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# Grotesque themes as Representatives of Reality: Comedy and Horror in the Literature of Waciny Laredj

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**Abstract:** This study examines the themes and distinctive features of the grotesque as manifested in the literary works of Algerian author Waciny Laredj (Wasīnī al-A‘raj), who depicts the Algerian reality through an experimental form of novelistic writing. Laredj makes use of the features of the grotesque—sarcasm, irony, amplification, exaggeration and the nightmarish—as a way of silhouetting Algeria’s situation and highlighting the struggle against both Islamic and state terrorism. Major similarities are noted between the style of the grotesque and elements central to novelistic narrative, such as polyphony and parallel plots. The grotesque reveals itself linguistically and stylistically in Laredj’s novels through their plots, the fantastical atmosphere that prevails throughout, and the use of analepsis, foreshadowing, omission, close-up shots and exaggeration. Specific examples of these phenomena are found in his *Ḍamīr al-Ghā’ib* (Third Person Pronoun) (1990) and *Ḥārisat al-Ẓilāl* (Guardian of the Shadows) (1997), in which human beings take on other forms by means of bizarre devices, and in which state terrorism mingles with Islamic terrorism in an atmosphere of comedic horror.

**Keywords:** Waciny Laredj, grotesque, Algerian reality, terrorism, polyphony, experimental literature, struggle, exaggeration, sarcasm, horror, irony, comedy, humor

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Laredj's use of the grotesque in context: Novelist trends following Algerian independence

In the immediate aftermath of Algerian independence in 1962, cultural life in Algeria suffered a period of stagnation.<sup>1</sup> Numerous intellectuals left the country as the zeal and enthusiasm that had inspired their messages at the height of the liberation struggle began to fade.<sup>2</sup>

However, thanks to reforms introduced between 1968 and 1972, the country also enjoyed a newfound stability that resulted in a literary revival which spawned the establishment of magazines and newspapers and drew writers and students back to the country. The literary movement of the 1970s was accompanied by the revival of the short story at the hands of authors such as Mirzāq Baqtāsh, Aḥmad Munawwar, al-ʿĪd Bin ʿArūs, and others.<sup>3</sup>

This situation gave rise to a particular form of Algerian novelistic expression which manifested itself in so-called “committed writing.” The Algerian novel began crystallizing in the 1970s with the release of al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār’s literary productions *al-Lāz* (al-Lāz), *al-Ṭshq wal-Mawt fī al-Zaman al-Ḥarāshī* (Love and Death in the Horashi Era), and *al-Zilzāl* (The Earthquake). Laredj describes Waṭṭār’s novel *al-Lāz* as:

A bold artistic feat which, in all realism, poses the issue of the revolution which was so relevant to that phase. It does so, however, from the perspective of the internal contradictions that had manifested themselves within the single party, and which reactionary forces attempted to exacerbate and deepen in the hope of containing, aborting, and ultimately killing the revolution from within before it had even opened its eyes.<sup>4</sup>

1 The following two-and-a-half decades witnessed efforts to rebuild the country’s political and national identity, and Algeria enjoyed relative stability under a single-party Socialist regime. In the 1990s, however, Algeria spiraled into violence when the army intervened to prevent the Islamist political party from coming to power despite its having won the country’s first-ever pluralistic elections. This clash led to the outbreak of a civil war between the Algerian Government and a variety of armed Islamist factions, foremost among them the Islamic Salvation Front. In an article entitled, “The National State and Civil Society in Algeria: An Attempted Reading of the October 1988 Uprising,” al-Munṣif Wannās analyzes the eruption of the conflict in Algeria during those years, saying: “The October 1988 uprising evidenced a crisis not only in the Algerian Liberation Front and the political system, but in the society as a whole. There was a deep fissure in the heart of Algerian society resulting from varied failures which we will have occasion to mention, as well as a struggle between the state-party and civil society on one side, and Islamist groups on the other [...] These failures resulted in an erosion of national legitimacy, which the youth sectors then replaced with a highly politicized religious legitimacy.” See Wannās (1996: 201–202).

This power struggle led to the outbreak of violence and terrorism in Algeria. At the same time, it ushered the country into a critical period following the aforementioned uprising, which spawned both a new political pluralism in the country and negative developments, such as the declaration of a state of siege, and state-initiated provocations of the Islamic Salvation Front. See: al-Jarrāḥ (2000: 61).

2 Algerian literature is inseparable from the general scene of Arabic literature and its deep reflection of the political, social and psychological reality of Arab societies. In the nineteenth century, criticism moved towards the idea of committed literature, revolutionary literature, critical realism, etc. and was directed towards seeing literature as a servant of society and that its tools should reflect the general system of life, whether in poetry, stories, novels, or theater. In examining the political climate that questioned the notion of Arab national identity in the 1950s, Arabic literature has searched for distinctive literary ways to combat “Western hegemony”, Imperialism, and Islamite extreme movements, taking into consideration the fact that literature cannot be separated from the social context. See: Ḥimmū (1999: 25–50), al-Jassem (1978: 16–32). For more reading on social criticism: Pakzad & Panah (2016: 82–89); Banī ʿĪsā (2021: 89–112).

3 Sharbiṭ (1998: 6–21).

4 Laredj (1986: 90). It should be emphasized in this context that the translation of examples and quotations from the novels was made by the authors of the article. Literal translation of these quotations was taken into consideration, since certain techniques (such as simile) require literal translation that fit with the original.

إنجاز فنيّ جريء وضخم، يطرح بكلّ واقعيّة موضوع الثورة التي فرضتها تلك المرحلة، لكن من وجهة التناقضات الداخلية التي كانت تحدث داخل الحزب الواحد والتي كانت تحاول القوى الرجعيّة تعميقها إلى حالة الإجهاض والاحتواء من الدّاخل، وهي تريد بذلك قتل الثورة وهي لم تفتح بعد عينيها

As for Waciny Laredj<sup>5</sup> himself, he went in search of a new literary genre that would distance himself to some extent from stereotypical novelistic styles via what is known as the art of the grotesque. Laredj undertook to craft a literary art that would combine ironic form<sup>6</sup> with alarming content, thus employing the novel as an expression of the phantasmagorical state of reality. As will be noted, the grotesque is closely linked to other literary forms such as the fantastical, the gothic novel, irony, parody, satire and comedy, a common feature of which is the blending of humor and horror as a means of presenting a frightening reality. Hence, given its critical intersection with other genres, the grotesque is an ambiguous or imprecisely defined literary or artistic form.

In what follows, we will examine this literary form with a view to identifying its distinctive properties, defining the method it employs, categorizing it in relation to other literary forms, and situating Laredj's own novelistic production within this context.

## 1.2 Distinguishing features of the grotesque

### The combination of comedy and horror

Laredj relies on the strategy of combining disharmonious elements such as comedy and horror. Comedy in this context is associated with black humor. Such a combination is necessary within this literary and artistic form. If solely the humorous aspect of the topic at hand was emphasized without bringing out its horrific side, the message regarding the "tragic Algerian reality" would lose its credibility, since the important aspect of the grotesque is "the nature of the irresolvable conflict."<sup>7</sup> Consequently, black humor performs a critical function in the creation of irony.

### Exaggeration

Exaggeration narrows the distance between the grotesque and the fantastic or phantasmagorical, as both the fantastic and the grotesque represent a departure from the familiar or ordinary. The difference between the fantastical and the grotesque lies in the degree of realism involved, where the grotesque, however much it tends towards the phantasmagorical, continues to hover within the sphere of the realistic.

