Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers
The PROFESIOLab electronic, peer-reviewed, open-access Magazine

ISSN 1989-9572

DOI:10.47750/jett.2024.15.04.009

Under the novelistic writing: crisscrossing between history and story

BOUGHACHICHE Meriem[1]

BENTOUNSI Ikram Aya[2]

Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers, Vol.15(4)

https://jett.labosfor.com/

Date of Reception: 01 May 2024

Date of Revision: 29 Aug 2024

Date of Acceptance: 14 Oct 2024

BOUGHACHICHE Meriem, BENTOUNSI Ikram Aya (2024). Under the novelistic writing: crisscrossing between history and story. *Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers*, Vol.15(4).87-93.

Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers
The PROFESIOLab electronic, peer-reviewed, open-access Magazine

Journal for Educators, Teachers and Trainers, Vol. 15(4)
ISSN1989 –9572

https://jett.labosfor.com/

Under the novelistic writing: crisscrossing between history and story

BOUGHACHICHE Meriem[1]
SLADD Laboratory. Faculty of Letters and languages, University of Constantine1, Algeria
meriem.boughachiche@umc.edu.dz

BENTOUNSI Ikram Aya[2]
DECLIC Laboratory (Didactics, Enunciation, Corpus, Linguistics, Cultural Interaction). Faculty of Letters and languages, University of Oum El Bouaghi, Algeria.
bentounsi.ikram@yahoo.fr

Summary

A testament to the undeniable vitality of contemporary writing, the historicizing mode of the novel underscores a desire for truth as a means of understanding the present: just as historians are drawn to fiction, novelists are equally inspired by history, which serves as a significant source of their creativity and demonstrates their commitment. This article aims to explore the novelistic discourse in its rewriting of history and to analyze it through the lens of identity and otherness about a new sense of temporality, as exemplified in the works of Alexandre Najjar. In these novels, history, fiction, confession, biography, and autofiction blend through diverse forms such as letters, memoirs, filial narratives, and portraits. The result is a hybrid creation on the boundary between the novel and historical truth—a merging of history and its narrative, allowing for an examination of representation, reconstruction, and the reconfiguration of figures of otherness. These figures are explored through psychological, philosophical, and archetypal concepts.

Keywords: Storytelling, Fictionalized history, Historical novel, Perception of otherness, Historical fiction.

As a form of poetic truth, the novel has always been a central feature of all societies, dating back to its earliest manifestations. Whether ancient, modern, or contemporary, narrative forms have undergone profound changes over the centuries. However, it is essential to acknowledge that no novel can exist outside its historical context and an accompanying discourse, where complex and varied styles and themes continually surface, including the challenging question of identity and otherness, are reformulated and reconsidered. This theme of identity and otherness has traversed time, space, cultures, and imaginations, remaining a persistent subject of reflection.

The perception of otherness is as old as time itself. It is vividly illustrated in the work of the Greek historian Herodotus, whose writings encompass various fields, including history, philosophy, ethnography, anthropology, and geography. His "distant view" of others, which simultaneously reflects on the self, laid the groundwork for decentering in historical inquiry—an approach that emphasizes the diversity of peoples and customs. As a result, Herodotus' thought serves as a valuable tool for examining the problem of otherness within the narrative of History, its rewriting, the historical novel, historical fiction, and the fictionalization of history—all modern and contemporary constructs that converge around the interplay between history and its narrative as explored through novelistic writing.

This article focuses on the continuous movement between identity and otherness by examining how one responds to the other in the novels of Lebanese writer Alexandre Najjar. It is crucial to situate Najjar's work within the broader context of contemporary novelistic trends, forms, and approaches, which enable novelists to revisit their worlds to question and better understand them. This exploration transcends a strictly Western or European framework, reflecting a universal order. As emphasized in the works of François Dosse, novelists, in their quest to "be in the world," often leave the confines of their studies to explore invisible areas, aiming to address the fractures and wounds of a social world that is frequently violent and deeply unequal (Dosse, 2023: 9). This evolving relationship with history, memory, the past, and the present highlights a fundamental shift in how novelists conceive their work.

