

# The New Algerian Arabic Novel: Formation Struggles, Experimental Stakes, and Characteristics

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## Abstract

*This study examines the evolution of the new Algerian Arabic novel in light of its historical, political, and social contexts. It explores how this literary form emerged as a response to transformations in Algerian society, particularly in the wake of pivotal events such as the June 1967 defeat, the October 1988 uprising, and the "Black Decade" of the 1990s. Influenced by both the Western "Nouveau Roman" and pioneering Arabic novelists from Egypt and the Levant, Algerian novelists adopted innovative narrative techniques including fragmentation, autofiction, myth, metanarration, and polyphony. While the early Algerian Arabic novels often aligned with ideological and state-driven narratives, later generations sought a more nuanced and introspective representation of the Algerian condition. This paper identifies the aesthetic, philosophical, and technical features that distinguish the new Algerian Arabic novel and evaluates its contribution to Arabic and global literary movements. The study concludes that despite moments of artistic decline or mimicry, the new Algerian Arabic novel has produced unique and influential voices that reflect the deep and complex reality of Algerian society.*

**Keywords:** *new algerian arabic novel, narrative experimentation, postcolonial algerian literature, autofiction and metanarration.*

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## Introduction

The novel originated in Europe as a creative and social necessity, responding to the needs of the European bourgeois society and reflecting a new reality that the prevailing artistic forms at the time could no longer comprehend or express—such as the emergence of the capitalist industrial society and the rise of individual freedoms. The novel, unlike other expressive forms, was uniquely capable of capturing these transformations due to its particular characteristics, which enabled it to fulfill this role.

Consequently, the novel has come to dominate the contemporary literary and critical scene, thanks to its flexibility that allows it to absorb vast amounts of information<sup>ii</sup> and serve as a crucible in which contradictions and oppositions collide. Within its texts, a multitude of stories and issues converge. As Hegel<sup>iii</sup> described it, the novel is the "epic of the modern age." Its fluid nature has made it resistant to being confined within any fixed mold, which explains its sustained prominence in creative production—unlike other literary forms such as the short story or poetry.

Since its inception, the novel has undergone numerous transformations in both form and content, in response to the political, social, and intellectual changes within European society. One such transformative phase in the history of the novel was what became known in France as the "Nouveau Roman" (New Novel), which began to emerge during World War I. The signs of innovation began to surface, and the Western new novel rose to prominence in the mid-20th century through the development of new narrative techniques, particularly by French novelists such as Alain Robbe-Grillet, Nathalie Sarraute, Claude Simon, Michel Butor, and others<sup>iv</sup>.

This new novel embodied both the intellectual and material features of European society, underscoring the inherent connection between intellectual production and the historical era that produces it. Every historical period leaves its imprint on the intellectual and literary discourses it engenders, marked by distinctive

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characteristics and features that refer back to it and provide a lens through which it can be understood. Thus, the narrative and stylistic techniques employed in a given novel reflect the intellectual and semantic structure from which it was produced<sup>v</sup>.

In Arabic literature, the beginnings of modern Arabic narrative emerged with the novels of Naguib Mahfouz in the second half of the twentieth century, followed by figures such as Edwar El-Kharrat, Elias Khoury, Sonallah Ibrahim, Mohamed Al-Bardi, Ezzedine Al-Tazi, Waciny Laredj<sup>vi</sup>, Emile Habibi, Moenes Al-Razzaz, and Salim Barakat<sup>vii</sup>.

The Arabic novel underwent a transformation in both form and worldview—its perception of objects and the world<sup>viii</sup>—under the influence of the Western novel. Indeed, the new Arabic novel is an extension of the new Western novel, adopting its narrative techniques and creative styles<sup>ix</sup>.

Beyond this influence from Western literature, the Arabic novel also evolved in response to political and social transformations within Arab societies. Some of these transformations were shared across the Arab world—such as the defeat of June 1967, while others were specific to individual Arab societies. Although the contexts varied, these factors collectively shaped the form and essence of the Arabic novel, endowing it with distinct features and characteristics.