### Ambiguity

As Virginia Swain notes in her book, *Grotesque Figures: Baudelaire, Rousseau, and the Aesthetics of Modernity*, the term 'grotesque' is a slippery one that has defied definition. She continues, "Depending on which authority one consults, the grotesque may designate either the lively mood and social

5 Born in the village of Sidi Boujnan (Tlemcen) in 1954, professor and novelist Waciny Laredj earned his Ph.D. with a dissertation entitled *Trends in the Arabic Novel in Algeria: A Study of the Historical and Aesthetic Roots of the Algerian Novel*, University of Damascus. Laredj, whose works have been translated into German, French, English, Italian and Spanish, among others, employs the style of the grotesque as a means of shedding light on major issues of concern to Algerians, such as violence, revolution, and Islamic terrorism as they relate to the fate of the individual and his or her human need for identity. For more information concerning Laredj, see: El-Aref (2015: 165–186); Benziane (2021: 68–78); Jarvis 2016; Laachir (2019: 188–214); Mukhtari 2002; Yelles 2010; Zayzafoon (2010: 61–80).

6 In a conversation between Nūri al-Jarrāḥ and Laredj on the world of writing as "the world of true birth from the womb of problems and causes," Laredj stated, "This agony that you speak of in Algeria will drive you either to suicide or to irony. I, for example, have chosen to go the route of irony. Never in my life has irony been as fundamental to my writings as it has been during the past few years, particularly in *Munḥadar al-Sayyidah al-Mutawāḥḥishah* (The Descent of the Wild Woman) and *Marāyā al-Ḍarīr* (Mirrors of the Blind)." See: al-Jarrāḥ 2000: 183.

7 Thomson 1972: 21.

inversion of the carnival (Mikhail Bakhtin), or the bleak fantasy and ironic expression of the alienated individual.<sup>8</sup>

Nevertheless, scholars agree on several stable features of the grotesque:

1. The grotesque is rooted in the unlikely combination of differing spheres.<sup>9</sup>
2. The grotesque is the opposite of everything unchanging and stable.<sup>10</sup>
3. Images of the grotesque are complex, tense, and contradictory.<sup>11</sup>

It becomes clear from the foregoing that the grotesque is closely associated with related artistic spheres and forms. It is associated, for example, with the *absurd*. Both the grotesque and the absurd aim to convey what is ridiculous or contrary to reason, the difference between them being that whereas the grotesque adheres to a particular formal pattern, the absurd may adopt a variety of patterns, including absurdist philosophy, absurdist irony, and even the absurdist grotesque. In addition to its freedom to create or innovate and its propensity for shifting forms, the grotesque serves to present a stereotypical quality or person in such a distorted, exaggerated and unrealistic manner that it prompts laughter.<sup>12</sup> The grotesque also borders on *satire*. The satirical artist attempts to arouse both laughter and revulsion in the reader by turning his victim into a grotesque character; satire thus becomes a device of the grotesque. Unlike the grotesque, satire attempts to elicit these two responses separately.<sup>13</sup> Both of these artistic forms, however, increase our awareness of the strangeness, abnormality and chaos to be found in ordinary experience.<sup>14</sup> Additionally, satire brings out the realistic dimension of the grotesque by enabling us to take a profound and conscious view of the social, psychological and political systems that surround us.

There is thus no clearly specified definition of what is termed 'the grotesque'. By examining its distinguishing artistic features, however, we hope to formulate a literary methodology and narrative of the grotesque. In what follows we will be analyzing the novelistic discourse of the grotesque by comparing Waciny Laredj's *Ḥārisat al-Ẓilāl* (Guardian of the Shadows (1997), and *Ḍamīr al-Ghā'ib* (Third Person Pronoun) (1990). Our aim will be to reveal the structure of the discourse associated with this literary form, identifying its hallmarks and the purpose for its use in the Algerian novel.

## 2 *Ḍamīr al-Ghā'ib* (Third Person Pronoun) and *Ḥārisat al-Ẓilāl* (Guardian of the Shadows): horror and black humor

In an effort to solve the riddle of his father's death, al-Ḥusayn Bin al-Mahdī, the narrator of *Third Person Pronoun*, visits a purported "cosmetic hospital" which, to his surprise, turns out to be a place that is divided against itself, as it were. Architecturally speaking, the place has an imposing grandeur. Its atmosphere, however, is positively Kafkaesque, due to bizarre-looking machines that turn its patients into "upright citizens."

The following passage is illustrative:

He ushered us into a huge room that reminded me of the Taḥtāḥa. It gave me the feeling of being on an open playing field. But then he closed all the doors, at which point the room started getting smaller and more cramped [...] People were packed in like sardines, lined up behind each other in groups of ten, and bound from their feet to their necks with wires of the sort that are used to pack wooden crates

8 Swain 2004: 11.

9 Chastel 1988: 25.

10 Bakhtin 1986: 48.

11 Bakhtin 1986: 23.

12 See: Thomson (1972: 38); Clayborough (1965: 10).

13 See: Thomson (1972: 42).

14 See: Stafford (1988: 15).

[...] All the machines were labeled with a stamp that read, "Nose Beautification Ward." A button was pressed, emitting a beep, and the peculiar machines began moving with increasing speed. Ten faces were pushed along automatically within the huge device, which concealed their features [...] meanwhile, from the other side, which the guide pointed out to us with his middle finger, blood ran out via a narrow trough into an artificial well. The ten bodies, now rewrapped, then emerged and were hoisted onto patches of grass that gave the impression that it was springtime.<sup>15</sup>

أدخلنا إلى قاعة واسعة. واسعة كالطحطاحة. تعطي الشعور بأننا في ملعب لا يُحَدُّ. أغلقت الأبواب كلها. بدأت القاعة تصغر وتضيق، ويتصاعد البخار الذي يملؤها [...] كان الناس مضغوطين كأنهم في علبة أسماك ومصطفين وراء بعضهم في وحدات، عشرة، عشرة ومربوطين من أرجلهم حتى رقابهم بأسلاك الصناديق الخشبية [...] كل الآلات في هذا الجناح تحمل ختم جناح تجميل الأنوف باللغة الأجنبية. يُسمع صوت زر الضغط، تبدأ الآلات الغريبة حركتها المتسارعة جدًا. تندفع عشرة وجوه بحركة آلية داخل الجهاز الكبير الذي يغيب ملامح الوجه [...] بينما من الجهة الثانية التي نبهنا إليها الدليل بإصبعه الوسط، كان دم يسيل ويصب من خلال ترعة صغيرة في بئر اصطناعي. تظهر الأجسام العشرة الملفوفة من جديد. تأخذهم رافعة دفعة واحدة وتضعهم على كتل الحشائش التي تورث انطباعا بأننا في فصل الربيع.

Readers' responses to such a passage may be somewhat confused or, at least, ambivalent. In his/her initial response, the reader may interact with the painful or tragic nature of the scene.<sup>16</sup> However, a rereading of the scene may bring out its humorous aspect, at which point one's sense of horror may be mingled with laughter, thus generating a kind of irony due to the incompatibility between these two contradictory elements. The degree of irony experienced will be determined by the *descriptive* dimension. The descriptive dimension takes the form of a simile, which—as becomes apparent later in the chapter—aims to distort the characters to the point of turning them into caricatures of themselves. Despite al-Husayn's invisibility (his disappearance is reported in a newspaper at the beginning of the novel for reasons that are not mentioned), he recounts the details of his investigation, which rouses the ire of officials who fear the exposure of facts about the revolution that have thus far remained concealed. In a phantasmagorical setting in which his father al-Mahdi's spirit is summoned, al-Husayn's sleuthing leads him to the hospital, where he sees "cosmetic" surgery being performed on patients with bizarre machines that cut off noses and maim bodies, turning them into "upright citizens," as he puts it.