Throughout literary history, the themes of identity and otherness have been addressed by a range of pivotal works: from the famous Greek maxim "know thyself" to the travelogues of orientalists, to the humanist reflections of Montaigne's *Essays*, Montesquieu's *Persian Letters*, and Rousseau's *Confessions*. These works illustrate how identity and otherness have long captivated intellectual curiosity, fostering a tradition of introspection and reflection on the self about others.

Travel accounts of the Orient have endowed artistic and literary orientalism with a distinguished legacy. However, the question of otherness remains closely linked to the hegemonic gaze of Western writers and artists. Radical otherness, exoticism as an aesthetic of diversity, and similar concepts have been used to define this relationship in literature. Despite the controversies these ideas have generated, particularly within postcolonial studies, the questions of identity and otherness are understood differently depending on the era, context, and writer.

In addition to the significant contributions of Western philosophical approaches to this central issue of human relationships, the social sciences have helped clarify how personal mythologies and the writer's efforts to construct and reconstruct identity and multiple imaginaries are influenced by encounters with others, foreign places, and alternate realities. Structuralist criticism, in particular, has provided the tools to analyze literary texts across genres, revealing their rules and inner workings in all their complexity.

Building on this theoretical foundation, the present reflection offers a philosophical and poetic reading. This analysis aims to demonstrate how the fictionalization of history, or the discourse surrounding history, when dealing with identity and otherness, can illuminate the more profound meaning, moral dimensions, and aesthetics of work by examining the overlap and complementarity of representations of identity and otherness.

In the novels of Alexandre Najjar, such as *Le Roman de Beyrouth*, *Phenicia*, *Athina*, *Berlin 36*, *L'Astronome*, *Harry et Franz*, and *Le Syndrome de Beyrouth*, diversity is embraced and perceived as a source of richness within a shared historical narrative. The relationship between identity and otherness is explored through various representations that literary creation offers, blending history and fiction via poetic and symbolic means.

Four key points will be addressed in this reflection: (1) the use of myth, not merely as a pretext, but as a framework for discourse on otherness; (2) the encounter with the "diverse" or the exotic experience; (3) an indictment against racism and a plea for respect for others; and (4) the elevation of otherness. These themes encapsulate the essence of Najjar's thought, his commitment, and his rhetorical approach.

Writing in the Shadow of Myth

The novels *Phoenicia* and *Athina* by Alexandre Najjar are powerful illustrations of how myth and history intertwine in poetic narrative to explore profound themes of identity and otherness. In *Phoenicia*, Najjar brings to life the grandeur and decline of an ancient civilization, focusing on the Phoenicians—renowned for their navigation and trade—amid the historical episode of Tyre's siege by Alexander the Great. Through the dual perspective of the besieged Tyrians and the Macedonian conqueror, the novel contrasts the mythical resistance figure of Elissa with the ambition of Alexander, embodying a confrontation between invader and defender that is epic in both scope and tone. The novel's underlying message extends beyond the ancient world, offering an allegory of modern-day Lebanon, a country fragmented by sectarianism and internal divisions, much like the rival Phoenician cities of the past.

Najjar's narrative in *Phoenicia* deftly intertwines romance and war, creating a space where the heroic figure of Elissa transcends the simple role of resistance leader, evolving into a symbol of feminine heroism and adventure. Her tragic love story with the city of Carthage and the betrayal of her homeland by neighboring cities like Sidon and Byblos reflects Lebanon's current struggles. Meanwhile, despite his military victories, Alexander is portrayed as ultimately fragile, his conquests hollow in the face of human suffering and existential doubt. The philosopher Zeno, introduced towards the novel's end, acts as a moral counterpoint, preaching Stoic ideals of equality and fraternity, offering a vision of unity that contrasts the divisiveness of war. His call for all people to be considered "fellow citizens," governed by a common law, resonates with a pastoral vision of peace and cooperation, symbolizing the triumph of Stoic thought over imperial ambition.

