Meanwhile, the term ‘illegal immigration’ is used to refer to the smuggling of migrants and people trafficking.

Put simply, illegal immigration is meant to be addressing the process of smuggling goods or people and human trafficking, while irregular migration is set for the unauthorized entry to a certain country. Choosing to be an irregular immigrant is only an alternative way for those who could not obtain or secure a legal entry to their destination country. They were either not given visa, or the duration to wait for a visa was too much, or they considered that in a matter of finance illegal immigration was cheaper for them.

Some of the countries like the European Union established a strict migration policy to restrict the legal inflow of immigrants, and that caused illegal immigration to spread vastly. As a consequence, it became a tendency for migrants to obtain their freedom and mobility via illegal migration. However, there are immigrants who entered the country legally, but overstayed leading to the violation of the law of residency so they become irregular

immigrants, as noted by the 2005 report of the Global Commission on International Migration. (32)

All in all, it can be said that irregular immigration is an international problem that faces citizens of all countries and particularly in the age of globalization. Liempt et al. contend that “even though globalization promised a world where people, technology and capital could circulate freely, the reality in terms of people’s mobility has been quite the opposite and is more like a gated globalism.” (1) As a matter of fact, we see that in this globalized world upper class people like the officials, scientists and rich business men from the underdeveloped countries are given access to the developed countries freely and endlessly whereas the low classes and poor people are denied the access to the developed countries and do not benefit from this very globalization. The following section will develop reflections on illegal immigration and its development.

2. Immigration, Irregular Immigration and the Maghreb

2.1. Development of Immigration

Migration is a phenomenon that was greatly increasing after the World War II. In fact, the post-World War era was called the ‘age of migration’ due to the large worldwide number of people moving from their country to another one. Australia was one of the countries that saw and lived such large scale movement of immigrants during that era. the United Kingdom was its major supplier of immigrants until the 1990s.

So far, Australia was unlike the United States, they adopted the multiculturalism policy to encourage immigrants to preserve their cultural identity while being a member of Australian society. However, the United States was called and is still being called the melting pot nation where people’s culture melts in a single cultural pot of diversity and hybridity.

In the mid-sixteenth century, farmers in Brazil started planting sugar cane, and as a consequence a large number of people were imported from Africa as slaves for manual labor

in order to work on the fields. It can be said that this migration was a forced one as Africans were not given the choice to immigrate to the American continent and work as farmers.

However, when the plantation owners freed their African slaves around the nineteenth century, they welcomed another wave of immigrants coming from Europe. The Brazilian society hoped that the white immigrants would change their society from a 'black' to 'white' society.

Unlikely, these European immigrants created hard times for the plantation owners, as the European governments sent many requests to improve the conditions of living and working for their people in Brazil. Yet, these farmhands brought another kind of workers called 'Orientals'.

Japanese immigrants were forming the majority of the workers and they faced strong racism feelings from Brazilians. In the early twentieth century, after the value of Japanese currency surpassed the Brazilian one, Japanese immigrants left the slave-like life. They sent their savings to their country, paid their debts, and bought the farms where they were working on. (Toro-Morn and Alicea 25)

In his prominent article "Reflections on Exile" (2002) Edward Said attached the experience of living in a non-native land with a strong yet emotional words such as "terrible experience" and "crippling sorrow". He continuously referred to exilic experience of immigration as "death but without death's ultimate mercy" (138). For him this human experience is much more like a suffering that one may undergo. It is an experience that separate people and drift them apart from their traditions, family, and geography (138).

We may notice that Said has lived such an experience when he emigrated from Palestine to United States. He was one of the most outstanding authors that wrote about the theme of exile in American literature, and he narrates his autobiography from an exclusive

first person narration claiming that “I, and only I, am responsible for what I recall and see” (13).

In the American literature field, there are many writers and authors that were inspired by their experience of exile. Theodor Adorno, the German-Jewish philosopher, wrote an autobiography entitled *Minima Moralia* (1951) and subtitled *Reflections from Damaged Life*. He described his terrible exilic condition when he fled from Nazi Germany during World War Two.

Also, Yoshiko Uchida, the daughter of Japanese immigrants, wrote *Desert Exile* (1982) based on her personal experience with her family in United States. They were incarcerated in a camp after Japan attacked the US in Pearl Harbor in 1941. United States, or the New World, from the very moment that was discovered, it was set as a place for exiles.

Additionally, a great number of British, Germans, Irish, Italians, Greeks, and Jews immigrated to the United States during the mid-eighteenth century. Perhaps, it was due to religious problems, plus the Great Famine that stroke Ireland at that time.

In the era of World War II, many writers and intellectuals escaped the Nazi-fascist persecutions in Europe, and immigrated to the United States. All this makes America the land of exile from the very beginning of its foundation.

2.2. Data of Illegal Immigration

It must be recognized that it is quite difficult to identify the exact scale of illegal immigration data; however, there are estimations. According to United Nations experts, there are 2 to 4.5 million people that cross the borders of countries illegally every year. It is estimated by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) that there are over 10 million migrants with irregular status in the USA, and half of them are Mexicans.

There are about 500.000 irregular immigrants who cross the borders each year although the efforts of authorities to subdue the number of illegal entry as put by the Global Commission on International Migration (33).

Similarly, there are from 1.9 to 3.8 million irregular immigrants in the European Union, and from 3 to 5 million in Russia, from 1 to 3 million for the Middle East and South American countries. Even Mexico, the major supplier of irregular immigrants in the world is receiving approximately one million irregular immigrants from the countries of South America (Aleshkovski 244).

Irregular immigration represents a danger for the millions of people all over the world. The fact of the matter is that the International Centre on Migration Policy Development estimates that about 400 Mexicans die each year when they illegally cross the US border. Also, each year about 2.000 immigrants die while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea illegally to Europe from Africa (GCIM 34).

2.3. Maghreb, Mediterranean Sea and Europe

In this research, a particular focus will be placed on analyzing illegal immigration from Africa to Europe as millions try to cross the Mediterranean Sea and join the European lands. The point is all the irregular immigrants portrayed in the series *Harga* are citizens of Tunisia or sub-Saharan African countries, and their only concern is to reach Italy via the Mediterranean Sea and make their dream come true.

But it must be noted that illegal immigration to Europe by crossing the Mediterranean Sea was described by some European officials and media channels as a massive invasion, or a plague. For instance, Jacques Chirac, the former president of France, stated in July 2006 that “Africans will flood the world”, and obviously his statement was only a reaction to those large numbers of Africans who were desperately seeking a refuge in the European continent. The public opinion grew certain stereotypical views about irregular immigrants as being

uncivilized and invaders of the European countries. They would take the jobs of white Europeans and benefit from health care and social helps. People in Europe perceived African immigrants as the reason behind the increasing of crime rates, terrorism, and joblessness in Europe.