The similes Laredj employs in this atmosphere include, for example:

- a. "People were packed in like sardines."<sup>17</sup>

كان الناس مضغوطين كأنهم في علبة أسماك

This simile may arouse a state of discomfort on the part of the reader given the dissonance between the horror of previous scenes and the humorousness of this phrase. Be that as it may, this amalgam accentuates the element of black humor, which in turn gives rise to irony and a sense of absurdity and fear.

- b. "Ten faces could be pushed along automatically within the huge device that [...] concealed their features. We heard what sounded like the dry clank of a hammer against a giant anvil accompanied by a single cry that bore in its depths the agony of ten living beings. The operation was followed by a deafening silence as the people, the machines, and the mysterious faces all fell still."<sup>18</sup>

تندفع عشرة وجوه بحركة آلية داخل الجهاز الكبير الذي يغيب ملامح الوجه. يشبه في تفاصيله محرقة يونانية. يُسمع صوت جاف كضربة مطرقة على سندان عملاق مصحوبًا بصرخة واحدة تحمل في عمقها آلام عشرة مخلوقات. يتبع العملية صمت مطبق في حركة الناس والآلات والوجوه الغامضة.

<sup>15</sup> Laredj 1990: 185–186. It is worth noting that Tahtāha is a large public square in the city of Oran containing a popular market where music and art aficionados like to gather.

<sup>16</sup> See: Thomson (1972: 2).

<sup>17</sup> Laredj 1990: 185.

<sup>18</sup> Laredj 1990: 185.

Devoid of humor, this description instills an intense angst in those who read it. Given its effectiveness in impacting the psyche, the grotesque is in fact sometimes used as a hostile weapon.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, this description of the state of terror and trepidation aroused by the ghastly “cosmetic” hospital shocks the reader by laying bare the reality of Algeria’s situation.

As for *Guardian of the Shadows*, whose content and style mark it also as a novel of the grotesque, there is a problematic narrator who, after enduring the amputation of both his tongue and his male reproductive organ, recounts facts that disclose the impact left on Algeria by Islamist violence. He recounts his experience with a certain Don Quixote—that is to say, the grandson of Cervantes who has dubbed himself Don Quixote and has come from Spain in search of his grandfather, who was taken captive in Algeria centuries earlier. The narrator, whose name is Ḥusayn, or Ḥusaysin, ends up being harmed by Islamist terrorism just as Don Quixote has been. Don Quixote’s journey to Algeria (at a time when warnings have been issued that journalists and foreigners will be killed) thus reveals the tragedy of the Algerian dilemma.

An illustrative passage follows:

I am going to tell you about Don Quixote, which, for me at least, will mean ridding myself of molten lava that comes spewing out of the heart and the memory like cascades of fire. Then I will leave it to you to fill in the blanks, the silences and the amputation-induced vacuums, as I am doing my best not to stick my nose where it doesn’t belong. The serious things that have been said about the Al Khaḍir family, for example, I will set aside. This family is descended from a strain of octopus that has thousands of arms. One of its many arms is sufficient to perform the function of speaking and listening even at a distance of thousands of kilometers. Meanwhile, another arm will be busy carrying out the massacres and stranglings it’s mastered so thoroughly just the way the Janissaries used to do to their rulers, while a third is delivering a speech on human rights before the United Nations [...] It is complicated, and calls for more explanation, but something’s keeping me from going into it any further.<sup>20</sup>

سأحدّثكم عن دون كيشوت وهذا معناه بالنسبة لي على الأقلّ التخلّص من هذه الحمم التي تتدفّق داخل القلب والذاكرة كشلالّات من نار. وأترك لكم البقية لملء الفراغات البيضاء ونقاط الصمت والبر، محاولاً قدر المستطاع عدم حشر أنفي فيما لا يعنيني مطلقاً. الحديث الخطير مثلاً عن عائلة الخضر سأضعه جانباً، فالعائلة من سلالات الاضطبوط التي تمتلك آلاف الأذرع؟ ذراع واحد من أذرعتها المتعددة كافٍ لأداء مهمّة الاستماع والكلام ولو على بعد آلاف الكيلومترات فيما تكون ذراع ثانية منهمكة في عمليات الذبح والخنق التي تتقنها بشكل جيّد كما كان يفعل الانكشارية بحكامهم، بينما الذراع الثالثة تلقي خطبة حول حقوق الإنسان في هيئة الأمم المتحدة... الأمر معقّد ويحتاج إلى تفصيل أكثر لكن شيئاً ما يمنعني من الذهاب إلى أبعد من هذا الحدّ.

This scene is shrouded in mystery and ambiguity due to the fact that the narrator postpones or conceals certain information. This postponement or concealment is deliberate, its aim being to impact the reader’s or listener’s state of mind. The narrator makes mention, for example, of the Khaḍir family, yet without any introduction. He then follows this with a long-winded, frightening description of them in which he likens them to a monstrous octopus. In so doing, he kneads together a gruesome image with a dash of black humor thrown in.

Both of these novels are clear examples of the grotesque, whose elements—which include absurd, irony-strewn narrative and sarcastic description—intersect and overlap across the two works.

The two novels also have an important feature in common, which is the presence of more than one narrator or voice. This polyphonic technique contributes to the grotesque qua literary genre, since each voice amplifies the novel’s shock value by introducing a discourse that is simultaneously infused with the bizarre, the absurd and the comedic.

Referring to the technique of using multiple voices in a literary text, Mikhail Bakhtin suggested the term “polyphony” based on his dialogical principle in the novel that emphasizes plurality of inde-

<sup>19</sup> See: Thomson (1972: 58).

<sup>20</sup> Laredj 1997: 13.

pendent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, i.e. not a plurality of characters and destinies in one objective world that describes the author's single consciousness, but a plurality of consciousnesses equal to their worlds that integrate within the novel while failing to merge. The intention is that each voice in the polyphonic novel reflects a complete and independent subject with its own inner world and a personal worldview that does not necessarily correspond to the author's view. This is different from the traditional novel, which presents a chronological development that leads to the development of dialects. The polyphonic novel unfolds a spatial concept in which different worldviews are presented to the reader simultaneously without any purpose of merging them. The author uses different languages, but does not devote himself to any of them. He uses the dialogue between the languages at every stage of the work, but remains neutral.<sup>21</sup>

In the following section, we will relate to this term within the context of Laredj's two novels and show how this polyphonic concept relates to his experimental writing.

### 3 Narrator, polyphony and its manifestations in the texts of *Third Person Pronoun* and *Guardian of the Shadows*

The term 'polyphony' was first introduced into literary theory by Mikhail Bakhtin in an essay entitled, "Problems in Dostoyevsky's Poetics." The polyphonic novel may be viewed as dialogical rather than monological in the sense that it has the capacity to convey several voices, each of which represents an alternative version of the truth. In his analysis of polyphony in the works of Dostoyevsky, Bakhtin focuses his attention on *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Crime and Punishment* as exemplars of the polyphonic novel. In the polyphonic novel, the varied voices are not presented as objects originating in the consciousness of the artist-author, but rather as varied forms of autonomous awareness, such that the characters and what they have to say come to have a complete semantic value. Throughout his essay, Bakhtin affirms Dostoyevsky's ability to merge these varying voices in his writings, thus giving them a distinctive quality. With reference to the two aforementioned novels, Bakhtin remarks that the ideas represented by the characters Raskolnikov and Ivan Karamazov actually reflect other ideas as well, just as a specific color in a painting may lose its abstract purity due to the reflections of the colors around it but, at the same time, a genuine new life, itself resplendent with color, blossoms into being.<sup>22</sup>

In Laredj's novels, polyphony manifests itself on a number of levels, most prominently that of the narrator. We begin with the significance of the narrator in *Guardian of the Shadows*, which features several different voices, each of which attempts to cover one aspect of Algeria's painful reality. Not content to present the point of view of a single narrator, Laredj includes a number of voices from differing sectors of society, thereby revealing the fragmented, nightmarish nature of the reality, which confronts the country and its people.

