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The Aesthetics of Fictionalizing the Red Decade in Saïd Boutadjine's Novel I Seek Refuge in God (A'ūdḥ billāḥ): A Reading from a Cultural Perspective

Dr. Mekhfi Ikram¹, Dr. Meskine Toufik²

¹: Abdelhamid Ibn Badis University of Mostaganem, Algeria, ikrammekhfi44@gmail.com

²: Higher Normal School of Béchar, (Algeria), meskine.toufik@ensbechar.dz

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Abstract

It has become a reality that the novel is the diwan (register) of humanity. Through its identification with human reality and its details as a virtual reality, the novel insists on the human constant and its enlightening role despite all constraints. Ultimately, it becomes a world fabricated by anyone suffering from the savagery of reality. The elixir of life for the novel remains that fictionalization (fictionalizing process) which presents reality in an aesthetic hue, making the recipient a spectator who derives various forms of pleasure without significant hardship. This approach attempts to trace the "Red Decade" in Saïd Boutadjine's novel I Seek Refuge in God (A'ūdḥ billāḥ) at the level of paratexts. Thus, it is divided into two parts:

The first is a theoretical aspect addressing the dominance of the novel over other genres in the twentieth century, as well as presenting narrative fictionalization as a modern critical concept and a unique aesthetic feature. The second is an applied aspect concerned with tracing the feature of narrative fictionalization of the Red Decade in Algeria at the level of textual paratexts.

Keywords: Fictionalization, Narrative, Novel, Characters, Title.

Introduction

The Algerian novel emerged as an independent genre to express what poetry could not. Aided by the vastness of its discursive space, the novel presented a different type of approach. It engaged with the issues of the 1950s society, condemning the practices of the occupation and calling for resistance in the pursuit of liberation. Perhaps sensing its own maturity shortly after independence, it engaged with the contradictions of society, monitoring its major transformations, describing, analyzing, and aiming for change. It celebrated socialism as the state's economic choice and its corollaries, such as the bias towards the vulnerable class and free education and healthcare. Later, it stood alongside society against the dark extremism of the 1990s, mourning the victims and the homeland.

There is no doubt that the novel was the genre most capable of resistance and endurance due to considerations related to its structure. However, its ability to survive was also because it let the recipient hear what they wanted to hear through an enlightening role that satisfied the curiosity constrained by introversion, the chains of which were broken by the consequences of modernity, including the information revolution and its speed.

Saïd Boutadjine is among those considered part of the generation following the pioneers. He differs from them only in having acquired a specialized cognitive background in narratology and semiotics. Although *I Seek Refuge in God* (A'ūdḥ billāḥ) is his only novel in his creative trajectory, it was a leap in the world of narrative due to the craftsmanship of its structure and its relative distance from the consumed ideological tone. Perhaps the most important feature of this novel is its ability to fictionalize the extra-textual reality, which is manifested in many textual paratexts. To what extent did this novel succeed in emptying reality of its solid content and reshaping it aesthetically through fictionalization?

1. The Dominance of the Novel

Eighty years ago, the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz predicted that poetry would retreat from its leading position in favor of the novel, which would become the diwan of humanity in the future, stating: "Poetry prevailed in the ages of instinct and myths. However, this era—the era of science, industry, and facts—inevitably requires a new art that reconciles, as much as possible, modern man's passion for facts with his ancient longing for imagination." This is confirmed by what the British newspaper *The Times* published in a recent issue about the top 100 books of the last ten years, where the novel accounted for a third, indicating that the novel will passionately strive in the distant future to be the undisputed art of the era and a unique genre indispensable to the human cultural scene.

