

The Structure of Historical Language and Its Narrative Manifestations in the Contemporary Arabic Novel: Al-Zayni Barakat by Gamal al-Ghitani as a Model

Laidani Houria

Higher School of Teachers, Taleb Abdel Rahman Laghouat, Algeria

Email: h.aidani@ens-lagh.dz.

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Abstract

This study seeks to explore the dialectical relationship between historical and fictional discourse by examining the mechanisms through which the language of historians is appropriated and transformed into an aesthetic instrument in contemporary Arabic narrative. The study takes the Egyptian novelist Gamal al-Ghitani's *Al-Zayni Barakat* as a case study to investigate the extent of his ability to emulate the linguistic and structural features of Mamluk-era chronicles, particularly those of Ibn Iyas. The study concludes that al-Ghitani's employment of historical language was neither a mere retreat into the past nor a form of classical imitation. Rather, it constituted a conscious experimental technique aimed at creating a metaphorical equivalent and an artistic projection through which he addressed the political and existential crises confronting the individual during the 1960s.

Keywords: Experimental novel; historical discourse; Gamal al-Ghitani; linguistic imitation; heritage intertextuality.

Introduction

The interaction between the art of the novel and the discipline of history represents one of the most significant creative foundations upon which the modern Arabic novel has developed, particularly during the 1960s, a period marked by a profound transformation in both national and aesthetic consciousness following the June 1967 defeat. While history is a utilitarian discourse that seeks referential truth, the novel reconstructs history as an aesthetic discourse that transcends the boundaries of the past, engages with the present, and anticipates the future.

Within this context, the experience of the Egyptian novelist Gamal al-Ghitani emerged as a landmark in establishing an experimental novel that adopts the language of history as the primary material for constructing its imaginative worlds. Al-Ghitani did not merely borrow historical events and figures; rather, he deconstructed medieval historical chronicles foremost among them the annals of Ibn Iyas drawing inspiration from their linguistic structures and documentary style to create an illusion of historical authenticity while simultaneously engaging in artistic indirection. Accordingly, this study seeks to examine the experience of historical language in *Al-Zayni Barakat*, investigating how the Mamluk setting, through both its language and urban milieu, was transformed into an artistic mask through which al-Ghitani condemned political tyranny and addressed the crisis of modern humanity in relation to the duality of time and nothingness.

1. Historical Language and Literary Writing

1.1 Between the Language of Narrative and the Language of History

The connection between history and narrative forms becomes particularly evident when discussing narrative language, which constitutes one of the principal formal elements shared by these

two genres. Indeed, the function of language in each cannot be overlooked, even though the discipline of history differs fundamentally from the art of storytelling.

Through narrative language, each genre opens itself to the other, to the extent that certain characteristics of one become essential features of the other. History cannot present historical facts except through narration, since it recounts past events and follows occurrences that have already taken place. This narrative element is equally fundamental to storytelling. Likewise, narrative fiction cannot dispense with accounts of events, for the event itself is its defining characteristic. However, in presenting these events, fiction is unconcerned with whether they actually occurred in history or were invented by the storyteller and produced by the imagination. Consequently, while the historical event remains bound to the past, the fictional event transcends the past to encompass what was and what could be, projecting possibilities toward the future at the moment of the novel's creation.

For this reason, critics beginning with Aristotle placed narrative above history, owing to its freedom from the constraints of historical time, whereas historical writing was regarded as being tied to actual events and confined by the limits of the particular and the temporal.¹

1.2 The Technique of Writing Between History and the Novel

Accordingly, the writing techniques employed by novelists and historians do not necessarily coincide, although they remain closely related. History itself relies upon narrative techniques such as storytelling and language to construct its discourse, while the novel often draws upon historical material and adopts the documentary style characteristic of historical narration in order to evoke the past and its events or to recreate them within the fictional work.