In both *Guardian of the Shadows* and *Third Person Pronoun*, we have a basic narrator who appears alongside other voices. Both of these narrators are protagonists directly connected to the events of the story. The narrator of *Guardian of the Shadows* is not only embedded within the story, but is a controversial figure as well. In the novel's opening, he states,

Algiers is the great city of futility, the free bird. O beloved whore, I am bitterly aggrieved, because a man afflicted by this country has beaten me to the words that I had hoped to say myself. Nevertheless, I am absolutely certain that I will not be spared their defamation, the sons of bitches. They will turn this statement of mine into an accusation, not knowing that [in so doing], they elevate me to a sublime

<sup>21</sup> See: Bakhtin (1982: 359–364).

<sup>22</sup> See: Bakhtin (2000: 80).

world greater than I. So be it. That is how they are. They have wasted their lives and their very blood waiting for opportunities to do harm.<sup>23</sup>

الجزائر، مدينة اللامعنى العظيمة. الطائر الحرّ، أيتها المومس المعشوقة. حزين لدرجة المرارة لأن رجلاً ممحوناً بهذه البلاد سبقني إلى هذا الكلام الذي تمتّيت أن أكون قائله ومع ذلك، فأنا على يقين مطلق بأنني لن أسلم من تجريحهم. أولاد الكلبة، سيلصقون بي تهمة هذا القول وهم لا يعرفون أنهم يرتقون بي إلى عالم سام أكبر مني. ليكن. هم هكذا، لقد أفسدوا أعمارهم ودمهم في انتظار فرص الإساءة.

In this passage, the narrator employs the technique of anticipation or foreshadowing by making mention of events that have yet to occur in the narrative. The frequency and importance of this technique vary depending on the type of story involved; however, foreshadowing generally takes the form of a project, a promise, a prediction, or in some cases, a dream or a fantasy.<sup>24</sup>

In this case, foreshadowing performs various functions: It fills a gap later in the novel. The narrator describes characters whose relationship to him we are not aware of as “sons of bitches,” and, later, as “Bani Kalbūn”<sup>25</sup>. This description serves to indicate the presence of a gap which the reader will fill in as his/her reading of the novel proceeds. Furthermore, it creates a state of expectation and anticipation on the reader’s part. It becomes clear from the manner of narration that there is something frightening in the offing. This frightening, yet hidden, something is alluded to in his statement, “I am absolutely certain that I will not be spared their defamation.” In response, the reader experiences growing tension, sensing that he/she is faced with an unknown entity, while at the same time developing expectations of the text.

This fear may shift, or possibly be exacerbated, in the next paragraph, where the narrator adds,

I no longer have either a tongue or a penis. Since the forcible amputation of those two ‘extra’ organs that supplied sensations for which there was no need—the lingual muscle and the reproductive organ—nothing troubles me anymore. I have the right to be proud now, since the principle source of harm has been removed, and I have become an upright man, a model citizen.<sup>26</sup>

فقدتُ اللسان والذكر.  
لا شيء يزعجني بعد عملية البتر القسريّ لعضوين زائدين، فائضين من الحواس: العضلة اللسانية والعضو التناسلي. يحقّ لي الآن أن أفخر، فقد استؤصل الضرر المركزي وأصبحتُ رجلاً صالحاً ومواطناً نموذجياً.

This piece of information, in addition to the mention of the masked men who have made the narrator promise to keep silent about his kidnapping and amputations,<sup>27</sup> serve as the novel’s opening, which generates a combination of fear and amusement borne by black humor. The black humor involved is critical and pointed, as when the narrator states, “I have the right to be proud now, since the principle source of harm has been removed, and I have become an upright man, a model citizen.”

The foreshadowing that points from the beginning of the novel to a danger that will worsen at the novel’s end is reminiscent of gothic novels. The narrator recounts the amputation of his reproductive organ and his tongue, saying:

After consulting among themselves, they stripped me naked and gathered in a circle around me. One of them had a knife that glistened in the moonlight, which no longer meant anything to me but death.

<sup>23</sup> Laredj 1997: 71.

<sup>24</sup> See: Qassumah (2000: 119).

<sup>25</sup> This is a Maghrebi fairy tale in which people tell about the wonders and curiosities pilgrims met on their journey. Banu Kalbun describes a tribe where people do not resemble humans in their customs and habits:

“Nothing is said about their religion of these people. Nevertheless, they are most likely totemists. They had an anthropomorphic totem, which they placed in the middle of their town, and they made it in the form of a dog, so reverent and glorified that they did not give it any name, nor described it in any way. The Banu Kalbun tribe used to put masks on their faces, which they did not remove except in cases of rage and anger.”

<sup>26</sup> Laredj 1997: 11.

<sup>27</sup> See: Laredj (1997: 9).



Then he started cutting away at my organ, which had shrunk in fear. When he had finished, he wrapped a string around what was left of it and secured it tightly [...] They pulled my tongue out and held it between my teeth. Then they started pressing on my jaw as hard as they could until I felt a piece of flesh being cut inside my mouth, and a peculiar saltiness. Then I disappeared again into the same darkness. When I regained consciousness, the two extra organs were gone for good so that I could be an upright citizen.<sup>28</sup>

تشارورا فيما بينهم، بعدها عروني، ثم تحلقوا حولي. لمع سكين أحدهم تحت ضوء القمر الذي لم يعد يعني لي إلا الموت. ثم بدأ بحزّ ذكرّي الضامر من كثرة الخوف وعندما انتهى لفّ على ما تبقى منه خيطاً وضبطه بإحكام [...] أخرجوا لساني، أحكموه بين أسناني وبدؤوا يضغطون بكلّ قواهم على فكّي حتى شعرت بقطعة لحم تُقطع داخل فمي وبملوحة خاصّة. ثم غبت ثانية داخل نفس الظلمة. عندما عدت إلى وعيي كان العضوان الزائدان قد بُترا نهائياً لأصير مواطناً صالحاً.

This scene reveals the enormity of the tragedy faced by the narrator Hūsaysin as a result of the terrorism that has afflicted Algeria and to which he has fallen victim along with the other characters. The grotesqueness of the situation is evident from the way in which it merges horror and sarcasm. The sarcasm can be felt in the narrator's seemingly casual statement, "Then they gathered in a circle around me," and, "Then he began cutting away at my organ, which had shrunk in fear." The irony is likewise palpable in his statement, "When I regained consciousness, the two extra organs were gone for good so that I could be an upright citizen."

This mélange of horror and sarcasm is reflected in *Third Person Pronoun*, whose narrator-protagonist al-Hūsayn Bin al-Mahdī, a disappeared journalist, is trying to track down his father and find out the reasons for his death. However, he comes up against supernatural or unknown forces which themselves track him down, and which end up driving him into a state of madness. The scenes of terrorism in the two novels intersect, and with a single voice, which is that of the dominant narrator.