The Arab world witnessed a series of defeats—political, military, and economic. Perhaps the most devastating of these was the June 1967 defeat, which shattered the hopes of an entire generation and triggered deep transformations. In its aftermath, long-held certainties collapsed, and Arab novelists began to abandon the traditional structure of the novel<sup>x</sup>, seeking instead new forms and narrative techniques that aligned with their evolving emotions, perspectives, and ideological stances.

There is near-consensus among critics that the June 1967 defeat was the primary driver behind the Arab novelist's turn toward experimentation and the search for new expressive forms in literature. However, Ahmed El-Madini<sup>xi</sup> rejects this sweeping judgment, arguing that it cannot be generalized across all Arab countries while ignoring the specificities of each nation and the unique societal and political transformations it underwent.

Edwar El-Kharrat described the new Arabic novel using terms such as "*new sensibility*" or "*trans-genre writing*"<sup>xii</sup>. The emergence of the new novel in Arabic literature occurred at different times. Its early signs appeared in Egypt during the 1960s, then extended to Syria and Palestine, and later reached the Maghreb during the 1970s<sup>xiii</sup>. The foundational generation of the Arabic novel—namely, the 1960s generation—pioneered narrative experimentation alongside the subsequent generation, dismantling boundaries between expressive forms and distancing their texts from dominant ideological frameworks. They employed and tested techniques they believed could better convey their perspectives and positions on various issues<sup>xiv</sup>.

The new Arabic novel no longer adhered to fixed rules in its structure or thematic content. It became a tool in search of uncertain truths and questioned certainties that had lost their credibility—a pursuit of existential truths that seemed absent<sup>xv</sup>.

After the June 1967 defeat, all previously dominant molds and forms, including in literary creativity, were rejected. The traditional novel and its narrative modes were set aside. One of the most significant aspects that was abandoned was narrative verticality, which had long characterized the traditional novel<sup>xvi</sup>. In its place, a new approach emerged, one that deliberately fractured linear narrative structures.

This wave of experimentation also introduced new techniques, such as integrating parts of the author's autobiography into the novel, a style known as autofiction. In this hybrid form, the novelist blends the traits of autobiography with fiction, so that elements of the author's life are mirrored in the narrative, making some parts of the events real with a touch of imaginative reconstruction. This style of writing has become widespread in contemporary fiction<sup>xvii</sup>.

Such tendencies are clearly evident in the Algerian novelistic experience. Examples include:

- *A Nation of Glass* by Yasmina Khadra (Salih)
- *The Confession of the Man Coming from Darkness* by Ibrahim Saadi
- *The Memory of Water* by Waciny Laredj

These works incorporate techniques such as multiple narrators, as seen in:

- *The Eighth Heaven* by Amin Zaoui
- *The Trees of the Resurrection* by Bachir Mefti

Among other experimental techniques in the Arab novel, including the Algerian context, is the use of myth. This has been employed since the late 1940s, initially as a veiled form of political critique in contexts where freedom of expression was absent and authoritarianism prevailed. Over time, it became a distinctive hallmark of the new Arabic novel<sup>xviii</sup>.

In addition to myth, the new Arabic novel also utilized the technique of metafiction, or what Gérard Genette termed "*metanarrative*" or "*narrative metalanguage*". Although this technique dates back to earlier narrative traditions—as found in Apuleius's *The Golden Ass* and Al-Tawhidi's *Al-Imtina' wal-Mu'ānasa*—it gained prominence in the post-1950s period and was intentionally developed in the context of the new Arabic novel<sup>xix</sup>.

Like novelists from various other Arab countries, Algerian novelists have been influenced by multimedia platforms in their literary production, including print, audio, and visual journalism. The new Algerian Arabic novel has actively engaged in experimenting with this narrative technique, approaching narration not only as a mode of storytelling but also as a means of delivering a wealth of knowledge across diverse fields<sup>xx</sup>.

