



Narrative embedding in the novel the returned from absence (Talal Mortada)

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ABSTRACT: The clear influence of Western modernity was evident on literary genres and their types. The novel, in particular, was the most affected literary genre by this influence, which made it more appealing to readers. Therefore, Arab narratologists carried out a renewal and updating of narrative components in line with the modern literary trend that encompasses the field of expression from the perspective of the contemporary receiver, who has become ambitious and passionate about what is distinctive and different in the novel. Among these modernists

was Naif Imam, the writer who created in the space of language a literary text dedicated to what is distinctive in the novelistic space. He is the novelist Talal Mortada, the man who always worked for renewal and innovation through his varied works, whether they were novels or stories or theatrical plays. We focused on his theatrical works "The Moving Cage," "The Strangers," trying through them to explore what attracted us in them by conducting a critical study based on a careful and well-founded reading of his works, with the first modern narrative approach, descriptive analytical, comparative, and interpretative approach to narrative criticism and analyzing his novel and its contexts. We also revealed all that is new, as well as highlighted semantic and stylistic studies related to the topic of the novel. We will discover this through the analysis of the novels. The results showed what the deep analysis of the narrative text reveals some hidden meanings, which have been revealed in more detail through a personalized narrative perspective in view of the research topic and his other works.

Keywords: Novel- Talal Mortada- modern narrative criticism- renewal in his.

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1- ABOUT THE NOVELIST AND JOURNALIST TALAL MURTADA

Talal Murtada is a Syrian novelist and journalist based in Vienna, Austria. He is a member of the Syrian Writers and Journalists Union and the Austrian chapter of PEN International (PEN Austria). He also directs the Arab Cultural Club in Vienna.

His literary and critical works include:

- Readings That Tempt the Wind (Qira'at Tughwi Al-Rih): A collection of critical essays and experimental literary readings, published by Dar Al-Rihab Al-Haditha, Beirut.
- Ambush (Kameen): A novel published by Dar Baal, Damascus.
- The Paper Mouse (Fa'r Al-Waraq): A collection of critical essays and experimental literary readings, published by Dar Baal, Damascus.
- Nizar: A novel published by Dar Baal, Damascus.
- The Female of Shadow and Light: A Reading of Austrian Women's Artistic Experience: A critical study published in 2020.
- Those Returning from Absence (Al-A'idun Min Al-Ghiyab): A novel published by Dar Al-Rihab Al-



Haditha, Beirut.

In the field of journalism, Murtada worked as an editor for the Lebanese magazine *Shu'oun* and the newspaper *Al-Binaa*. He has also contributed articles to several Arab newspapers, including Syrian publications, the Lebanese newspaper *Al-Anwar*, and the London-based *Al-Quds Al-Arabi*.

In digital media, he served as Managing Editor of the Lebanese news website *Shatranj*. He currently manages his own cultural and media platform, *Art and Cities (Kunst und Städte)*, based in Vienna, which focuses on arts, culture, and urban life.

Throughout his career, Talal Murtada has combined fiction writing, literary criticism, journalism, and cultural activities, making significant contributions to contemporary Arab literary and cultural discourse both within the Arab world and internationally.

2- OVERVIEW OF THE NOVEL

The Returnees from Absence is a novel by Talal Murtada, published by Al-Rihab Modern Printing, Publishing and Distribution Foundation in Beirut, Lebanon, in 2020. It appeared in its first edition and comprises 206 pages. The novel's cover was designed by the Lebanese artist Abdel Halim Hamoud, a novelist, poet, painter, and political cartoonist who has held numerous exhibitions in both fine arts and political caricature. Among his most recent exhibitions is *Gazelles that Split Meaning*. In an interview conducted by Dareen Houmani on 21 May 2024 for the cultural program *Third Shore*, Hamoud discussed his artistic approach to designing book covers and literary works (Houmani, 2024).

The first element to capture a reader's attention is undoubtedly the book cover, which serves as the initial gateway into the textual universe. Through it, the reader begins to imagine the world contained within the pages. Contemporary literary texts are no longer presented without visual accompaniment; instead, authors and publishers carefully select images, colours, and graphic elements that reflect the thematic and symbolic dimensions of the work. Consequently, these visual choices are far from arbitrary. Rather, they constitute a meaningful semiotic system that guides the reader's interpretation. This is consistent with Hamid Al-Hamdani's observation in *The Structure of the Narrative Text*, where he states that the cover is "the space occupied by writing as typographical characters on the page, including its design, through which the semiotician penetrates the symbolic and semantic depths of the text" (Lafta, 2011, p. 111).

