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Dr. Mouada Aldjia ¹

¹: Morsli Abdullah University Center - Tipaza – Ageria-, mouadaaldjia5@gmail.com,
mouadae.aldjia@cu-tipaza.dz, ORCID ID: 0009-0004-4734-8183.

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Abstract:

Talking about Gnostic discourse in general, and about Gnostic narration in particular, is a turning towards those existential, metaphysical worlds that inevitably produce spiritual relationships between the self and its reality, and between the self and existence, with the aim of touching upon the reality of the act of identification between the ego (human being) as a part, and the absolute as a whole in a transcendent, luminous crucible.

Therefore, through this research paper, we endeavor to shed light on the Gnostic narrative project of the Moroccan novelist “Abdel-Ilah Ben Arafa”, in which we touched upon existential implications through which he wages the battle of memory and establishes a project he called “new literature” with a religious reference and cognitive Gnostic goals that achieve a transformation in the reader’s conscience, behavior, and knowledge by reconnecting the self with its memory, history, and cultural, intellectual, as well as Gnostic heritage in particular.

Since the Gnostic novel transcended and combined the magic of writing through adopting the path of allusion and using Sufi language, the depth of contemplation, the confusion of the question, and the pursuit of the luminous path with the aim of taking the reader out of the crucible of intellectual confusion, historical ignorance, and the chaos of concepts in the cultural heritage, it became a real model that calls for interpretive consideration that goes beyond superficial meanings and searches for the inner purposes.

Hence, we pose the following question: To what extent was the Gnostic novel of “Ben Arafa” able to represent a true transcendent model of the discourse of the self through reconsidering Sufi thought, its aesthetic angles, philosophical approaches, and civilizational stakes, and destabilizing cultural contexts in order to achieve sublime spiritual values?

Keywords:

Sufism - Culture - Interpretation - Narrative - Gnosticism - Heritage

1/- Presentation:

The text provokes questions, and the movement of cognitive accumulation stimulates feelings and triumphs over the constants in it. Its formulation in the structure of its understanding of the variables of reading that create something new in it, and remove the constants from it to reveal the hidden elements in it, and this is what makes the reader renewed and changed with the change of readings, and it is a natural phenomenon for reading to change towards developing understanding in response to the variables of the era according to what it seeks to achieve in moments of revelation and vision.

Since writing is usually a reaction to a situation full of crisis and suffering, and a departure from the circle of silence in order to establish a different equivalent, relying on language in all of this, it is natural that Sufi writing would go beyond that, towards presenting the specificity of spiritual practice and Gnostic manifestations, by adopting the path of allusion, and what it leads to in terms of cultural implications that show and highlight the specificity of the Gnostic message, outwardly and inwardly.

Gnostic writing goes beyond pure religious discourse towards charging the text with a civilizational intellectual heritage and depicting a social cultural reality with all its ontological and epistemological dimensions. The language of the text, accordingly, has gone beyond spiritual aims and objectives to: “exploding its comprehensive concepts, and the tool for this explosion is the construction of the symbolic and indicative image. As long as interpretation is always placed in the realm of the possible, it remains constantly open. Therefore, the Sufi indicative language also remains open and not closed, unlike social language. Sufi language builds bridges between what is referred to and strange and mysterious meanings, inviting the reader to discover them and deduce their secret. Sufi writing is therefore an exciting writing that

wards off the interested reader towards it, just as a moth is attracted towards a source of light or just as the Sufi's self is attracted towards the divine truth.”⁽¹⁾

From this perspective, language, for the people of Gnosticism, is no longer “a form that carries content or a vessel that carries its content, but rather the form becomes the content and the content becomes the form...”⁽²⁾.

Accordingly, Sufi writing became “an obsession through which the Sufi expresses his tension and anxiety, and through this language he wants to penetrate beyond the familiar and the usual. He sets out from life, but not to return to it, but rather to rush towards the absolute, the permanent, and the amazing.”⁽³⁾

2/- The Gnostic Discourse and the Paths of Reading and Interpretation

The process of questioning any literary text requires taking into account the distance between the cognitive world and the reader's cultural field, and that of the author, and “overcoming this distance means embarking on a journey that leads us from our familiar spiritual world to the strange world of the author.”⁽⁴⁾.

