

The Language of Narrative and the Techniques of Constructing Narrative Discourse in Zayni Barakat

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Abstract

Jamal al-Ghitani's novel *Zayni Barakat* constructs its narrative discourse by employing history as an artistic medium rather than merely a record of events. The novelist relies on intertextuality with the chronicles of Ibn Iyas, particularly *Bada'i' al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i' al-Duhur* (The Wonderful Flowers in the Events of the Ages), drawing upon historical events and figures to recreate them within a fictional framework that reflects contemporary issues, foremost among them tyranny, oppression, and the violation of individual freedoms. His objective is not to rewrite history but to transform it into a tool for interpreting the present and revealing the similarities between the past and contemporary reality.

Al-Ghitani also employs a variety of narrative techniques, most notably artistic opposition, ironic contrast, and the transformation of historical reports. He reshapes historical accounts and events in a manner that serves the artistic structure of the novel while endowing it with new semantic and aesthetic dimensions. Furthermore, the use of classical language and a documentary style reinforces the illusion of historical authenticity without compromising the fictional nature of the narrative. In this way, al-Ghitani successfully combines history and fiction, presenting a novelistic model that unites the authenticity of heritage with the modernity of narrative vision.

Keywords: Historical intertextuality; Narrative discourse; Artistic opposition; Irony; Historical fiction.

Introduction

The narrative discourse in *Zayni Barakat* constitutes one of the most distinctive features of Jamal al-Ghitani's novelistic experience. Through it, he succeeds in reconstructing historical material according to an artistic vision that transcends the boundaries of documentation and enters the realm of creativity and imagination. To achieve this, he employs a variety of narrative techniques, foremost among them intertextuality with historical sources, irony, and the transformation of historical reports. These techniques enable him to evoke the past in order to expose the issues of the present, particularly manifestations of tyranny, oppression, and surveillance.

From this perspective, the present section seeks to examine the principal linguistic and narrative techniques upon which al-Ghitani relied in constructing his novel and to demonstrate how he transformed the historical text into a vibrant fictional discourse that combines the authenticity of heritage with the modernity of artistic vision, thereby affirming the novel's capacity to recreate history in an aesthetic form imbued with intellectual and humanistic dimensions.

1. The Technique of Intertextuality

In *Zayni Barakat*, al-Ghitani employs two forms of intertextuality with the chronicles of *Bada'i' al-Zuhur*, both founded upon the principle of correspondence:

Correspondence between the fictional text and the classical historical text with respect to the themes of tyranny, political oppression, and injustice toward humanity.

Correspondence between the temporal setting of the novel and that of the historical text inspired by Ibn Iyas's chronicles, despite his use of the technique of analepsis (flashback). The narrative begins in the year 922 AH, then moves chronologically back to 912 AH, from which point the events unfold until they return to the year in which the novel initially began, namely 922 AH.

1.2 Artistic Opposition to Historical Writing

What distinguishes al-Ghitani's method in the novel is his reliance on a fundamental premise: the possibility of explaining the present through the past by employing the technique of incorporation, or artistic opposition, through the evocation of analogous historical events and their projection onto the present. The novelist's concern is not the reproduction of historical accounts that is, the mere repetition of what Ahmad Ibn Iyas wrote in *Bada'i' al-Zuhur* when discussing the novel *Zayni Barakat*.

Accordingly,

"...the parallelism that is intended to be revealed through the return to the past is the similarity between the ideological, social, and cultural conditions of two different historical periods. In other words, it is the relocation of contemporary content and meaning to the closing years of the Mamluk era, that historically rich period with its political and social realities and implications, in order to merge the concerns of the past with those of the present while focusing on the crisis of freedom and the dominance of systems of oppression and terror, without falling into directness on the one hand or into the conventions of traditional Arabic storytelling, which emerged within a particular cultural context, on the other."

