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The Tourism-Literary Text in Contemporary Algerian Novelistic Discourse: A Reading of Rabah Khedoussi's Impressions of a Returnee from the Cities of Beauty

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Abstract

Travel literature constitutes a distinctive narrative genre centered on recording travelers' lived observations, geographic encounters, and cultural negotiations. In Algeria, travel writing boasts a profound historical legacy spanning classical Arab-Islamic travelogues and nineteenth-century European exploratory narratives, evolving into dynamic contemporary expressions mediated by modern digital platforms. This research paper examines the intersection of the tourism-literary text and novelistic discourse through an in-depth critical reading of Algerian author and historian Rabah Khedoussi's travelogue, *Impressions of a Returnee from the Cities of Beauty* (Inṭibā'āt 'Ā'id min Mudun al-Jamāl). The study interrogates how Khedoussi navigates the porous boundaries between factual empirical observation and creative fictional reconstruction. Through a paratextual analysis of the title, preface, and epilogue, alongside an examination of the narrative chronotopes (temporality and spatiality) and referential frameworks, this paper demonstrates how Khedoussi transforms geographic itineraries—spanning Istanbul, Athens, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Jordan, Beirut, and Miliana—into rich cultural, historical, and aesthetic landscapes. The study concludes that contemporary Algerian

travel writing departs from traditional ornate rhetoric toward a modernized, impressionistic discourse that reclaims memory, negotiates the relationship between the self and the other, and elevates the travelogue into an epistemological and aesthetic inquiry.

Keywords: travel literature, tourism-literary text, Algerian novelistic discourse, Rabah Khedoussi, narrative chronotope, paratextuality, factual vs. fictional referent, spatial semiotics.

1. Introduction

Travel literature (*Adab al-Riḥlah*) is a multifaceted literary art predicated on transmuting the empirical observations, sensory impressions, and cultural insights gathered by individuals throughout their physical or imaginative journeys into narrative discourse. Whether rooted in authentic geographic expeditions or anchored in speculative imaginative voyages, travel writing enables the author to convey nuanced perceptions of visited landscapes and their attendant socio-cultural, historical, and anthropological manifestations. Through evocative descriptive language and artistic imagery, the writer reconstructs the spatial world of the journey before the reader, inviting cognitive, emotional, and aesthetic participation in its unfolding topographies.

Within the Algerian literary landscape, travel writing holds a rich and enduring heritage. Throughout the nineteenth century, European explorers, colonial travelers, and artists documented their encounters with Algerian topography, society, and cultural traditions, producing a voluminous corpus that significantly influenced local and regional travel discourse. In the modern and contemporary era, Algerian travel literature has experienced a remarkable revitalization. Authors have increasingly utilized novelistic techniques, journalistic prose, and modern digital media to share their travel experiences, forging hybrid texts that seamlessly synthesize objective realism with creative fictionality.

Among contemporary Algerian figures who have enriched this genre stands Rabah Khedoussi—a distinguished novelist, storyteller, and cultural historian. Khedoussi's travel writing presents a compelling fusion of subjective personal experience, cultural analysis, and historiographical reflection. For Khedoussi, travel transcends mere spatial dislocation; it functions as an epistemological instrument for cultural discovery, a catalyst for reclaiming historical memory, and a dynamic dialogue between the past and present, and between the self and the other.

This study investigates Khedoussi's prominent travelogue, *Impressions of a Returnee from the Cities of Beauty* (*Inṭibā'āt 'Ā'id min Mudun al-Jamāl*). We seek to explore the aesthetic and formal mechanisms that position this text between the factual and the fictional, tracing how

linguistic representation mediates narrative space, temporal structures, and referentiality. Furthermore, given Khedoussi's extensive background in novelistic and short-story writing, this paper analyzes the extent to which his travel discourse incorporates novelistic narratology and narrative mechanics.

2. Generic Determinants and Paratextual Framing

Analyzing the circumstances of the journey begins with an examination of the text's paratextual thresholds (Genette, 1997). Paratexts—including the title, preamble, and epilogue—serve as pivotal interpretive signposts that hint at the text's generic identity, reveal the author's underlying motivations, and establish the tension between factual documentation and imaginative aestheticization.

