



## **Manifestations of Polyphony in the Novel "The Serpent's Embrace" by Azzedine Djellaoudji**

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### **Abstract:**

Ezzedine Djellaoudji's novel "The Embrace of the Serpents" is an epic narrative that chronicles the French invasion of Algeria in 1830, alongside internal and external resistance under the rule of the Ottoman Regency. The novel employs Bakhtin's polyphony technique to present multiple voices—those of the Dey Hussein, Emir Abdelkader, Shamkha, the French generals, and others—each reflecting a distinct ideological and historical position. This study, grounded in a genetic structuralist approach, analyses the significance of these voices and how they interact to construct a complex, multi-layered vision of a pivotal historical era. The findings reveal that Djellaoudji's use of polyphony serves not only as a narrative strategy but as a means of recovering wounded collective memory, deconstructing colonial discourse, and affirming the complexity of Algerian identity.

**Key words: Narrative, Invasion, Discordant, Conflict, Divergent, Resistance.**

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### **Introduction:**

The narrative vision of historical events in the novel is not presented as rigid or static facts; rather, it employs the mechanism of polyphony, as theorized by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Through this technique, the polyphonic dimension manifests in the construction of a multifaceted novelistic world, encompassing a rich spectrum of voices

that incarnate diverse social, political, and ideological orientations within a fractured Algeria on the eve of the French colonial invasion of 1830.

Polyphony thus plays a decisive role in revealing the complexities of the human psyche, which often conceals numerous secrets and conflicting attitudes. Each voice possesses its own space for expression, bearing its unique worldview, values, and aspirations. The clash and interaction among these voices generate narrative tension and endow the text with a rich complexity that defies simplistic or unilateral interpretations.

The employment of the polyphonic technique in this novel raises fundamental questions that constitute major entry points for approaching the architecture of the text: How does polyphony serve as a structural strategy in the novel? What is the significance of each voice within the overall narrative construction? And to what extent did the novel succeed in achieving its narrative and intellectual objectives in exposing the mechanisms of collusion that weakened the ruling authority and poisoned the political and social climate on the eve of the French invasion?

### **Bakhtin's Theory of Polyphony: The Monologic and the Polyphonic**

The complexity and multiplicity of human experience have been influenced by Western theoretical approaches to this technique, particularly as developed by the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin.

Bakhtin (1895–1975) is considered the foremost theorist of the concept of polyphony in narrative works. He elaborated this concept through his in-depth studies of the works of Fyodor Dostoevsky, where he distinguished between two types of the novel; the monologic novel (Monologic) and the dialogic novel (Polyphonic) or multi-voiced novel.

#### **1. The Monologic Novel**

This is the type of novel in which the author's voice dominates and reflects the author's own vision in representing reality. In such a form, the relationship between the writer and the fictional character is one of control and dominance. All voices are subordinated to a single logic, and divergent viewpoints and opposing ideas are suppressed or neutralized.

## **2. The Polyphonic Novel**

Also known as the multi-voiced novel, this form grants the fictional character independence from the dominance of the author. Characters are given a degree of freedom to express their ideas, thereby providing a multi-faceted vision of the world. The world is understood to encompass contradiction, diversity, and conflict, and as such, each character is permitted to speak from their own consciousness and perspective. It is this model that Bakhtin identifies as the highest form of the novel.

### **Polyphony in the Historical Novel**

In the historical novel, each voice possesses its own distinct perspective that does not dissolve into a single unified viewpoint. The significance of this concept becomes particularly evident when applied to the historical novel, especially those dealing with periods of conflict, transformation, and colonization. In such contexts, polyphony does not merely serve an aesthetic function but carries a profound historical, political, and humanistic dimension.

Within the narrative process, the novel grants diverse voices—the ruler and the ruled, the colonizer and the colonized, the resister and the collaborator, the intellectual and the common person, the man and the woman—equal rights to exist and speak. The significance of this approach in the historical novel manifests in several ways:

1. Providing a more comprehensive and profound vision of the historical event. The novel goes beyond both the official narrative and the single counter-narrative, revealing internal and external tensions, contradictions, and the conflicting interests that shaped that historical period.
2. Humanizing history. Instead of focusing solely on major historical events, the novel highlights individual experiences, personal suffering, hopes, and fears, making history more vivid and closer to the reader.
3. Deconstructing dominant discourses. By placing the voice of the colonizer alongside that of the colonized, and the voice of authority beside that of the people, the novel exposes the ideological biases and fragile foundations on which monolithic discourses rest, whether colonial or otherwise.
4. Creating a space for dialogue and questioning. The polyphonic novel does not offer

ready-made answers; rather, it opens the door to questioning and discussion about the past, its present implications, and its future. It invites the reader to participate in the dialogue that unfolds between the different voices.