In *Athina*, Najjar shifts the focus to the feminine, creating a novel where the protagonist is central to the story and symbolic of the broader struggles of women for freedom and independence. Set against the backdrop of the Greek War of Independence and Ottoman oppression, the novel traces the journey of Athina, a determined young woman fighting for her autonomy. Her struggle becomes a metaphor for the larger tension between women and men in society, particularly in the context of otherness. Through Athina's character, Najjar reflects on the universal quest for freedom, positioning her as a Mediterranean resistance figure against despotism.

In these works, Najjar uses metaphor, historical allegory, and mythical allusion to weave narratives that are as much philosophical as they are poetic. The love stories and historical events are not merely backdrops but serve as vehicles for deep reflections on freedom, identity, and the human condition. The author's use of female protagonists like Elissa and Athina elevates the discourse on feminine otherness, positioning women as equal participants in the quest for liberty and justice. While grounded in their specific historical and cultural contexts,

these characters embody universal struggles that resonate across time and space, making Najjar's novels timeless meditations on the human spirit's resilience in the face of oppression.

Finally, *The Astronomer*, a novel where exploring the exotic meets philosophical reflection, complements this trajectory. Here, Najjar expands his exploration of otherness, intertwining the philosophical with the poetic. As in his other works, the protagonists of these stories are defined by their exceptional destinies, driven by a relentless pursuit of truth, happiness, and freedom. Through their journeys, the reader is invited to reflect not only on the struggles of individuals but also on the broader human endeavor to understand the self and the other in a world fraught with division and conflict.

The meeting with the "Diverse."

The writing of The Astronomer polarizes exoticism from the relationship between the East and the West. Focusing on Tuscan society and its icons, the Lebanese one is also present through a historical discourse of an encounter between East and West. The exotic experience is not read as a simple image but as an exoticism that constructs the other as an identity. A Mediterranean historical novel, The Astronomer has as its backdrop the Florence of the Medici and the East of the early 17th century where François, a young Parisian astronomer passionate about astronomy, enters the service of Galileo, a scholar, a man of genius fighting obscurantism but carried away by a secret suffering after having given in to the pressures of those around him by leaving the woman he loved.

In the novel, Galileo and his science occupy a central place: eponymous character; the narration highlights a scientific discourse, in particular, the functioning of the stars. Although many actual biographical elements frame Galileo's presence, the fact remains that the portrait reserved for him makes him a character in a novel. Added to this is the fictional story through the love story between Najla and François. The narration includes names of scientists such as Nicolas Copernicus, Johannes Kepler, Tycho Brahé, Giordano Bruno, and many others. Historical figures, such as Cosimo II, Robert Dudley, Fakhreddine II, and men of the Church, were protagonists or serving the context.

Francis, a perfect navigator, is called to the service of Galileo, who wanted to test one of his original creations whose existence must remain secret: the celatone, a telescope, and instrument allowing navigators to determine their geographical position from any place in the sea. The experimentation of this invention will lead the assistant Francesco to Lebanon on a ship that sets sail for a political mission. The celatone leads the assistant into a perilous adventure wherein invisible conspirators prepare to get their hands on the invention. Francesco shows courage and defends the mission entrusted to him to the end. At the same time, the Emir of Mount Lebanon, Fakhreddine II, exiled in Tuscany, meets the scientist where Francesco meets a Lebanese woman, a close friend of the prince, with whom he falls in love. However, this love fails: under her family's influence, Najla is forced into a marriage already promised to a wealthy Muslim. The day after Galileo's famous trial, the young man gathers his memories to tell his own experience of a Western astronomer in love with an Eastern woman.

Indeed, this novel of love and adventure traces a whole section of history between East and West: the West of knowledge and the quest for truth fighting religious obscurantism, that of orientalists, of the protectorate and diplomatic relations… but also and above all of an exotic and impossible love between Najla and François, between the East and the West—a doubly significant metaphor.

