

The Foundational Novel in Waciny Laredj Periodisation: The Late Style of the Algerian Novel

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Abstract

This study examines the problem of periodising the Algerian novel and identifying its foundational beginnings through a critical reading of Waciny Laredj's project, which seeks to move beyond conventional schemes of periodisation that have confined the Algerian novel within theoretical models and Western-centred historical frameworks. It interrogates the relationship between literature, history, and society, maintaining that the emergence of the Algerian novel cannot be reduced either to a chronological sequence or to a single model regarded as an absolute point of departure. The study highlights the importance of returning to early and marginalised narrative texts and rereading them within their historical, cultural, and social contexts to uncover the continuity and distinctive character of Algerian narrative. It also examines Waciny Laredj's position, which challenges the designation of Muhammad Husayn Haykal's *Zaynab* as the sole point of origin of the Arabic novel. In his view, such a conception has led to the exclusion of an earlier Arab and Algerian narrative corpus and has created a rupture with Arab narrative memory. Drawing on the perspectives of Edward Said, Paul Ricœur, Michel Foucault, Niklas Luhmann, and others, the study emphasises the need to reconsider the concepts of beginning, continuity, rupture, periodisation, and cultural memory. It concludes that Waciny Laredj's project represents a critical attempt to reconstruct Algeria's cultural and narrative history from within while freeing it from a mode of periodisation shaped by a colonial perspective. Such an approach makes it possible to restore due recognition to marginalised foundational texts and to foreground both the distinctive character of the Algerian novel and its historical development.

Keywords

Algerian novel; periodisation; foundational beginnings; Waciny Laredj; narrative; cultural memory; history; rupture and continuity; *Zaynab*; Western-centrism; literary criticism; Arabic novel.

Introduction

Perhaps the key theoretical issue is to demonstrate the effective assimilation of the subtext, society, through reflection on social classes as a means of extending periodisation into a

comprehensive account of the first novel beyond the confines of theory. At stake in a humanistic understanding of the novelistic scene are the concepts of the novel and the human; this is the decisive turn to which considerable attention must be given in reassessing the role of consciousness and practice in our literary and novelistic production, understood as both historical and social practice. The utmost aspiration of our modest study is to renew the systems of awareness through which the phenomenon of the first novel is apprehended as a historical phenomenon that articulates the cultural and national mind. When we open the Algerian novel to the question of periodisation, we encounter an elusive point of departure for theory, a beginning that challenges theoretical consciousness and stakes a claim to recognition for the Algerian novel. We would not be exaggerating if we said that the Algerian novel has historically been alienated; rather, it is imprisoned within a theoretical consciousness shaped by historical centralism, which has relegated it to the absent, the marginalised, and the peripheral, and has compelled it to remain outside history, most often theoretical history. This different angle of approach, and this mode of thinking that challenges theoretical consciousness and governing periodisation, constitute a necessity imposed by a new consciousness seeking to investigate the conditions governing the historical birth of a theory of the Algerian novel by examining its earliest beginnings and subjecting them directly to theoretical scrutiny, without losing sight of the historical conditions from which those foundations emerged and while respecting the conditions and particularities of the Algerian narrative environment.

Awareness of the origins of the Algerian novel entails awareness of historical forms and the novel's earliest experiments. It encompasses the transformations and processes of artistic creativity and their social relations and connections through a communicative engagement with the worlds of the literary canon, which took shape within historical differentiation and specificity. This canon emerged under specifically Algerian conditions, yet the "metropolitan construction of periodisation" placed it outside the consecrated and recognised corpus. Algerian novelistic creativity consequently emerged deprived of its historical matrix through the loss of specificity, arising "lame" and dispossessed of consciousness as a consequence of theory's political unconscious.

Research into the earliest formations of the Algerian novel through a systems approach seeks to confront the historical consciousness of this narrative directly with the discipline imposed by theory and to distinguish among the theoretical formulations that shaped the contours of periodisation within this narrative achievement. It is a complex form of consciousness that examines the textual signs marked by the novel's narrative practices as an incomplete literary genre. This can be achieved only by effecting a methodological rupture with the existing theoretical formation governing periodisation and by examining its mechanisms. The periodisation of theoretical production concerning the novel should not proceed based on isolated developments within literary theory, but rather at the points where that theory intersects with the moments in which the earliest narrative formation emerged sociologically and culturally.

The author of *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, who addressed the question of beginnings in an engaging, relatively detailed, practical, and theoretical manner, asks about the

significance of the beginning as a theme upon which one reflects in a “merciful,” complex, and almost impossible manner. The demarcation of boundaries within the narrow confines of beginnings arose from a historical authority that transformed this demarcation into a cultural revolution against the very forms of beginnings. The demarcation of beginnings therefore depends upon determining the point of beginning itself.