Accordingly, the reader finds himself living the adventure of entering the author's cultural cognitive worlds, and realizing the points of convergence between them and his present and apparent worlds. It is a journey of discovery and deduction based on the act of internal dialogic exchange between a present self and another that is revealed yet absent.

All of this is the field of expertise of the interpretive study, which seeks, through this integrative act between the poles of the production process, to fuse the horizons of the Gnostic experience and its cognitive specificities, and its cultural implications. According to this perspective, the text is farther and deeper than being a mirror reflecting the image of its owner, his life, and the outcome of his psychological and social experiences, and his ideological and cultural accumulations. It is an internal struggle between the self's awareness and its inner insights.

Thus, interpretation is not a theory bound by certain and fixed rules and controls, nor is it a philosophy, but rather it takes from it the product of the contemplation that it follows, nor is it an ideological or doctrinal orientation, but rather a method and approach to understanding, interpretation, as well as artistic and aesthetic evaluation. It is sufficient for the interpreter to be

imbued with different intellectual positions in order to practice his interpretive process of literary texts in a manner consistent with his ideological positions and paths.

This is because “the real interpretation that produces the meaning of texts requires discovering the meaning through analyzing the levels of context, as the text ultimately sides with an ideology that has its seeds or genetic precursors in the culture.”⁽⁵⁾ It is ultimately the product of the interaction of two ideologies: the ideology of the sender, which then forms the ideology of the text, and thus the ideology of reading. This is the cognitive space on which the interpretive approach operates.

The effectiveness of interpretive understanding is embodied within the levels of reading theory in diverting the apparent to the hidden as an indicator of it, and adopting the principles of intuition and contemplative vision in understanding texts according to their hidden meaning. This effectiveness is also embodied more in “the recipient’s contribution to analyzing the interpretation equation, not only as a receptive “I,” but also as an active “I” that suggests its ability to deconstruct texts with the visions it possesses, in such a way that each new reading announces a new birth of the meaning or meaning implied or projected onto the text.”⁶

The essential condition for the interpretation equation is knowing the life of the work in the consciousness of multiple generations of readers, which gives one single meaning different connotations and makes it not closed but rather open to possible and probable interpretive possibilities, which can open the way for the emergence of multiple and diverse meanings.

Thus, the interpretive process as a critical practice differs from other cognitive theories in a fundamental point, namely the interaction between the poles of the creative process, i.e. the interaction between the structure of the literary text and its recipient, who plays the role of the second producer of the text according to the context of culture.

It is nothing but a journey in search of what is hidden in the shadows of words and what is written between the lines, and in filling in those blank spaces that the author deliberately leaves in his literary text with the intention of inciting his reader, who strives hard not to leave it empty, and to give it its semantic depth and actual value.

Thus, according to this approach, we can make meaning the product of an interaction between the text and the reader, the latter who must perceive creativity and fill in the gaps contained in

creative texts. As a result of this interaction, we find ourselves faced with a new text, neither the author's text nor the reader's, but rather the reading text. By this, we mean the interpretive reading that invests in what structural reading and deconstructive reading have produced, except that the latter does not stray far from interpretive reading, since interpretation is nothing but "a dialogue with the creator's text, making that dialogue subject to dissection and deconstruction, and in doing so it does not acknowledge the model text; therefore, interpretation creates a research text based on another depository."⁽⁷⁾.

Based on what we have mentioned, it has become clear how interpretation, as a mental activity, is like a space that is impossible to define, surrounded by various worlds that are impossible to know, and in which components that are difficult to clarify overlap. Its sole goal is the literary text and the truth that it seeks to deduce.

In light of these cognitive problems and the hermeneutical insights previously raised, it became clear that there is an urgent need for a new method in approaching the Gnostic corpus, since the Sufi text, specifically the narrative one, is not like any other text. It is a text surrounded by various worlds that combine truth and imagination and aim to reveal what is unspoken and dissect the systems that produce it. This is what provokes the reader's taste to adopt it as a fertile field for applying the mechanisms of the interpretive procedure.

