

History and Fictionalization in Gamal al-Ghitani's Al-Zayni Barakat: A Study of Intertextuality and Narrative Techniques

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Abstract

This study examines language and narrative techniques in Gamal al-Ghitani's novel Al-Zayni Barakat, focusing on the nature of the relationship the writer establishes between historical material and narrative fictionalization. Al-Ghitani draws on events and figures from the history of Egypt in the late Mamluk period, particularly those recorded in the chronicles of Ibn Iyas, and then reshapes this material within a narrative structure that goes beyond merely recounting historical events. The study focuses on the most prominent mechanisms employed by the writer in this process, foremost among them intertextuality, temporal retrospection, artistic opposition to historical writing, ironic paradox, and the transformation of historical accounts. The use of these techniques contributes to rearranging events and altering the manner in which they are presented, while also endowing them with new meanings related to contemporary concerns, particularly authoritarianism, political repression, and the crisis of freedom. The study concludes that al-Ghitani did not approach history as a static body of material; rather, he artistically reproduced it through a narrative language that draws upon heritage and reemploys it to express the concerns of the Arab individual. In doing so, he succeeded in establishing a clear interaction between the past and the present, and between the historical document and narrative fictionalization.

Keywords: Al-Zayni Barakat; Gamal al-Ghitani; intertextuality; narrative techniques; history and fictionalization.

Introduction

History and heritage have long constituted important sources for novelistic writing. However, the presence of the past in the modern Arabic novel is no longer limited to recalling events and facts as they appear in historical sources; rather, it has become a space for rereading and interpreting them from the perspective of the present. Accordingly, the novelist has come to draw upon historical material as an artistic substance open to reshaping, selecting from it what serves his vision and reconstructing its events and characters within a fictional world that brings together reality and imagination.

Gamal al-Ghitani stands out as one of the most important novelists whose literary experience is closely associated with heritage and history. His novel Al-Zayni Barakat is among the foremost works that clearly reveal this orientation. Al-Ghitani returned to the period of the late Mamluk era and drew upon the writings of the historian Ibn Iyas, particularly Bada'i al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i al-Duhur (The Marvels of Flowers in the Events of the Ages). Yet he did not simply reproduce what was recorded in these writings. Instead, he reformulated the historical material according to his own vision,

blending historical events with narrative fictionalization and transforming the past into a means of expressing issues that have remained present in the Arab reality, such as authoritarianism, repression, fear, and restrictions on freedom.

This work reveals that the significance of history in the novel does not lie in its presence as ready-made material, but rather in the manner in which the novelist reshapes it within the text. Al-Ghitani employed a range of narrative techniques that enabled him to transform historical events into a coherent fictional structure. Among the most prominent of these are intertextuality, temporal retrospection, artistic opposition to historical writing, ironic paradox, as well as the reformulation and transformation of historical accounts in accordance with the nature of narrative discourse. Thus, the historical text becomes a point of departure for constructing a new text whose meanings extend beyond the period of the events it evokes.

Accordingly, this study seeks to examine language and narrative techniques in Al-Zayni Barakat, and to reveal the manner in which Gamal al-Ghitani dealt with historical material and how he succeeded in transforming it into narrative material that conveys a distinctive vision of both the past and the present. The study also seeks to highlight the role of intertextuality and narrative techniques in constructing the novel and to demonstrate the extent to which they contribute to revealing similarities between two realities separated by centuries, particularly with regard to authoritarianism, repression, and the crisis of freedom. Hence, the study raises a central question: How did Gamal al-Ghitani employ language and narrative techniques in Al-Zayni Barakat to reshape historical material, and what meanings emerged from this interplay between history and narrative fictionalization?

1-Intertextuality Technique

In his novel, al-Ghitani employed two forms of intertextuality with the chronicles of Bada'i al-Zuhur, both based on the principle of correspondence:

Correspondence between the fictional text and the heritage text, particularly in terms of the themes of authoritarianism, political repression, and human injustice.

Correspondence between the time of the novel and the time of the historical text from which he drew inspiration in Ibn Iyas's chronicles, despite his use of the technique of "temporal retrospection." He begins in 922 AH and then takes us back chronologically to 912 AH, proceeding with his narration of events until he reaches the year with which he began, namely 922 AH.