In essence, both the novel and history constitute forms of narrative discourse. Nevertheless, history remains a utilitarian discourse that seeks to fulfill a referential function by establishing historical events with rigorous objectivity through uncovering the laws governing them. The novel, by contrast, is an aesthetic discourse in which the poetic or creative function takes precedence over the referential one.²

1.3 The Novel's Appropriation of the Language of History

Many Arab novelists have drawn inspiration from the language of historians, while some have even emulated renowned historical chronicles such as Al-Maqrizi's *Khitat* and Ibn Iyas's *Annals*. Among the foremost of these writers is Gamal al-Ghitani, who sought to capture the simplicity of their syntactic structures and their proximity to the language of everyday reality. His aim was to construct a discourse whose tone closely resembles that of the indigenous historical document, thereby reinforcing the notion that historical events recur and that the policies of those who once shaped history may re-emerge in different forms. This implication is of particular significance in the novel, since the novelist writes for history, writes about history, writes through history, and ultimately writes in the language of history itself.

Among the historians who have enjoyed exceptional esteem among literary figures, the Egyptian historian Ahmad ibn Iyas occupies a prominent position through his celebrated work, *Bada'i' al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i' al-Duhur* (The Marvelous Flowers in the Events of the Ages). In this work, Ibn Iyas departed from the approach adopted by the historians of his time, "...who concentrated primarily on rulers, sultans, and other prominent figures, turning instead to the lives of ordinary people and the common folk. Equally distinctive were his unique mode of expression and narrative techniques that is, his own characteristic language which led the Soviet orientalist Ignaty Krachkovsky to describe Ibn Iyas's writings as historical 'annals' intended to entertain men of letters."³

Following the Arab defeat in the war against Israel in June 1967, writers increasingly turned to history, excavating its heritage in search of explanations for the successive defeats experienced by the Arab world, both internally through the intensification of political despotism and externally through the persistence of colonial domination.

"...By drawing upon elements of cultural heritage, the novel sought to capture aesthetic values within a comprehensive vision of humanity and the world. In its attempt to interpret reality, it aspired to establish a complete correspondence between the present (the real) and its metaphorical equivalent (the mythical). This artistic vision may be applied to modern Arab novelists during their struggle against both the internal Other the tyrannical ruler and the external Other the colonial oppressor. Consequently, the heritage-based novel became an urgent civilizational necessity in the face of cultural confrontation between the West, representing the image of this ugly human being, and the East, representing its counterpart, both in its positive and its negative dimensions..."⁴

From the early 1960s onward, when the novelist Saad Makkawi published his historical novel *Al-Sa'irun Niyaman* (The Sleepwalkers), inspired by Mamluk Egypt (1468–1499), he presented its history with all the conflicts that unfolded within the palaces of the Mamluk rulers and the oppression suffered by the Egyptian populace under their tyranny. He vividly portrayed the grim reality of Cairo's alleys, homes, markets, coffeehouses, dens of libertines, gatherings of wandering dervishes, Sufi lodges, and other locations, offering an authentic picture of the hardships endured by the people during those turbulent and barren years. Indeed, the model of Mamluk Egypt has remained a recurring image in subsequent narrative works that engage with this Mamluk setting and its historical period, together with its cultural and civilizational dimensions.⁵

In his novel, Saad Makkawi sought to emulate the language of Mamluk historiography in order to lend his work a sense of linguistic authenticity. He accomplished this by skillfully employing Egyptian colloquial Arabic elevated into an eloquent literary register. This approach stands in marked contrast to that of Jurji Zaydan, who, in his novel *The Tyranny of the Mamluks*,⁶ merely borrowed historical material while rendering it in a standard classical style far removed from the spirit of the vernacular, as he consistently did throughout his historical novels. This distinction clearly separates Zaydan's historical fiction from the works of Saad Makkawi and Gamal al-Ghitani, both of whom write novels in the documentary language employed by the historians of the Mamluk and Ottoman periods in Egypt, even though neither of their works is classified as a historical novel.

2. Al-Zayni and the Experimental Novel

In order to achieve a greater degree of authenticity in his return to the heritage, Gamal al-Ghitani, when constructing his central character Al-Zayni Barakat which is also the title of the novel committed himself to a faithful recreation of the Mamluk period in all its material manifestations, including its urban environment and linguistic conventions. This mode of writing resembles what "...screenwriters do in filmmaking when they reconstruct a particular historical period. The success of such a film is measured by the extent to which its cinematic events correspond to historical reality and by the consistency of its formal manifestations speech, clothing, food, furniture, architecture, and all the material aspects of that civilization with those of the period it seeks to portray. It may be argued that al-Ghitani succeeded remarkably in this historical embodiment, as evidenced by the fact that adapting *Al-Zayni Barakat* into a television production posed little difficulty for directors, since the novel itself almost functions as a screenplay that faithfully reproduces the era it depicts."⁷

Through its stylistic formations and diverse artistic techniques, Al-Zayni Barakat vividly represented the oppressive and authoritarian reality in a manner unmatched by the novels of the 1960s. In these works, experimental novelists position themselves behind their protagonists, expressing varying attitudes toward political authority, ranging from absolute loyalty and the justification of governmental abuses to cautious allegiance, opportunistic exploitation of power, avoidance of confrontation, and outright rejection.