The Orient, as an "invention of the West," the essential thesis of Edouard Saïd, is perfectly illustrated in Francis' speech in his descriptions of Najla, its oriental beauty, of Deir-el-kamar, "Convent of the Moon," which fascinates Francis and makes him say: "There are places that make you want to live there forever. I would have liked to stay longer to converse with its men and women, admire its old people, drink its water and its light..." (Alexandre Najjar: 159). However, he is forced to return home once his mission of protecting the prince and his relatives from the Ottomans is completed.For the astronomer that he is, "Stargazing was the school of love" since both have in common: "the quest, contemplation and the joy of discovery" (Alexandre Najjar: 171). Finally, François and Najla are the metaphorical couple of a long history between France and Lebanon.

Against Racism: An Ode to Fraternity and Coexistence

Berlin 36 addresses the theme of otherness and identity and the conflicts these concepts have historically caused. Through its narrators and characters, the novel depicts efforts to understand others—those from different cultures, religions, races, and worldviews. It explores the rich diversity of humanity, which has often been a source of tension and conflict between civilizations.

In the face of shaken humanism, the novelist assumes the role of an advocate, wielding eloquence against all forms of injustice. The work champions an ideal of tolerance and respect for others, as underscored by the prologue of *Berlin 36*:

> *"Without Jesse Owens, I would never have visited America. For years, a Lebanese friend living in Boston had been inviting me to spend a few days with him, but I could not bring myself to go, paralyzed by my contempt for George W. Bush's American policies, which I found too arrogant. The day finally came when I decided to take the plunge, inspired by my passion for Jesse Owens. For me, Owens*

> *represented the America I admired—bold, determined, and free. Owens was not only an accomplished athlete who shone at the Berlin Olympics; he was also a man who overcame the segregation plaguing his country and ridiculed the Nazi theory of Aryan supremacy. In Lebanon, like him, I had experienced 'apartheids' and resistance to 'organized darkness.' I could not remain indifferent to his fight against racism and hatred."* (Najjar: 1)

Berlin 36 offers a historical narrative that leads the novelist to portray Jesse Owens, the African American athlete who "symbolized peaceful resistance to human stupidity, racism, hatred, and dictatorship." Owens transcended differences of nationality and race to achieve athletic greatness and, more importantly, disavow the "monster Hitler, who plunged the world into horror" (p. 277). Owens' gold medal at the Olympics marked a turning point in race relations: *"Did it take an Olympic gold for the American people to finally recognize that a Black man was equal to a White man?"* (p. 183)

> *"I am proud to be an American. I see the sun shining through the clouds when I realize that millions of Americans are finally recognizing that what we Negroes are doing is for the glory of our country and that Negroes are full citizens."* (Najjar: 186)

The novel's critique of racism is amplified by its biting portrayal of Hitler and the racist ideology of the Third Reich. One passage describes Hitler's reluctance to shake hands with Owens: *"What I feared is happening. I do not want to be forced to shake hands with Negroes. They are winning everything because they benefit from the physical strength of primitive man. In the future, we must prevent this unfair competition by banning athletes of color from the Games!"* (p. 183). To avoid accusations of favoritism from the International Olympic Committee, Hitler resolves to congratulate a White American athlete. When asked about Helen Stephens, the 100-meter race winner, Hitler says: *"By congratulating a White American champion, I will show that my issue is not with Americans, but with Negroes."* (Najjar: 183–184)

The Olympic Games thus serve as a stage for exploring the identity/otherness dichotomy. Other historical figures, such as Goebbels and Göring, also appear in the novel, hiding behind the mask of peaceful Germany. The novel critiques Pierre de Coubertin, the founder of the modern Olympics, for supporting Nazi ideology. However, figures like Sheikh Pierre Gemayel, a Lebanese politician, reject intellectual terrorism and racist theories, confirming that the Games revealed the true nature of Hitler's ideology despite its superficial organization and efficiency. Ultimately, the novel's message stands against all forms of racism and social injustice, including those still prevalent in Lebanon.