We shall not dwell extensively on the philosophy of beginnings, because what concerns us here is the demarcation of artistic boundaries insofar as they constitute moments in the periodisation of the novel. The novel is the narrative of experience par excellence; literary historians broadly agree on this point. Ian Watt states: “There is a complete premise in the novel form generally, and this premise, or basic convention, is that the novel is a detailed and truthful report of human experience. According to Watt, that form was bold in asserting the primacy of individual experience in the novel, just as Descartes’s *cogito* was bold in philosophy.”¹

How does the first novel, or narrative, come to be understood as a simple accommodation to temporalisation?

What will be discussed in relation to these narrative phenomena is a series of epistemologically significant concepts operating across the periodising divisions of those forms and their development within the history of the novel, through the hypothesis of dynamic relations operating at different levels of these phenomena. This also entails reconsidering the relations between superstructure and infrastructure to stimulate the totality of the representational practice of production in its poetic form. According to Waciny, “there is not a single study that addresses this fundamental theme: the reflection of infrastructures in superstructures through a complex dialectical process.”²

Cultural studies therefore advocate treating all forms of culture as phenomena embodied in subcultures or signifying practices, in which hierarchies of genres and systems disappear, while the earliest models take shape as signifying or marked codifications, that is, as epistemic models invoked as paradigms of formation. In this regard, Edward Said maintains that forms such as the novel and the text are forms of beginning and of being in the world, through which one may study changes from one cultural period to another as transformations in the idea of what a beginning ought to be. Any critical work that purports to engage with such questions risks embarrassment not only at its beginning but also in its continuity, and these beginnings of criticism are profoundly awkward and unsettling within knowledge. “Thus,” said Roland Barthes, reformulating Bachelard’s proposition, “the study and production of literature today is the study and production of de-formation.”³ Accordingly, to read the Algerian novel in Edward Said’s terms, we must follow the discursive formations of this literary genre; tracing these earliest formations means isolating the formative beginnings of Algerian narrative. “The critic’s function is to subject the text’s prior reflective

¹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel*, 33, 15.

² Waciny Laredj, *Trends in the Arabic Novel in Algeria: A Study of the Historical and Aesthetic Origins of the Algerian Novel* (Algiers: National Book Enterprise, 1986), 10.

³ Edward W. Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, xii.

reenactment to a rigorous rule, reconstructing it reflectively through the use of tests of verification and criteria of probability.”¹

The proposition advanced by Waciny Laredj’s project concerning the Algerian novel takes a non-systematic form, for it approaches the novel only through its “experience” as a phenomenon apprehended from within. “The truth is that the inability to understand the new system governing the causes of social development is the primary reason leading to such an anxious view of the world. Anxiety, of course, derives its existence from the writer’s experience of the external world, but this experience, by virtue of its nature, is a subjective one arising from viewing reality in a particular way.”² The principal flaw in conventional academic periodisations lies in their failure to formulate a stable concept distinct from those of general history. Such periodising conceptions sought harmony with general history without examining the conceptual levels involved. This fragility reveals a deficiency in epistemic awareness and an inability to distinguish the teleological from the methodological and procedural dimensions of periodisation. This is what led Waciny Laredj to conclude that “there is not a single study that addresses this fundamental theme: the reflection of infrastructures in superstructures through a complex dialectical process.”³

Waciny attributes the novel’s delayed emergence to a theoretical architecture that remains bound to a rhetorical mode. Distorted reflections may therefore be understood as a centrifugal effect of theory, as he maintains that “the Arabic novel could have emerged more extensively, and perhaps before 1947, had there been a genuine development of the artistic and revolutionary heritage and an exploitation of the momentum of the Revolution at the level of creativity, as was the case with the novel written in French. Yet historical circumstances converged, accumulated, and became increasingly complex, prompting the writers of the Reformist Movement and its critics to regard novelistic and fictional creativity as something superfluous. This frustrated cultural action and drew it into labyrinths that submerged it in highly marginal and formal details... It therefore did not attain the status of a novel complete in its formal and artistic construction, because the historical circumstances, with all their economic, political, social, and cultural contradictions, in addition to the writer’s own culture and his particular and objective circumstances, neither assisted nor contributed to the emergence of the novel The restraints that the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama had placed in its path before independence did not contribute to the development of this fictional art.”⁴ Waciny’s observations therefore examine the mechanisms for displacing the centralisation produced within class conflict, through which agency is produced across different cultural climates and geographical locations.⁵ This points to a clear anxiety within

¹ Vincent B. Leitch, “Reading Texts,” in *Cultural Criticism: Foundational Texts*, by Vincent B. Leitch et al., trans. and intro. Mustafa Bayoumi Abd al-Salam (Iraq: Dar al-Funun wa al-Adab for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, 2019), 56.

² Laredj, *Trends in the Arabic Novel in Algeria*, 94.

³ Laredj, *Trends in the Arabic Novel in Algeria*, 10.

⁴ See Laredj, *Trends in the Arabic Novel in Algeria*, 57, 75–76.