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In *Zayni Barakat*, al-Ghitani attempts to persuade the reader that he has written a genuinely heritage-based novel through imitation and stylistic emulation. Yet what he actually accomplishes is the extraction of his material from a specific historical source the chronicles of Ibn Iyas before reconstructing its events, shaping its geographical setting, manipulating its temporal framework, and selecting as his central character *Zayni Barakat ibn Musa*, a historical figure who served as *muhtasib* (market inspector) during the reign of the Mamluk Sultan *Qansuh al-Ghawri*. He later rose through the ranks of government until becoming governor of Cairo and its surrounding regions.

The Egyptian historian Ahmad Ibn Iyas introduced this figure in his monumental work *Bada'i' al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i' al-Duhur* as follows:

"In [the month of Shawwal], al-Hajj Barakat ibn Musa was invested with robes of honor. His father, Musa, was an Arab, and his mother was called 'Anqa'... This marked the first appearance of Barakat ibn Musa and the beginning of his prominence in leadership. His influence increased greatly, and he came to be counted among the leading dignitaries of Egypt. His prestige continued to grow until he reached the position that will be mentioned in its proper place... Barakat ibn Musa had originally been one of the young falconers who carried birds on their hands. Later, the Sultan entrusted 'Ali ibn Abi al-Jud to al-Hajj Barakat ibn Musa so that he might punish him and recover money from him. Ibn Abi al-Jud was brought down from the Citadel in chains and taken to the residence of Barakat ibn Musa."²

1.3 Al-Ghitani and the Chronicles of Ibn Iyas

The presence of historical material in *Zayni Barakat* reveals al-Ghitani's writing strategy and the nature of his artistic engagement with the heritage source:

"...It is a fluid form of intertextuality, resembling an intrinsic textual interaction. This intertextual dynamism becomes evident when the author undertakes a series of transformations, modifications, and alterations of the narrative material. He rearranges its chronology by advancing and delaying events, condensing and expanding them, without any intention of rewriting a historical text artistically or composing a historical novel."³

From this discussion, it becomes evident that Jamal al-Ghitani sought to transform his novelistic experience from that of a witness to the events of his own era the 1960s to that of a witness to an earlier age, namely the final period of Mamluk rule in Egypt during the tenth century AH (sixteenth century CE). Through this strategy, he explores the recurring patterns of tyranny throughout history, thereby reinforcing the notion that understanding the present can only be achieved

"...through penetrating the past, which, in the writer's view, is the legitimate father of the present and its contradictions, making use of a historical documentary language rooted in the classical heritage."⁴

Al-Ghitani's method of composing his historical narrative closely resembles the approach of filmmakers in writing and directing their screenplays. It is as though he consciously embraced this artistic method, shaping his novel in a cinematic fashion. Thus,

"...the success of a film is measured by the degree to which its events correspond to actual historical events and by the consistency of its external manifestations speech, clothing, food, furniture, architecture, and all the material aspects of civilization with those of the historical period it portrays. We believe that al-Ghitani succeeded in this embodiment, as evidenced by the fact that adapting *Zayni Barakat* into a television production was not a difficult task for its directors, since this novel/screenplay is almost an exact replica of the historical period it depicts."⁵

2. The Technique of Irony

Al-Ghitani employs satirical irony through the motif of lanterns (or lamps in his novel), an idea that Ibn Iyas mentions only briefly in his historical chronicle:

"Among the events that took place during the Sultan's absence was that Amir Almas, the Chief of Police, imposed restrictions upon the people. He ordered that every household hang a lantern and that no one should leave his house after the evening prayer or carry weapons while walking."⁶

2.1 The Issue of Hanging Lanterns

Al-Ghitani transforms the issue of lanterns into a matter of public concern, devoting an entire section of his novel to it under the title:

"Title of a Letter Delivered to the House of Zakariyya ibn Radi by a Special Messenger from *Zayni's Men*."