In addition, the Sufi text, and the narrative text in particular, is a renewed verbal space based on symbolic coding. "The aesthetic experience that the Sufi lives does not deal with apparent beauty in its actual, true form, but rather as a nakedness borrowed from divine beauty. Therefore, Sufis always search for the inner self and do not rely much on directness, because it does not lead to true knowledge. It opens the way for wings to fly behind the words and phrases to other meanings that the word bears through interpretation and explanation."⁽⁸⁾.

Since reading is a process of discovery before it is an interpretation of the written text, it has become imperative for us to discover the world of the Sufi text and Sufi writing, as a renewed verbal space in which the reader stands before the terror of the word and the depth of meaning. Based on the above, contemporary critical thinking is not satisfied with searching for the explicit meanings of the text, but rather its goal is to dig beyond the aims in order to grasp the purposes. This procedure is no longer its only goal, but has become a necessity imposed by the text on its reader. Accordingly, it has been transcended to be not only what is meant by reading and

interpretation, but rather the cultural systems that are pregnant with the field of understanding and interpretation.

3/- Cultural Systems and Interpretive Necessity:

Contemporary critical theory has moved towards interrogating the cultural burden and its ideological outcomes within creative texts, and the birth of cultural criticism has been announced as a counterpart to literary criticism. This cognitive shift has necessarily required interpretive criticism to go beyond the aesthetic specificity of the text towards digging into cultural purposes and contents.

Cultural systems, with their differences and diversity in the literary text, are of great importance in producing the meaning that inevitably expresses a cultural system embedded in the folds of the text in an impossible and intense way. It is a balanced system that is transmitted from one generation to another through repetition and practice in an unconscious, unintentional manner. It is often hidden and not apparent in the text, but it seeks to achieve implicit goals that are reinforced by the prevailing culture.⁽⁹⁾

A/- On the Nature of the Pattern:

The term “pattern” is mentioned in Arabic dictionaries and is synonymous with the meaning of order. This is what is stated in Lisan al-Arab under the root (n-s-q): “The system of everything is what is in the manner of a single general system in things, and you have arranged it in a coordination.”⁽¹⁰⁾ This is linguistically, but technically, Al-Ghadami considered (pattern) as a word: “.. It is frequently used in public and private discourse, and is common in writings to the point that its meaning may be distorted, and it appears simple as if it means what was according to a single system... and it may come as a synonym for the meaning of structure... or the meaning of system according to the concept by “De Saussure.”..⁽¹¹⁾

Hence, we can consider the term “pattern” as a bracelet from a linguistic or technical standpoint; one of the most important terms that occupied an important position in studies of text and discourse linguistics, and its purpose is to follow the sequence of the components that make up the structure in a certain context, or what is generated by the movement of the relationship between the elements that make up the structure, except that this movement has a system and a law that governs it that can be observed, revealed and interrogated.

As if we were to say that this novel has its own order that is generated by the succession of the actions of the characters in it, or that these elements that make up this painting of threads and colors are composed according to an order of their own.⁽¹²⁾ Muhammad Miftah also states that: “There is no agreed-upon definition of the pattern, as its definitions exceed twenty. However, a common core can be identified, which is that the pattern is composed of a group of elements that are interconnected with each other, with the presence of a distinguishing feature or features between one element and another.”⁽¹³⁾

B/- Cultural Pattern and Production of Meaning:

With textual criticism approaches, the text is dealt with from a purely formal perspective, considering it a closed pattern that is read for itself and from itself, far from any contextual authority that contributes to producing its internal meanings. However, with cultural criticism, the critical awareness based on it has become more flexible in transcending external contexts that appear within the text in the form of implicit systems, on which all components are built, whether structural, aesthetic, or influential.

Thus, according to this perspective, the text became an effective means of discovering the tricks of culture in passing on its systems.⁽¹⁴⁾ The prevailing culture in a society constitutes the frame of reference for producing the meaning contained in texts, including creative texts. Words are not merely neutral signifiers, but rather derive their meanings from the social and cultural context in which they were produced, used, and received, as the meanings of a single phrase vary according to the prevailing cultural pattern.