In *Guardian of the Shadows*, we have a principled narrator who also allows other voices the chance to speak, thus completing the picture as well as reinforcing the experience of horror and meaninglessness. These include:

a. The voice of the taxi driver Hūsaysin rides with, and whose words underline the absurdity of daily life. He says:

You know, brother? It is all a big lie. It is never been anything, and it never will be. This life is not worth a *millim*, I tell you. They have not left us a thing [...] if things go on the way they are now, all the young men will head for the forest. They are driving everybody to ruin. I resist with my mother's car—this precious bequest that came following her husband's death. Last time they paid me a visit, they came to take it away from me. Luckily, for me, I had left it at the garage that night to have some parts replaced.<sup>29</sup>

تعرف يا خو؟ كذبة كبيرة؟ ما كاين والو وما راح يكون والو. صحيح أنها حياة ما تسواش مليم. لم يتركوا لنا شيئاً. إنّما أفضل من هذا الفراغ. ولكن إذا استمرت الوضعية على ما هي عليه الآن سيصعد كلّ الشباب إلى الغابة. إنهم يدفعون بالكل نحو الخراب. أنا أقاوم بسيارة أمي، هذا الإرث الثمين مقابل استشهاد زوجها. في المرة الماضية زاروني لأخذ السيارة مني. من حظّي أنني في تلك الليلة تركتها في المرآب لتغيير بعض قطع الغيار. في البداية لم يصدّقوني. كانوا أربعة مدججين بالأسلحة: كلاش وبنادق الصّيد. بعدما فتشوا الدار بكاملها خرجوا بهدوء تام من الباب الذي دخلوا منه بدون خوف أو قلق. تعرف؟ ماذا نتمنّى في حالات العجز التام مثل هذه، كلاش فقط. عندما طلبت منهم سلاحاً للدفاع عن نفسي، هل تعرف بماذا أجابوني؟ هناك دولة تدافع عن الجميع. الحقرة يا خو؟ الدولة لا تعرف مطلقاً أنني موجود وأنّي كائن يعيش بشطط ويتنفس بصعوبة.

b. The voice of Hannah, the blind lady who hosts Hūsaysin, and who embodies the bitterness of the present and nostalgia for the past. In words that mingle to some extent with those of the author, she says:

<sup>28</sup> Laredj 1997: 213–214.

<sup>29</sup> Laredj 1997: 119. It is worth noting that the *millim* is the smallest monetary unit in Algeria, worth one-thousandth of an Algerian dinar (one-hundredth of a piaster).

You are all stupid and ignorant, illiterate to the bone. You brag about being patriots, but you do not know a thing about the magic of the sweet acacia flower, our bright flame that must never be extinguished. The acacia is our pride and our great ruse. Wake up, damn you, before it is too late, and before everything's lost. Whoever forgets the color of the acacia flower has forgotten the color of his own soil.<sup>30</sup>

أغبياء وجهلة. أميون حتى العظم. تتنافخون بالوطنية وأنتم عاجزون عن معرفة سحر زهرة الكاسي، شعلتنا الدافئة دوماً التي يجب أن لا تنطفئ جذوتها مهما كان الأمر. الكاسي هي فخرنا وخديعتنا الكبرى. عليكم اللعنة. استيقظوا قبل فوات الأوان وضياح كل شيء. من ينس لون زهرة الكاسي، ينس لون تربته.

c. The voice of Don Quixote who, far from being merely a passing voice in the novel, takes over the narration in Chapter Four, where he covers all events or fills in the gaps left by Ḥusaysin in Chapters 1–3. He does this by recording his daily memoirs from the time he sails from Spain until he enters the Algerian capital, where he is thrown in prison on security-related charges that have no basis in reality. Don Quixote performs two functions:

- That of a *complementary narrator*, in which capacity he presents information which is needed to understand the story or fill in gaps, or reminds readers of things done or said earlier so as to ensure that all the pieces are properly connected.<sup>31</sup> In writing his memoirs, Don Quixote attempts to cover events that were missing from the original narrative, that is to say, events that preceded his journey to Algeria.
- That of a *confirmatory narrator* who substantiates the idea of Algeria's shattered situation by mingling a dreamy idealism with an appalling reality. In so doing, he confirms what was said earlier in Ḥusaysin's narrative about the state of meaninglessness that hangs in the air, saying:

I used to dream of seeing a city. But instead I saw an entire city crawling toward me. It advanced not only with its fragrant acacia blossoms, its cherished customs and its stories, but also with a vague mixture of unpleasant odors like those of decomposing corpses. Now, even in this state of futility and absurdity, another city is now emerging inside me, and perhaps deep inside all of us.<sup>32</sup>

In *Third Person Pronoun*, by contrast, we have only two narrative voices: that of al-Ḥusayn, and that of his father, al-Mahdī, who breaks into the novel in an ambience of hair-raising phantasia. The deceased al-Mahdī comes out of the picture frame to speak to his son and tell him the truth about his death.

In the following passage, al-Ḥusayn employs a kind of semi-logical summary narrative when he says:

On my way to the newspaper, I saw beautiful words breathing their last and trees committing suicide in droves, setting their own branches on fire. I saw the sun burning to a crisp, sparrows turning into cats, the cats into rats, the rats into elephants, the elephants into ghouls, and the ghouls into things that looked like fear and darkness, even though everything in the city—institutions, newspapers, radio stations, people—was proceeding in routine, ordinary legal fashion.<sup>33</sup>

في طريقي إلى الجريدة شاهدت بقايا الكلمات الجميلة تلفظ أنفاسها الأخيرة والأشجار تتحرر جماعات وجماعات وتحرق أغصانها بنفسها. شاهدت الشمس تتضخم والعصافير تتحول إلى قطط والقطط إلى فئران والفئران إلى فيلة والفيلة إلى غيلان والغيلان إلى أشياء تشبه الخوف والغموض مع أن كل شيء في المدينة كان يسير بشكل قانوني روتيني وعادي. المؤسسات، الجرائد، الإذاعات الناس.

<sup>30</sup> Laredj 1997: 17.

<sup>31</sup> Qassumah (2000: 141).

<sup>32</sup> Laredj 1997: 137.

<sup>33</sup> Laredj 1997: 15.

Al-Ḥusayn's voice is that of a fantastical narrator that serves to amplify the description. Consequently, his narration shifts at times into description charged with additional features that render it "a tightly organized semantic and rhetorical network."<sup>34</sup> The following descriptive scene in the narrator's voice is illustrative:

People were packed in like sardines, lined up behind each other in groups of ten, and bound from their feet to their necks with wires of the sort that are used to pack wooden crates. Each row was separated from every other by a flexible metal piece capable of moving freely and which, when a button was pressed somewhere, would come down, and ten wrapped-up human bodies would tilt in one direction or another.<sup>35</sup>

كان الناس مضغوطين كأنهم في علبة أسماك ومصطفين وراء بعضهم في وحدات، عشرة، عشرة، ومربوطين من أرجلهم حتى رقابهم بأسلاك الصناديق الخشبية. بين كل صف وصف، قطعة معدنية رخوة قابلة للحركة الحرة حين يضغط على زر ما في مكان ما تنزل القطعة المعدنية ومعها تميل عشرة أجسام بشرية ملفوفة.

This description of the interior of the so-called "cosmetic hospital" combines comical, sarcastic simile with the frightening. The narrator depicts something that, logically speaking, could not possibly exist in reality.