Among the authors who have incorporated such techniques into their narrative practices are Waciny Laredj, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, and Bachir Mefti. Their works often employ excerpts from newspapers<sup>xxi</sup>, as seen in the novels of Laredj, Mefti, and Rachid Boudjedra, among others. The emergence of the novel in the Maghreb countries occurred later than in the Mashreq, largely due to the difficult political conditions experienced by the former. Thus, the Maghrebi Arabic novel can be considered an extension of the Mashreqi novel, having drawn influence and inspiration from it due to intellectual exchange and the Mashreq-based education and training of many pioneering Maghrebi novelists<sup>xxii</sup>.

In Algeria, the novel appeared even later than in neighboring Maghreb countries, owing to Algeria's unique political and cultural circumstances that distinguished it from other Arab and Maghrebi nations, despite their shared colonial histories. The emergence of the Algerian Arabic novel was significantly influenced by the Tunisian novel, and in its early stages, it remained traditional in form, focusing primarily on ideological, political, and social themes, with little attention paid to aesthetic or artistic dimensions<sup>xxiii</sup>.

Its development was particularly difficult during the 1970s, and its progression was slow. Many Algerian novelists aligned themselves with the dominant political authority, believing that this authority represented values of social justice. Writers such as Mohamed Ztili, Ismail Amouqate, Tahar Wattar, Waciny Laredj, and Amar Yazli, among others, embodied this orientation. However, this alignment with political ideology came at the expense of the artistic and technical quality of narrative production, negatively impacting the aesthetic aspects of the Algerian novel<sup>xxiv</sup>.

An eyewitness to this period—one of the distinguished novelists and critics who have enriched the Algerian literary scene from that era to the present—is the novelist Waciny Laredj. He testifies to this era, saturated with events, transformations, and both overt and covert struggles between various political and social orientations in Algeria during the 1970s, stating:

*“That period alone—the 1970s—witnessed more accomplishments than any previous phase in Algerian history... and the novel was a reflection of it all.”<sup>xxv</sup>*

Amin Zaoui, another prominent novelist and scholar of Algerian literature, similarly documents this era<sup>xxvi</sup>. He affirms that the Algerian Arabic novel in the 1970s aligned itself with the political authority of the time, labeling this body of literature as *“the literature of the agrarian revolution.”<sup>xxvii</sup>*

Tahar Wattar, considered a pioneer of the Algerian Arabic novel, openly expressed pride in his alignment with the political establishment, declaring that he had devoted his writing to glorifying the ruling power and praising its achievements. He stated:

*“I am one of the gains of the national revolution... In the field of literature, I consider myself a full-fledged authority. I established, and I can proudly say that I have succeeded to a large extent in founding a revolutionary current and in advancing Algerian literature.”*

This alignment of novelists with the dominant political current led to a body of literature that was didactic and propagandistic, often dominated by slogans. As a result, much of the artistic quality was lost, and the narratives fell into the trap of excessive directness and blatant ideological bias, rather than delving into the real social issues that weighed heavily on the lives of ordinary Algerians.

Bachir Bouijra critically describes the narrative content of that period, stating:

*“Upon revisiting many of the novels written between 1970 and 1978, we find an unjustified convergence between the issues they addressed—mostly in service of the prevailing political moment—and individual conflicts deeply infused with foreign ideologies that, at times, contradict the actual socio-political realities.”<sup>xxviii</sup>*

Nonetheless, there also emerged a counter-current in Algerian fiction—a narrative trend that openly critiqued the authorities and their practices.

The Algerian Arabic novel shares many of the same characteristics and features as its Mashreqi and Maghrebi counterparts, having drawn from both in shaping its artistic form. However, it distinguishes itself through the specificity of the issues it addresses, which are rooted in the realities of Algerian society<sup>xxix</sup>.

Following the 1970s, signs of transformation began to emerge in the content of Algerian novels. References to the agrarian revolution and the socialist project gradually disappeared, while narrative texts continued—albeit subtly—to return to the theme of the liberation revolution, perhaps because it represented the collective project of a nation and its people. In contrast, the agrarian revolution and the socialist project were the choices of a particular elite, which faced opposition.