We must not forget that after the 9/11 attacks that stroke the US, Islamophobia started to emerge and people from Africa and the Arab world were no longer welcomed to the western countries. The 7/7 London bombing of 2005 in addition to the attack of Madrid on March 11, 2004 made the situation worse for Arabs and Africans. Those circumstances served as factors, and ingredients to feed their xenophobia towards immigrants in general, and irregular immigrants in particular as noted by De Haas (1306).

Usually, irregular immigrants are just people who are fleeing poverty and tribal war, and seeking better life conditions and employment with a better salary than that in their native country. From this perspective we can assume that illegal immigration is an economic process by nature.

In addition, illegal immigration to Europe increased remarkably after the events of the Arab Spring of 2011 as noted by Aleshkovski (248). On October 15, 2008 the European Council had a meeting in Brussels that dealt with how to control illegal immigration and the members of the Council approved two major decisions. The first decision was to control illegal immigration in particular by ensuring that irregular immigrants return to their countries of origin or to a transit country. The second decision stated that EU countries should make border control more effective whereby the European Council recalls that each state is responsible for the controls of the external borders of the EU.

The solutions that were reached by the European Union to face illegal immigration focused on finding and attacking the weaknesses of the smuggling and trafficking networks. Also, EU countries decided to strengthen the border controls. The European Union even

exerted pressure on Maghreb states, so that they intensify their border controls and make migration laws tougher (De Haas 1306).

Even irregular immigrants are considered as victims of the ruthless and merciless traffickers and smugglers. A migrant smuggler is viewed as “an intermediary who moves a person by agreement with that person, in order to transport him/her in an unauthorized manner across an internationally recognized state border.” (Perruchoud and Redpath-Cross 91). It means that people who want to immigrate to other countries illegally have to deal with unscrupulous criminals who can even take their money and kill them if they consider they represent a threat to them. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime stated that “the system of migrant smuggling has become nothing more than a mechanism for robbing and murdering some of the poorest people of the world” (20).

The real cause of African migration to Europe is not ‘African misery’ as it is assumed, because this phenomenon is not a new one as it started centuries ago. People from Africa and from the Maghreb migrated to European countries because of colonial considerations as Europe colonized those underdeveloped countries in the past, and as a consequence they moved there because of the language and the culture spread by the colonizer. For instance Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians were making out the majority of African immigrants in Europe since the 1960s when the Maghreb countries were freed from colonial France. After independence thousands of Moroccans, Algerians, and Tunisians moved to Spain, France and Italy to settle there and live a decent life.

At the turn of 21st century, the data indicate that over 2.6 million Moroccans, 1.2 million Algerians, and 700.000 Tunisians lived in Europe. Although Europe passed many restrictive laws on migration since the oil crisis of 1973, the number of immigrants did not decrease at all. On the contrary, thousands of families left the Maghreb to permanently stay in Europe. The traditional destinations for these Maghrebians families were genuinely France,

Belgium, Germany, and the Netherlands. However, after the increasing demand for low-skilled labor in southern Europe in the late 1980s, the Maghrebians destination changed to Spain and Italy (De Haas 1307).

Since the 1990s, when Italy and Spain required a visa from immigrants of the Maghreb there were a wave of small fish boats illegally crossing the Mediterranean Sea carrying irregular immigrants. The sub-Saharan Africans started to join these attempts of illegal immigration since 2000.

In the name of pan-Africanism, the former Libyan leader Muammar al-Qadhafi welcomed sub-Saharan Africans to work in Libya. By the time, Libya grew to be one major destination for migrants from every part of Africa. However, this age of evolvment and harmony would not last long. In 2000 and after some clashes happened between Libyans and African workers which led to the deaths of around hundreds of sub-Saharan migrants, there were quite an anti-immigrants resentment which toughened the attitudes towards immigrants in Libya.

In responding to people resentment, the Libyan authorities set a more restricted immigration laws and regulations. This resulted in African immigrants changing their destination to Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia in order to cross the Mediterranean Sea illegally and reach Europe. There were quite a lot of sub-Saharan migrants trying to reach Europe through the Libyan coast as well notes De Haas (1308).

The vast majority of irregular immigrants travel on their own initiative. It means they are not victims of smugglers as it is commonly assumed. There are even well educated people who choose to illegally cross the borders of Europe. Although, the media focus on “boat migrants”, there are many other less risky ways to enter Europe via using a tourist visa and false documents. In fact many irregular African immigrants enter Europe legally and then overstay their visas (De Haas 1309).

3. Europe/Maghreb Relationship and History about Migration

Geographically speaking, the Maghreb states and the EU are neighbors since they share borders in the Mediterranean Sea. Shifting to a historical perspective, the majority of Maghreb states were French colonies: Algeria from 1830 to 1962, Morocco from 1912 to 1956, Tunisia from 1881 to 1956, and Mauritania from 1904 until 1960. Only Libya was an Italian colony since 1912. Due to this historical legacy, the five states of Maghreb were influenced culturally, politically, economically, and linguistically by their former colonizers. As an example, the French language continued to be used widely in education and administration in Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia. France was the main trading partner and investor with Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Mauritania even after independence. While Italy is still the first and main trading partner of Libya, important investor, and a major importer of the Libyan oil.

When these central Maghreb states: Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia gained their independence there were a series of trade agreements signed with the European Economic Community. Since 1970s, the relationships between the Maghreb states and the EU was framed by many different policies: The Global Mediterranean Policy (1972-1992), The Renovated Mediterranean Policy (1992-1996), The Barcelona Process (1995-2008), The European Neighborhood Policy (since 2004), and finally The Union for the Mediterranean since 2008. The only policy that was targeting only the five states of Maghreb is the 5+5 Group (5 Maghreb states+ 5 southern European countries: France, Italy, Spain, Malta, and Portugal).

In spite of all the agreements and policies that were signed, the EU and the Maghreb countries failed to extract the Maghreb from its economic stagnation and political issues even after more than fifty years of signing these trades agreements. This goes for that EU's lack of

long-term vision where their main focus was only trade and security-driven; it was neither co-development nor democracy promotion.

The Maghreb countries are also responsible for failing to overcome the economic challenges, and balance the differences between regions and societies. Additionally, the high rate of poverty and illiteracy, and the unemployment of educated youths continue to fuel anger, frustration, riots, and the desire to migrate to other horizons especially to Europe (Bichara 189).

It was mentioned before that migration to Europe is not any new, but rather goes to the beginning of 20th century, around 1920 there were many Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians that were brought to France for manual labor in agriculture, mining sectors, and industry. It was estimated that 40.000 Algerians and Moroccans served in the French army during the Second World War. After the war, Europe suffered a quite loss in the youth population by which it opened its gates for migrant workers, as it was in need to manpower to reconstruct what was ruined by the war.

When Europe was facing difficulty with the small number of population, the recently independent Maghreb states were quite the opposite, facing huge economic problems. As with the growing population, governments could not provide jobs to all people. The first phase of Maghreb migration was from 1964 to 1974, during that times the gates to Europe were widely open due to the need of 3-D jobs (dirty, demeaning, and dangerous) workers.