A distinctive mode of writing subsequently emerged, dominated by textual interactions or, at least formally, by the technique of intertextuality, which, at a particular stage in the evolution of contemporary narrative, became an ideal strategy of imitation. In this approach, form serves content just as content serves form, since the novels of this period no longer merely imitate reality but rather reinforce it by imitating one another.⁸

3. Al-Ghitani and the Historical Text

Among the writers who most effectively incorporated the language of historical works particularly the annals of the Egyptian historian Ahmad ibn Iyas into their fiction was the Egyptian novelist Gamal al-Ghitani in *Al-Zayni Barakat*, where "...language constituted his principal means of artistic indirection and of creating the illusion that the events of the novel take place during the Mamluk period."⁹

Al-Ghitani simultaneously approached and departed from the historians, especially Ibn Iyas, thereby highlighting the distinction between the historian's technique of recording information in succession sometimes commenting upon it and at other times refraining from comment and the novelist's technique, which employs narrative construction and artistic composition to express what words alone cannot fully convey.

It appears that Gamal al-Ghitani possessed a distinctive conception of time, as reflected in his statement:

"I listen attentively... I direct my gaze toward the corners of history and the immediate present and every present is history so that I may hear and perceive the sighs, longings, and features of those whose voices are forgotten and whose identities are neglected by time."¹⁰

Here, the author seems intent on articulating his own understanding of history and time, rejecting the classification of his work as a historical novel while affirming its connection to the political circumstances in Egypt following the June defeat and its engagement with broader existential concerns.

Al-Ghitani further states:

"My perception of time constituted the foundation of my concept of history. For me, history is time. I do not conceive of history as a specific era marked by symbolic divisions invented by human beings years, months, minutes, and seconds. The very moment in which I am speaking has passed forever and can never return [...]. Indeed, I would go even further and say that tomorrow is an imagined future history."¹¹

The Moroccan critic Said Yaqtin likewise comments on al-Ghitani's conception of time:

"For al-Ghitani... all of his narrative works seek to illuminate this vision and express it in a unique manner. It can be summarized in a single phrase: 'the sense of time.' It is this sense that determined his perception of phenomena, shaped his methods of investigating them, and enabled him to produce a distinctive and remarkable experience in the writing of the short story and the novel. Whenever we

speak generally about his literary career, his works immediately present themselves, revealing their identity and distinctive characteristics."¹²

Al-Ghitani was undeniably a writer of his own generation the generation of the 1960s yet he possessed a unique intellectual formation and artistic vision. Deeply attached to the past and to a lost cultural heritage, he was continually preoccupied with the notion of time, through which he contemplated the idea of death death approaching from both within and without. This existential awareness explains his persistent turn toward history, particularly in his capacity as a writer specializing in the medieval Arab periods.¹³

Al-Ghitani possessed an unwavering determination to look backward to return to the past, to identity, and ultimately to the self. This determination was not an act of escape but rather an expression of fidelity to oneself and of a profound human sensibility that sought, through art, to overcome the inevitability of nothingness.

This vision is most clearly manifested in his novel *Al-Zayni Barakat*.

4. The Historical Form in *Al-Zayni Barakat*

In *Al-Zayni Barakat*, Gamal al-Ghitani draws upon an extensive historical knowledge that enabled him to construct the fictional world he envisioned and to endow his characters with a language that authentically reflects their historical milieu. The novelist derived his refined imaginative vision from a vast body of historical material, through which he simultaneously indicted both ancient and contemporary oppressive authorities, while producing a remarkable lesson in literary language a language that aspires toward the idiom of the ancients without itself becoming archaic.¹⁴

When al-Ghitani modeled his historical style on that of Ibn Iyas, he did not merely pour contemporary themes into the stylistic and syntactic molds of Ibn Iyas's age in order to create the illusion of writing a historical novel in the classical sense. Nor did he simply gather events from various historical sources and arrange them chronologically to produce a narrative approximating an authentic historical account, as an objective historian might do when recording historical events.