In "The Serpent's Embrace," Azzedine Djellaoudji skillfully employs these Bakhtinian possibilities, drawing on diverse narrative techniques such as stream of consciousness, intensive dialogue, interior monologue, and letters and documents, to grant each character an independent voice and unique perspective.

### **Analysis of the Significance of Voices in "The Serpent's Embrace"**

Understanding the polyphonic dimension of the novel requires an analysis of the principal voices and their meanings within the overall structure of the text. The voices of the characters identified can be organized into groups, each group representing a distinct social, political, or ideological stratum of Algerian society during the critical period of the French colonial invasion of 1830.

#### **First: Voices of the Declining Authority and Algerian Society on the Eve of the Invasion**

##### **1. 1. The Voice of Hussein Dey**

His voice represents the declining Ottoman authority in Algeria. It is a voice marked by aging, rigidity, stubbornness, and detachment from reality. His discourse is at times characterized by arrogance, and at other times by regret and self-justification, particularly once it was too late. He represents the last Ottoman Dey of Algeria before the French invasion.

2. This voice reflects the contradiction between outward displays of power and arrogance—symbolized by the famous Fly Whisk Incident of 1827, which occurred between Hussein Dey and the French consul Pierre Deval—and the reality of internal weakness and an inability to confront the growing threat.

The significance of his voice lies in its embodiment of the end of an era, symbolizing the rigidity that led to collapse, and serving as a tragic expression of helplessness in the face of an overwhelming modern force. It also exposes the internal dysfunctions that contributed to the fall of Algiers.

Historical sources indicate that Hussein Dey did not recognize the consequences of his misguided choices until successive defeats of the resistance forces by the organized French armies. This became particularly clear after he fled into exile and witnessed the gradual unraveling of everything he had once controlled.

## **2. The Voice of Shamkha**

Shamkha may be considered the most symbolic character in the novel, and her voice represents the land, the enduring female populace, and rooted popular wisdom. Her voice expresses the pain and daily suffering under Ottoman rule and then under the crushing weight of colonial occupation.

Shamkha engages with nature, draws inspiration from local myths, and foretells the future in her own distinctive manner. She derives her emotional and patriotic sensibilities from the heroism of her uncle Al-Shamikh, whose legacy lives on through her memory and actions.

She is present at every key event—from the capital to Blida, then with the prince's resistance camp, in northern Constantine, and finally in the oases answering the call of the pious Sheikh Ahmed Bouziane—as though Algeria itself is moving and calling out.

Shamkha's significance extends beyond the individual; she symbolizes Algeria itself—wounded yet resilient, maintaining its identity despite adversity. Her voice represents continuity and survival, in contrast to the voices that succumbed or yielded to the occupation.

## **3. The Voice of Al-Shamikh / the Phantom**

This voice embodies legend, collective memory, and mysterious popular resistance. It may belong to a real person who has become mythologized, or it may symbolize the innate spirit of rebellion within the people. His voice echoes like a presence in the background of events, warning and motivating.

As Shamkha is warned: "Do you realize, Shamkha, that if it weren't for my vigilance, they would have killed you? I protected you repeatedly from their plots, just as I served as an invisible shield for many fighters."

It also works to instill loyalty to the homeland, passing this virtue to future generations,

represented in his son Ali, who inherits the values of his righteous ancestors. Al-Shamikh's voice thus embodies the dimension of collective memory that transcends the individual.

#### **4. The Voice of Commander Yahya**

This voice represents traditional military leadership within the local Ottoman system. It expresses a sense of duty, discipline, and perhaps confusion or uncertainty when confronting an enemy employing unfamiliar tactics and modern weapons. His voice may also reflect a degree of internal loyalty that conflicts with the political scheming unfolding around him.

He is a competent leader whose position is challenged by Ibrahim Agha, the son-in-law of Hussein Dey, who sows discord and division within the army and among the populace. Ibrahim Agha repeatedly insists on his superior military competence, claiming: "I am a better commander than Yahya, stronger in battle, and more capable of leading armies."