The initial signs of the new Algerian Arabic novel appeared in works such as *Al-Hawwat wa al-Qasr* (The Fisherman and the Palace, 1980) by Tahar Wattar, *Al-Jazīya wal-Darawish* (Al-Jaziya and the Dervishes) by Abdelhamid Benhedouga, *Nawar al-Louze* (Almond Blossoms, 1983), *What Remains of the Biography of Lakhdar Hamrouche* (1982)<sup>xxx</sup>, and *Al-Tafakkuk* (Disintegration) and *Al-Halazoun al-'Anid* (The Stubborn Snail, 1985) by Rachid Boudjedra<sup>xxxi</sup>.

The foundations of the new Algerian Arabic novel were laid by a group of novelists, including Merzak Begtach, Djelali Khalas, and Habib Sayah<sup>xxxii</sup>, alongside the pioneering generation, such as Tahar Wattar and Abdelhamid Benhedouga. Notably, the latter was among the first to employ the technique of fragmenting narrative monologue in Arabic novels in Algeria<sup>xxxiii</sup>.

During this period, new novels began to emerge that tackled the contemporary crises Algeria was facing, differing significantly from their predecessors in both form and content<sup>xxxiv</sup>.

The events of October 1988 marked a turning point in the trajectory of the Algerian novel and a critical juncture in the country's broader history. The logic of violence prevailed, Algerian blood was cheapened,

and the population became desensitized to death and tragedy. The masks fell, the sanctities collapsed, false narratives were exposed, and the utopian dream of a prosperous democratic Algeria completely disintegrated.

Given the inevitable interconnection between cultural expression and social dynamics, every transformation in the societal reality is accompanied by a corresponding cultural output that both draws from and is shaped by that transformation<sup>xxxv</sup>.

Accordingly, a new novelistic experience emerged in Algeria in the late 1980s and early 1990s, following the profound political and social upheavals the country witnessed. However, Algerian novelists who engaged in narrative experimentation during this period did not venture far into radical innovation. Instead, they adopted a middle-ground stance, cautiously exploring new forms without fully committing to the more daring dimensions of literary experimentation<sup>xxxvi</sup>.

The distinct experimental features of the Algerian Arabic novel only began to clearly surface during the last decade of the 20th century and into the early 21st century. During this time, the forms of the new Algerian Arabic novel diversified. Some novels focused on language innovation, others on character construction, while some explored intertextual diversity, the use of the fantastical, or mythological elements—each according to the writer's literary sensibility, creative genius, and aesthetic vision.

As for the worldview, it was a shared dark and bleak vision among novelists of the 1980s and 1990s. This vision reflected the crises, psychological suffering, and moral disillusionment experienced by Algerian individuals and society at large. These writers depicted the collective trauma in various ways and through distinct styles. Among the most notable authors are: Waciny Laredj, Tahar Wattar, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Rachid Boudjedra, Amin Zaoui, Yasmina Khadra (Salih), Ezzedine Gellalouji, Bachir Mefti, and others.

The new Algerian Arabic novel is thus characterized by a diversity of artistic features, with each novelist leaving a distinct creative fingerprint. While their works may intersect in terms of themes and aesthetic perspectives, this is due to their shared social, intellectual, and existential context, even if their individual viewpoints and interpretations may differ to varying degrees.

Based on the notion that "*the true meaning of literature can only be understood within the historical context in which the text was produced*," the structure of the new Algerian novel can be interpreted and analyzed in light of the social, political<sup>xxxvii</sup>, and intellectual climate that gave birth to it. Thus, the novel serves as a reflection of the novelist's vision—both of the world around them and of their own inner self. Each novelist imparts a unique signature to their creative experience, distinguishing themselves from their contemporaries, even though they shared the same historical and cultural environment. This is due to the variability in individual responses to similar circumstances, which explains the diversity of narrative forms in the new Algerian novel.