For some reasons Maghreb countries encouraged migration as it reduced the pressure on labor market, lessened the poverty rates, and thus obtained political stability. The first generation of migrant workers was illiterate or with elementary school certificate and the majority was between 18 to 30 years old. Although they suffered from racism and xenophobia, their contribution in Europe was valuable.

After the oil crisis, the European states restricted the migration policies since they were no longer interested in regular migration, but they did facilitate 'family reunion' and the integration of migrants in Europe. The contribution of this family reunion was quite noticeable since it changed the European population scale as by the end of 1970, the total number of migrants was 1.5 million migrant. In consequence of the change in the European migration policy, the idea or the myth of returning back to homeland that was dominant among immigrants during the first phase faded away; instead migrants chose a permanent stay in Europe.

The increasing number of migrants fueled up the racist attitudes, and agitated the far-right parties. Since the 1980s, Maghreb migrants were associated with the danger of Muslim invasion. Migration to Europe was even more difficult after 1990, representing the third phase of migration process. After the setting of the new Schengen restriction there were waves of illegal immigration attempts across the Mediterranean Sea, and this led the European countries to focus more on protecting their borders and fight irregular migration. However, the flow of irregular migrants to European countries did not stop even after the restrictive policies. And still to this moment there are waves of irregular migrants crossing the sea to reach the European coast.

It must be mentioned that almost 80% of irregular migrants are the result of tourist over-stay, but the media focus more on the image of "death boats", the small fishing boats full of irregular immigrants crossing the sea. The media want to depict a "human tragedy". Many Algerians, Moroccans, and Tunisians settled in Europe since three or four generations, so it is quite difficult to estimate the right number of Maghreb migrants. However, in December 2010, in a conference of the Arab League it was set that the Maghreb migrants represent 1.2% of the total population of EU, i.e. the number of 6 million migrants. The flow

of irregular immigrants would not stop as the salaries and opportunities in Europe remain attractive

The majority of irregular migrants choose the less risky way to obtain their spacial mobility, but the statistics prove that there are plenty of people who die while trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea. Death boats have become a topic that attracts writers, researchers, media reporters, and film directors that want to address this phenomenon of crossing the Mediterranean Sea by using a boat. The next and last section of chapter one tackles the representation of illegal immigration on TV as embodied in the Tunisian sitcom *Harga*.

4. Overview of *Harga*

4.1. Summary of the Plot

The case study of this research is about the Tunisian TV series *Harga* which was directed by Lassad Oueslati in 2021. The series introduces the human tragedy of taking risks only to cross the sea border and live a decent life in Europe.

Harga (2021) tells a story of a group of irregular immigrants, Tunisians and sub-Saharan Africans, who overpass the borders to reach Europe seeking a better life condition and better opportunities. The TV series is worthy to be analyzed as it tackles the phenomenon of irregular immigration from many different perspectives.

All the characters have their own reasons to immigrate but they share the same goal and the same destination. So they all meet together on the ‘death boat’ and share the tragedy of being stuck in the middle of the sea waiting for help and this for days. After being rescued, they discovered and saw the reality which was far enough from their imagination.

Oueslati stated to Mosaique Fm radio that his intention was not to stop irregular immigration, but “it was a scream of panic, to open our eyes.” There was a report written by Rai Uno about the TV series *Harga* and it predicted that we will find this work in international platforms too. Aymen mabrouk, an actor in this TV series stated that the most

famous newspaper in Italy wrote about *Harga* and he suggested that this work will be a success on Netflix. Another actor told Mosaique Fm that in the first episode of this TV series there were real people of harraga (irregular immigrants) acting with them.

The poster of the series is a powerful image that symbolizes the pain and loneliness encountered by the characters as they start their journey to the European land of dreams and hopes. (See below)



Figure 1: Poster of *Harga* (season one, 2021)

The down shot, which the shot that is taken from above makes the subjects seem vulnerable and powerless. We feel that the characters are trapped in the sea and are unable to frame their fate. If they are lucky enough they will make it as their boat will reach its destination in Italy.

4.2. Technical Details of *Harga*

In what follows some technical details about the crew members engaged in the acting and production of the Tunisian series *Harga* will be provided. The researcher relied on the relevant online database IMDb (Internet Movie Database) which provides information related to films and television series by focusing on cast, production crew, plot summary, ratings and fan critical reviews.

Title of the TV Series: *Harga* (2021-2022)

Number of seasons: 2 and it must be mentioned that the researcher chose to specifically delimit the study to season one although season two is as relevant as the previous one

Number of episodes: 40

Creator and director: Lassaad Oueslati

Screenplay: Imad Eddine Hakim

Production Companies: Clean Film (Italy) and Etablissement de la Télévision Tunisienne (Tunisia)

Main cast:

Wajiha Jendoubi (Naama)

Aïcha Ben Ahmed (Hala)

Riadh Hamdi (Majeed Ferchichi)

Mhadheb Rmili (Faouzi Essaroukh)

Yasmine Bouabid (Waad)

Sana Al Habib (Amina Echerif)

Abdellatif Kheireddine (Khmaies)

Oussama Kochkar (Ayed)

Malek Ben Saad (Fares)

Sadak Trabelsi (Karim)

Nabil Chahed (Lt. Achref Oueslati)

Hakim Boumsaoudi (Lt. Siraj Massoudi)

Meriem Ben Hssen (Aiyah Echerif)

Mohamed Ali Zgargar (Mansour)

Oumaima Bahri (Kayla)

Mohamed Grayaâ (Jalloul)

Mamadou Bael Sar (Koufi)

Executive producer: Ridha Sallema / Aziz Sallema

Assistant producer: Abdelkrim Limem

Cinematography: Rabii Messaoudi

Music: Riadh Ferhi

Supervising editor: Ahmed Ben Kridis

Production management: Faysal Methamem

Series costume: Hanen Ben Guiza

Props: Seif Rabhi

Decoration: Achref Belghithi

Special effects: Moncef Abes

Makeup: Sana Ben Abdelsallam / Anisa Ghallela

In conclusion, the series *Harga* focuses on clandestine immigration and the suffering of Tunisian and African immigrants who flee their homeland to make their dreams come true in Italian territory. The next chapter will analyze the way the director Lassaad Oueslati portrays the sufferings and the social issues of those immigrants.

Chapter Two: Portrayal of Illegal Immigration

“The greatest nations are defined by how they treat their weakest inhabitants.” Jorge Ramos

“It is the obligation of every person born in a safer room to open the door when someone in danger knocks.” Dina Nayeri

“Refugees are not terrorists. They are often the first victims of terrorism.” Antonio Manuel de Oliveira Guterres

“Do you know why we call it harga? Because we burnt ourselves not the borders” Khmaies in Harga

The second chapter is dedicated to the way director Oueslati depicts illegal immigration in his series *Harga*. To do that, the researcher analyzed cinematography, characterization, the script, the sound and the mise-en-scene. After all, Sikov notes that “film studies assumes that everything within the image has expressive meanings. By analyzing mise-en-scene, we begin to see what those meanings might be” (13).