1-1 Artistic Opposition to Historical Writing

What distinguishes al-Ghitani's approach in his novel, however, is that it proceeds from a fundamental idea: the possibility of explaining the present through the past by employing the technique of embedding, or artistic opposition, through evoking similar historical events from the past and projecting them onto the present. What matters to the novelist is not simply reproducing the historical account that is, reproducing what Ahmad Ibn Iyas wrote in his book Bada'i al-Zuhur, when speaking of the novel Al-Zayni Barakat.

Accordingly, "...the parallelism that is intended to be revealed through the return to the past is the similarity between the ideological, social, and cultural conditions of two different periods; that is, returning the contemporary content to the end of the Mamluk era, or to that historical period rich in realities, events, and political and social implications, in order to merge the concerns of the past with those of the present, with particular emphasis on the crisis of freedom and the domination of systems of oppression and terror, without falling, on the one hand, into directness, or, on the other, into the trap of Arab storytelling, which emerged within a particular culture."

In *Al-Zayni Barakat*, al-Ghitani sought to make the reader believe that he had written a quintessentially historical novel through imitation and emulation. Yet what al-Ghitani actually did in his text was to extract his material from a specific historical source, namely Ibn Iyas's chronicles. He then reconstructed its events, furnished its geographical space, manipulated its temporal framework, and selected its central character, "al-Zayni Barakat ibn Musa," a real historical figure who held the position of muhtasib during the reign of the Mamluk Sultan "Qansuh al-Ghuri." He subsequently rose through the ranks of government until he became governor of Cairo and its surrounding areas. The Egyptian historian Ahmad ibn Iyas provided a description of this figure in his major work, *Bada'i al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i al-Duhur*, stating:

"In [Shawwal], al-Hajj Barakat ibn Musa was honored with a robe of distinction. His father, Musa, was an Arab, and his mother was called 'Anqa' ... This was the first appearance of Barakat ibn Musa and his emergence to prominence. His position became very great, and he came to be counted among the leading notables of Egypt. His prominence continued to increase thereafter until what happened to him, which we shall mention in its proper place... Barakat ibn Musa was among the pages of the falconers who carried birds of prey on their hands. Then the Sultan handed Ali ibn Abi al-Jud over to al-Hajj Barakat ibn Musa to punish him and extract money from him. They brought Ibn Abi al-Jud down from the Citadel while he was in chains and took him to the house of Barakat ibn Musa."²

2-1 Al-Ghitani and Ibn Iyas's Chronicles

The presence of historical material in *Al-Zayni Barakat* reveals al-Ghitani's writing strategy and the nature of his artistic treatment of heritage material: "...it is a smooth form of intertextuality, resembling a process of self-intertextual interaction. This intertextual interaction becomes apparent when the writer undertakes a series of transformations, modifications, and alterations to the narrative material, changing its chronological order by bringing some events forward and postponing others, condensing and extending them, without intending to rewrite a historical text artistically or to write a historical novel."³

From this presentation, we can discern Jamal al-Ghitani's attempt to shift his fictional experience from being a witness to the events of his own age the 1960s to becoming a witness to an earlier age, namely the period of the last Mamluk rulers in Egypt in the tenth century AH (sixteenth century CE), by searching for recurring manifestations of authoritarianism throughout history. This reinforces the idea that understanding the present is achieved "...through delving deeply into the past, which, in the writer's view, is the legitimate father of the present and its contradictions, employing in this process a documentary and historical heritage-based language."⁴

Al-Ghitani's method of writing his historical text was somewhat similar to the way filmmakers construct and direct their film scripts, as though al-Ghitani had taken this artistic principle into consideration. He shaped his text in a cinematic manner, since "...the success of a film is measured by the extent to which its cinematic events correspond to actual events, and by the consistency of its formal manifestations speech, clothing, food, furniture, architecture, and all the material aspects of the civilization of the period with those of the age being chronicled. We believe that al-Ghitani succeeded in this impersonation, as evidenced by the fact that transforming *Al-Zayni Barakat* into a television production was not particularly difficult for those involved in cinematic direction, since this (novel/script) is almost an exact replica of the period it chronicles."⁵

2- The Technique of Irony

Al-Ghitani employed a satirical form of irony in relation to the idea of the lanterns (the idea of the lanterns in al-Ghitani's novel), which Ibn Iyas had mentioned incidentally in his history:

"Among the events that took place during the Sultan's absence was that Prince Almas, the police chief, began restricting the people and ordered them to hang a lantern at every house, and that no one should leave his home after the evening prayer or walk about carrying a weapon."⁶