This section extends from pp. 102–118, incorporating virtually every form of official administrative writing, including sermons, letters, proclamations, reports, royal decrees, and legal opinions. All segments of society participate in the discussion from the Sultan, religious scholars, judges, military commanders, and men of letters to ordinary men, women, and children. Each addresses the issue of lanterns from a different perspective. Through both his style and language, al-Ghitani magnifies the issue to the point that it becomes one of the finest examples of satirical ironic literature.

In the Proclamation of the Lanterns, included by Jamal al-Ghitani in his novel, the author presents the various positions adopted by public opinion, ranging from support to opposition and reservation.*

Indeed, such a historical incident, concerning the punishment of one of the Sultan's officials the muhtasib (market inspector) of Cairo, 'Ali ibn Abi al-Jud would ordinarily have been announced to the public through a royal decree proclaimed by official heralds in the marketplaces. Ibn Iyas, however, records it merely as a noteworthy event and a punitive measure worthy of documentation, without reproducing the customary public form in which such announcements were made, namely the public proclamation (nidā').

A. The Zayni Barakat Version

Proclamation:

O people of Egypt,

We command what is right

and forbid what is wrong.

By order of our Lord, the Sultan,

'Ali ibn Abi al-Jud

shall be executed

with blows of the hands.

He shall dance all along the road

as women dance.

Strike him!

Strike him!

Whenever he falters,

strike him again.

Whoever wishes to witness the spectacle

and take vengeance upon the enemy of God,

let him come out after the afternoon prayer.

O people of Cairo!

O people of Cairo!⁷

Through al-Ghitani's treatment, this punitive event is transformed into an authentic royal decree and an official state document. The author deliberately shapes its informative content according to the conventions of the public proclamation, a form widely employed during the Mamluk period, thereby enhancing both the realism and credibility of the narrative. It is precisely here that al-Ghitani's artistic mastery becomes evident.

2.2 Transformation of the Historical Narrative

Ibn Iyas records a daily incident that exemplifies the style of Mamluk annalistic writing, in which historical chronicles frequently descend to the level of everyday news, much like modern newspapers reporting cases of social deviance and moral scandal.

A. An Example from Bada'i' al-Zuhur

"Among the events was that a tailor named Naja ibn Timsah assaulted a young boy of about ten years of age. He lured the child into a house on Middle Island, where the boy cried out for help. The tailor then slaughtered him and threw his body into a well. When the crime became known, the boy's mother apprehended the tailor and brought him before the Sultan. He confessed to murdering the

child, whereupon the Sultan ordered that the tailor be hanged at the very place where he had killed the boy."⁸

Despite the horrific nature of the incident, Ahmad Ibn Iyas narrates it in a straightforward and uncomplicated manner, free from exaggeration, as though he were recording an ordinary historical occurrence with simplicity, directness, and factual objectivity.

B. The Zayni Barakat Version

"A tailor from the district of al-Mughrabilin not an insignificant tailor, but one who made robes and caftans for princes and high-ranking officials had passed the age of forty. Yet God afflicted him with a deep-seated vice. While walking through the Khayyamiyya Market, he noticed a handsome young boy and asked him, 'What is your name, clever one?' The boy replied, 'My name is Kamal.' The tailor said, 'Come with me; I'll take you to your father at the mosque.' Instead, the accursed man led him to an abandoned ruin behind the Blue Mosque and assaulted him. The child could not bear the attack and returned to his father in tears. The father went weeping to Zayni. Zayni ordered the tailor to be brought before him and asked the boy, 'Is this the man?' The child nodded while crying. The tailor shouted, 'The boy is lying!' Zayni struck him across the face and declared, 'Children do not lie.' He then ordered that the tailor be paraded throughout Cairo on a donkey and imprisoned in al-'Arqana until his final punishment should be determined."⁹

This type of narrative is particularly appealing to novelists. The task of the novelist who draws inspiration from historical sources is to select incidents that do not rise to the level of major historical events involving military campaigns, political decisions, the Sultan, or affairs of state. Moral scandals such as this provide fertile material for artistic treatment. By choosing a narrative style appropriate to the historical period and expressing it in language closely resembling that of its own time, the novelist grants the event new artistic dimensions. A comparison between the two versions clearly reveals the extent of al-Ghitani's creative transformation of the historical source.