Chapter two is divided into two sections. The first section explores the conditions of irregular migrants. In fact, the section introduces the way the director screened smugglers and

their use of violence. The section is also about the depiction of poverty in the series, and it can be said that it is considered as one of the reasons of illegal immigration. Finally, section one takes us on the boat of the migrants and makes us see the risks and dangers of migrating illegally by boat.

The second section of chapter two deals with the disillusionment and disappointment felt by the characters in the series as they try to reach their Italian paradise only to find incarceration, hatred and racism. Here, the researcher focuses on the strategy used by the series director to portray the discrepancy between the idealistic dream of immigrating to Italy and real life for Tunisians and Africans. In fact, it is argued that African and North African migrants in the series *Harga* faced racism and xenophobia when they were incarcerated in an immigrant camp by Italians. This made them think that perhaps their hope to settle in Italy and make a decent life was just a chimera and an illusion.

1. Conditions of Immigrants

As mentioned previously, irregular movement of people across borders is an economic phenomenon by nature since the major goal of migrants is a better life conditions and a good salary. They are often labeled as ‘economic migrants’ since they are young men seeking a better life, and money which they send back to their families to pay off their loans taken to finance their trip to the North. The majority of those immigrants get the money of their trip either by selling their lands and their properties, or by getting a loan from a bank. Usually, the oldest son goes first to pave the way for his siblings who will come later as was noted by Väyrymen (20).

Väyrymen adds that there should be however a clear distinction between the three concepts: illegal immigration, human smuggling, and human trafficking. It is true that the three concepts describe the irregular movements of people across borders; however, they differ in term of their political and legal consequences. Väyrymen adds that human

trafficking is a subcategory of smuggling (4). Also, he notes that smuggling routes are made because of the weak laws, lenient borders control, corrupted police officers, and the power of organized crime (2).

Illegal immigration and human smuggling can be understood because of their humanitarian and economic purposes. Human trafficking, on the other hand, is regarded as a nasty and an inhumane practice that receives the world condemnation. Usually, smuggling differs from human trafficking although both are about getting financial profits, the smugglers in the latter one have the right to decide the end use of their victims.

Meanwhile, illegal immigration is only about a person who is seeking a better life by means defined to be illicit according to international laws and governments. Consequently people need the help of smugglers to reach their goal (Väyrymen 6).

Bales adds that the goal behind illegal immigration is to find employment in a country that has attractive salaries. In contrast of the other irregular movements across borders, irregular migrants have the freedom to decide themselves whether they leave their country for a foreign destination or not (10-11).

There was a *Global Report* in 1999 that was conducted to clear the confusion between this three words. Yet, it was noted by Miller that illegal immigration, human smuggling, and trafficking are interrelated and contribute to a terrible paradox (321).

Paoli noted that the main task in smuggling is to take the irregular migrants across the borders for a profit while in human trafficking, smuggling is combined with other criminal activities as it involves violence, drugs trade, and prostitution (94-99).

In what follows, we are going to examine the way Oueslati represents smugglers, life on the boat, and poverty of the migrants as depicted in *Harga*.

1.1. Smugglers and Violence

Smuggling of immigrants in the series *Harga* is portrayed in a realistic way as the main character Faouzi also known as Essaroukh (played by the honorable Tunisian actor Mhadheb Rmili) is introduced to the series viewers as a very dangerous smuggler devoted of ethics and who only cares about money. His nickname *Essaroukh* (الصاروخ), i.e. rocket is very symbolic in some respects.

The *Online Arabic Modern Dictionary* (معجم اللغة العربية المعاصرة) gives the following literal definition of the word “rocket”:

" قذيفة نارية أسطوانية الشكل مخروطية الرأس تُقذف إلى مسافات بعيدة بتأثير اندفاع الغازات الناتجة عن احتراق الوقود من الخلف، وقد تحمل مواد متفجرة كالقنابل أو سفناً فضائية "صواريخ أرض أرض/ أرض جو/ عابرة للقارات/ نووية - صاروخ مضاد للطائرات".

So right from the beginning, the series viewers know that Essaroukh is a dangerous and a villain character and if anyone gets close to him this may lead to their tragic end. As a rocket, he destroys everything surrounding him and one had better not dealing with him. Besides, one can add that in North Africa in general and Algeria in particular there is a type of hallucinogenic pills called Essaroukh which are very dangerous and can have a devastating effect on youth. Those young people in Maghreb countries use Essaroukh to escape their real life misery and suffering to relieve their stress. Usually, this kind of drug is used in medical sphere as a pain relief for those who have mental issues.

Therefore, the metaphoric meaning of the nickname of Faouzi the Tunisian smuggler conveys a subtle symbolic connotation as the thousands of young people in the Maghreb region who drop out of school and are jobless become involved in criminal activities and take hallucinogenic pills that give them the courage to illegally immigrate and face death in the sea without caring about their destiny.

In one specific scene of episode number eight (see figure 01 below), Faouzi talks to his subordinate Ayed after their boat was stuck in the middle of the sea for at least two weeks, saying:

At that time, I was working at the port when I saw the corpses diffused on the seaside. At that moment I decided to become a smuggler. I thought I will be a harrag who will make them reach their destination alive, not a one who will kill them. I thought it was a source of livelihood for both me and the irregular immigrants. By time, I did know that smuggling is not that simple domain to work on. [...] Do you know Ayed, sometimes I really feel like I am a hero. At least I opened a way in the sea for those people who are living in misery and poverty.

Essaroukh is a vicious and mean smuggler although he thinks he is a hero as he saves those lost young people who want to join the other side of the Mediterranean Sea. So there is a humanistic side in this villain character. The following shot is worthy to be examined:



Figure 02: Saroukh Episode 08 (frame 28 m 40 s)

In this shot, the first thing to notice is the scenery behind. We can see that the wide opened window shows the Mediterranean Sea that surrounds the boat. The sea is the main reason that gathers all those characters making them share the same destiny. If we tilt a little bit to the side, we see the character Saroukh with a low key lightning. As we focus on his facial expression, we can notice that he is completely not afraid of death and not terrified; rather he is calm and he sings a Tunisian folk song with his friend Ayed.

The progression of the character Saroukh in the episodes is quite contradictory as he was presented first as a villain character who smuggles people in exchange of money and uses violence and harsh words to obtain what he wants. However, it must be said that the

series director Oueslati chose not to make use of informal language and profanity in the series in order not to chock the series viewers. *Harga* is a family program that was broadcasted during the Holy Ramadan of 2021, and consequently the Arabic viewers of the series needed to relax and enjoy their time after they broke their fast by watching an enjoyable TV series.

The series director emphasizes the fact that smugglers are mean and dangerous people as shown in the figure below.



Figure 03: Saroukh and Jalloul Episode 01(frame 24 m 37s)

The first thing to notice is the extreme low key lighting and the dark features of the image as the facial expression of Saroukh and his companion is darkened. The focus is on Saroukh face as he is asking his subordinate about the information collected by the corrupt police agents, and his eyes are pointed to the police officer car leaving. The time of shooting the scene is night as to stress the fact that all those illegal activities of smuggling migrants happen in the night when there is darkness and people cannot see them.