What concerns us here is the work of cultural criticism on literary and creative texts, and the central proposition in this criticism, in my opinion, is based on the connection between the meaning of the sign (the meaning of the word) and the cultural context in which that sign is circulated, meaning that the text, especially the creative one, does not give the same meaning except within the same cultural system that frames it. The meaning of the text does not result, therefore, from the lexical meaning of the words suggested by the producer of the text, even if he wanted to, but rather results from the recipient's assessment and way of understanding things within the cultural systems in which he lives, which shaped his philosophy of life, surrounded him with the beliefs in which he believes, and influenced his individual interests, personal experiences, as well as his own assessment and interpretation.

4/- The Gnostic Narrative about “Ben Arafa” A Semio-Cultural Interpretive Approach (Selected Models)

The creative critic "Abdel-Ilah Ben Arafa" is an important icon in the field of modern narrative writing that has drawn inspiration from and employed Gnostic concepts and the essence of spiritual experiences, weaving from that a creative space that encourages Gnostic beauty and creative renewal in narrative fiction according to visions and proposals that depart from the norm, and seek to inject a high, fruitful spirituality into understanding, writing, and enriching literature in general, and the novel in particular.

This is what the six creative works that have been published so far from the “Ibn Arafa” novel project attest to: “Jabal Qaf” (2002); “Bahr Nun” (2007); “Bilad Sad” (2009); “Al-Hawameem” (2010); “Tawasin Al-Ghazali” (2011), and “Ibn Al-Khatib in Rawdat Taha” (2012).

What we aim to achieve through this study is to illuminate the various dimensions of the distinguished novelistic path of the creative Ibn Arafa, through a semiotic-interpretive approach that took on the adventure of storming the unknowns of this renewed creative experience, raising various questions about the tributaries of this experience, its literary foundations, its reading keys, and its aesthetic stakes that it raises under the name of “the Gnostic novel.”

In his Gnostic narrative project, the Moroccan novelist Abdelilah Ben Arafa, as he fights the battle of memory, seeks to establish what he calls a “new literature” with a Quranic reference, relying on a different concept of literature and its cognitive goals, the most important of which he sees as producing cognitive literature that achieves a transformation in the reader’s conscience, knowledge and behavior. This novel is not like any other novel, it is neither social nor historical, nor does it belong to any type of novels that he used to read. A new narrative literature that aims to reconnect with our memory, history, cultural, literary, intellectual and Gnostic heritage, and to think and renew it. It has attracted the connotations of what is religious, Sufi and philosophical, and has given free rein to its imagination in order to narrate the Gnosticism of meaning, the presence and the paths of the knowers in a new foundational manner that breaks with the past of narrative, starting from what he calls the worlds of narrative fascinated by itself.

His novel writing comes in a context he calls the Gnostic novel project, and through it he bets on the creative imagination that raises language from the rubble of memory, and restores

dialogue with the illuminating and wounded heritage at the same time. This written effect is what he calls “Gnostic imagination”; i.e. imagination within the novelistic discourse, upon which the process of building Gnostic aesthetics is based. Abdel-Ilah Ben Arafa employed it and invested it in all his novels, because “Ibn Arafa” was not only a professional novelist, but a Gnostic Sufi who amazes the reader with what he lives in his depths. He penetrates the reader through talking about the atmosphere of the spiritual Sufi “who sees with his insight what he does not see with his sight.”

Sufi thought is a rational interplay between emotional perception and Gnostic revelation. Sufi knowledge is not like other philosophical or scientific knowledge, as it is based primarily on emotional evidence, not on proof, where subjectivity becomes its sole starting point in the search for the truth. This is because Sufi knowledge is a spiritual experience that the knower lives with Allah Almighty, so it is broader and more comprehensive than any logical and objective definition, and even language would be inadequate in the face of this experience swimming in the depths of the mind in search of the truth, so esoteric knowledge takes on Sufi dimensions known as Gnostic states.