1- 2The Issue of Hanging Lanterns

Al-Ghitani transformed the issue of the "lanterns" into a matter of "public opinion," devoting a title to it in his novel: "The Title of a Letter Delivered to the House of Zakariya ibn Radi by a Special Messenger from al-Zayni's Men." The issue occupies pages 102 to 118 and brings together all forms of administrative and official correspondence, including a sermon, letter, proclamation, report, sultanic decree, and legal opinion. All segments of society participate in it, beginning with the Sultan, followed by religious scholars and judges, army commanders, writers, and ordinary people men, women, and children. Each addresses the issue of the lanterns from his own perspective and according to his particular point of view. The writer's style, together with his language, contributes to magnifying the issue and exaggerating its significance, until it became one of the finest examples of what has been written in the field of "satirical literature of irony."

In the proclamation concerning the lanterns, which Jamal al-Ghitani includes in his novel, the writer presents a range of positions expressed by public opinion, whether supportive, opposed, or reserved*:

"From this moment onward..."

Such a historical account, concerning the punishment of one of the Sultan's officials, namely the muhtasib of Cairo, Ali ibn Abi al-Jud, would necessarily have been presented to the people through a sultanic decree proclaimed by "criers" in the marketplaces. Ibn Iyas, however, records it in Bada'i al-Zuhur as a significant event and a punitive measure requiring documentation, overlooking the conventional form through which such news would have been publicly announced. One of its most common forms was the "proclamation."

1-1-2 An Example from Al-Zayni Barakat

"Proclamation:

O people of Egypt,

We command what is right and forbid what is wrong.

By order of our lord, the Sultan,

Ali ibn Abi al-Jud is to be executed,

by being beaten with the palms of the hands.

He shall dance all the way,

as women dance.

Strike him.

Strike him.

Whenever he stops,

let those who wish to witness the spectacle

and take revenge upon the enemy of God

come out after the afternoon prayer.

O people of Cairo,

O people of Cairo.”⁷

With al-Ghitani, this punitive event is transformed into an actual sultanic decree and an official document. This required the writer to formulate its informational content according to the structure of the “proclamation,” a form that was widespread during the Mamluk period, thereby making it more realistic and credible. This is precisely where the writer’s artistry lies.

3- Transformation of the Narrative Account

Ibn Iyas records a daily news item that represents a model of the writing of chronicles during the Mamluk period. In their presentation of historical events, chronicles descend to the level of daily news, much as journalism does in our own time when it reports on social deviations and moral scandals.

1-3 An Example from Bada’i al-Zuhur

“Among the events was the following: a tailor named ‘Naja ibn Timsah’ assaulted a young boy of about ten years of age in a house on the central island. The boy cried out for help, so the tailor slaughtered him and threw him into a well. When the matter became known, the boy’s mother seized the tailor and brought him before the Sultan. He confessed to killing the boy, whereupon the Sultan ordered that the tailor be hanged at the place where he had killed the boy.”⁸

Despite the horrific nature of the account, Ahmad ibn Iyas’s presentation of it appears direct and simple, without exaggeration or sensationalism. It is as though the historian treated this everyday incident as a historical event in its directness, simplicity, and documentary character.

2-3 An Example from Al-Zayni Barakat

“A tailor from the al-Maghazilin district, not an insignificant tailor, he made farajiyas and caftans for princes and state officials. He was over forty, but God had afflicted him with a deep-rooted disease. While walking through the Tentmakers’ Market, he was attracted to a young boy. He said to the boy: ‘What is your name, clever boy?’ The boy replied: ‘My name is Kamal.’ He said: ‘Come with me, I will take you to your father at the mosque.’ But the accursed man led him to an old ruin behind the Blue Mosque and assaulted him. The boy could not bear it and went to his father in distress. The man went to al-Zayni in tears. Al-Zayni ordered that the tailor be brought before him and asked the boy: ‘Is this the man?’ The child nodded through his tears. The man shouted: ‘The boy is lying.’ Al-Zayni struck him in the face and said: ‘Children do not lie.’ He ordered that the man be paraded on a donkey throughout Cairo and imprisoned in al-‘Arqana until his fate was decided.”⁹

This type of account is particularly favored by novelists. The task of the novelist who draws his material from historical books is to select accounts that do not rise to the level of historical events associated with a military episode, a political situation, an affair concerning the Sultan, or matters of governance. An incident involving such a moral scandal is precisely the kind of material that the novelist can give an artistic dimension by choosing a style appropriate to the conventions of its period and presenting it in language close to the reality of that period. By comparing the two accounts presented above, we can recognize the extent of the artistic transformation to which al-Ghitani subjected his text.