Also, we can see that the subordinate of Saroukh is not less vicious then his boss as he looks like Emperor Palpatine, the Dark Lord of the Sith Darth Sidious who wears a black hooded cloak. Perhaps the series director, whether consciously or unconsciously, referred to the cultural reference of *Star Wars* to remind the viewers that whether it is *Star Wars* franchise or the series *Harga*, there will always be darkness and viciousness in our existence.

We realize that smugglers are not working alone as they rely on corrupt police officers to reach their objectives. Väyrynen observes that illegal immigration is one of the problems of organized crime and the illicit global economy, as the organized crime is a group of subnational and transnational corporate agencies that work systematically outside the law scoop to gain profits for its members and the leaders. He adds that corruption is a needed element in the process of crossing borders illicitly as it makes it much more easier for smugglers (2-6).

Smugglers are usually connected to international networks as illegal immigration brings profits for smugglers located in the Maghreb and in Europe as well. The following shot illustrates the cooperation established between Maghreb and European smugglers.



Figure 04: Saroukh and his Boss Episode 01(frame 12m 46s)

We notice the luxurious yacht and the Italian rich man whom Saroukh works for. The man sitting on the splendid sofa is holding a cup of wine, and there is a chess game on the table which stands as a symbolic trope of strategy and malignance used by smugglers. After all, smuggling innocent people is like playing a chess game as one needs to be resourceful and intelligent to win the game.

We can also see that Saroukh is standing in front of the Italian smuggler. He is being totally submissive to the European criminal, and his stand is so similar to that of a soldier

waiting for orders. So here perhaps the series director wants to remind viewers that there is a form of a new colonization as globalization makes third world countries subject to developed countries and even in the organized crime hierarchy.

The Italian gangster throws money on the table symbolically to humiliate the Tunisian smuggler. He tells Saroukh that since he got caught by the police, he became a “Carta Bruciata” means a burned card. It means that he no longer needs Saroukh to be in his service. Saroukh was abandoned although his subjugation and loyalty.

The director did not reveal the face or the identity of the Italian gangster and this may mean that the leaders of the European organized crime stay in the dark while making people like Saroukh work for them as their pawns.

When Saroukh was captured and interrogated by the police officers in Italy, he was not afraid at all, and he did not confess about his crimes. On the contrary, he kept denying the accusations with a straight face and he showed a sarcastic expression when he heard that there is commands from above to free him.

In this research, it has been argued that smugglers use violence without any mercy. The series director used another villain character to convey the viciousness and meanness of smugglers. (See the figure below)



Figure 05: Tunisian irregular migrant and a Smuggler Episode 02 (frame 7 m 22 s)

Immigrants were drowning and desperately seeking help, but the Lebanese smuggler did not allow them to get on his boat, and pointed out a gun on one of them with threatening that he would kill anyone who gets near his boat. Thus, he left them to die in the sea without any sympathy.

Truong adds that the more enforcement applied on borders control against immigration, the more sinister and criminal ways are used to overpass the borders. Consequently, the intensity of using violence by smugglers will increase too leading to a more complex and immoral methods of human smuggling (11-14).

There was a study conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crimes named *Abused and Neglected –A Gender Perspective on Aggravated Migrant Smuggling and Response* in 2021, highlighted the violence, torture, rape, and kidnapping crimes that happen along the routes of smuggling. The study focused on the smuggling routes within West and North Africa, the Mediterranean Sea, and Central America. Interviews with smuggled migrants and feedback from UNODC partners confirm that the use of violence is widespread on certain smuggling routes.

The Mediterranean sea was identified as one of the most dangerous transit point where irregular migrants are exposed to unsafe and dangerous travel conditions. In addition to various types of crimes and violence that are practiced by smugglers (4).

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) conducted some interviews with migrants in which they stated that physical abuses or harassment are the most common form of abuses encountered along the Mediterranean migration routes (180).

Mhadheb Rmili, the actor who played Saroukh stated to Mosaique fm Broadcast that: “The smuggler or any negative character, is but a result of the social environment [...] he was not born that way.” However, one must not forget that smugglers are criminals who chose the easy way to make money through illegal practices and by threatening the lives of hundreds of

irregular migrants who escaped poverty to make a decent living. The next section of the thesis analyzes poverty as the main reason for Africans to immigrate.

1.2. Poverty or Death with Dignity

The director of *Harga* introduced the difficult conditions of Tunisian people who live in the dirty suburb (See the figures below).



Figure 06: Fathallah Suberb Episode 01 (frame 5 m 57s)



Figure 07: Fathallah Suberb Episode 01 (frame 6 m 22s)

We can see that the shots convey a powerful image of misery and poverty. For sure people who live among garbage and carcasses of burnt cars or stand in line with a bucket for purchasing fresh water have nothing to lose and would prefer dying in the sea as they chase their dream rather than remaining in desperate places.

Poverty created a social class full of frustrations, wants, unfulfilled dreams, despair, and no value to life. It has the power to make people compromise their morals, values,

cultural and religious beliefs. As we will see later with the friend of Fares who choose to engage in another activities to gain money, it is haram money though.

The saying “Lack of money is the root of all evil”, said by George Bernard Shaw can be the basic slogan behind the raising rates of the irregular migration phenomenon. As the statistics shows that deep poverty and hunger is the main push factors that leads irregular migrants to leave their motherlands and risk their lives while trying to reach the other side of the Mediterranean sea.

Although there was a very common idea that irregular migration is kind of a resistance to the global poverty, Alejandra Mancilla stated “irregular migration is not a resistance rather it is an instance of someone acting on the right of necessity; they cross borders to save their lives rather than merely looking for better lives (113).

Naturally, there are two main reasons contribute to the rising trend of both irregular and regular immigration and these are poverty and warfare. In *Harga*, there were a lot of sub-Saharan characters representing the many Africans attempts to reach the assumed paradise and flee their homelands due to war and persecution. In the series we notice that each boat that goes for this risky journey, there should be some Africans on the trip.

As it was mentioned in chapter one, most Africans changed their destination from Libya to other Maghreb states (Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia) after the tragic accident that happened around 2000, and by time they started to join the many attempts of crossing the Mediterranean Sea and enter Europe illicitly via Tunisian coast.

So basically, Oueslati in his TV series did not tackle illegal immigration only as a Tunisian issue, but as a Maghrebian issue, and an African one as well. He introduced many characters with different origins, but all are heading to the same destination.

Selma, the journalist in *Harga*, made interviews with the characters during their stay in the detention center, one of them was the African women Daniela who lost her husband and

children during her journey to Europe. She said: “we thought that if we arrive to Italy all the sufferings will end, and we will start a new life. I came from my country, I passed through Libya to reach Tunisia, and from there I rode the boat here. Starvation can make you do anything.”

Daniela represents the African woman and her misery, running from war, persecution, and starvation in her country to reach the assumed paradise, and along the way she lost all her family members.