The Beirut Novel and *The Beirut Syndrome* allow the novelist to reconnect with Lebanon's history and collective memory through flashbacks that explore the past to understand the present better. In *The Beirut Novel*, the narrative is shaped by testimony. The story spans generations: the grandfather, who participated in peasant revolts against the Ottomans; the father, a doctor witnessing the upheavals of the 20th century; and the son, Philippe, a journalist experiencing both the golden years of cosmopolitan Lebanon and the bitterness of an absurd war. These characters illustrate coexistence challenges in a multicultural and multi-religious Lebanon, a nation mired in prejudice yet embodied by a beautiful and rebellious city.

In *The Beirut Syndrome*, the extended metaphor of the city as a woman returns to the civil war era, marked by the Christian Kataeb, the Druze of Jumblatt, the Shiite Amal militiamen, and the Palestinian fedayeen from across the border. Amira, a young Christian fighter, is sent to France to study peace, and upon her return to Beirut after 20 years, she finds herself navigating a nation scarred by the period from 2000 to 2019, culminating in the devastating explosion that weakened Lebanon's economy.

While the novel exposes the corruption of Lebanon's ruling class and the deep-seated social injustice, it also celebrates the resilience and spirit of the Lebanese people. The novel pays tribute to Lebanon's heroes and martyrs, including figures such as Rafik Hariri and assassinated journalists, in a historicizing fiction or "historical novel" that emphasizes the power of commitment to freedom of expression, regardless of religion or social origin.

The Greatness of Otherness

Harry and Francis tell the story of an unexpected encounter between two individuals who appear to be complete opposites—separated by borders, war, and career—but who become allies against the extremism, obscurantism, and arbitrariness of the Nazi regime.

The protagonists of this novel, Harry Baur and Franz Stock, were actual historical figures who met at least once. While it is uncertain whether the German chaplain Abbé Stock saved the French actor Harry Baur in Nazi-occupied Paris, the novelist imagines and develops this encounter, brief though it may have been, into a narrative where the historical backdrop elevates a hymn to fraternity and peace, centered on the theme of otherness.

Harry Baur, a renowned celebrity, often called the "sacred monster" of French silent and talking cinema, was also a prominent stage actor. He portrayed characters such as Jean Valjean in *Les Misérables*, Volpone, and Beethoven, and even took on the role of a Jew due to his Alsatian heritage and fluency in German. However, this role sparked rumors of his being Jewish. These rumors were fueled by his solidarity with Jewish actors and the

Jewish origins of his second wife, Rebeca Behar (also known as Rika Radifé). Denounced by his peers, Baur became the target of a Gestapo witch hunt, leading to his imprisonment and torture. Tragically, he died shortly after being released from prison.

During his incarceration in the Parisian prisons of the Third Reich, Baur found solace in his meeting with Franz Stock, a German chaplain sympathetic to the French prisoners. Despite the horrors of the war, an extraordinary bond of friendship formed between the two men, leading to Baur's release through Stock's unwavering support and devotion to his humanitarian mission. In his role as a chaplain, Stock condemned the Nazi barbarity, defending Harry Baur until the end, repulsed by the actions of his compatriots and the dictates of the Nazi regime.

The novel is rigorously structured, aligning with the judicial genre, where the chaplain assumes the role of a lawyer in a courtroom drama. His voice takes center stage, pleading Baur's case. The chaplain argues:

> *Harry Baur hails from a Christian family in Alsace. He was baptized, raised by a nun, made his first communion with the Marists, and was confirmed by the Archbishop of Paris. He even married in a church and almost became a seminarian! (...) Without a doubt! I even administered communion to him in his cell. Here are the documents that corroborate my assertions. (...) Most Turks are Muslims of the Hanafi school. However, Rika Radifé is of Turkish origin, born in Constantinople. The Gestapo even sent her an imam to test her knowledge of the Quran! To strengthen my case, I now move the debate to a political territory...* (Alexandre Najjar: 137-138).

Beyond Father Stock's humanitarian efforts as the representative of the German Catholic Mission in Paris, the novel also highlights the crucial role played by the Paris Mosque in saving lives during this crisis.