Thus, the basic premises on which the Gnostic vision depends are that it does not view existence as an outside that can be known by external means, but rather as an inside that must be penetrated and its being must be interrogated in order to perceive its essence and true nature. Consequently, the duality of the inside and the outside has deviated in Sufi thought towards two prominent paths and fields; the first is the rational starting point, which constitutes the tool for knowing the outside world, and the second is the heart for knowing the inner, internal world.

This Gnostic concept soon developed during Sufis’ search for the truth of the divine self as an existence and as an inner perception, which is not solely achieved by the evidence of reason and the evidence of transmission, but also by individual taste, as the latter: “is the only means of knowledge and its source, knowledge of Allah Almighty and His attributes, and what is due to Him, for taste is what establishes the truths of things.”⁽¹⁵⁾

Thus, Sufi knowledge is: “inspirational and shines in the soul... Hence, the Sufi experience is primitive and cannot be explained by reason, but rather reason is what explains it. It is a movement between the mind and the infinite heart with its longing and love, and the infinite absolute, while reason is a finite movement that heads toward the infinite.”⁽¹⁶⁾

What strengthens this argument is what Sahl Ibn Abdullah al-Tustari said when he was asked about his knowledge of the Essence of Allah Almighty: “An Essence described by knowledge, not comprehended by encompassing nor seen by sight in this world, and it exists in the truths of faith without limit or indwelling, and the eyes see it in the Hereafter, apparent in His kingdom and power. Allah Almighty has veiled creation from knowing the essence of His Essence, and has guided them to it with His signs, so the hearts know, and the sights do not perceive Him. The believers look at Him with their sights without encompassing or perceiving an end.”¹⁷

Al-Tastari stipulated the rational in Sufi knowledge when he spoke about knowledge and made it one of the conditions of actual perception, but it was not in an absolute manner compared to the effectiveness of the ability of faith in grasping the light of divine truth, and clarifying the extent of the inability of apparent and superficial human abilities to question the absolute with a Gnostic questioning. This is what the thinker Pascal Blaise also approved, saying: “We do not perceive the truth with the mind alone, but also with the heart, for the heart perceives absolute truths and first principles.”⁽¹⁸⁾

According to this approach, Sufi knowledge is an intuitive experience in which the Sufi moves from inspiration with the intention of uncovering the veils. Based on this, it is a divine knowledge that cannot be devoid of taste in interpreting the unknown worlds that are concerned with the idea of connection between the servant and the divine self, which inevitably leads to the complete realization of the act of union. This is the ultimate goal of the knower, which he intends to live by reason and not by contemplation. Accordingly, the Gnostic novel attracted this innate awareness, as it is distinguished by its combination of the magic of writing, the depth of contemplation, and the perplexity of the question, and the magic of writing in the narrative skills represented in the composition between the multiplicity of narrative lines and the multiplicity of times and voices. The luminous writing seeks to take the reader out of the darkness of intellectual confusion, historical ignorance, chaos in concepts, and nihilistic narrative writing to the light of ecstasy, knowledge, prudence, and maturity.

This is because the Gnostic practice, whether through meditation or writing, is an intellectual project that specializes in research in the field of Sufism. We find that it draws from the source of Sufi language and the heritage of Sufis. It is a special existential literature, or rather, it is elite literature, as it requires an intellectual effort far from Sartre’s existentialism. It overlaps with the

historical novel in Sufis' return to history and their work on previous historical heritage documents.

The writer of the Gnostic novel focuses on those outlets, gaps, niches, spaces and blanks that permeate history. The Gnostic writer differs from the historian in the method of formulation and the goals of construction. The true writer is the one who bears witness to the events of history with his presence; he brings them out of their pastness by breathing life into them. Therefore, what is called the literature of presence or the literature of meaning appeared, which means mastery of existential presence in time and place, which indicates the being of existence, or the present existence opposite to non-existence, which Muslim mystics call presence or presence, which is that the author gives a testimony of presence, and this can only be achieved through insightful, enlightened reading that reveals meanings through interpretation.

The writer of the Gnostic novel is not interested in the narrative form except in what serves his cause on which he builds the novel, which is represented in the Gnostic dress from the real world full of disappointments, corruptions and failures towards the lofty stations in which the soul ascends and rises. The Gnostic novel also contributes to reconsidering Sufi thought through aesthetic angles, philosophical approaches and civilizational stakes that were not presented in the past. Thus, Gnostic writing becomes an essential approach to rejecting reality and destabilizing its deviant contexts that deviate from the lofty spiritual values.