Through this comparison, it becomes evident that

"...investigating historical discourse, understanding the ways in which it operates, and tracing the nature of its production may create the impression of a close affinity with another literary genre the novel. The first manifestation of this affinity lies in the association of the historical event with the concept of narration, which necessarily invites comparison with the novel in terms of its informative function, narrative practice, and the presence of imagination and myth. In reality, however, the relationship between history and the novel extends beyond their shared narrative impulse to encompass common identity, function, and significance. Both are founded upon presenting events, investigating facts, and acknowledging the repeatability and intertextuality of events through resemblance and analogy, in accordance with the empirical principles that govern them and establish objectivity, the primary criterion invoked whenever the scientific nature of history is examined."¹⁰

Thus, al-Ghitani's artistic brilliance lies in his ability to merge history with reality, fusing them imaginatively within the act of storytelling without allowing either to dominate the other. In doing so, he grants narrative a new aesthetic dimension rooted in the classical Arabic narrative tradition. His text emerges from heritage in order to renew itself and returns to heritage in order to reaffirm its authenticity. Throughout this continuous movement, al-Ghitani's narrative vision matures and his stylistic individuality becomes more sharply defined, while remaining firmly situated within the literary current of his generation the generation of modernism and the Novel of Sensibility whose intellectual and artistic foundations rest upon the continual search for possible worlds capable of

expressing the Arab experience in novelistic form while simultaneously affirming its universal human significance.¹¹

Results

By examining the mechanisms through which narrative discourse is constructed in Jamal al-Ghitani's *Zayni Barakat*, this study has arrived at the following critical and creative findings:

History as a Mask for Contemporary Reality:

Al-Ghitani's invocation of history is not merely an intellectual exercise or an act of historical documentation. Rather, he employs history as an artistic mask and a reflective mirror through which he probes the realities of the present, exposing the structures of tyranny, political oppression, and the violation of fundamental human freedoms.

Mastery of Intertextuality and Artistic Opposition:

The novelist successfully deconstructs Ibn Iyas's chronicle *Bada'i' al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i' al-Duhur* and reconstructs it through the dual mechanisms of correspondence and divergence. Rather than reproducing historical accounts verbatim, he consciously reshapes them reordering events, condensing and expanding episodes to serve the dramatic and aesthetic architecture of the novel.

The Artistic Employment of Satirical Irony:

Irony functions simultaneously as a strategy of deconstruction and reconstruction. Al-Ghitani magnifies seemingly marginal historical incidents recorded in the chronicles such as the episode of the lanterns and transforms them into matters of public concern, thereby illustrating the mechanisms of media exaggeration and political propaganda within authoritarian regimes.

Cinematic Narrative and the Illusion of Reality:

The novel is distinguished by its highly visual, scene-based narrative structure, which closely resembles cinematic composition. Through the careful use of classical documentary language descriptions of furniture, clothing, official administrative correspondence, and ceremonial expressions the novelist reinforces the reader's sense of historical authenticity while preserving the imaginative nature of fictional discourse.

The Dialectic of Authenticity and Modernity:

Zayni Barakat presents a successful practical model of the New Sensibility Novel, harmoniously combining the authenticity of classical Arabic narrative heritage with a modern artistic vision. The novel affirms that the past constitutes the legitimate foundation of the present and its inherent contradictions.

Recommendations

In light of the semantic and structural dimensions revealed by this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

Reconsidering Heritage Texts in Contemporary Criticism:

Greater attention should be devoted to critical studies examining the mechanisms through which heritage is incorporated into the modern Arabic novel, moving beyond the traditional perception of history as merely a static record or a collection of stories from the past.