⁵ The examination of beginnings depends upon scrutinising forms of aesthetic experience within history and challenging the concept of agency generated by the centralising movement of historical experience and system. The experience of social movements and systemic forms becomes confined within the empirical record of social movements and the extent to which their mobilising forms remain dependent upon systemic consciousness.

the very concept of periodisation. Such anxiety calls for explicit attention to procedural, methodological, and epistemological issues and has contributed to delays in the periodisation of Algerian culture and even to an explicit negation of the national narrative experience. The novel was thereby made to exist outside its own time, in Milan Kundera's sense, according to which novels are excluded from history when they no longer participate in the discoveries that constitute the history of the novel, and thus fall outside that history or belong to the post-history of the novel.

To what extent did Waciny Laredj's contributions constitute a model for displacing the agencies of periodisation?

And to what extent did the earliest beginnings constitute foundational models for the Algerian novel?

1.1 The Anthology of the Algerian Novel and the Consciousness of Beginnings

Examining the relationship between literary studies aimed at probing the complexities, aesthetics, and styles of artistic works, on the one hand, and the role of cultural studies in scrutinising the cultural functions of these works through their complexities, historical textuality, intertextuality with various issues and institutions, and interrelations, on the other, enables us to address early Algerian textual culture through two important questions:

Is Algerian culture the product of the representations imposed upon the text, or is it the source of the text's intertextuality?

And how can the representations of the earliest texts constitute a canonised basis for the acceptance of literary works?

We shall begin by assuming that the system, that is, the narrative system, as the great archive of cultural memory, is the site of intellectual and aesthetic investment. One effect of centralism has been to transform periodisation into a shared experience. Periodising culture thus occupies a privileged position, for there is a systemic logic within the periodising mind. These systems, as homogeneous domains, have come to challenge the principle of narrative identity and are closely related to what Edward Said calls "novelistic inventions," art, and geography. Husserl, for his part, had earlier concluded that "the form provides a complete image of the double continuity of the modes of flow."¹ For Ricœur, the beginning is a beginning within continuity. This may rest upon what Husserl calls retention. Here, the concept of movement is condensed into the continuity of novelistic form and into the moments of flow that guarantee this continuity through a systemic transmission into the model, for "every point in the continuity is a point in the continuity of the modes through which movement passes, and the accumulation of all these enduring points constitutes the continuity of the process as a whole."²

What guarantees the continuity of the novelistic project is the expansion of the point of beginning, which in turn expands the points of flow within present projects generated by the originary quality that distinguishes the Algerian novelistic experience in all the texts

Rendering the systemic experience of artistic forms, texts, and novels visible without subjecting them to the observer's scrutiny reproduces their conditions; in other words, it reproduces agency.

¹ Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 42.

² Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 44.

inscribed upon the foundational text of Apuleius's *The Golden Ass*. Accordingly, the development of the novelistic project remains contingent upon the experience of recalling the project of originary flow, which inaugurated retentional continuity as a limiting point. This is the point that legitimised the project of resisting colonialism as a limiting point of infinite flow within the historical mind, and it constitutes the primary requirement of Algerian novelistic differentiation through the essential preservation of retention and recall from within the model that rejects colonialism. This successive narrative chain of the novelistic project was thus reflected in an experience that preserved what Husserl calls the continuous singular tone.¹

Waciny Laredj maintains that "every anthology is not merely a repetition of its predecessors, but rather a wager directed towards something specific."² When we read these doctrinal systems of narrative temporalisation, we are compelled, as researchers in cultural studies and the theory of the novel, to ask what this might mean for the novel's emergence and future. It is not easy to establish close connections between narrative and systems of time, that is, between temporal maps and the incorporation of culture into the historical periodising mind. Imperialism, in Edward Said's formulation, monopolised the entire system of representation; in parallel, the periodising mind monopolised experiences of representation. Narrative forms consequently emerge deficient in everything that points towards the national cultural mind, since "the Arab bourgeoisie always arose under Ottoman authority or in the shadow of European colonialism and was therefore a political choice rather than a social one. For this reason, it did not wager on industry, science, or knowledge, and the capitalist accumulation it achieved was an accumulation of opportunity and spoils."³

Waciny therefore sought to analyse the didactic configuration of novelistic production, for "political action undoubtedly has a role, but the matter concerns individuals who produced a literary consciousness for which there was no precedent. Yet what were the causes of these internal shifts, and what were the pressing cultural needs? What degrees of awareness of the new genre accompanied their project?"⁴

The foundational void in the Algerian narrative mind prompted Waciny Laredj to bridge this historical gap by collecting texts dispersed here and there, many of them almost lost. The critic therefore sought "to place the texts collectively in the hands of the specialist reader to curb the deadly orality that has advanced to the point of affecting the academic field. Through them, the researcher can trace the process that governed them and their internal system, and

¹ Husserl maintains that the complexities are connected with the reconstruction or restoration of the past. The rationale for this term lies in the fact that we are always concerned with a singular tone, indeed with a whole that we can reconstruct in imagination by following the sequence of the first tone, then the second, and so forth.