The evolution of book-cover design gained particular momentum in the late nineteenth century. What had once been a simple paper wrapping gradually developed into a distinctive outer cover unique to each publication. Illustrations and decorative motifs became integral features, often incorporating a window-like opening that revealed part of the original binding. Over time, the outer cover adopted the same artistic design as the book itself, giving rise to what is now recognized as the art and craft of book-cover design. As Al-Saif notes, "the paper wrapper evolved into a dedicated outer cover for each book. These covers incorporated illustrations and often featured a window through which part of the original cover could be seen. With time, the outer cover came to bear the same design as the book itself, marking the birth of book-cover design as both an industry and an art form" (Al-Saif, 2014, p. 24).

Another essential component of the book is the image. As the familiar saying goes, a picture is worth a thousand words. In contemporary literary criticism, visual imagery has become one of the most significant paratextual elements contributing to the understanding and interpretation of narrative discourse. Images carry symbolic and semantic meanings that interact with the title and other visual components of the cover, offering readers preliminary interpretive cues before they engage with the text itself. Consequently, visual discourse has assumed a central position in modern semiotic approaches to literary analysis.

It has become a visual discourse with semiotic and semantic dimensions, prompting the viewer to approach the artwork through multiple interpretative levels, ranging from the artistic level to the iconic level, encompassing both the manifest and latent components of the visual material. The image is not merely a



combination of colors and visible forms; rather, it constitutes an integrated semantic system that generates meaning through a network of symbols, relationships, and connotations that invite interpretation.

In this context, the image cannot be reduced to what is perceived by the naked eye. As Thani (2007, p. 23) argues, "the image, through its inputs and outputs, possesses patterns of interpretation; it is a text like all other texts, distinguished by its unique organization of semantic units manifested through forms and behaviors." Consequently, the image emerges as the product of an interaction between reality, personal experience, and imagination. Moreover, our perception of the world is fundamentally based on the mental images we possess; the clearer these images are, the more coherent and confident our interaction with reality becomes.

Applying this perspective to the novel under study, and by examining the statements of the artist Abdel Halim Hammoud alongside his published works on social media platforms, it becomes evident that the cover design is neither accidental nor merely an aesthetic exercise. Rather, it is governed by deliberate artistic intentionality, where every visual element performs a specific semantic function within the semiotic structure of the cover.

At the threshold of the cover, dark colors—predominantly black and deep red—dominate the composition, creating an atmosphere of mystery and tension. At the center appears a woman enclosed within a red frame, as though imprisoned in a dark and confined space, suggesting a state of isolation or psychological confinement. Around her neck hangs an ancient Pharaonic ornament, an element that evokes historical and cultural memory while extending the symbolic significance of the character beyond the limits of the present. Furthermore, the woman appears taller than the mountains behind her, a compositional choice that seems intentional, symbolizing transcendence, superiority, or the ability to overcome obstacles, thereby granting the character an exceptional symbolic dimension.

Outside the frame stands a falcon with a piercing gaze, seemingly waiting for the woman to emerge so that it may swoop down upon her. This element carries a significant semiotic dimension. In Arab culture, the falcon traditionally symbolizes dignity, courage, pride, freedom, victory, and keen vision. However, within the context of this cover, it assumes a different role, transforming from a positive cultural emblem into a sign of surveillance, threat, and impending danger. This shift enriches the interpretative possibilities of the image and illustrates the movement from its conventional meaning to a contextualized symbolic significance.

The remaining space of the cover is filled with abandoned houses that evoke the passage of time and the disappearance of life, reinforcing themes of ruin, absence, and forgotten history. Two birds soar across the dark sky, conveying feelings of alienation and disorientation. Above the woman's frame appears a glass vessel containing red fruits, an element that may symbolize life, temptation, or fertility, depending on the interpretative framework adopted. Beneath the frame, another woman is depicted walking alone into an unknown landscape. Despite the uncertainty of her destination, her posture conveys confidence and determination, suggesting that she moves toward a destiny she consciously embraces.

It is noteworthy that the cover is dominated by dark tones associated with ambiguity and anxiety, encouraging the reader to search for interpretative keys capable of decoding the visual discourse. Color, therefore, fulfills not only an aesthetic function but also a semantic and communicative one. As Nafi' (1999, p. 125) states, "color has acquired a communicative function, replacing language and writing. Therefore, it should be linked to the psychology of both the speaker and the recipient, as well as to the social environment and the artist's surroundings. Through color, hidden meanings and the concealed dimensions of the human psyche are conveyed." From this perspective, color becomes a semiotic medium that carries multiple symbolic meanings, varying according to cultural and psychological contexts, and contributes to enriching both meaning and interpretation.