Including Historical Fiction in Academic Curricula:

University curricula should incorporate the study of Jamal al-Ghitani's novels particularly *Zayni Barakat* as exemplary models demonstrating how historical documents can be transformed into vibrant works of fiction that critically engage with contemporary reality.

Promoting Interdisciplinary Studies between Literature and the Arts:

Given the novel's highly visual and cinematic character, further research should investigate the relationship between narrative techniques and cinematic devices such as screenplay construction, montage, and the implicit movement of the camera within the text in al-Ghitani's literary works.

Suggestions

To broaden the scope of future scholarly inquiry, the following research projects are proposed:

A Comparative Study:

Conduct a comparative analysis between the historical figure of Zayni Barakat as portrayed by Ibn Iyas and his fictional representation in al-Ghitani's novel, with the aim of identifying the aesthetic distance between historical fact and artistic truth.

The Semiotics of Space and the Body:

Undertake a specialized semiotic study of the spaces of oppression within the novel including prisons, monitored neighborhoods, and the network of spies (*bassaṣīn*) to explore how physical space functions as an instrument for deepening the crisis of freedom.

The Language of Authoritarian Discourse:

Carry out a linguistic and stylistic analysis of the language employed in official decrees and public proclamations throughout the novel in order to uncover the mechanisms of linguistic domination through which political authority shapes and controls public consciousness.

¹ Mohammed Sahbi, *The Obsession with Returning to Heritage among Arab Modernist Novelists: Al-Ghitani as a Model*, published on 3 February 2018 at 10:30 a.m. Available at:

<https://ouvrages.crasc.dz/index.php/en/29-le-roman-moderne-ecriture-de-l'autre-et-de-l'ailleurs/264>

² Ahmad Ibn Iyas al-Misri, *Bada'i' al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i' al-Duhur* (The Wonderful Flowers in the Events of the Ages), Madbouly Bookstore, Cairo, 1st ed., 2005, Vol. 2, p. 1004.

³ Abu Bakr Marzouq, "The Novel Zayni Barakat: Between Historical Material, Narrative Justification, and Representation," *Journal of Linguistic Sciences* (Special Issue: Proceedings of the International Conference Literature and Cinema, 6–7 March 2016), Laboratory of Linguistic Sciences, Faculty of Arts and Languages, Amar Telidji University, Laghouat, 2016, p. 465.

⁴ Mohammed Sahbi, *The Obsession with Returning to Heritage among Arab Modernist Novelists: Al-Ghitani as a Model*, published on 3 February 2018, p. 15.

<https://ouvrages.crasc.dz/index.php/en/29-le-roman-moderne-ecriture-de-l'autre-et-de-l'ailleurs/264>

⁵ Abu Bakr Marzouq, *The Novel Zayni Barakat: Between Historical Material, Narrative Justification, and Representation*, p. 465.

⁶ Ahmad Ibn Iyas al-Misri, *Bada'i' al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i' al-Duhur*, Madbouly Bookstore, Cairo, 1st ed., 2005, Vol. 2, p. 1403.

* These tables are reproduced from the unpublished Master's thesis: *Zayni Barakat: A Reading of the Textual Thresholds*, by Abu Bakr Marzouq, University of Oran, 2005–2006.

⁷ Abu Bakr Marzouq, *Zayni Barakat: A Reading of the Textual Thresholds*, Master's Thesis, University of Oran, 2005–2006, p. 138.

⁸ Ahmad Ibn Iyas al-Misri, *Bada'i' al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i' al-Duhur*, Madbouly Bookstore, Cairo, 1st ed., 2005, Vol. 2, p. 1281.

⁹ Jamal al-Ghitani, Zayni Barakat, Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, Cairo, 3rd ed., 1985, pp. 82–83.

¹⁰ Abu Bakr Marzouq, Intertextuality and the Heritage Text in Al-Ghitani's Novels, pp. 82–83.

¹¹ Abu Bakr Marzouq, Intertextuality and the Heritage Text in Al-Ghitani's Novels, p. 46.