Also there is another character in the series that typifies poverty and hopelessness, namely Fares, a young man that dropped out of school to finance his family. He works part-time jobs so that he can help his mother as his father who is disabled and who subsequently dies because of lack of treatment.

In one scene of the series we see Fares running with a new wheelchair and bringing it to his home for his father. His smile and happiness is so obvious, but there are another boy and a girl wearing their bags and going to school and their way is the opposite of that of Fares. One can interpret this scene as an attempt of the series director to convey the subtle message that while Fares is trying harder to help his family financially, his peers are normal students who study and are supported by their families.

Although Fares lives in poverty with his family, he is not thinking of *harga* at all; instead he refuses the idea completely. His mother Naama (played by the honorable Tunisian actress Wajiha Jandoubi) is the one who pushed him to go to Italy. In fact, Naama was mesmerized by her neighbor whose son returned from Italy with a nice car and a lot of money to support his family. Naama even told her son Fares that if she was able to immigrate she would definitely cross the Italian border on a boat. Actress Wajiha Jandoubi stated to *Mosaique fm Broadcast* that she heard a women in real life telling her sons she would illegally emigrate from Tunisia to Italy if she could do that.

The following discussion between Fares and his friend is worthy to be examined:

His friend: I wish I could go in your place (illegally immigrate)

Fares: I am trying my best, I am working day and night here, and I do not want to leave my dad and siblings alone.

His friend: you are not helping with anything by staying here. Your mother was right when she said you are a coward.

Fares (with an angry tone): you want me to throw myself into the sea so that I become a brave man in your eyes? The coward who is in front of you is providing a living for an entire family, all his money went for his dad medical fees, and his siblings' needs. Do you want me to steal and take what is not mine, and dirt my hand with Haram money, so you would say that I am a 'man'? If this is manhood to you my friend; I do not want it!

The conversation shows that Fares and his friend have a completely different perspectives about irregular migration/harga. While Fares thinking that crossing the sea on death boat is a sort of craziness, his friend thinking quite the opposite as he perceive the whole idea of taking the risk and cross the sea as a sort of a heroic action.

The friend of Fares, perhaps, presents the most common perspective on irregular migration among Maghrebian youths. To cross the Mediterranean sea on death boats, then return after months or years with a lot of money, car, and a beautiful European woman. This superficial picture of Harga killed many youths monthly if it is not daily. Even if they survive the route of the Mediterranean sea, the other side of it can be even more dangerous.

This conversation actually introduces a very wrong stereotypical image about being a 'man' among young people. We must not forget that in Maghreb countries young men who immigrate illegally and make a decent situation are viewed as heroes by the other members of the society. The tragic hero starts his risky journey to uncertainty and the unknown and by the end he marries a beautiful European woman and makes a stable living to help his family his motherland.

We notice in the storyline of *Harga* that whenever the characters mention dying in their way to Europe, they relate it to dignity. "*At least we will die with dignity,*" is repeated

on and on in different episodes of the series and becomes a motto for hopeless young generations in Tunisia.

But one is to ask where the dignity is of dying in the middle of the sea? Or where is the dignity for a young Tunisian or a young Sub-Saharan African when their corpses are found diffused on the sea shore? Even if we cannot provide an accurate answer to these relevant questions we must acknowledge that Oueslati tried to inform the viewers about the sensitive issue of illegally immigrating. The director depicts some aspects of real life in Tunisia without judging the characters. He lets the viewers to make their own judgement on the ethics of illegal immigration. And we Algerians have our saying about the issue of illegal immigration as we have relatives, friends and neighbors who run away from their mother land to make a living and some of them died in the sea or went missing without knowing if they died or not.

Basically, the very typical idea that Africa is a continent on the move is actually an exaggerated image that was presented by Western media, politicians, and researchers as well. But the truth of the matter is that Africa is still an underdeveloped continent as thousands of her youth immigrate illegally because of poverty and lack of economic opportunities.

This being said, one must recognize that the worldwide view of Africa is that it is an unsafe continent where the masses are displaced because of poverty and war. Also, the stereotypical image of full 'migrants boats' that resembles a serious human tragedy is not accurate since according to several studies about the movement towards, from, and within Africa, the highest rates of migration was within and between African countries as noted by Flahaux and De Haas (7). Put simply, that the majority of African migrants are moving within the continent not to Europe as it is represented via media as: mass invasion, flood, plague ...etc.

Flahaux and De Haas add that the available data is contradicting the idea that Africa is a ‘continent on the move’. Studies has shown that the common interpretations about the African migration is driven by poverty is wrong and contradicts the study results (22).

Put simply, the majority of African migrants are moving within the continent not to Europe as it is represented in western media. But when migrants move from the Maghreb to Europe they solely use boats except very few examples of people who get the Turkish visa and enter the European Union territory via Greece, Poland and Serbia, among many other buffer states. The next section is about the depiction of illegal immigrants being on the boat.

1.3. Death Boats

The series director depicts the process of crossing the Mediterranean Sea by ‘death boats’ in a very miserable way focusing on the conditions of the trip. He pointedly portrays the bad and dangerous side of illegal immigration by simply putting the characters on the boat in a difficult condition as they face death at any moment because of storms and rains that can overturn the boat and lead to their end.

In one scene, we see the boat surrounded by the sea; the weather is cloudy and the rain is pouring endlessly. The boat engine is not working and the image is dark as the film director wants us to feel the fear of being stuck in the middle of nowhere against fighting nature to survive. Even the characters start to send a prayer (dua) to Allah to save them. The series viewers feel that the characters are not acting at all; rather they are real illegal immigrants who face death.

One of the young immigrants Khaled tries to comfort his friend Walid by saying: “it is okay, it is okay;” however, Walid stood up shouting in fear: “How is it okay, how?! Can you not see? We are surrounded by water! We will die!” Indeed, Walid died and ended up a corpse in the seaside of Zarzis port while Khaled was rescued by the Italian rescue team.

Within the episodes, the director introduces the many scenarios of death that could happen during the illegal immigration process. Illegal immigrants may be tossed in the sea as an extra weight, be killed by someone in the boat, face starvation, and drown in the sea.

Many death scenarios can happen along the way of irregular migrants boats due to the harsh conditions, illness, accidents, drowning. Data has shown that the Mediterranean sea routes are fatal especially the central one since there were more than 20.000 migrants died along the way to Europe since 2014, plus many deaths are still unrecorded as it was stated by the International Organization for Migration(2020). Remember the link

The fact that smugglers usually arrange an overcrowded small boats with no safety equipment for this kind of journeys, plus the majority of irregular migrants do not know how to swim play a major role on the high death rates of irregular migrants. Also, food, water, and fuel usually are taken in by a small amounts which leads the boat to stop in the middle of the way where irregular immigrants run out of food and die out of thirst, starvation, or drowning. As it was noted by the UNODC (40).