Husserl analyses retention through the changes it produces in the state of the melody. This intentional doubling of the intentionality characteristic of retention ensures the integration of recollection into the constitution of the internal consciousness of time, which may have disappeared from view because of our concern with distinguishing recollection from retention. Recollection is not merely an "as if" present; rather, it intends the present and, in this way, posits it as having formerly been present. See Paul Ricœur, *Time and Narrative*, 46, 52.

² Waciny Laredj, *The Collection of Absent Texts: An Anthology of the Foundational Algerian Novel, The Grant of Foundation* (Algiers: Dar al-Fada' al-Hurr, 2007), 2.

³ Mohammed Kadik, *From the Epic to the Novel: Mechanisms of Generic Transition* (Algiers: Dar al-Tanwir, 2020), 412.

⁴ Laredj, *The Collection of Absent Texts*, 3.

interrogate the continuity and discontinuity (*Continuité et Discontinuité*), in Michel Foucault's sense, that occurred within this fragmented history, propelling one part of it forwards and effacing another because it was incapable of survival. This also makes it possible to understand the causes of the states of silence and blankness that accompanied this troubled emergence under the various conditions of linguistic perspectives, which imposed particular contexts upon systems of language and writing."¹ He did so in the conviction that establishing a foundational consciousness for the Algerian novel, embodied in its earliest texts, could open Algerian narrative to renewed interrogative hypotheses through a composite framework that is historical, cultural, sociological, and critical. Contemplating these ambiguous foundational conditions inevitably leads us to complex questions for which the desired answers may not currently be available, even when these texts are assembled into a unified corpus. Ultimately, such an assembly is no more than a simplifying procedural measure for research, not a solution to the problems surrounding the emergence of the novel in Algeria and the complex questions arising from them. Literary history has not resolved these questions to this day, while academic work in Algeria and the Maghreb has retreated from them in recent years, replacing literary history with procedural structuralist and semiotic criticism which, despite its value, does not resolve the historical gaps that confront us with numerous questions.²

Waciny Laredj asks whether this apparent succession of texts is sufficient to speak of a history of the novel and whether it constitutes evidence of a distinctive and genuine trajectory for the Algerian novel written in Arabic, or whether this succession is merely illusory. This places us before an even more complex question: do literary texts emerge in this manner, in a vacuum, outside the systems surrounding them?

1.2 Periodisation and Systems of Representation

The oppression exercised by theory, together with its alliance with periodisation in obscuring the earliest narrative experiences within silent expressive forms, confined indigenous creation to non-canonical (*Non Canonique*) artistic attempts. Such creation remained invisible, embedded within the periodisation of Third World narrative, so that the earliest narrative experiences emerged as forms fully coded as subaltern and as silent indigenous formations, amounting to little more than scribbles about which history remained silent. Conversely, the question of belonging within or outside theory is, according to Edward Said, fundamentally related to our belonging to the systems of colonialism and postcolonialism, resistance, and decolonisation. This raises the hypothesis of contrapuntality as a basis for the theoretical representation of this paradox. The latent legitimating components of novelistic form began to take shape within the indigenous narrative component as representations of imperialism lost legitimacy in the wake of resistance to metropolitan culture.

The theoretical conceptions of the third theory of the novel generated by Edward Said's ideas are based on a set of closely interconnected concepts that approach narrative through its relations with power, texts, and various representations to "constitute the perspective from which culture, history, society, literature, and especially the novel are examined. Among

¹ Laredj, *The Collection of Absent Texts*, 4.

² Laredj, *The Collection of Absent Texts*, 4.

these concepts are some of truly immense significance, particularly for societies such as Arab society today and for its political, historical, cultural, ethnic, and national questions. Foremost among them are the concept of the interconnection between history and narratives; the purely imaginary construction of the imagined community, as he and other scholars call it; the interweaving of imagination and history, and of reality and magic; indeed, the impossibility of defining reality outside the framework of fiction, or history outside the framework of narrative.”¹

All societies have reflected on the map of their position within what we call the “world” through an alienated vision deeply saturated with the final monopolistic form of Europeanisation. The idea of world-consciousness constituted a profound response to the various historical shifts in intellectual trajectories, most of which were designated as a “turn” (*tournant*), accompanied by an adjectival qualifier expressing the degree and character of that turn. The interstitial nature of postcolonial narrative assigns a systemic function that enters the paradigm to articulate the relations and functions inscribed between the human being and the world. There is no doubt that the study of other domains of history reveals visions and conceptions not disclosed by chronicles and historical writings, most of which sought to appease the ruler. Here lies the wager of systems theory: to posit a new periodising narrative that gathers this literary history from its margins, so that it is not restricted merely to chronology by establishing links of continuity. Rather, this theory must engage with **history from below, from the perspective of minor narratives**, by excavating the recesses of historical texts away from radical approaches to historiography.