This dominance of the novel may raise many difficult questions, as it represents a decisive triumph for the spread of one literary genre over others in a specific era. For example, poetry—the symbol of tenderness and sweetness—spread in the Arab desert despite its well-known harshness of life and nature, to the extent that "...Al-Jahiz restricts poetry to the Arabs, finding it unpalatable in any other tongue." However, it must be acknowledged that the lag of poetry behind the novel starting from the 1970s is not due to its fragility as a human invention that has long accompanied the sighs of the conscience and served as its ultimate refuge when the soul's conditions worsen; rather, it is because it is burdened with constraints that limit its freedom in articulating human details.

Perhaps the first reason for the dominance of the novel genre is psychological, in that it consists of worlds fabricated by the self, parallel to the real world, possessing the ability to take the self far away from the constraints of judgment and the disclosure of secrets. This coincides with an ancient human pattern in the human unconscious that incites man to break free from himself and explore other worlds. It is the theater that the self builds for itself and escapes to, a theater that guarantees the self the pleasure of viewing without suffering scars, which is not possible in its real world.

After this, it becomes easier to investigate the reasons for the novel's dominance. The first of these relates to the breadth of its discursive geography, making it the most capable of containing all ideas, especially the perplexing ones that trouble human curiosity. On the other hand, the history of genres proves that the novel was the genre most responsive to the major transformations of existence and the most capable of identifying with the movement of history and its conflicts. At a certain moment, it had to convey the ugliness of wars and the tears of the bereaved, and it had to convey the details of lovers' moments and the conversations of their souls, listening to the agonies of the spirit when exhausted by the bruises of savagery. The novel, then, is akin to the psychological state fabricated by the self to break free from its reality and temporarily rid itself of its constraints.

Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that the novel represented, for the general reading public, a reading alternative to other writings, especially scientific ones characterized by an elitist conceptual apparatus not accessible to the general reader, requiring prior readings to comprehend its signs. Hence, for the reader of this era, the novel represents an excursion and a journey not provided by books of hard knowledge.

Some might argue that the direct reason for the novel's dominance is the celebration it received from criticism throughout all stages of its development. This view easily turns into a reverse

question: What prompted critics to pay attention to it? There is no sufficient answer other than saying that they are influenced by some of the aforementioned factors. They found the fertility and clarity they did not find in poetry, making it easy for them to develop an emitted discourse that identifies with the soul and competes with the revelations of poetry. Perhaps it is the beginning of the end of poetry's role when prose adopts it, in an era where the narrative discourse celebrates poetic language.

2. The Novel and the Fictionalization of the Extra-Textual

The leap witnessed by narrative through the weaving of complex and intertwined connections with the extra-textual (history, religion, sociology...) is evident. This would not have been possible without the feature of narrative fictionalization adopted by the novel, for example, the genre most capable of transcending the extra-textual written outside narrative according to a stylistic pattern that looks from the angle of the sanctity of the event and the comprehensiveness of the statement.

Narrative fictionalization is understood as a kind of artistic deception and illusion. Hence, Littré defines the novel as a "shadowed story", a statement that completely aligns with what Muhammad Al-Mashhadani says when he makes the novel's mission "the cancellation of correspondence between the world of reality and the world of imagination". However, the matter is not as simple as Muhammad Al-Mashhadani sees it. The fictional/non-fictional dichotomy has brought back to mind the discussion about the text and its specificity: Is it a closed structure, or is it an open space for interpretation? And what are the considerations the scholar relies on to differentiate between the fictional and the non-fictional?

John Searle leaned "towards adopting the author's intentionality as the sole criterion for differentiating between the fictional and the non-fictional, arguing that fallacies—in their simple forms—cannot occur without a deliberate intention". From the perspective of his interest in systemic semantics, Paul Ricoeur believes "that the first moment of the extra-textual's transformation into a written discourse is the moment when the correspondence between the meaning of the text and the author's intention is nullified, because the writer's ownership of the text and meaning has practically ended". In any case, what can be deduced from these two statements—regardless of their contradiction—is that fictionalization has the potential to end the debate over the classification of literary genres and their functional structure; rather, it will make the literary genre a single block with the extra-textual, reshaping it into a new clay.