As for al-Mahdī, who relates facts that fill gaps in the narrative, he represents the voice of the unknown. The only figure capable of revealing the truth about the past, al-Mahdī is the absent narrator who is summoned to the scene, whereupon he relates how "cold hands" like those that had violated Ḥusaysin in *Guardian of the Shadows* killed him together with a female companion. Al-Mahdī states:

Her eyes fluttered like those of a freshly slaughtered chicken. Incredulous, she said nothing, clinging to my weary shoulders [...] When she heard that everything was over and that the revolution had not been the blank sheet she had always imagined it to be [...] I dug my grave in silence and I helped her to dig hers. All we heard was the strokes of the axe as it violently split the ground [...] I felt the cold dagger come down on my neck. The pain was severe at first, but a second later, everything turned hazy and I could not feel anything at all [...] My corpse had gone cold and had begun to decompose.<sup>36</sup>

ررفت عيناها كفرخ مذبوح بشفرة حادة. لم تصدق، ولم تقل شيئاً. التصقت بكنتفي المنهكين [...] حينما سمعت أن كل شيء انتهى وأن الثورة لم تكن ورقة بيضاء كما كانت دائماً تتصورها [...] حفرْتُ قبوري وساعدتها على حفر قبرها بصمت. لم نكن نسمع شيئاً إلا ضربات الفأس وهي تشق الأرض بعنف [...] شعرت بالخنجر البارد ينزل على الرقبة. الألم في البداية كان قاسياً ثم بعد ثانية غام كل شيء ولم أحس على الإطلاق [...] كانت جثتي قد بدأت تبرد وتحلل.

This is a narrative of irony which serves to evoke horror and death, as the character of the narrator is raised to life, which, being impossible, ushers the narrative into the realm of the fantastical.

## 4 Techniques of novelistic discourse: black humor, close up and similes

We focused in the preceding section on polyphony and its role in creating a discourse of the grotesque in Laredj's novels *Third Person Pronoun* and *Guardian of the Shadows*. In this section, we turn our attention to constituents of novelistic discourse, which reinforce and undergird the grotesque, specifically, black humor and the cinematic "close-up" technique.

### 4.1 Black Humor

Black humor differs from traditional satire and comedy in that, unlike these two techniques, black humor "brings about no personal liberation or social reconciliation. Rather, it tends in the direction of

<sup>34</sup> Hamon 1981: 8.

<sup>35</sup> Laredj 1997: 186.

<sup>36</sup> Laredj 1997: 88–89.

such goals, but generally fails to achieve them.”<sup>37</sup> Black humor does not concern itself with arousing laughter or finding solutions. Rather, it seeks to baffle the reader about what he or she is reading.

The following passage from *Guardian of the Shadows* raises a number of points:

You will have to pardon me for my confusions, and for not mentioning the details of the assault I suffered, since I have been traumatized by a treacherous assassination. The funny thing is that I am a dead man who is keeping the promises he made himself! I swore to the masked man and the bearded men with him that no one would ever learn of the amputations, at least for the sake of the man who bet on my good character and risked his neck by taking responsibility for letting me go. If I breathed so much as a word, they would have wiped and torn him to shreds. I may be dead, but I am a man of my word, and there's no way I would put a kind man's life in peril. On the other hand [...] what was that fool doing with a gang of murderers? Pardon me [...] they are not a gang of murderers. That is not what I meant to say. That was just the slip of an amputated tongue made by a dead man, a madman on the verge of a nervous breakdown.<sup>38</sup>

عليكم أن تعذروني في إرباكاتي وتمنّعي عن ذكر تفاصيل الاعتداء الذي وقع لي، فأنا مرعوب من اغتيال غادر. المضحك أنني رجل ميت ويحفظ الوعود التي قطعها على نفسه! فقد أقسمت للرجل المثلّم وللملتحين الذين كانوا يرفقته بأن سرّ حادثتي بتر الذکر واللسان سيموت بين ظلال الروح بدون أن يعلم به أحد. علي الأقل خوفاً على الرجل الذي راهن علي صفائي وقدم عنقه متحماً مسئوليّة إطلاق سراحه. لو خرجت كلمة واحدة مني سيقدمون علي محوه وتمزيقه. أنا رجل ميّت ولكنّي صاحب كلمة ولا يمكن أن أرض حياة رجل طيّب لمخاطر الموت. لكن؟... واش كان يدير هذا المهبول مع زمرة من القتلة؟ عفواً... ليسوا زمرة قتلة. ليس هذا ما كنت أقصد قوله. مجرد زلة لسان مقطوع، نابعة من رجل ميّت. رجل على أبواب انهيار عصبيّ مجنون.

Of note here is that Ḥusaysin only mentions what happened to him parenthetically in the course of narrating other events. He recounts the most critical, and painful, information in the entire novel as an aside of sorts, which makes us want to laugh and cry at the same time. The narrator attempts here to adopt a tragic and ethical point of view in comic form: He tells the truth in passing, then hesitates, then denies it, thus producing an ironic humor in an atmosphere charged with fear.

Black humor is also a prominent theme in *Third Person Pronoun*, where it is employed in numerous places as a means of exposing the true nature of the authoritarian institution and the individuals who tamper with martyrs' files.

The final chapter of *Third Person Pronoun* is replete with black comedic scenes, some of which focus on irony and others on the absurd. Al-Ḥusayn is brought to trial on the bizarre charge of suffering from a dangerous brain tumor by the name of al-Mahdi which needs to be removed:

“The folds of his brain conceal a martyr who poses a danger to the city's health. The machine has shown me conclusively that the tumor is none other than the face of a martyr who wants to resurrect his bones [...] It has to be removed so that we can try him properly. We would not want the fairness of the trial to be compromised [...] We are supposed to try you no matter what. However, the presence of this tumor is cause for concern, and we wouldn't want to do you injustice” [...] But before I could defend myself again, the lawyer came running out of the toilet with his mouth full of chewing tobacco and begging the court for a reprieve as he tried to fasten his belt.<sup>39</sup>

تلايف مخّه تخبيّ شهيداً خطيراً على صحّة المدينة. أظهرت لي الآلة بشكل لا يدعو إلى الشك أن الورم ليس شيئاً آخر غير وجه شهيد يريد إعادة بعث عظامه [...] - يجب استئصال الورم حتّى نتمكن من مقاضاته بشكل عادل. لا نريد أن تُمسّ المحكمة في نزاهتها [...] - المفروض أن نحاكمك في كلّ الظروف، لكنّ وجود هذا الورم مقلق ونحن لا نريد أن نظلمك [...] قبل أن ادافع عن نفسي مرّة أخرى، خرج المحامي من المراض يجري، فمه مملوء بالتبن الغامل. تدخل، يستنجد عطفاً من المحكمة وهو يحاول أن يقفل حزامه.

37 Schulz 1974: 8.

38 Laredj 1997: 10–11.

39 Laredj 1990: 252–253.

This passage contains shots that are downright slapstick, such as when the attorney for the defense comes rushing out of the bathroom with tobacco in his mouth demanding that the trial be postponed. A hilarious scene, it demonstrates the irony of the situation, in which disturbing emotions mingle with the presence of hidden conspiratorial forces that are at work to bring the narrator to ruin (by turning him into either a vegetable, or an “upright citizen”) by means of a ludicrous accusation.