Waciny Laredj has consistently reflected upon the Arabic and Algerian novel by asking why Arabic narrative has been appended to its Western counterpart and how the history of an Arab Nahda can be constructed around a colonial moment. Every Arab moment is made dependent upon the “Napoleonic moment,”² when Napoleon introduced the printing press, while this history overlooks the fact that, even if it was a moment of birth, it was also a moment of the assassination of reason, a moment of colonialism, killing, and destruction, and should therefore be examined from this standpoint, it was thus self-evident that we should seek a differentiated moment, one that locates the beginning within the sites of specificity that “arise from the demarcation of boundaries imposed at the beginning and for its sake, and this represents the particular kind of vision. The ‘discipline/vision’ of ‘reciprocal domination’

¹ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, trans. Kamal Abu Deeb, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Dar al-Adab, 2004), translator’s introduction, 16.

² The question that occurred to me while reading Waciny as he raised the issue of the first colonial moment concerns his rejection of the paternal model in his discussion of the first point of reference. In my view, he raises the question of denying that the Arabic novel is an illegitimate daughter of Western theory within a contrapuntal vision. “Napoleon remains the illegitimate son who seeks to erase this attribute from his civil status because of the hatred and shame attached to it, and to repair, in his own favour, those psychological and social disturbances created by everyone’s unhappy awareness that he restores to the nation the father’s killer while at the same time remaining the son of the Revolution, an emperor whose illegitimate birth was confirmed by historians, who found nothing better with which to explain his astonishing admission to a military college, corresponding in the popular consciousness to the positive aspect of his extraordinary success.” See Marthe Robert, *The Novel of Origins and the Origins of the Novel: The Novel and Psychoanalysis*, trans. Wajih Asaad (Damascus: Arab Writers Union Publications, 1987), 307.

does not reflect the ‘explicit resemblance’ of imagination; rather, imagination inhabits the literary work with self-consciousness at its actual beginning.”¹

These differentiated transitional states of narrative² are the gaps in which the laws of continuity and connection are activated through the movement of creative self-consciousness, the domains in which creativity and memory are linked to consciousness. Niklas Luhmann initially adopts the conceptual-historical position of the second-order observer, through which the historically contingent semantics of both terms are reconstructed and connected to the trajectory of structural changes in society. Within this process, memory and culture are redefined as seemingly indispensable terms of social communication in accordance with the fundamental principles of systems theory and epistemic interests, and are integrated into the comprehensive architecture of the theoretical edifice. In the case of memory and the processes of conscious memory, as Luhmann calls them, systems of consciousness take corresponding forms.

From this perspective, Waciny Laredj’s approach to the periodisation of the Algerian novel sought to organise the relationship between memory and culture, given its considerable importance in preventing operational closure, or self-closure, and thereby ensuring the capacity to produce new dynamic systems as it turned towards the earliest texts. At this stage, and without prejudgment, Waciny’s critical vision may be understood as the result of a decisive, necessary, and prior condition. Waciny Laredj reveals the genuine anxiety surrounding the proper relationship between literature and history, and between history and literature, by dismantling the alienated consciousness that governs this dialectical relationship, unlike other critics and researchers concerned with the Algerian novel in particular and the Arabic novel in general. His attempt to dislodge the historical agency of periodisation from the Algerian novel, or to situate the novel at the zero degree of history, constitutes a bold attempt to renew the history of literary forms by proposing cultural alternatives to our theoretical assumptions about the Algerian novel. In this context, “the problem of beginning lies at the very site of beginning itself, where two kinds of beginning appear, although they are in fact two sides of the same coin. The first, which I call temporal and multiple, anticipates a continuity flowing from it, and this type of beginning is appropriate to work, argument, and discovery. This is what Émile Benveniste describes as the ‘pivotal moment that provides the zero point for calculation,’ enabling us to begin, orient, and measure time to construct the work, to discover, to produce Beginning is a formal appetite that imposes a severe discipline upon the mind, which seeks to think through every turn of its ideas from the beginning; ideas then appear connected in a meaningful sequence of moments continuously experienced.”³

¹ Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, 45–46.

² Spencer Brown’s conception of the emergence of form in *Laws of Form* begins with self-reference, where there is no distinction between self-reference and difference. In other words, there is no distinction between self-reference and observation, since the observer must differ from what is observed and must also be related to itself in order to distinguish itself. An important element in Spencer Brown’s thought is the concept of re-entry, that is, the entry of form into form, or the making of a distinction within what has already been distinguished. See Niklas Luhmann, *Introduction to Systems Theory*, 92, 100.

³ Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, 76.

Waciny maintains that a group of texts reached the limits of creative possibility and drew their narrative consciousness from the system of a distinctive narrative environment.¹ Accordingly, if we exclude these texts because they do not respond to the spirit of the age, such a proposition requires us to examine and understand the internal world of the texts and the manner in which it operates from within. Through a transhistorical dialogical system, a dispersed aesthetic systemicity permeates different periods, produced by a learned culture that intermittently suppressed the voices of this aesthetic. The aesthetic value of these texts was consequently fragmented and dispersed throughout the novel's historical consciousness.