The significance of this voice lies in demonstrating the limitations of traditional military power when faced with modern warfare, and in representing a generation of leaders confronted with challenges that exceeded the capacity of their inherited structures.

#### **5. The Voice of Mahmoud al-Hawat**

His voice represents the ordinary person, the coastal dweller who lives off the sea and witnesses events unfolding around him. He serves as a popular observer, conveying the reactions, fears, and simple hopes of ordinary people amid the upheaval.

His voice combines occasional sarcasm with practical wisdom derived from everyday experience. Its significance lies in embodying the ground-level perspective, distant from political calculations and close to lived reality.

#### **6. The Voice of Abu Hamza al-Qurtubi**

This voice represents the religious and scholarly dimension of society. He is the jurist and learned scholar, whose discourse draws upon Islamic principles and Andalusian heritage, as his title suggests. His voice calls for resistance against injustice and voices opposition to the French colonial invasion.

He stands in contrast to the voice of the Sheikh al-Islam, who aligns with the ruling authority and represents its political orientation. Abu Hamza criticizes him, responding firmly: "The closest to God are those who speak the truth. This Sheikh al-Islam is a hypocrite; he does not care about God's religion nor about the people's salvation."

The significance of Abu Hamza's voice lies in highlighting the central role of religion in shaping societal identity and mobilizing the population against invasion, as well as representing the religious discourse that maintained its independence from political authority.

## **Second: Voices of Intellectuals and the Elite**

### **Hamdan Khoja**

This voice is particularly important because it represents a historical figure, the author of *Al-Mir'ah*, a work of considerable historical value, as Hamdan Khoja witnessed the French colonial invasion firsthand and lived through that turbulent era.

In the novel, his voice embodies reason, political analysis, and dual critique: a critique of the corruption and injustice of the local Ottoman system, and a critique of the arrogance and colonial intentions of France. He attempted to expose the French scheme before the invasion, warning of the catastrophe that would follow.

The significance of his voice lies in representing the enlightened elite, who recognized the threat early and attempted to prevent catastrophe. At the same time, it reflects the frustration of confronting both internal collapse and an external enemy simultaneously.

## **Third: Voices of Organized Resistance**

### **Emir Abdelkader and His Family**

The voice of Emir Abdelkader represents a central axis in the novel and serves as a core voice of conscious, organized Algerian resistance. His voice is not limited to that of a military commander; rather, it is a composite of multiple dimensions:

**The Military and Political Leader:** Abdelkader's voice is characterized by firmness, strategic planning, organizational skill, and the ability to mobilize and build emerging state institutions. As the French General Bugeaud remarks to his colleague, the Duke

d'Aumale: "Who are you and who am I compared to this man? This is a man who stood up and led an entire people with nothing but faith."

**The Spiritual Leader and Mystic:** His voice derives strength from deep faith, grounded in Islamic, jihadist, and ethical values, which grants him a halo of sanctity among his followers. He was deeply devoted to his family, washing his mother's feet and earning her prayers.

**The Poet and Intellectual:** In certain speeches and dialogues, his voice reflects eloquence, wisdom, and philosophical contemplation, revealing the literary and reflective dimension of his character.

**The Human Being:** The novel does not overlook his personal humanity—his private suffering, family relationships, moments of hesitation or pain. His grief at the setbacks of the resistance was profound: "How sorrowful and broken-hearted I am at what has befallen you, O people of the land, and at what you have brought upon yourselves."

**Significance of Emir Abdelkader's Voice:** His voice embodies the emergence of modern Algerian national consciousness and symbolizes comprehensive resistance that integrates the sword, the pen, and the spirit.

#### **Fourth: Voices of the "Other" (Colonizers and Collaborators)**

##### **French Generals: De Bourmont, De Micheal, Trizel, and Peigné**

The voices of these French generals represent the overwhelming force of colonial power, yet they are not a single, homogeneous voice.

De Bourmont (the first commander of the campaign) is present strongly at the beginning of events. His voice embodies military arrogance, obedience to orders, and the pursuit of swift victory at any cost.

De Micheal and Trizel may represent different phases or approaches within the colonial project. De Micheal, who signed a treaty with Emir Abdelkader, may symbolize an initial attempt at political negotiation or recognition—however superficial—of Algerian resistance. Trizel, who broke the treaty, represents the return to a purely military option.