The title is written in bold red lettering, a choice that enhances its visual prominence and symbolic force. Within this context, the color red evokes notions of danger, tension, and conflict while immediately



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3- OVERVIEW OF THE NOVEL

The novelist opens his work with a myth-inspired dedication in which he justifies his absence and exile while declaring his presence in the Austrian city of Vienna: "To Syria and Austria I have entrusted the anxieties buried within the ruins of my soul" (Murtada, 2020, p. 6).

From its very beginning, the novel introduces a number of characters borrowed from the enchanting world of fiction, drawing upon both Eastern and Western literary traditions. The author places at the threshold of the text a section entitled "Characters," whose purpose is not to introduce the fictional figures he himself has created, but rather to present the well-known literary characters he has deliberately summoned into his narrative. This distinctive narrative strategy immediately captures the reader's attention.

Among these characters are:

- Miss Marple, the famous detective created by the British novelist Agatha Christie.
- Saeed Mahran, the protagonist of *The Thief and the Dogs* by Naguib Mahfouz, a professional thief distinguished by his sense of honor and his defense of the poor.
- Berthe, the daughter of Madame Bovary in Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary*.
- Jean-Baptiste Grenouille, the protagonist of Patrick Süskind's *Perfume*, a man obsessively fascinated by the scent of women, whom he murders in order to distill their unique fragrances.
- Quasimodo, the protagonist of Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, an outwardly deformed yet kind-hearted and devoted lover who struggles to rescue Esmeralda from the archdeacon driven by his desire to possess her.
- Tanios, the protagonist of Amin Maalouf's *The Rock of Tanios*, whose life is marked by injustice, persecution, and the wrongful killing of his father.

Alongside these borrowed literary figures, the author creates original characters to construct two intersecting worlds: the world of reality and that of imagination, where conflict, dialogue, and occasional reconciliation continuously unfold.

The narrative revolves around the City of Books, a fictional city that mirrors real societies. Like any other city, it embodies both virtue and vice, housing opportunists and altruists, exploiters and the exploited. Through the fusion of celebrated literary characters drawn from renowned Eastern and Western novels with characters of his own invention, the novelist creates a richly symbolic fictional universe.

The symbolism becomes particularly evident in the murder of the Sage, who had been striving to develop a medicine capable of curing all diseases. His death symbolizes the destruction of reason, wisdom, and culture in favor of the forces of evil. These destructive forces are embodied in Sheikh Jalil, who manipulates religion to serve his personal ambitions, and Berthe, portrayed as a procurer who exploits women for financial gain. Together, these two characters represent powers driven solely by wealth and domination, regardless of the human cost. Their rivalry symbolically reflects competing forces seeking global



supremacy, the exploitation of resources, and the reduction of humanity to instruments serving their own interests.

The novel adopts a fantasy framework that reimagines well-known literary characters by assigning them new roles within its narrative while preserving the essential traits originally bestowed upon them by their creators. Through this intertextual dialogue, the author weaves an allegorical tale that explores the eternal struggle between good and evil. At the same time, the novel celebrates the transformative power of love as a force capable of restoring individuals to their true selves, granting them inner security, and affirming profound humanistic and moral values.

4- THE IMPLICIT STRUCTURE IN THE NOVEL

Literary structures, in their various forms and manifestations within the narrative text, acquire significant importance in the production of meaning, as they represent ideological and cultural contents that transcend the apparent meaning of the text. The structure, as Abdullah Al-Ghadhami explains, possesses a narrative nature that operates within a carefully constructed plot; therefore, it remains hidden and implicit, capable of concealing itself behind multiple masks, the most prominent of which is the mask of linguistic aesthetics (Al-Ghadhami, 2012, p. 79). This concealment is not arbitrary; rather, it serves a semantic and aesthetic function aimed at enriching the text and granting it deeper dimensions. It also encourages the reader to engage in interpretation and to search for the hidden meanings embedded beneath the surface structure.

The modern novel is based on experimentation as a textual strategy that seeks to transcend ready-made traditional forms. Experimentation represents a creative act founded on openness, innovation, and the exploration of new possibilities of writing. It enables the novelist to search for new modes of narration, question classical narrative methods, and reconsider established forms at the levels of vision and structure. As Al-Bahiri states, experimentation involves “a search for new forms of storytelling, the creation of innovative narrative structures, the questioning of classical realistic descriptive narration, and the disruption of its established rules and ready-made patterns in theory and practice, vision and formation” (Al-Bahiri, 2010, p. 82).