"Jabal Qaf", "Bahr Nun", "Bilad Sad", "Al-Hawameem", "Tawasin Al-Ghazali", "Ibn Al-Khatib in Rawdat Taha", "Yassin, the Heart of the Caliphate", and "The Necklace of the Secret of Love: The Biography of Love in Ibn Hazm". These literary works, despite the differences in approach, the differences in narrative horizon, and the distinction in the stakes of creative writing, contribute to reconsidering Sufi thought through aesthetic angles, philosophical approaches, and civilizational stakes that were not presented in previous times.

I have previously recorded a note that I feel it is necessary to mention here, which is that in these works we do not evoke the historical "lives" of the Sufi figures that are the subject of the narration. "Lisan al-Din Ibn al-Khatib" by Abd al-Ilah ibn Arafa in "Ibn al-Khatib in Rawdat Taha" intersects with the historical Ibn al-Khatib in name and some historical and cognitive data, but it separates from him in the horizon of presence and the method of evocation, whether through imagining the historical blanks in his translation, or through reconstructing his thought

and spiritual experience from the perspective of the questions, stakes and needs of our era, which is radically different from the historical context in which Ibn al-Khatib's experience crystallized as knowledge, gnosticism and life. In his conception of the Gnostic narration, Abd al-Ilah ibn Arafa speaks of two main concepts: The concept of writing with light and through travelling in it from the world of reality to the world of creative imagination, and to the extent that its source is inspired by the Qur'an and the secrets of its letters and the manifestations of its sea, the knowledgeable self is revealed of sciences and knowledge that transport the narrative text to unexpected shores.

The concept of the present that includes the past and the future together, re-raising previous issues that occurred in history; where he interacts with history from the perspective of gnosticism, no matter how diverse the historical worlds invested in the novel; as is evident from the nature of the characters he deals with in the narration (Ibn Arabi, Al-Shattari, Al-Ghazali...) through the Gnostic treatment of even some issues such as the tragedy of the expulsion of the Moriscos from Andalusia in the novel "Al-Hawameem", but he distances the Gnostic novel from its classification within the historical novel, even if it relies like it on specific characteristics, such as the dominance of narration in the past tense, and taking into account the chronological sequence of events.

These novels, as much as they re-read this spiritual heritage from theoretical perspectives, ontological approaches, and cognitive and civilizational stakes that had not been previously considered in dealing with the Islamic Gnostic heritage, also pose new aesthetic questions to novelistic creativity that require a renewal of the tools of critical approach in a way that is compatible with the new creative and narrative horizon that the various forms of textual interaction with the styles of Sufi writing provide..

What can be generally observed about these narratives is that they do not rely on the recipient's literal understanding. The words and letters in the Gnostic narratives are references to more subtle and hidden meanings that invest in the Sufi heritage through a deep awareness of its cognitive and aesthetic connotations. The key to these narratives is Sufi knowledge and the sources that lead to it from taste, revelation, observation and manifestation, and what it yields in terms of stations and ranks.

The aim of these novels is to take the reader out of the darkness of confusion and ignorance into the light of ecstasy, knowledge and prudence, and to create a luminous language; because darkness is from the world of corruption, and light is from the world of righteousness... With these features, Ibn Arafa's novels provide the reader with a double pleasure; the pleasure of getting to know a creative, Gnostic world that has uniqueness and distinction in understanding and practicing the novel, writing and literature; and the pleasure of testing diverse critical visions in approaching an experience that has not ceased to declare the necessity of approaching it differently due to its special Gnostic and literary nature, in awareness and practice.

With these features, the book provides the reader with a double pleasure: the pleasure of getting to know a creative, Gnostic world that is distinguished by a considerable degree of distinction and beauty, and the pleasure of testing diverse critical visions in approaching an experience that has been declaring the necessity of approaching it differently due to its special Gnostic and literary nature, in terms of awareness, practice, and construction.

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