The narrator, therefore, is not concerned with the extra-textual in all its details, nor with the burden borne by others to uncover its details and subsequently judge it, because this would only

lead to research whose truthfulness can be questioned on multiple levels in light of the relativity of knowledge, which does not believe in the constant. What truly concerns the narrator is the process of emptying the extra-textual of "its real referential semantics, and loading it with fictional semantics to support, clarify, or explain it in a different, more beautiful, suspenseful, and exciting manner, where ordinary language turns into metaphorical language, and ordinary speech into coded speech with semantics, which achieves the element of mental stimulation by provoking the recipient's mind, thus fulfilling their emotional desires".

After this, it will be available to the narrator to breach the procedural tools relied upon by methodologies. He will also take a rational stance towards the ethical, making him superior to the various references of the extra-textual, because he will combine the raw material of this extra-textual with the aesthetic hue he imparts to it at the moment of writing. In other words, he will transform the extra-textual into an engaged text that asks but does not answer; it will not suffice to depict the event but will interpret it through a language that hints without revealing, points without specifying, a language forced into suggestion and symbolism to deliver the message to its address, a language that may lead to an interpretative contradiction; however, it is a contradiction that does not lead to exclusion, but rather consecrates the image of pluralism in reading, and through it, cultural pluralism.

3. Saïd Boutadjine as a Narrator

Saïd Boutadjine's distinction in narrative stems from many factors that do not consistently converge in many narrative writers. At the forefront of these factors is his academic background as a specialist in narratology. Hence, for him, knowledge illuminates the path for talent. Added to this is his linguistic pluralism, which first enabled him to closely examine Western achievements—both its narrative and criticism—in their mother tongue. At the Sorbonne University, Saïd Boutadjine had the opportunity to attend the lectures of Greimas and Kristeva, drawing from semiotics what he needed, which manifested in his writings that rely entirely on linguistic economy and extreme selectivity in choosing linguistic signs.

It is also impossible to ignore his experience of the major transformations that the Algerian society underwent on all levels, and the accompanying ideological and identity polarization that ultimately led to a violent conflict, the scars of which are still strongly present on both the cultural and societal conscience.

From a purely artistic point of view, Saïd Boutadjine believes in the "shock" theory; when he selects titles that present their texts in the form of linguistic paradoxes that disrupt time, grammar, and reality, such as: "The Death of the Dead Man" (Wafāt al-rajul al-mayyit), "What

Happened to Me Tomorrow" (Mā ḥadatha lī ghadan), "A Period to Hell" (Nuqṭa ilā al-jahīm), "I Seek Refuge in God" (A'ūdḥ billāh), and other titles that insist on a different semiotic juxtaposition, allowing an infinite number of language games. As for themes, Saïd Boutadjine's writings refuse to compromise on the human as a sacred constant that forms the essence of engaged writing. He does not hesitate to invoke history, myth, and religion, the tales of old women, the badia (desert/rural life), and the Sahara... "and everything that would outline the major turning points of human existence; it is the identification with the clay of local culture and the attempt to elevate it to universality, contrary to some anomalies that lost a lot by neglecting the value of circularity, and relying on imported ideas in a dictatorial manner in many instances," not knowing how to update these ideas in favor of their cultural specificity. It is, therefore, the desire to write civilization, not the history of civilization.

The Applied Aspect

The corpus of this research is Saïd Boutadjine's only novel, *I Seek Refuge in God* (A'ūdḥ billāh), through which he attempted to approach the decade of blood in the Algeria of the 1990s. The primary consideration in choosing this novel as a corpus is its freedom from any blatant ideological biases towards any of the conflicting parties. "Perhaps it is the only novel that took the human as its ideology, and championed the country, unlike some works that were written—often from within the event—in a hasty manner, and confined themselves within the coordinates of what is 'permitted' to avoid any commotion."