Following Edward Said in *Beginnings*, where Said sought to conceptualise criticism as an act of resistance, Waciny Laredj likewise shifts criticism from the notion of crisis towards that of resistance. He directs a sharp critique at the critical establishment, holding it fully responsible, historically, for the position assigned to the Algerian novel: "The critical establishment must impose itself as a force of resistance."²

"Under this climate, governed by considerable laxity and a lack of debate and epistemic partnership, a living part of our literature dies. Whenever I open a narrative work in order to understand its system, a problematic question arises in my mind: Is the narrative distance between us and our narrative texts really so vast and fatal?"³ For Waciny Laredj, creativity has an essential cultural component. According to him, we have created a major rupture with our earliest texts: *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, Abu al-Ala al-Ma'arri's *The Epistle of Forgiveness*, Ibn Arabi's *Mi'raj*, and others. Within their imaginative systems, these texts carry a substantial historical legacy that articulates our presence within the theoretical architecture of the early novel. Our literary history therefore requires a bold and courageous moment. Waciny Laredj consequently asks: "What does *al-Taghriba al-Hilaliyya* lack in order to constitute the first nucleus of novelistic texts? Today, we can speak of a neglected and suppressed historicity whose source is a fragile self-confidence, caused by successive colonialisms, severe epistemic defeats, and repeated failures to pursue a genuine modernity capable of connecting an enlightened collective memory with a present that is always in the process of achievement and formation."⁴

¹ Waciny thinks from within the model by examining the worlds of the text and the environment, principally invoking differentiation as a decisive moment between environment and system. He therefore does not remain bound to the systemic form of the art of the novel, with its conditions as an incomplete genre and a contested form, but moves beyond this towards examining internal worlds, overcoming reliance on the play of forms. Schmidt drew attention to the play of forms, considering the condition of organisation to constitute an arbitrary art in which the primary form is established as a functional sign of the completeness of the model. According to him, when observing the model, the observer does not focus on a specific aspect, namely form, which would constitute first-order observation, but rather on the "process" of literary production, the observation between inside and outside. Schmidt maintains that "it is possible only to observe forms rather than not observe them, and to know that this occurs through the disclosure of a paradox. Art is therefore 'the substitution of interconnected forms for what cannot be observed as a unity,' and 'what is visible in the world is a necessity dictated by the system.'" According to Luhmann, the function of art is accordingly "to allow the world to appear within the world." See Siegfried J. Schmidt, ed., *Literaturwissenschaft und Systemtheorie*, 140.

² Waciny Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement in the Light of Modern Critical Approaches* (Dar Khayal for Publishing and Translation, 2022), 18.

³ Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 19.

⁴ Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 7.

Waciny challenges the theoretical consciousness underpinning the theory of the Arabic novel, as articulated by critics such as Faisal Darraj and Abdallah Ibrahim. He strongly opposes the propositions of scholars who periodise the Arabic novel by treating *Zaynab* as the first systematic nucleus of Arabic novelistic form and as an epistemic model of the Arabic narrative genre. He states unequivocally: “The novel *Zaynab* was not a blessing for the Arabic novel; rather, the opposite is true. This statement may seem strange and unfair to a man who resisted culturally by imposing this genre, which did not exist according to the recognised Western specifications.”¹

By designating *Zaynab* as the first Arab novelistic achievement, Arab periodisation imposed ready-made moulds and epistemic matrices that severed ties with the historical record and imposed a radical conception that swept away everything that preceded it. Waciny therefore resisted these ready-made certainties, fully aware “that such a statement may overturn many certainties that have become so deeply entrenched in Arab culture that it has become difficult to penetrate their fixed domains without colliding with cultural and scholarly institutions, foremost among them the critical establishment.”² From this perspective, *Zaynab* generated a one-dimensional model of periodisation, as though it had become the Greenwich meridian of the novel after European-centred theory imposed it.

The novel *Zaynab* constituted a specific moment of temporal rupture and propelled the earlier legacy towards extinction. It chose the easiest path through a harmful act of acculturation at the cultural, epistemic, and literary levels. *Zaynab* was a wound at the heart of the memory of more than ten centuries of continuous narrative heritage. More strikingly, amid all this, we assumed that our modernity began with Napoleon’s campaign in Egypt in 1798, that is, with a moment of dependency that remained unliberated from the Western political and literary model, a colonial moment par excellence associated with defeat and with a ready-made Western inheritance prepared for consumption.³ From Waciny’s perspective, *Zaynab* thus constitutes a hybrid cultural and acculturative form that ultimately favoured a falsified mode of writing, namely the novel as conceived by Ian Watt.

Waciny Laredj assumes the function of the observer.⁴ In the sense employed by systems theory, reconsidering this political periodisation because *Zaynab* severed its relationship with

¹ Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 8.

² Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 7.

³ Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 8.