2.1. The Title: Generic Ambiguity and Impressionistic Signification

The title operates as the primary seductive threshold of the literary work, directing readerly horizon of expectations (*Erwartungshorizont*) toward the core theme and ideological stance of the author. In traditional Arabic travelogues (such as those of Ibn Battuta, Ibn Jubayr, or Al-Abdari), titles were formulaic and rigid, typically featuring the word *Al-Riḥlah* (The Journey) followed by the traveler's name, the destination, or an ornate rhymed subtitle. In contrast, Khedoussi selects a descriptive, bifurcated title: *Impressions of a Returnee from the Cities of Beauty* (*Inṭibā'āt 'Ā'id min Mudun al-Jamāl*).

This title introduces key semiotic and generic markers:

- *Impressions (Inṭibā'āt)*: Signifies a subjective, reflective consciousness. The text does not promise an exhaustive, objective gazetteer, but rather the emotional and intellectual resonances preserved within the traveler's psyche.
- *The Returnee ('Ā'id)*: Replaces the conventional noun *traveler* with *returnee*, emphasizing the post-travel phase. Travel writing is inherently a retrospective act of recording: the author writes upon returning, documenting the psychological aftermath of the journey rather than its immediate real-time unfolding.
- *Cities of Beauty (Mudun al-Jamāl)*: An aestheticized spatial characterization encompassing diverse historical metropolises (Istanbul, Athens, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Jordan, Beirut), projecting a romantic and cultural halo onto the visited topographies.

Thus, the title signals a modern prose narrative that bridges classical travel documentation with twentieth-century novelistic subjectivity, challenging rigid generic boundaries.

2.2. The Preamble: Memory, Forgetting, and Imaginative Infiltration

The introductory discourse in travel literature traditionally serves to justify the journey's motives and outline its itineraries. In Khedoussi's preamble, the author immediately establishes the cognitive tension between lived experience and the fallibility of memory. Khedoussi deploys recurring lexical markers—such as **impressions**, **fleeting moments**, **memories**, **glimpses**, **residual recollections**, and **forgetting (nisyān)**—to acknowledge that writing cannot capture the totality of what was observed.

By admitting that memory retains only selective flashes and emotional impressions, Khedoussi opens the text to the workings of the subconscious and the imaginative realm. Whatever gaps exist in empirical recollection are naturally bridged by narrative reconstruction, bestowing upon the travelogue a distinct fictional and aesthetic dimension.

2.3. The Epilogue: Patriotic Confession and Apologia

Khedoussi reserves the conclusion of his travelogue for a profound emotional confession and an apologia. He offers an apologia for his inability to record every encounter (*"for that which I was unable to recount"*), reiterating the insurmountable gap between lived reality and the written page. Concurrently, he delivers a passionate patriotic confession, elevating Algeria above all the visited foreign capitals:

"A single gaze upon the soil of Algeria is equivalent to a thousand journeys across foreign lands..."
(Khedoussi, 2004, p. 60).

This concluding stance reaffirms that foreign travel, however dazzling its aesthetic allure, ultimately serves to heighten the traveler's existential attachment to the homeland, consolidating Algerian identity through intercultural encounter.

3. The Chronotopes of the Journey: From Action to Narrative Construction

In Bakhtinian narratology, the **chronotope** (time-space matrix) governs the artistic representation of human experience (Bakhtin, 1981). In Khedoussi's travelogue, space and time undergo systematic narrative textualization.

3.1. Narrative Temporality

The temporal architecture of **Impressions of a Returnee** unfolds across three distinct layers:

1. **Event-Time (Zaman al-Ḥadath)**: Spans the physical duration of the journeys conducted between 1982 and 2004. These travels were undertaken on various official occasions, diplomatic missions, and cultural conferences sponsored by Algerian ministries and cultural

institutions. The wide temporal gaps between journeys render the text a cumulative retrospective archive rather than a singular diary.

2. *Writing-Time (Zaman al-Kitābah):* Characterized by fragmented, intermittent composition. Khedoussi describes writing as a psychological compulsion to unburden memory: *"The urge to write besieged me, and I found no solace except after putting pen to paper"* (p. 3).

3. *Reception-Time (Zaman al-Talaqqī):* Pertains to the contemporary reader who consumes the travelogue as a psychological vehicle of escapism, finding in Khedoussi's accessible, journalistic prose a sanctuary from mundane confinement.