Fictionalizing the Title

Fictionalization in the novel *I Seek Refuge in God* begins with the title, given its functional and structural importance as previously noted. This title performs an informational role par excellence through its traditional (heritage) load. However, the author restricts his citation of the title to a part of the phrase: "I seek refuge in God from the accursed Satan" (A'ūdḥ billāh min al-shayṭān al-rajīm), leaving room for the recipient to enter the maze of the novel, directing their horizon towards something rejected that requires aversion and seeking refuge, exactly as the common people invoke this phrase when facing the abominable and the demonic. Thus, the title directs the horizon of expectation towards two opposites:

- A faction that seeks refuge in God: Represented by As'ad - the South - the Sand - the Mind - the inhabitants of Al-Ain.... This faction represents good for the Sultanate of Bani Uryan.
- A faction from which refuge is sought: Represented by the Bashagha Saleh - the North - the Cement - the Belly - the Qalabiq.... This faction represents the annihilation of the Sultanate of Bani Uryan.

From this moment, fictionalization operates to make the extremism fabricated under the eye of the North a true synonym for "Satan," with all the evil and audacity against the sacred and the constant in the religious heritage that this sign carries. Suffice it to say that he is the first creature to rebel against the command of his Creator, openly declaring his enmity and his doctrine of evil. This fictionalization will only be complete with the set of references established by the narrator in the opposite party (the South), which he endows with the character of pure faith and the rituals of pure Sufism, as if declaring that his consideration of the South as a demon is not metaphorical, but a firm conviction, due to what it committed against the Sultanate and its inhabitants. This is manifested in many places, especially in the context of talking about the hero "As'ad" when he says: "He was strict like a dead person, and if he laughed by mistake, he asked God for forgiveness and prayed two rak'ahs," "What a bitter struggle he fought against himself? And what divine power honored him with that patience that made him great in my eyes." But when it comes to the camp of evil, we find patterns such as: "The image of the Bash Agha Saleh roamed in my memory, I saw him burning houses, plunging the knife into the heart of a girl who refused to marry him, and slaughtering a three-year-old child, snatching women's jewelry.... As for the carpets, he made them a bed for his horse..." It is, therefore, the ancient conflict between good and evil, pure faith and debauchery, light and darkness.

Fictionalizing Place

The events of the novel *I Seek Refuge in God* take place in the Sultanate of "Bani Uryan"; which is divided into a South where the region of "Al-Ain" is located, and a North inhabited by evil. It will be the orbit of various conflicts between the people of "Al-Ain" and the people of the "North." After a hundred pages of narrative saturated with the fantastical, the reader will discover that "Al-Ain" is nothing but the conscience of the nation, its mind, and its wisdom, with what its culture refers to of insight, vision, and light. Meanwhile, the "North" is nothing but the interests belonging to the affluent people of influence and pressure groups, who desperately defend them regardless of the level of violence. The conflict in its fictional image, then, is a conflict between values, whose references worked to present us with the conflict between the two traditional parties of the Black Decade.

It is important to investigate the reference of this fictionalization, which is based on the "North" / "South" dichotomy; which in its simple image appears to have a geographical reference, where the "South" is often characterized by the dominance of Gnosticism (Irfaniyya) in its people's performance of worship rituals, while the "North" is characterized by sharpness and pragmatism. But in its deeper image, it is a conflict between the "South" of the earth exhausted by poverty and underdevelopment, and the "North" satiated with welfare. It is the civilizational conflict

expressed by Tayeb Salih in his novel *Season of Migration to the North*; and if "Tayeb Salih's hero 'Mustafa Sa'eed' migrated from the South to the North, the hero of *I Seek Refuge in God* migrated from the North to the South, which is a beautiful inversion of the narrative perspective credited to the narrator."