Since the novel embraces the concerns of society and the transformations it undergoes—and derives its content from them—the new Algerian Arabic novel has actively engaged with the realities of Algerian society, thus crafting a distinct thematic identity. It focused on the individual's suffering, particularly in the face of a suffocating economic situation that remains stagnant, alongside countless social anxieties and a complex, unstable political climate. The novel has captured the Algerian condition in all its specificity and realism, addressing the intellectual's experience, their position regarding the unfolding events in society, their relationship with various forms of authority, their aspirations, and their role within this overwhelming

landscape. All of this has given the novel a local character that distinguishes it. Furthermore, distinct individual literary experiences have emerged, marked by their own aesthetic and philosophical visions.

The new Algerian Arabic novel seeks to distinguish itself from both its Arab and global counterparts<sup>xxxviii</sup>, and many Algerian novels have reached high artistic standards. Notable among these are the literary experiences of Waciny Laredj, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Ibrahim Saadi, Ezzedine Gellalouji, and Rachid Boudjedra. However, some fictional writings fell into complacency, merely replicating narrative templates and themes that did not reflect Algerian particularity, but instead emerged from other societal climates and conveyed a different form of modernity—resulting in works that bordered on plagiarism<sup>xxxix</sup>. Other texts merely transcribed reality verbatim onto the page, presenting it as fiction, which weakened the literary quality of these works at the levels of language, imagination, narrative, and technique<sup>xl</sup>.

Some critics argue that Algerian novelists of the 1990s rushed to exploit the theme of the security crisis and the fear and sorrow experienced by Algerians in all spheres—political, economic, social, and security-related—writing about these issues without sufficient reflection or a coherent intellectual vision capable of interpreting events or situating them within a referential framework from which potential solutions might emerge. According to this view, the 1990s Algerian narrative experience amounted to nothing more than a thematic and technical reproduction lacking even the minimal standards of artistry and narrative innovation. It was dominated by rhetoric and superficiality.

Yet this opinion cannot be generalized to all Algerian novels. Several literary experiences took firm root in the Algerian creative scene and even reached international recognition, such as those of Waciny Laredj, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Rachid Boudjedra, and others<sup>xli</sup>.

Amidst this novelistic boom that the Algerian Arabic literary scene has witnessed, each novelist has stood out with their own distinctive style, shaping an individual experience that became a defining feature by which the author is known. While some novels were artistically weak, others were marked by a remarkable narrative structure that elevated them to the level of literary excellence, further distinguished by their effective use of new narrative techniques, aligning them with the broader project of the new novel. Thus, it can be said with confidence that there exist Algerian writers who have successfully authored a truly new Algerian Arabic novel, both technically and artistically.

### **Conclusion:**

The new Algerian Arabic novel is the product of a complex interplay between historical trauma, social fragmentation, and intellectual ferment. Born out of a need to reinterpret and rewrite Algerian identity in the face of political oppression, ideological rigidity, and civil unrest, this novelistic form has evolved to express the multiplicity and contradictions of Algerian society. Initially constrained by political ideologies and revolutionary dogmas, Algerian fiction gradually broke free to embrace more experimental, introspective, and diversified forms of narration. Techniques such as autofiction, myth, metanarrative, and polyphonic voices became integral to its literary fabric.

Despite criticisms aimed at certain works that lacked artistic depth or merely reproduced external templates, many Algerian authors have risen to the challenge, offering innovative and authentic portrayals of Algerian life. Writers such as Waciny Laredj, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Rachid Boudjedra, and Amin Zaoui exemplify this literary transformation. Their contributions have positioned the Algerian Arabic novel as a distinct and vital component of both Arab and world literature.

Ultimately, the new Algerian Arabic novel reflects not only a literary evolution but also a broader cultural and existential quest for meaning, identity, and freedom of expression. It continues to grapple with the collective memory and lived realities of Algerians, offering a critical space for dialogue, resistance, and creative renewal.

## References

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