> *I know that the General Commission for Jewish Affairs asked the Paris Mosque to verify or invalidate the status of individuals claiming to be Muslim, whom it "suspected" of being Jewish. However, I have learned, under the seal of secrecy, that the founder and rector of the mosque, Kaddour Benghabrit, and his administrative staff would sometimes issue false certificates of Muslim identity or conversion to Islam to Jewish women when circumstances permitted, helping them escape arrest or deportation.* (Alexandre Najjar: 81).

The novel poignantly portrays the "greatness of otherness" through the human interactions and exchanges between the actor and the chaplain within a universe of brutality, hatred, and relentless rejection. Ultimately, it is a story of possible reconciliation.

What emerges from this reading is that "historical novels," to use the term coined by Dominique Viart, offer a new way of understanding and engaging with history. Alexandre Najjar's work exemplifies this approach, emphasizing the quest for meaning and the pursuit of utopian ideals—specifically, the utopia of coexistence. This is an imaginary and idealized space that only writing can continually create and recreate, addressing the fundamental question of otherness and intercultural dialogue. This new regime of historicity, reflected in literary and historical expressions, constantly invokes collective memory, creating a meaningful narrative within the work of novelists like Najjar, who, much like modern historians, seek to reclaim the past and make sense of the present. In doing so, these writers leave their desks and venture into the world like ethnographers, returning with stories that resonate with the tensions and struggles of contemporary society.

Celebrated myths, mythologized figures, impassioned pleas, and legal indictments structure the novel's discourse, embodying values communicated through accusatory rhetoric and eloquent testimonies on identity and otherness. The novel invites reflection on respect for others, diversity, tolerance, the excesses of war, extremism, intellectual terrorism, racism, and dictatorship, but above all, the greatness of otherness.

While history and memory provide an expansive reservoir of themes on human relationships, fiction allows for exploring infinite meanings through imagination, metaphor, fable, symbolism, and allegory, all serving a distant reality that remains ever-present.

At the beginning of the 21st century, literature has moved far beyond the narcissistic and self-centered works of the past. Instead, today's writers are deeply attuned to contemporary events, past traumas, and how these have been processed by collective memory. Their work often parallels that of historians and sometimes provokes cautious defenses of national borders. (François Dosse: 11).

Through this constant interplay between history and narrative, the contemporary "historical novel" emerges, offering a new lens through which to view the past.

Bibliographic references

-Dosse, F. (2023). The truths of the novel. A history of the present time [Les vérités du roman. Une histoire du temps présent]. Cerf. Paris
-Hartog, F. (2003). Regimes of historicity [Régimes d'historicité]. Seuil. Paris
-Levinas E. (1963). Difficult freedom [Difficile liberté]. Paperback. Paris
-Najjar, A. (1997). The Astronomer [L'Astronome]. Grasset. Paris
-Najjar, A. (2000). Athina [Athina]. Grasset. Paris

-Najjar, A. (2005). The novel of Beirut [Le roman de Beyrouth]. Plon: Paris
-Najjar, A. (2008). Phénicia [Phénicia]. Plon. Paris
-Najjar, A. (2009). Berlin 36 [Berlin 36]. Plon. Paris
-Najjar, A. (2018). Harry and Franz [Harry et Franz]. Plon. Paris
-Najjar, A. (2021). The Beirut Syndrome [Le syndrome de Beyrouth]. Plon. Paris
-Saïd, E. (2006). Orientalism. The Orient created by the West [L'Orientalisme. L'Orient crée par l'Occident]. Seuil, Coll. "The Color of Ideas" [La Couleur des Idées]. Paris
-Segalen, V. (1982). Essay on exoticism. An aesthetic of diversity [Essai sur l'exotisme. Une esthétique du divers]. Fata Morgana, Coll « Explorations ». Paris
-Viart, D. (2012). "Historicity of Contemporary Literature" [Historicité de la littérature contemporaine] in Dominique VIART and Laurent DEMANZE, ed., Ends of Literature, volume 2, Historicity of Contemporary Literature [Historicité de la littérature contemporaine]. Armand Collin. Paris