3.2. Narrative Spatiality

Space in Khedoussi's text is transformed from raw geographic coordinates into an expressive textual architecture (*le lieu textuel*). The trajectory of the traveler moves across three spatial typologies:

- *Point of Departure (Makān al-Inṭilāq):* Although unstated in explicit terms, all journeys originate from Algeria, which remains the emotional gravitational center throughout. In every foreign station, Khedoussi notes that his homeland *"refuses to grant me a leave of absence for more than a single week"* (p. 60).
- *Transitional/Bridge Space (Makān al-Jisr):* Because the author traveled primarily by commercial aviation, transitional transit spaces are largely elided, with the notable exception of Sofia (Bulgaria), which functioned as a transient transit stop en route to Athens.
- *Target Destinations (Makān al-Hadaḑ):* Encompasses major cultural metropolises: Istanbul, Athens, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Jordan, Beirut, and the domestic historic town of Miliana. These spaces were visited for tourism, literary symposia, and intercultural dialogue.

Importantly, Khedoussi applies descriptive defamiliarization to these spaces. For instance, in depicting Miliana, the narrative exaggerates its pastoral beauty, transforming it into an earthly paradise (*jannah sāḥirah*) through evocative language that reflects the symbolic resonance and emotional security the space evokes.

Table 1
Chronotopic Structure and Spatial Typology in Khedoussi's Travelogue

Spatial Category		Geographic Stations / Manifestations	Narrative & Aesthetic Function
Point of Departure (Homeland)		Algeria (Algiers, regional hubs)	Emotional gravitational center; anchor of identity and benchmark of intercultural comparison.

Transit / Bridge Space		Aviation corridors; Sofia (transit to Athens)	Ephemeral transit node; minimal narrative elaboration due to rapid modern air travel.
Target Metropolises	Cultural	Istanbul, Athens, Damascus, Baghdad, Cairo, Jordan, Beirut	Loci of intellectual encounters, conferences, historical contemplation, and aesthetic discovery.
Internal Space	Aestheticized	Miliana (Algeria)	Idealized pastoral sanctuary; defamiliarized through poetic exaggeration as an earthly paradise.

Note. Synthesized by author based on Khedoussi (2004).

4. The Referent: From the Factual to the Fictional

In semiotic terms, the referent denotes the real or conceptual entity to which the linguistic sign points. In travel literature, the relationship between the signifier, signified, and external referent is inherently ambiguous: does the travel text mirror an objective external reality, or does it construct an autonomous virtual world?

4.1. The Factual Referent

The empirical grounding of Khedoussi's text is established through precise historiographical, architectural, and political references. In describing Istanbul, Khedoussi provides historical context: *"It is the former city of Astana, ancient Byzantium, or Constantinople, so named after Constantine who made it the capital of the Eastern Empire in 330 AD"* (p. 4). Furthermore, Khedoussi engages with contemporary political realities and literary conferences, offering critical commentary—such as his critique of the Damascus Literature and Resistance Symposium:

"The Symposium on Literature and Resistance focused extensively on the manifestations of resisting the occupying enemy of the land, while neglecting the internal resistance of the oppressed Arab individual within their own home and workplace" (p. 10).

4.2. The Fictional Referent and the Transforming Medium of Language

Despite its factual anchor, the travel text inevitably departs from photographic documentation. As cultural theorist Lucien Goldmann (1964) asserted, the literary artist does not slavishly replicate empirical reality, but constructs a coherent, imaginative world that represents a possible virtual model of the real. Similarly, Moroccan scholar Shoaib Halifi (2002) emphasized

that the imaginary in travel writing is not falsehood (*kadhīb*), but an interpretive lens and an intellectual stance toward the observed world.

Language operates as the transformative crucible that converts visual and auditory stimuli into textual architecture. Khedoussi avoids supernatural marvels (*'ajā'ib wa gharā'ib*) or medieval hagiographic miracles (*karāmāt*), opting instead for a sober, modern, journalistic realism. However, the subjective selection of details, the emotional filtering of memories, and the narrative pacing imbue the text with a poetic fictionality that engages the reader's imagination.

5. Conclusion

This study has examined the artistic and structural dimensions of contemporary Algerian travel literature through Rabah Khedoussi's **Impressions of a Returnee from the Cities of Beauty**. The analysis demonstrates that Khedoussi revitalizes the travel genre by stripping it of archaic rhetorical ornamentation (such as rigid rhymed prose **saj'* and excessive baroque figures) in favor of a lucid, dynamic, and journalistic narrative style that remains deeply invested in cultural reflection.

The significance of Khedoussi's work lies in its multifaceted integration of the touristic, the historical, and the literary. Travel in his discourse is not a superficial accumulation of souvenir sights, but an act of memory reclamation wherein geographic cities are transformed into enduring textual spaces. By demonstrating how the empirical journey is transmuted into aesthetic contemplation, Khedoussi's text exemplifies the vibrancy of the modern Algerian travelogue as an open intersection between reality and fiction.

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