The villain character Saroukh killed his comrade by throwing him alive in the sea, although the latter killed an African immigrant and harassed a girl. Another character on the boat was always robbing others belongings and threatening them. Saroukh was stabbed by him when he attempted to steal his money that he collected from irregular migrants. When the rescue team asked Ayed what happened to Saroukh, he simply answered: “it happened like it happen on any other boat of hargha; when people got carried away, you have to expect anything from them.”

The series director highlights the atrocities of illegal immigration via the sea as shown in the following shot.



Figure 08: Episode 05 (frame 31 m 7 s)

The figure shows a very tragic image of corpses on the coast of Tunisia. This picture is really evocative of the risks of illegally immigrating by the sea. Journalist Tarek Elkizani wrote an article in DW Arabi on 24 October 2022 in which he noted that:

There are two cemeteries built to bury the corpses of irregular migrants that appear on Zarzis Coast. One is called ‘Africa Gardens’ and it was made by the Algerian artist Rachid Krishi in 2021 to preserve the memory and the honor of dead bodies and bury those unknown irregular migrants’ corpses from Sub-Saharan countries. There is another cemetery called the ‘Strangers Cemetery’ where they bury the foreign corpses that end up on the Tunisian coast.

Basically, a decade ago, Zarzis became one of the most common destinations to irregular migrants where they ride boats and start their journey to Europe. Irregular migrants come to Zarzis from Sub-Saharan countries, South Africa, and Libya sharing the same goal of reaching the Northern side of the Mediterranean Sea.

The data issued by the *Forum Tunisien pour les Droits Economiques et Sociaux* indicate that there is approximately 507 (dead and missing) persons and according to the Italian Ministry of the Interior there were 13750 irregular migrants that reached the Italian coast in 2022.

According to an article published on the *EuroMed Rights Organisation* there was around 1,200 people who arrived to the Italian coast from Tunisia. The Italian sea guards stated that they rescued around 35 boats in distress after leaving Tunisia, and this was over the weekend of 22 and 23 April 2023. In addition, there were several shipwrecks recorded

between April 7 and 8 in the route between Tunisia and Italy. At least 27 migrants are missing after two boats sank. Another record of a shipwreck was between 8 and 9 April 2023 in the Italian island Lampedusa where 2 migrants died and around 20 went missing as it was reported by the German aid group ResQship.

2. Paradise and Disillusionment

2.1. Into the Migrant Detention Center

The series director wants to show us that the very moment immigrants stepped out of the boat; they were caught by Italian police, and put into a detention center which is also known as the hotspot to be treated as a group of criminals. The incarceration camp is a de facto prison where immigrants do not know when they would be free again. Oueslati stated that the hotspot of Italy depiction was based on true stories that were collected from real life irregular migrants' experiences.

The following shots illustrate the miserable conditions of immigrants incarcerated in the Italian camp. (See below)



Figure 09: Episode12 (frame 25 m 58 s)



Figure 10: Episode15 (frame 27 m 47 s)



Figure 11: Episode15 (frame 28 m 54 s)

It can be said that illegal immigrants are viewed as criminals by Italian authorities as contended by the shots above. Perhaps figure 8 includes over dramatization as European laws forbid maltreating children and no sane man will imagine Europe may oppress or chock an innocent child, but we are here concerned with a fictional work of cinema and therefore using dramatization is important so that a series like *Harga* be positively received by viewers.

When it comes to reality, there is a report that was published on the website *Global Detention Project* on April 6, 2023 which reported that Italy was accused by the European Court of Human Rights (ECHR) of violating human rights, and criticized for the restriction that is implied on the rescue of migrants around the sea, and keeping asylum seekers and irregular migrants in prolonged de facto detention.

It was stated on the report that in October 2017, there were four Tunisians, who attempted to go to Italy, but when their boat broke down, they were rescued by an Italian ship; they took them to the Lampedusa Hotspot (Contrada Imbriacola) where they were detained for ten days. The Tunisians said that “it was impossible to interact with authorities during their stay in the detention camp, and the conditions there was inhuman and degrading.” Then they were returned to Tunisia with 40 other irregular migrants after being forced to sign papers they do not know their content, and that made them no longer able to visit Italian lands. This act is actually a violation to Article 4 of the EHCR which clearly states that “collective expulsion of aliens is prohibited.”

Italy also violated Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights which says: “No one shall be subjected to torture or to inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment.” It must be said that the treatment and materials in the Lampedusa hotspot was classified as inhuman and degrading by the ECHR.

Similarly Article 5 of the ECHR which reads: “everyone has the right to liberty and security of person,” was violated by Italians. It was reported that Lampedusa Hotspot is a closed area surrounded by bars, metal fences, and gates.

Oueslati in his TV series portrayed the incarceration camp of Italy as jungles where there is no law to abide to and authorities do not interfere within the problems that happen between irregular migrants. For instance, a number of crimes were highlighted in the series such as murdering, drug use, women harassment, and theft to name but a few.

In a comparative study carried out by scholars Pastore and Roman, they criticized the overall management of the southern Italian shores stating that: “Egyptian and Tunisian migrants, once disembarked, are usually not allowed access to the asylum procedure: they are issued a repatriation order and are either immediately returned to their countries of origin or end up in pre-removal detention” (26).

Although Italy considers Tunisia as a ‘safe country’, statistics show that Tunisians have the highest rates of denied access to asylum procedures, and face detention and quick deportation to their country.

In addition to that, in 2023 Human Rights Watch reported that 22% of people living in Italy are at the risk of food poverty due to the prices of groceries and unprocessed foods which increased by 8.2% between June 2021 and June 2022.

The honorable Tunisian actor Aymen Mabrouk who played the role of Tidjani in *Harga* stated to Mosaique fm Broadcast that what is portrayed about the detention center is real, and there is a ‘hotspot’ in Italy that has 6000 individuals where some crimes happened like organs trafficking and selling children.

In the last scene of season one of *Harga*, irregular migrants escaped the detention camp after they made a rebellion. They stood up in the Italian coast looking at the sea, and their faces expressed their desire to run away from Italy. Their hopelessness was contrasted by a boat that just arrived to the Italian shore and the new comers in opposite were happy because they reached their destination, without knowing what is waiting for them. So the series director zooms on each character’s face when they were staring at the new comers. This last scene is very powerful as it juxtaposes real life for illegal immigrants in Italy with the stereotypical false expectations of new comers from Tunisia.

2.2. Racism and Discrimination

The last point to address in this chapter is the depiction of racism and discrimination in the series. Oueslati shows that immigration whether legal or illegal is difficult on the Italian soil and particularly for Africans because of their skin color. The series director introduces the female character Kayla, an illegal immigrant from Sub-Saharan Africa who faces racism and discrimination due to the color of her skin. We are shown that no one talks to her and Italians avoid walking on the same street side when they see her.

After she saw an expression that includes the N-word written on the wall of the restaurant she has a conversation with the Tunisian chef:

Chef: Do not worry, I will clean it. This is not the first time they do it.

Kayla (smiling): All the walls here have bad words written on them, will you clean them all?! Do not worry about me I got used to it.