#### 4.2 The cinematic “close-up”

One of the most important techniques of modern cinema, the close-up shot has a remarkable capacity to underscore the message being conveyed by a given scene. As one scholar of the cinema has observed, “The close-up is the very spirit of cinema [...] It has not only broadened our view of life; it has deepened it as well.”<sup>40</sup>

In both *Third Person Pronoun* and *Guardian of the Shadows*, the close-up technique serves to expand the boundaries of the scene or narrative, which evokes a sense of horror in the reader. Take, for example, the following passage from *Guardian of the Shadows*:

Locking my mother between his brawny, viper-tattooed arms, he drew her forcefully toward his chest and pressed on her neck with his thick hands. Then he pulled her head back, pressing on her spine with his right knee until she collapsed onto her knees. When her throat was fully exposed, he took out a sharp knife [...] and cut off her head, which dangled from her body by a thin string of flesh.<sup>41</sup>

وضع أمي بين ذراعيه العريضتين الموشومتين بالثعابين. جذبها بقوة باتجاه صدره وضغط على رقبتها بكفّيه الغليظتين ثم سحب رأسها ضاغطة بركبته اليمنى على عمودها الفقري فانهارت على ركبتيها، عندما أصبح نحرها بارزاً، أخرج سكيناً كبيرة [...] قطع رأس أمي الذي ظلّ عالقاً بالجسم بجلدة رقيقة.

The scene recounts the testimony of a girl whose mother was murdered by masked Islamists before her very eyes. Quoted from a newspaper by the narrator Hūsayṣin, the gruesome scene is bound to spark both outrage and angst on the part of the reader. By slowing the narrative pace and thereby intensifying its effect, the narrator has taken the event reported by the press and transformed it from a news clip into a close-up shot.

Similarly in *Third Person Pronoun*, the combined use of the close-up technique and slowed narrative pace helps to bring out the intensity of the scene, particularly that of the trial, where al-Hūsayn is “accused” of having a brain tumor in the form of his dead father. The passage below describes the presiding magistrate:

The judge ran his hand over the place where his nose would have been and adjusted his undersized spectacles. Then he opened his mouth as far as it would go and, before he spoke, devoured an onion whole. This bizarre atmosphere terrified me. Truth be told, it bothered me to be naked, and there were times when I was so repulsed by myself that I wanted to vomit.<sup>42</sup>

تحسّس القاضي مكان أنفه. عدّل نظارتيه الصغيرتين. فتح فمه عن آخره. التهم رأس بصلة كاملة. قبل أن يتكلّم كنت مرعوباً داخل هذا الجوّ الغريب وللصراحة أقول لكم إنّ عريّي كان يزعجني. وفي أحيان أخرى كنت أقرف من نفسي لدرجة أتمنى أن أتقيّاً.

This description serves to depersonalize the judge, who is depicted less as an actual human being than as a verbal caricature of one. The narrator tells us that the judge “opened his mouth as far as it would go and [...] devoured an onion whole.” This fiction, which gives us no sense of the judge’s humanity, goes beyond caricature to include black humor, as it drives home the meaninglessness of what takes place in the courtroom. After all, there is no concrete accusation, and the judge, the lawyer and the clerk alike are mere talking machines whose purpose is to confirm the absurd state of

<sup>40</sup> Friedberg 1998: 2.

<sup>41</sup> Laredj 1997: 31.

<sup>42</sup> Laredj 1990: 239.

affairs being described by the narrator. In this context, the close-up technique becomes a tool for exposing what is wrong with the current reality and its political systems.

Within this literary magnifying glass, the importance of description lies in its being part of the narrative. In this context, description has several functions, one of which is informative. This function, which “involves providing the input necessary to follow the narrative,”<sup>43</sup> is particularly prominent in *Third Person Pronoun*, where al-Mahdī tells his son about his burial with the woman who had died with him:

I dug my grave in silence and I helped her to dig hers. All we heard was the strokes of the axe as it violently split the ground [...] I felt the cold dagger come down on my neck. The pain was severe at first, but a second later, everything turned hazy and I could not feel anything at all [...] My corpse had gone cold and had begun to decompose.<sup>44</sup>

حَفَرْتُ قَبْرِي وَسَاعَدْتُهَا عَلَى حَفْرِ قَبْرِهَا بِصَمْتٍ. لَمْ نَكُنْ نَسْمَعُ شَيْئًا إِلَّا ضَرْبَاتِ الْفَأْسِ وَهِيَ تَشَقُّ الْأَرْضَ بَعْنَفٍ [...] شَعُرْتُ بِالْخَنْجَرِ الْبَارِدِ يَنْزِلُ عَلَى الرِّقْبَةِ. الْأَلَمُ فِي الْبَدَايَةِ كَانَ قَاسِيًا ثُمَّ بَعْدَ ثَانِيَةِ غَامٍ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ وَلَمْ أَحْسُ عَلَى الْإِطْلَاقِ [...] كَانَتْ جَثَّتِي قَدْ بَدَأَتْ تَبْرُدُ وَتَتَحَلَّلُ

This passage also involves use of a literary device known as analepsis, in which a past event is narrated at a point later than its chronological place in a story,<sup>45</sup> and by means of which the narrator provides information that has heretofore been concealed from the reader.

In other scenes of the novel, simile reveals the depth of state terror. By means of a kind of narrative cinematography, as in the beginning of the novel, description performs a preparatory function in which it is somewhat distanced from the narrative action. Al-Ṣādiq Qassūmah states in this connection:

The fact that the description may be described as static (in comparison with the narrative) does not mean that it is entirely devoid of movement, since it remains connected to the overall movement of the story. It may also be said to possess movement in itself (consisting, as it does, of both the movement of descriptors and the movement of the entities described, as noted earlier), in addition to its being connected to the movement of actions, for which it may serve as a preparatory background, as well as being a factor in their development.<sup>46</sup>

In the prefatory section that precedes the narrative, entitled “Narrator’s Introduction,” the opening narrator (not the one who tells the story) comments on the report that al-Ḥusayn Ibn al-Mahdī has disappeared from the newspaper, saying:

What are we to say after what happened? Before the name of the city, the name of the newspaper, people’s faces and human appearances changed, millions, even billions of creepy-crawlies descended on the downtown area. They looked like ticks black as tar—some said black as an eclipse. They gnawed away at the pages of the newspapers, they ate holes in the walls, they forced people to close their mouths tight, they bored crevices in tired faces, and they settled in their wrinkles.<sup>47</sup>

ماذا نقول بعد الذي جرى؟ قبل أن يتغيّر اسم المدينة والجريدة ووجوه الناس والأشكال آدميّة، كان قد نزل إلى قلب المدينة ملايين بل ملايين الزواحف التي تشبه العلق. علق أسود مثل القطران. بعضهم يقول مثل الكسوف. تسلّط على أوراق الجرائد فقضمها وعلى الحيطان فخرمها، وعلى أفواه الناس فزمها، وعلى الوجوه المتعبة فحفرها، واستقر بين تجاعيدها وقتاً طويلاً

This passage contains a series of terrifying similes which create an atmosphere of horror and the phantasmagoric from the very outset. The opening narrator, who exists outside the framework of the

<sup>43</sup> Qassūmah, 2000: 207.

<sup>44</sup> Laredj 1990: 88–89.

<sup>45</sup> See: al-Raqīq 1998: 76.

<sup>46</sup> Qassūmah 2000: 207.

<sup>47</sup> Laredj 1990: 7–8.

story, attempts to bring out the nightmarish dreadfulness of the tale which has yet to be told through phrases such as: “millions, even billions of creepy-crawlies descended on the downtown area,” “ticks black as tar” and “Some say black as an eclipse.”