⁴ Waciny invokes several systemic perspectives in confronting the systematic form of *Zaynab*, which is constructed upon an impoverished form of imitation. What lies outside the model can be reached only from within the model. Niklas Luhmann developed his concept of systemic rationality, according to which the system separates itself from its environment and achieves operational closure through the distinction between self-reference and external reference. This distinction renders the system indifferent to its environment and provides the basis for establishing its own complexity. Rationality must therefore be understood as the system’s continuous self-production or self-interruption through its own operations, which articulate its improbable complexity. Functional systems distinguish themselves through the self-reference of second-order observation in order to overcome the blindness of rationality. All that second-order observation can do is render this blindness visible. But how does this apply to art? In his essay “World Art,” Luhmann suggests that the distinction between first-order and second-order observation also distinguishes ancient from modern art. Traditional or premodern art is characterised by a mimetic relationship with the world of first-order observation. Modern art is characterised by world art, a title intended to highlight the paradox of a condition in which art has lost the

all preceding texts, thereby creating a negative and destructive rupture with inherited narrative forms and producing, in his words, a devastating gulf between itself and an ancient narrative heritage that was fully developed in many of its forms. “Within this critical certainty, *Zaynab* became a historical axiom, a foundational novel without a memory, yet it alone became the Arab novelistic narrative memory. It was constructed according to its French model.”¹ Waciny Laredj describes these impoverished colonial periodisations as major historical losses. As a consequence, Arabic and Algerian narratives lost their exploratory journey towards earlier, fully developed models and thus became a lost memory, constructed upon a colonial structure.

“Today’s cultural failures can be understood only by critically returning to these moments of periodisation, retesting them epistemically, excavating them deeply, and placing them within a horizon of questioning.”² He considers these periodisations, concealed behind colonial moments, to be an expression of a damaged horizon of modernity, insofar as they isolated the ancient Arabic narrative achievement and created epistemic gaps between the history of this narrative and the earliest imaginative texts.

The perspective adopted by the researcher, consciously or otherwise, in his engagement with the periodisation of the Algerian novel can be explored through the nature of the vision underpinning that periodisation. The critic seeks to formulate the historical and narrative consciousness of the Algerian individual by searching for the earliest imaginative forms and laying them bare, away from the imperial theoretical assumptions transmitted to us through impoverished acculturation and the *Nahda* in the name of consciousness of the model, under the guise of acculturation and difference, which bears the Lacanian desire for harmony as a colonial consciousness of hegemony in the Gramscian sense. Here, the critic laments the condition and position of criticism within this historical confrontation: “Regrettably, Arab criticism has tended towards the easier path in dealing with literary phenomena and has never paused, with rigour and seriousness, to contemplate its own achievement with considerable insight and a measure of humility Arab historical criticism moved towards a truncated history that excised a vital part of Arab narrative history, and in its investigation of the emergence of the novel, it never seriously sought the genuine ruptures or their foundations It also erased immensely rich imaginative capacities The problem is that this erroneous conception of literature, which severs it from the world in which we live, imposed itself upon criticism, rendering it largely mechanical.”³ Waciny’s project therefore seeks to regulate the critical and periodising system of the Algerian novel. Having supervised the Laboratory of Translation and Terminology and its research teams for a considerable period, he encountered a state of critical laxity within institutional and critical practice, marked by the absence of epistemic, cultural, and civilisational standards capable of meeting intellectual needs. He therefore deemed it necessary to reconsider and regulate the gaps in periodisation

certainties provided by *mimesis*, the “one world” that unifies observer and world. See David Roberts, “The Paradox of Form: Literature and Self-Reference,” *Poetics* 21 (1992): 80.

¹ Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 9.

² Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 14.

³ Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 17.

and critical studies through a stronger critical will aimed at serving Arab and Algerian culture and imposing itself as a force of resistance. “Under this climate, governed by considerable laxity and the absence of debate and epistemic partnership, a living part of our literature dies. Whenever I open a narrative work in order to understand its system, a problematic question arises in my mind: Is the narrative distance between us and our narrative texts really so vast and fatal?”¹

There is agreement that *Zaynab* is not the first Arabic novel. Egyptian cultural centralism established it at a particular historical moment, yet the same theses remain dominant to this day, even though many of those who challenged this centralism have not moved beyond the threshold of the nineteenth century, after discovering texts that preceded *Zaynab*. Each country has come to possess its own foundational novel. In Algeria, for example, there is *The Tale of the Lovers in Love and Longing*, written by the poet Mustafa Ben Ibrahim.²

Waciny maintains that the earliest texts “do not need someone to retrieve them from their ashes as a dead heritage, but rather as living texts no different from other artistic genres, each of which rests upon an internal system that produces literariness and cultural specificity, through which it becomes possible to speak of an Arab and Algerian narrative capable of putting an end to a rupture that is culturally unjustifiable.”³ From this perspective, *Zaynab* appears extremely weak when set against these texts,⁴ as he demonstrates in his analysis of them, having collected the earliest texts in a single volume entitled *Foundational Texts*. Reconsidering these major narratives, which many overlook, contributes to reconstructing Arab narrative consciousness by clarifying the ruptures already discussed and the Nahda, and by moving beyond the Napoleonic thesis. According to Siegfried J. Schmidt, art acknowledges consciousness in the act of observation while choosing form available to communication as communication; the world created through artistic activity thus stands between the producer and the observer.