Chef: If you want to live here, you have to get used to it.

Kayla: You mean get used to humiliation; do you know what the first Italian words I learned?

They are all bad ones; I hear them when I walk down the street. Do you want to know them?

Black, job thief. See, I started to learn Italian language (with a sarcastic smile)

Chef: we are all treated this way; you have to endure.

Kayla:[...] Skin color makes the difference and decides the way they treat you.

In another scene, Kayla got harassed by a group of Italian boys and one of them said to her: “you want to live in Italy? This is Italy,” and he was about to hurt her.

On January 07, 2016, Faïçal Daly published an article entitled “Tunisian Migrants and Their Experience of Racism in Modena” which highlights the various dimensions of racism in Italy especially racism against Tunisian immigrants. The study was based on interviews, observations, analysis of racism in workplaces. The results of this study confirm that Tunisians migrants are facing hostility, violence from Italians in addition to being part of a wide, national anti-immigrant discourse.

A report published on November 21, 2018 by the United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner stated that since June 2018, the Italian government took some anti-migrants and exclusionary measurements that put irregular migrants on a high risk of being used by traffickers, and not being able to meet their needs through licit means. The Italian government did not provide protection nor regularize the stay of those irregular migrants.

During the elections of 2018, some politicians made a very racist and xenophobic anti-immigrant and anti-foreigners speeches that fueled the public opinion. The UN experts stated that those speeches were but a kind of many other activities as such the hate incidents against groups and individuals, including children, based on their actual or perceived ethnicity, skin

color, and race. There were around 169 racially motivated incidents, 126 were involving racist hate speech, propaganda in public demonstrations, and 19 cases of violent racist attacks that were reported.

According to Statista Research Department website, in 2021 there were in total of 1160 crimes that has racist and xenophobic reasons behind with around 380 cases of violence. During that year, 195 grave violations and 142 physical assaults were under racist or xenophobic Italians. Incitement to violence was classified as the most common hate crime that occurred in Italy.

In 2016, the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) reported 803 hate crimes with the majority based on racism and xenophobia. Usually, victims of this kind of crimes who are not regular residents refrain from reporting to the police in fear of being deported to their country of origin.

In conclusion, *Harga* is a TV series that addresses the most common socioeconomic issue in Maghreb states in general and Tunisia in particular, by portraying the most important aspects of irregular immigration as such: the violence of smugglers, poverty as the main reason of youths to choose this kind of journeys, and the portrayal of migrants conditions on the death boats. In addition to the discrimination and racism that they face along with the detention camps bad treatments to those irregular migrants.

The director tried to portray the most realistic image of this phenomenon, counting on the information he collected during his trip to Italy to see the hotspots with the interviews he made with real life irregular migrants including Saroukh. By all means, Oueslati depicted the real dark and tragic side of illegal immigration across the Mediterranean sea, showing the suffering along the way and what is waiting for migrants behind the sea.

CONCLUSION

The director of the Tunisian series *Harga* Lassaad Oueslati presented a relevant cinematic work that can be considered as a realistic account of irregular immigration and its devastating effects on people and their relatives.

It must be said that the scenes that were filmed on the boat were particularly interesting since Oueslati mentioned that “the characters during the boat scenes were not acting and we notice that in their facial expressions. They experienced motion sickness and suffered from the setting conditions which contributed to the documentary features of the TV series.” Also, the scene of the families when they were making manifestation in front of the Tunisian Ministry of the Interior, Oueslati declared that it was inspired from a real manifestation that happened. Even the actors in that scene were a real families that lost their children in the Mediterranean sea, he called them and asked to repeat what happened before, and used it as another feature of documentary in *Harga 2021*.

So *Harga* can be considered as a documentary series as it intends to document reality of illegal immigration of the Maghreb region in general and of Tunisia in particular so as to inform viewers about a sensitive socioeconomic issues that concerns thousands of young men and women.

And the result of directing such a series is that it was received positively by the critics and the audiences. In fact, *Harga* gained a number of national and international awards including the international prestigious award of Matera Fiction for the best international TV series of 2023. Additionally, *Harga* was received very positive reviews on IMDb as 10,000 users watched the series and gave a weighted average vote of 9/10.

The series portrayed the sufferings, misery, and injustice that irregular migrants went through. It also showed the reason why people choose to immigrate and focused on the

emotional impact of families when their children leave the country. There is an emotive quotation of Majid, the father of Khaled, who stated: “We are living in a country that nothing relates us to it, except the ID card.” He said those sad words as he hit the bottom of despair, and completely lost hope on authorities to bring back his son.

The powerful conversations between characters allowed the series viewers to feel a mixture of emotions and live each moment. The storyline was complicated, but well elaborated as each character has a story to tell and a reason to immigrate. Nevertheless, all characters wanted to live in dignity by achieving their dreams in the West.

The techniques used in filming the series are similar to the ones used in Hollywood studios. *Harga* is a masterpiece that deserves a worldwide recognition, and all the awards it gained were just a small amount of its real weight in both the cinema world and real world.

Chapter one of this thesis was a general overview about irregular immigration from different perspectives. The researcher focused on giving a clear definition of irregular immigration its origins and causes. Thus it can be said that the TV series succeeded in reflecting on this cultural and geographical phenomenon called *harga*.

The second chapter focused on how the TV series *Harga* portrayed illegal immigration. The researcher divided the chapter into two main sections by introducing the portrayal of the conditions of immigrants and by showing the distance between real life and the idealistic false expectations of immigrants.

Similarly, one ought to admit that one of the main difficulties of conducting this research was the lack of academic books and articles on the TV series *Harga*. Therefore the thesis recommends that further research be conducted on the various depictions of illegal immigration in the Maghreb region. We are all concerned by this sensitive issue that affects us all.

Watching, exploring, and decoding the Tunisian TV series *Harga* was very enjoyable and relevant from a scientific perspective. However, the researcher could not tackle all the ideas that were presented in the series because of time constraints in addition to the framework of any master dissertation which obliges any student to delimit their research to certain aspects.

Aristotle said once: “The aim of art is to represent not the outward appearance of things, but their inward significance.” The director of *Harga* went deep the image of irregular immigration and ‘Death boats’. He mirrored the facts and the real experiences of being an irregular immigrant and portrayed how reality can crash the chasing of dreams behind the sea only to find disillusionment and despair in the West.

Oueslati stated that: “*Harga* is just a scream out of fear.” Its goal is neither to change nor to stop the ideas and thoughts of pursuing dreams behind the Mediterranean Sea, but it is just a shout out of panic to the misery of millions of citizens who live in the Maghreb region.

In conclusion, after I explored *Harga*, I realized that this TV series is an important communicative medium that deserves a deep examination as it reveals to us information about illegal / irregular immigration from Africa to Europe, and the different issues linked to this phenomenon.

In short, I believe that examining the second season of this TV series would reveal a more interesting and accurate image about what it is truly like to live in the Maghreb of 2023 and constantly dream of reaching the other side of the sea.

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