There is also an important place subjected to narrative fictionalization; which is the Mountain (Al-Jabal). It retained its name as the Mountain, but he associated it with horrors in line with the fantastical atmosphere hovering over the text. The narrator wanted from fictionalizing the mountain to refer to a major paradox related to a contradiction that will mark the semantic destiny of the place, which was organically linked to the history of Algeria. During the revolution, the mountain meant jihad, liberation, and what revolves in their semantic field of dignity, pride, and magnanimity. But during the decade, it became a place for the most horrific violent practices of all kinds. This contradiction in the semantics of the "Mountain" sign is in fact nothing but the bewilderment that gripped the self, seeing its compatriots fighting each other, despite their agreement on a single doctrinal and sectarian destination.

Fictionalizing Characters

It is not an easy matter to address the issue of fictionalizing all the characters, so the focus will be on the essential ones. Digressing, the novel—in the detail of characters—is founded on two paths. One is realistic, comprising realistic characters like Huda, Abdu, and the Writer. The second is fantastical, closer to magical realism—as an artistic vision—and is represented by As'ad, the Bashagha Saleh, Abd al-Batil, the Qalabiq, the Taratir, Ayatollah Khubzistani.... These are the box of fictionalization, because the first section is real from a realistic standpoint. Therefore, the approach will address the characters that combine strong influence on the course of the novel and the strength of their suggestion at the level of textual semantics. The following can be observed:

As'ad:

The narrator's schema for As'ad suggests at first that he represents the Islamic party in the decade's conflict, which is a beautiful "misdirection" practiced by the novel. However, the recipient discovers As'ad in an amorphous image closer to myth. This is manifested through a lot of description such as: "The saint (Wali) As'ad stayed in his small dome for several years, seeing only the morning light sneaking through a narrow skylight at the top of the dome he built for himself," and such as: "A letter signed by the one you wonder whether he is alive or dead... he wrote it tonight before the dawn prayer." This explicitly indicates that As'ad represents nothing but the value that was absent in the conflict between the North and the South, which is the value

of reason and wisdom, in favor of the value of the belly and intestines. This is supported by the semiotics of the name "As'ad"; derived from happiness (Sa'ada) and good fortune (Sa'd).

Ayatollah Khubzistani:

This is a name—as is clear—consisting of two signs, (Khubz/Sistani) [Bread/Sistani], and his role in the novel is to supply the conflicting parties with sulfur and adopt an extremist doctrinal discourse. By deconstructing the two signs forming the name, it becomes clear that this character refers to an extremely base value that fueled the flames of conflict. "Khubz" (bread) refers to a culture of negative consumption on all levels and the absence of the spirit of innovation and initiative. The second sign refers to a penetration in the social fabric at the sectarian level; which led to the incursion of extremist discourses not in the interest of the country that adopts moderation and has its cultural and sectarian specificity. This penetration indicates the weakness of intellectual immunity due to introversion that places it on the margins of civilization, hence being dazzled by every newcomer without filtering or updating. Therefore, the problematic is twofold, consisting of reconciling the knowledge of transmission (Naql) and the knowledge of embodiment.

The Bashagha Saleh:

The narrator presents this character in a presentation akin to Foucauldian archaeology, by returning to the character's history during the war of liberation, where he was a "sergeant or corporal" alongside the enemies against his compatriots. The narrator says: "The image of the Bash Agha Saleh roamed in my memory, I saw him burning houses, plunging the knife into the heart of a girl who refused to marry him, and slaughtering a three-year-old child, snatching women's jewelry.... As for the carpets, he made them a bed for his horse." Then he clarifies the character's positioning in the ruling system after independence: "Days passed and he returned with the soldiers wearing helmets on their heads," "And here he is now with the Supreme Leader, perhaps one of his advisors." Then the man persists in going: "To the cemeteries to curse the martyrs publicly." Then this dishonorable past continues to haunt this character, making him live in an inferiority complex, because "the mob will not forget our past."