The researcher Mohammed Kadik argues that “if Abdallah Ibrahim considers Haykal’s novel to be the last of the texts of the foundational period, this means that it represents the best achievement of the transitional process. Ibrahim considers the pioneering status of Haykal’s novel to be historically, artistically, and objectively doubtful, since, as Sayyid Hamid states, at least two novels preceded *Zaynab*. These works employ an Arabic close to ordinary usage and nearer to popular speech; the language does not issue from the writer at all but flows naturally from the characters. This explicitly means that *Zaynab* fulfilled these critical

¹ Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 19.

² Waciny Laredj cites Tayeb Ould Laroussi’s proposition that reading this novel places us before two beginnings, one Arab and one Algerian, since it was written sixty-six years before Muhammad Husayn Haykal’s *Zaynab*, the novel through which the beginning of the Arabic novel is conventionally dated. See Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 23.

³ Laredj, *The Ancient Arabic Narrative Achievement*, 38.

⁴ From another perspective, the novelist Gamal al-Ghitani questions scholars’ insistence on treating *Zaynab* as the first Arabic novel, using emphatic and categorical language: “In my view, *One Thousand and One Nights* is the greatest text in the world, and it contains all the techniques of modern narrative, from the mixing and interweaving of temporalities to an event unfolding in two places at the same time, and so forth. Why this insistence on *Zaynab*?” In an interview conducted by Jihad Fadel, *Questions of the Novel: Interviews with Arab Novelists* (Arab Book House, n.d.), 110.

criteria, which, in our view, could equally be met by an epic text far removed from the novel. Nevertheless, we must note that Abdallah Ibrahim indicated that *Zaynab* appeared at the end of a transitional historical stage marked by considerable overlap between literary tastes and critical judgements. This means that the transitional process had achieved the required ‘contradiction of opposites’ within the Kantian conception. Accordingly, *Zaynab* marked the end of a foundational transitional stage that established the conditions for the Arab context to reach the modern novel, that is, what Abdallah Ibrahim describes as a narrative that envelops facts and events in a thick covering, distances them from the spirit of rapid and sudden movement, and leads them towards a narrative order governed by the logic of internal transformation imposed by the characters and their ideas. Is this sufficient for us to speak of the end of a transitional stage according to the Kantian conception, which requires an intermediate subjective space that enables the individual to participate and communicate? And can we speak of a common sense that expresses the need for transition?”¹

The study advances the contrary proposition that *Zaynab* was not the first Arabic novel to be written. The issue is not simply one of precedence; it goes beyond the play of forms, as previously indicated. The ordering of beginnings is a form of historical understanding, according to Edward Said. For this reason, dating Arab consciousness and narrative from the *Nahda* constituted, according to Waciny Laredj, a fatal moment, because this form of understanding amounts to the displacement of the bourgeois narrative order in Ranajit Guha’s sense. Yet the issue is a deeper one that articulates what Edward Said calls the movement towards consciousness: consciousness of the point of beginning from the point of continuity that follows it, understood as an awareness of the direction in which movement towards differentiation may occur at the moment of flow, the flow of the cultural form of narrative creativity away from the imperialism of metropolitan form. Edward Said observes that “differentiation is sometimes the specialised function of an inherited tradition, discipline, or institution.”²

Conclusion:

The procedural tools and critical apparatus through which Waciny Laredj approached the position of the Algerian novel within history derive their method from the Algerian model. The researcher undertakes a conscious and deliberate process of scholarly experimentation, attempting to reperiodise cultural history, to detach himself from the colonial moment of European periodisation, and to respond to the questions most closely connected with the formation of the Algerian cultural mind and its historical problematics. From Waciny’s perspective, the novel is “a new art among the forms of Arabic writing. To date, there is not a single systematic study that addresses the Arabic novel from a perspective that links it to the reality that produced it. Even the theoretical studies of Georg Lukács, despite their quality, often present considerable difficulty when one attempts to connect them with the underdeveloped character of the Arabic novel, which was shaped by an underdeveloped

¹ Mohammed Kadik, *From the Epic to the Novel: Mechanisms of Generic Transition* (Algiers: Dar al-Tanwir, 2020), 410–11.

² Said, *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, 76.

reality when measured against novelistic achievements at the human level.”¹ The critical landscape of the contemporary Algerian narrative mind must therefore invest in a critical orientation capable of mapping visions of the world that articulate a cultural vision produced by representations of theory’s alienated consciousness.

¹ Laredj, Trends in the Arabic Novel in Algeria, 8.