Rather, through his artistic method, al-Ghitani sought to transport his spirit as a writer endowed with exceptional literary sensitivity into the historical period most capable of serving his narrative vision. He deliberately selected the reign of the Mamluk Sultan Qansuh al-Ghawri, focusing on the period between 912 AH and 922 AH (1506–1516 CE), which witnessed the first Mamluk defeat in the Levant at the Battle of Marj Dabiq, followed by their final defeat in Egypt at the Battle of al-Raydaniyya, where the last Mamluk sultan, Tuman Bay II, was killed in 1517 CE.

Al-Ghitani's intentions in returning to history become evident upon reading *Al-Zayni Barakat*. The novel reveals the magnitude of the political and human tragedy perceived by the author in his own era the 1960s and 1970s and clarifies the reasons behind his invocation of history and cultural heritage. As one critic observes, he "...transported his narrative to the Mamluk period, and when he portrayed the character of *Al-Zayni Barakat ibn Musa*, he deliberately severed ties with his contemporary reality, committing himself to a faithful reconstruction of the Mamluk age."¹⁵

This historical reconstruction, however, is also justified by al-Ghitani's own personal experience. It is as though he had never truly departed from the historical space about which he wrote. He was a son of Egypt, of historic Cairo, and of the ancient district of al-Jamaliyya, where he lived for nearly a quarter of a century long enough to absorb both the Mamluk and Ottoman heritage that has remained deeply embedded in Cairo and throughout Egypt. Al-Ghitani himself writes:

"I would read history and then allow my imagination and emotions to wander among those ancient buildings that have survived from that era and that continue to serve the very purposes for which they were originally constructed."¹⁶

Indeed, the contemporary Egyptian remains, in many respects, an integral part of this ancient historical legacy.

Although Al-Zayni Barakat revolves around historical subjects and events, it cannot properly be classified as a historical novel. Historical fiction itself may assume various forms: some works strive to recreate a historical period with meticulous accuracy and fidelity, while others depart from historical reality and transform it into pure imagination. Whatever its form, the historical novel remains constrained by historical events and figures. The novelist, however, enjoys far greater artistic freedom when history serves merely as the raw material for literary creation. Consequently, there exists a significant distinction between the historical novel and the novel that merely draws its material from history.¹⁷

Results

The Convergence of Historical and Fictional Discourse:

The study demonstrates that the relationship between history and the novel in contemporary narrative is neither oppositional nor merely intersecting, but rather one of integration and mutual interaction. History advances through narrative storytelling, while the novel draws upon historical linguistic documentation to strengthen both its aesthetic and referential dimensions.

Al-Ghitani's Conscious Linguistic Imitation:

The research establishes that in Al-Zayni Barakat, Gamal al-Ghitani did not simply place contemporary concerns within ancient forms. Instead, he consciously recreated the linguistic and structural features of Ibn Iyas's chronicles, employing documentary language to produce an artistic strategy based on illusion and narrative indirection.

The Past as a Metaphorical Equivalent of the Present:

The study reveals that al-Ghitani's return to the Mamluk era particularly the reigns of Qansuh al-Ghawri and Tuman Bay II was motivated not by a desire for conventional historical documentation but by his use of history as an artistic mask and metaphorical equivalent through which to denounce political oppression and authoritarianism in Egypt during the 1960s and 1970s following the June 1967 defeat.

The Uniqueness of Al-Ghitani's Concept of Time:

The research shows that, for al-Ghitani, history is synonymous with an existential awareness of time. He does not regard history as a series of closed periods but rather as a continuous cycle in which the present constantly reproduces the past and the future itself becomes an imagined history. This conception serves as an artistic means of confronting death and overcoming nothingness.

A Departure from the Traditional Historical Novel:

The findings conclude that Al-Zayni Barakat belongs to the category of the experimental novel that derives its material from history, rather than the traditional historical novel, owing to the complete artistic freedom with which al-Ghitani transforms historical heritage into an aesthetic and creative discourse.