Peigné's voice is the most brutal and explicit, embodying the policy of "scorched earth"

and total war. His discourse justifies extermination and destruction as a means to subdue the resistance and break the people's will. He believes: "There is no heroism or courage except what I knew at the head of my columns when they were burning and destroying everything."

**The Zouave and Karagla Cavalry:** The voices of these troops reflect a complex and tragic reality. They were Algerians conscripted to fight in the French army against their own people. Their voices express betrayal—or in some cases, desperate pragmatism and the search for survival. Theirs is a voice that embodies internal division and the tragedy of collaboration under occupation.

**Cohen the Jew:** Cohen represents the voice of the Jewish minority in Algeria, which found itself in a precarious position between the waning Ottoman authority and the incoming French colonizers. His voice reflects the concerns of this minority, its economic interests, and its search for security, shifting between the old power and the new.

His voice also illustrates the pattern of minority groups being used or exploited to the utmost during periods of major conflict. In both Western and Arab narratives, Jewish characters are often portrayed as intermediaries between conflicting powers, compelled to navigate unstable ground in search of protection and survival.

1- Secondary "Other" Figures—Manara, Al-Ashqar, the Hook-Nosed One: These voices may belong to minor characters, yet they play specific roles in the plot or in embodying negative human archetypes. They represent the serpent's heads that lurked and conspired both internally and externally, amid the chaos of the political scene.

## **2- Dialogic Interaction and the Overall Significance of Polyphony**

3- The strength of *The Serpent's Embrace* lies not merely in presenting multiple voices separately but in the dialectical, interactive dialogue that unfolds between them.

4- Forms of dialogue in the novel include:

5- Direct dialogue: between characters in various scenes.

- 6- Indirect dialogue: through the juxtaposition of differing perspectives on the same event (e.g., Dey Hussein's view of the invasion versus Hamdan Khoja's; Peigné's view of the resistance versus Emir Abdelkader's).

Interior dialogue (monologue): where a character confronts themselves, revealing contradictions and inner struggles.

Dialogue with history and memory: Shamkha or Al-Shamikh converses with the past, while Emir Abdelkader contemplates the future.

This dialogic interaction makes the novel truly "polyphonic" in the Bakhtinian sense. No voice completely silences another. Even the colonizer's voice is presented according to its own (distorted) logic, allowing the reader to critique it from within.

### **Overall Significance of Polyphony in the Novel**

Complex Algerian identity: The novel demonstrates that Algeria was not a monolithic entity, but a society diverse in social, political, and religious composition. This multiplicity is mirrored in the diversity of voices and their responses to the invasion.

Resistance to the Colonial Narrative through Algerian Voices: *The Serpent's Embrace* resists the colonial narrative by empowering Algerian voices—both the popular and the intellectual—granting them full weight and legitimacy, thereby countering the French narrative that portrayed the invasion as a "civilizing mission" for a "backward" people. By recovering wounded memory, the novel allows voices erased by official history—women, marginalized groups, victims of Peigné's violence, and even collaborators as part of the tragedy—to be heard. This contributes to a deeper and more authentic understanding of the past.

Embodiment of the Tragedy in "*The Serpent's Embrace*": The title itself evokes lethal struggle and suffocating entanglement. The multiplicity of voices embodies this tragic embrace between opposing forces: the colonizer and the colonized, the resister and the collaborator, the past and the present. The serpents symbolize conflicting powers and entangled interests that trap and destroy.

The novel does not close the door to interpretation; instead, it invites the reader to participate in the dialogue, assess the positions of characters, and understand their complex motivations.

### **Polyphony as Structural Strategy**

The Serpent's Embrace proves itself as a work of fiction that does more than recount history; it reconstructs and reinterprets it through the polyphonic technique as a structural strategy. Djellaoudji builds the symbolism of "the serpents" as multiple forces and conflicting interests that intertwine and confront one another, creating a deadly embrace from which no single party emerges unscathed.

The consonance and dissonance of these voices create the dynamic of the lethal "embrace," exposing a complex network of responsibilities and causes that extends beyond mere colonial action. This polyphonic novel is, in the end, a profound invitation to engage with a traumatic past in order to understand the present and envision a more enlightened future.

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