With such excavation into the character; the psychological and political dimensions of this character are completed. Hence, there is no difficulty in semantically carrying it to represent the Francophonie "which remained to finish what the occupation started of distortion on all levels, and which—as a party presenting itself as enlightening—did not achieve the equation of reconciling the knowing transmission and the knowing embodiment of the newcomer, but entered without insight into the furnace of identity distortion." It soon became a doctrine

practicing exclusion when it grew strong, to practice violence later when it felt the opponent's threat to its existence, and to professionalize double standards when it comes to consecrating its ideology: "I hide you in my eyes so that no one touches you, and in the morning I announce that you are the killer."

Fictionalizing the Victim:

This represents the finest fictional scene in the novel, where "Ahmed the Infidel" comes to the cemeteries fleeing from the might of the authority and its opponents, for he "was subjected to an assassination attempt, and strove to convince humans that the neighborhood of Bin Tina is no longer safe as it turned its back on its children." He is surprised by the dead talking to him. In a feature of dark humor, the narrator will unearth, through the character of Ahmed the Infidel, the depth of the atrocities committed against the country and its inhabitants. Patterns such as:

"My killer is there, clapping behind you with the clappers, so arrest him and deprive him of the pleasure of clapping... do not kill him.... deprive him of this blessing and that is enough."

"The sad old man replied: My heart is full, I am a Mujahid, the Bash Agha Saleh came to me and this Abu Musran..."

"My name is Mas'oud, and the one who spoke to you before me is named Mubarak Ibn Al-Yamna, we slaughtered Sufyan the son of the Bash Agha Saleh in the presence of his father, Abu Musran, and Ayatollah Khubzistani."

"I, sir, am without a name, I forgot my name from the excess of bullets, I did not tell them to kill me, nor did I instruct them to bury me in this narrow grave, and I do not know why they killed me, nor who killed me."

And on the tongue of the four-year-old child: "Uncle, tell Mama to 'mix' (prepare) milk for me, tell her Hatem is hungry."

Patterns like these do not need to justify their fictionality, but they perform the role before which all signs retreat, through the semiotics of tragedy cloaked in dark humor, and through presenting the details of some scenes of violence that lack any human justification. The tragedy reaches its peak in the child's speech, who is supposed to be the furthest being from the squabbles of adults, yet he was killed with a lump in his throat for the milk his mother was absent to fetch. The words of this child from the narrator's perspective are more important "more important than 'strict' international resolutions, than constitutions, than treacherous principles, piled up like carcasses."

Conclusion

From the above, the following can be observed:

The arrival of the novel in Algeria was a boon to the cultural scene. The intellectual was afforded the opportunity to write in a genre that provides a vast space for expression without the constraints that obstruct revelation. This was embodied in the eruption of a narrative volcano unprecedented in the history of Algeria, to the point it was said: The novel is the diwan of man.

It is not strange that the novel dominates other literary genres in spread and sales, because it was the most capable of keeping pace with the era in all its transformations and details. From a psychological standpoint, it managed to fabricate a world similar to man's real world, to which he flees from the constraints of life, not to mention that reading a novel represents pleasure, unlike reading traditional knowledge books that require training to grasp their concepts.

Fictionalization is considered the most important element in narrative work, as it attempts to present the event aesthetically by filling the gaps that are difficult to fill in reality. Regardless of the author's intentionality to mislead, the narrator is not concerned with the extra-textual in all its details; rather, what truly concerns him is emptying this extra-textual of its references and statements calcified by reality, making it a fictional and aesthetic space that serves as a theater for interpretation and subsequent change.

Saïd Boutadjine, relying on a cognitive background that varied between narratology and semiotics, presented the most wonderful models of fictionalization. The recipient will be faced with places and characters emptied of their realistic content, to play the role of human values on the stage of the novel. This means that the sign for Saïd Boutadjine has become compliant; what is important is not its utterance, as much as the quality of its juxtaposition, and the semantic destiny it can bring about at the level of the poetics of narrative.

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