Another simile, which may bring up ambivalent feelings in the reader, is the one used to describe Albūhafṣī (al-Mahdī’s friend) in the struggle for survival which he endured with al-Mahdī in prison. Albuhafsi recalls, “I used to pass him water through the little holes in the window using a piece of cloth soaked in water, and which he would suckle *like a baby*.”<sup>48</sup> The passage depicts the harshness and misery of the period al-Mahdī went through in prison, while the incongruity in the statement is intensified by the depiction of al-Mahdī as a baby suckling the water juxtaposed with the frightfulness of the message being conveyed.

A simile involving young children appears in another scene as well, where al-Mahdī recounts the events of his torture, saying, “Somebody took out a piece of white cotton. Then, with a brisk motion he opened the skin, and the testicles flew every which way like a couple of children’s toys.”<sup>49</sup> The effect of this exaggerated, caricature-like illustration is heightened by the incongruence between the humorousness of the description (which likens testicles to children’s toys) and the bitterness that lurks beneath its surface. Simile-based descriptions in other scenes also present bitter ironies enveloped in humor as in the trial scene, where the narrator turns the judges into automatons that eat onions whole and try him on a charge devoid of all logic.

The narrator describes the judge, saying, “He wiggled his bottom like somebody who has a desert worm wiggling through his cecum.”<sup>50</sup> This statement comes in the midst of a trial that can only be described as highly bizarre, and in which al-Ḥusayn is being accused of having a tumor in his head by the name of al-Mahdī that will have to be removed in order for the trial to proceed. Consequently, the narrator has to resort to comedy as a counterweight to the reader’s experience of the bizarre.

Likewise, in *Guardian of the Shadows*, Laredj makes frequent use of the simile to perform a comedic function. Examples of such comic relief are his description of Don Quixote, whose eyes he likens to those of a rooster,<sup>51</sup> and of Ḥannā,<sup>52</sup> saying, “Sniffing out the stranger coming into the house, she takes him over like someone who’s come upon easy plunder.”<sup>53</sup>

Metaphor also plays a major role in both novels. *Guardian of the Shadows*, for example, contains a passage describing Don Quixote’s imprisonment at sea, where he says, “I felt myself before a world that was collapsing into ruin, in which all I could hear was the prisoners’ throttled cries.”<sup>54</sup> Elsewhere he states, “I felt myself awakening a dead era.”<sup>55</sup>

In a passage quoted earlier from *Third Person Pronoun*, the narrator uses a series of fantastic metaphors to describe his experience on the way to the newspaper, saying:

I saw beautiful words breathing their last and trees committing suicide in droves, setting their own branches on fire. I saw the sun burning to a crisp, sparrows turning into cats, the cats into rats, the rats into elephants, the elephants into ghouls, and the ghouls into things that looked like fear and darkness.<sup>56</sup>

شاهدتُ بقايا الكلمات الجميلة تلفظ أنفاسها الأخيرة والأشجار تتحرر جماعات جماعات وتحرق أغصانها بنفسها.  
شاهدت الشمس تتفحّم والعصافير تتحوّل إلى قطط والقطط إلى فئران والفئران إلى فيلة والفيلة إلى غيلان، والغيلان إلى  
أشياء تشبه الخوف والغموض

48 Laredj 1990: 19.

49 Laredj 1990: 48.

50 Laredj 1990: 252.

51 Laredj 1997: 20.

52 Hannah is an acquaintance of Ḥusaysin’s who symbolizes Algeria’s Andalusian heritage.

53 Laredj 1997: 35.

54 Laredj 1997: 27.

55 Laredj 1997: 148.

56 Laredj 1990: 15.

Another important constituent of description is the *temporal element*, that is, the story's rhythm and pace. *Guardian of the Shadows*, for example, contains numerous pauses, that is, descriptive passages that have little impact on the progress of the plot.<sup>57</sup> This type of non-narrative material appears at the beginning of the novel, where the narrator spends more than twenty pages engrossed in descriptions and digressions that move the plot neither forward nor backward.

Of relevance to the temporal element is the literary device of extended narration, which involves taking up a large amount of space in the text to recount an event which took a relatively short period of time,<sup>58</sup> as in the description of the acacia flower, or of Don Quixote.

The slowed-pace technique also prevails in *Third Person Pronoun*, where the narrator frequently interrupts scenes with deliberate pauses, such as when he states:

Sometimes in the midst of this death, I feel as though I have turned into a fly, just a fly that buzzes hopelessly around, having burnt its wings and grown short of breath. Even so, I go on insisting on my right to live, and to hold on to what makes me different from everybody else. For example, I hate Friday for the simple reason that it has no meaning.<sup>59</sup>

يجدث معي أحياناً وسط هذا الموت أن أشعر بأنني تحولت إلى ذبابة. مجرد ذبابة تحوم بلا رجاء، أحرقت أجنحتها وضاق تنفسها. ومع ذلك، ما زلت أصر دائماً على حقي في الحياة وفي الاحتفاظ بتفاصيلي الخاصة التي تختلف حتماً عن تفاصيل غيري. مثلاً أنا أكره يوم الجمعة لا لشيء سوى أنه يوم فارغ من المعنى

In sum, close-ups, slow motion, extended narrative, and lengthy pauses bolster the descriptive element in the novel of the grotesque by imbuing the temporal with a spatial dimension, highlighting events in a nightmarish way through the use of simile and metaphor.

## 5 Conclusion

The hypothesis of this research, centered on the new experimental writing that Laredj adopted, was to create a new representative image of Algerian reality. Laredj has employed the grotesque with all its characteristics of sarcasm, irony, exaggeration, and nightmares in order to define the borders of this reality: representing the struggle against Islamic terrorism and the struggle against the terrorism of the authorities, which are two main axes linked to the Algerian reality. This is in addition to the great similarities between narrative elements in two of his novels: *Ḍamīr al-Ghā'ib* (Third Person Pronoun) and *Hārisat al-Zilāl* (Guardian of the Shadows) in terms of the polyphony of voices, similarity of names, and the presence of two parallel plots in each novel.

These two novels cover an important historical, political and social period in the history of Algeria – the 1980s and 1990s of the twentieth century. They also reveal the artistic development of Laredj's literary writing in terms of narrative discourse and language. They reveal the poetics of mixture between horror and comedy through plot construction and the use of satirical descriptive language, which create the impression of confusion and hesitation in front of the horror of reality arising out of this confusion.

The use of humor in the "mistaken" places makes the reader feel the terrifying nature of the scenes, as he feels a mixture of horror and caricatured humor in an atmosphere charged with realism and absurdity.

By integrating the dual elements of fear and humor, Laredj lays the groundwork for a new Arabic, Algerian novelistic approach whose style and techniques frame a message rooted in a committed, principled stance. In so doing, Laredj has introduced a new literary genre, which intersects with other linguistic forms of expression such as the fantastical or the miraculous. However, by virtue of its par-

<sup>57</sup> See: Raḡīq 1998: 128.

<sup>58</sup> Raḡīq 1998: 127.

<sup>59</sup> Laredj 1990: 14.



ticular artistic aim—namely, to give voice to the painful Algerian experience of the last several decades—it does not correspond perfectly to these other genres. After all, like the theatre of the grotesque and the art of the grotesque, the novel of the grotesque is an attempt to expose the true nature of reality as it is lived and experienced by addressing contemporary issues. In addition, like any art form that breaks with the familiar, the grotesque strives “to produce a creative text that possesses not only a life of its own, but a privacy and intimacy which, quite frequently, even the most subtle interpretation may penetrate only with difficulty.”<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Laredj 1990: 53.

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