Recommendations

Reassessing the Experimental Novels of the 1960s:

The study recommends a renewed critical evaluation of the Arabic experimental novels of the 1960s through contemporary critical approaches that analyze mechanisms of linguistic intertextuality rather than relying solely on political or ideological interpretations.

Further Research on Heritage Language in Narrative:

Scholars in literary criticism and linguistics are encouraged to investigate the various linguistic levels employed in Arabic novels that combine literary standard Arabic, vernacular speech, and the documentary language of historical writing as exemplified in the works of Saad Makkawi and Gamal al-Ghitani in order to uncover their stylistic significance.

Promoting Interdisciplinary Studies Between History and Literature:

The study recommends organizing academic conferences and collaborative research projects between departments of History and Arabic Literature to explore both the boundaries and the intersections between historical documentation and fictional narrative.

Suggestions

A Comparative Stylistic Study:

Conduct a comparative investigation of the narrative styles employed by Saad Makkawi in *The Sleepwalkers* and Gamal al-Ghitani in *Al-Zayni Barakat* in order to identify the fundamental differences in their adaptation of Mamluk-era language.

The Aesthetics of Audiovisual Reception of the Historical Text:

Undertake a study examining the adaptation of historically inspired novels into television drama, using the television series *Al-Zayni Barakat* as a case study, with particular attention to the success of translating historical language and material culture into visual representation.

The Image of the Other and Tyranny in Heritage-Inspired Fiction:

Encourage further research into the dialectic of East and West, as well as that of the internal tyrant and the external colonizer, in Arabic novels that adopted the medieval period as an artistic mask following the events of 1967.

¹ Linda Hutcheon, *Historiographic Metafiction*, *Fusul Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 2, Summer 1993, p. 99. Quoted in: Mohamed Hussein Abu al-Hasan, *The Novelistic Form and Heritage*, Egyptian General Book Organization, Cairo, 1st ed., 2012, p. 110.

² See: Mohamed al-Qadi, "The Novel and History (Two Ways of Writing History Novelistically)," *Fusul*, Vol. 16, No. 4, 1998, p. 42.

³ Ahmed Mohamed Attia, *New Voices in the Arabic Novel*, Egyptian General Book Organization, Cairo, 1987, pp. 22–23.

⁴ Ahmed Mohamed Attia, *New Voices in the Arabic Novel*, Egyptian General Book Organization, Cairo, 1987, pp. 22–23.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

⁶ See: Jurji Zaydan, *The Tyranny of the Mamluks*, Dar al-Jil, Beirut, n.d. (Its events take place during the late nineteenth century).

⁷ Abu Bakr Merzouk, "The Novel *Al-Zayni Barakat*: Between Historical Data, 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.

⁸ Abu Bakr Merzouk, *Intertextuality and the Heritage Text in Al-Ghitani's Novels*, p. 318.

⁹ Mohamed Hussein Abu al-Hasan, *The Novelistic Form and Heritage*, Egyptian General Book Organization, Cairo, 1st ed., 2012, p. 112.

¹⁰ Said Yaqtin, *The Novel and Narrative Heritage*, Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, 1st ed., 1992, p. 93.

¹¹ Fawzi al-Zumaili, *The Poetics of the Arabic Novel: A Study of the Forms and Significance of Rooting the Arabic Novel*, Khutuwat Publishing and Distribution / Al-Quddus Cultural Foundation, Damascus, 2nd ed., 2007, p. 254.

¹² Said Yaqtin, *The Novel and Narrative Heritage*, Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, 1st ed., 1992, p. 92.

¹³ Abu Bakr Merzouk, *Intertextuality and the Heritage Text in Al-Ghitani's Novels*, p. 43.

¹⁴ Mohamed Hussein Abu al-Hasan, *The Novelistic Form and Heritage*, p. 302.

¹⁵ Abu Bakr Merzouk, "The Novel Al-Zayni Barakat: Between Historical Data, Narrative Justification, and Representation," p. 465.

¹⁶ Gamal al-Ghitani, "The Problem of Novelistic Creativity among the Generation of the 1960s and 1970s" (Special Issue), *Fusul*, Vol. 2, No. 2, January–March 1982, pp. 58–59.

¹⁷ Mohamed Sahbi, "The Obsession with Returning to Heritage among Arab 'Modernist' Novelists: Al-Ghitani as a Model," 3 February 2018, 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>