Through this reading of the two examples, we can understand that “...the study of ‘historical discourse,’ the understanding of the ways in which it operates, and the accommodation of the nature of its production may suggest the affinity that can be perceived in a literary genre, namely the ‘novel.’ The first manifestation of this affinity lies in the association of an utterance (the historical event) with the concept of (storytelling), which necessarily entails conformity with what is assumed to be its

counterpart in the genre of the 'novel,' in terms of the function of reporting, the practice of narrativity, and the presence of the imaginary and the mythical. In reality, however, the relationship linking (history) and (the novel) may extend beyond their shared narrative and informative tendency to include a commonality of identity, function, and significance. Both are based on the presentation of facts, the investigation of truths, and the belief in the possibility of events recurring, repeating, and entering into intertextual relations through analogy and similarity, in recognition of the experimental scientific law that governs them as a basis for achieving (objectivity), which constitutes the primary criterion invoked whenever the search concerns the 'scientific' limits of history."¹⁰

From this perspective, al-Ghitani's artistry becomes apparent in his ability to bring together "history" and "reality" within his narrative and to fuse them through fictionalization into the act of storytelling without exceeding its limits, thereby granting it a new aesthetic dimension. This dimension extends through the tradition of classical Arabic narrative by means of a clear dialectic: the text emerges from heritage in order to renew itself, and returns to heritage in order to establish its roots. Within this continuous cycle, al-Ghitani's narrative vision takes shape and his stylistic individuality becomes more refined, without his voice departing from the larger chorus of his generation the generation of modernity or from the literary production of his age, particularly the "novel of sensibility," armed with its intellectual and artistic foundations and grounded in its continuous search for possible worlds that artistically embody the image of the Arab as a novelist, while presenting him in his universal, human dimension.¹¹

Results

Through its analysis of language and narrative techniques in Al-Zayni Barakat, the study reached a number of conclusions, which can be summarized as follows:

The study revealed that history constitutes a fundamental element in the construction of Al-Zayni Barakat. However, Jamal al-Ghitani did not treat it as ready-made material to be reproduced; rather, he reshaped it within a narrative structure compatible with his artistic and intellectual vision.

It became evident that intertextuality with Ibn Iyas's chronicles, particularly Bada'i al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i al-Duhur, represents one of the most important mechanisms employed by al-Ghitani in constructing his novel. He drew upon historical material while making changes to the sequence of events, their details, and the manner in which they were presented.

The analysis of the novel demonstrated that al-Ghitani employed temporal retrospection artistically. His return to the past was not an end in itself, but rather a means of establishing a connection between the historical time of the novel and contemporary reality, while highlighting similarities between the two experiences.

The study revealed a clear presence of artistic opposition to historical writing. The writer did not merely reproduce what appeared in the sources; rather, he reformulated historical events and endowed them with new dimensions through fictionalization and narrative.

Satirical irony contributed to transforming some simple or marginal events in the historical sources into situations with a powerful presence within the novel, as is particularly evident in the issue of the lanterns.

It became clear that al-Ghitani drew upon the historical account and reformulated it in a manner compatible with the novelistic structure, transforming the event from its direct, documentary form into a more detailed and vivid narrative scene.

The study demonstrated that the heritage-based and documentary language employed by al-Ghitani contributed to constructing a historical illusion and endowed the novel with the characteristics of the period it depicts, without preventing it from expressing contemporary issues.

The novel demonstrates that al-Ghitani's invocation of the past is closely connected to the present, as history becomes a means of exposing phenomena of authoritarianism, political repression, and restrictions on freedom.

The study concluded that the relationship between history and the novel in Al-Zayni Barakat is not one of direct reproduction or imitation, but rather one of interaction and reconstruction, whereby the historical text is transformed into artistic material open to interpretation and the production of meaning.

Ultimately, it becomes clear that the distinctiveness of al-Ghitani's experience lies in his ability to combine historical reference with novelistic imagination, enabling the novel to transcend the boundaries of historical storytelling and become an artistic reading of the present through the past.

Suggestions

Conduct further studies addressing the presence of historical heritage in the works of Jamal al-Ghitani, in order to reveal the diversity of his methods of employing heritage material.

Undertake an independent study of the heritage-based language in Al-Zayni Barakat, given its role in constructing the historical illusion and shaping the distinctive character of the novelistic discourse.

Expand research into the relationship between Jamal al-Ghitani's novels and the historical sources upon which he relied, in order to determine the extent of the transformation and alteration he introduces into the original material.

Study the narrative techniques employed in the novel from other perspectives, such as polyphony, characterization, time, and space, and their relationship to the formation of the novelistic vision.

Conduct comparative studies between Al-Zayni Barakat and other Arabic novels that employ history and heritage, with the aim of identifying similarities and differences in their treatment of historical material.

Give greater attention to studies linking historical fictionalization with issues of contemporary reality, as this approach allows for a deeper understanding of the function of history in the modern Arabic novel.

Recommendations

There is a need to pay greater attention to the study of the Arabic historical novel as a field in which history and literature intersect, rather than viewing it merely as a retelling of past events.

Researchers should be encouraged to study the ways in which heritage is employed in the Arabic novel, with particular emphasis on the artistic transformations that novelists introduce into historical material.

Al-Zayni Barakat should be taken into consideration in studies examining the relationship between the past and the present, as it provides a clear model of how history can be employed to interpret issues concerning society and the human condition.

It is necessary to distinguish between the original historical material and its novelistic treatment when studying works based on historical events or figures.

Critical studies focusing on language and narrative techniques in the historical novel should be encouraged, as they reveal the manner in which the document and historical event are transformed into an artistic structure.

Greater attention should be devoted to the works of Jamal al-Ghitani and other writers who have made heritage an integral part of their creative projects, given the broad possibilities they offer for studying the interaction between heritage and modernity in Arabic literature.

¹ – Mohammed Sahbi: “The Obsession with Returning to Heritage among Arab ‘Modernist’ Novelists: Al-Ghitani as a Model,” dated February 3, 2018, at 10:30 a.m., available at: <https://ouvrages.crasc.dz/index.php/en/29-le-roman-moderne-ecriture-de-l'autre-et-de-l'ailleurs/264>.

² – Ahmad ibn Iyas al-Misri: *Bada'i al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i al-Duhur*, Madbouly Library, Cairo, 1st ed., 2005, Vol. 2, p. 1004.

³ – Abu Bakr Marzouk: “The Novel Al-Zayni Barakat: Between Historical Given, Narrative Justification, and Representation,” *Journal of Language Sciences* (Special Issue: Proceedings of the International Conference entitled “Literature and Cinema,” March 6–7, 2016), Language Sciences Laboratory, Faculty of Arts and Languages, Ammar Thlidji University – Laghouat, 2016, p. 465.

⁴ – Mohammed Sahbi: “The Obsession with Returning to Heritage among Arab ‘Modernist’ Novelists: Al-Ghitani as a Model,” dated February 3, 2018, at 10:30 a.m., available at: <https://ouvrages.crasc.dz/index.php/en/29-le-roman-moderne-ecriture-de-l'autre-et-de-l'ailleurs/264>, p. 15.

⁵ – Abu Bakr Marzouk: “The Novel Al-Zayni Barakat: Between Historical Given, Narrative Justification, and Representation,” p. 465.

⁶ – Ahmad ibn Iyas al-Misri: *Bada'i al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i al-Duhur*, Madbouly Library, Cairo, 1st ed., 2005, Vol. 2, p. 1403.

– These tables are extracted from a master’s thesis entitled *Al-Zayni Barakat: A Reading of the Textual Paratexts*, by Abu Bakr Marzouk, University of Oran, 2005–2006 (unpublished manuscript).

⁷ – Abu Bakr Marzouk: *Al-Zayni Barakat: A Reading of the Textual Paratexts*, Master’s Thesis, University of Oran, 2005–2006, p. 138.

⁸ – Ahmad ibn Iyas al-Misri: *Bada'i al-Zuhur fi Waqa'i al-Duhur*, Madbouly Library, Cairo, 1st ed., 2005, Vol. 2, p. 1281.

⁹ – Jamal al-Ghitani: *Al-Zayni Barakat*, Dar al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi, Cairo, 3rd ed., 1985, pp. 82–83.

¹⁰ – Abu Bakr Marzouk: *Intertextuality and the Heritage Text in al-Ghitani’s Fiction*, pp. 82–83.

¹¹ – Abu Bakr Marzouk: *Intertextuality and the Heritage Text in al-Ghitani’s Fiction*, p. 46.