The concept of structure can also be understood through the relationships established among the components of the text, since linguistic units do not acquire their value independently but rather through their relations with one another within the textual system. In this context, Ferdinand de Saussure considers the system to be “those linguistic elements that acquire their values through their relations with each other, not independently of one another” (Hamouda, 1997, p. 184). Thus, meaning does not emerge from an isolated element, but rather from the network of relationships connecting the various components of the text.

Reading a literary text does not end at the level of aesthetic pleasure provided by artistic images and expressive styles; rather, it extends toward intellectual and cognitive dimensions that broaden the reader's horizons and enrich their human experience. Literary texts reflect diverse human experiences and questions, allowing the reader to contemplate and rediscover both the self and the world. From this perspective emerges the question concerning the relationship between the author's intention and what is actually embodied within the text: does what the writer intends necessarily correspond with the meanings revealed by the text?

Answering such a question is closely related to the nature of the relationship between the author and the text, as well as to the extent of the writer's ability to control its semantic paths and direct its possible interpretations. The author may attempt to construct a specific meaning; however, the text often possesses the ability to generate meanings that exceed the author's intention, due to the interaction between its internal structures, the reader's experiences, and the mechanisms of interpretation.

Since literature often draws its inspiration from crises and human transformations, creative writing



becomes a means of revealing the unspoken and questioning what remains hidden within society. The skilled writer is the one who can convey his visions and implicit meanings through an artistic and indirect manner, controlling their appearance and concealment according to the requirements of the text's strategy.

In the novel *The Returnees from Absence*, the novelist addresses a number of sensitive issues that fall within the sphere of the forbidden and the unsaid in literary discourse, employing modern narrative techniques that enable him to construct a fictional world extending beyond the mere reproduction of events and facts. The novel does not seek to reproduce history as it is; rather, it employs history as an artistic material open to reconstruction and interpretation. Thus, history becomes a framework through which ideological and intellectual structures are implicitly embedded. Through this interaction between the historical and the narrative dimensions, the writer succeeds in conveying his perspectives within a fictional structure that combines aesthetic and semantic aspects, where each level contributes to and reinforces the other in shaping the overall meaning of the text.

The Syrian crisis has left a profound impact on hearts and minds, and the Arab writer has been present in documenting the events of this crisis and portraying the realities of the war in Syria. Among these writers, the novelist Talal Murtada occupies a distinctive position, as he is a Syrian who personally experienced the consequences of the crisis. His novels focus on the effects of war and its impact on human beings in general, yet he addresses these themes implicitly through artistic and narrative strategies.

Talal Murtada deliberately conceals his intentions within the text in many of the narrated scenes, embedding them behind a set of narrative signs open to interpretation. Through this approach, he allows the reader to participate in the process of producing meaning and to construct the possible endings that they anticipate.

In his text, the novelist employs several techniques of psychological expression, such as flashback, the evocation of the past, and monologue, given that the novel deals with moments of collapse, tragedies, and the immense fears experienced by humanity as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which claimed many lives and spread terror among people.

In the unfamiliar space that combines the prison, the hospital, and the research center, what matters is that we realize that everyone who enters this place belongs to a group of characters subjected to injustice and oppression. These spaces become places where such characters surrender to what is imposed upon them. They are marginalized and suppressed figures, incapable of initiative or action. The writer succeeds in evoking the idea of oppression and the domination of the Other without delving into excessive details. Perhaps one of the aesthetic features of this novel lies in the scarcity of available details and in leaving a free space for the reader to complete the missing elements through imagination.

For Talal Murtada, the novel is an act of creative transgression through which he practices various approaches to writing. Writing, for him, is a passion, and the true writer is the one who possesses a courageous pen capable of addressing all subjects. He also adopts a new style and creates a structure that differs from those of his contemporaries.

Among the most significant new elements introduced in his fictional work are:

5- PRESENTING REALITY IN A NEW FORM

The novel begins in a seemingly traditional manner; its opening does not reveal the complex processes of encoding, the innovative artistic techniques, or the ability to weave and construct narratives that lie beneath its surface. The most significant element that grants any novel coherent artistic dimensions is its ability to establish an internal logic that governs its narrative structure and organizes its plot. Undoubtedly, the process of defamiliarization and the re-presentation of reality in a new form enables the author, on the one hand, to emphasize the implicit message of the text, and on the other hand, to engage the reader's emotions, creating a sense of pleasure and suspense that encourages the continuation of reading.



This process leads the writer to create new intersections and configurations that require a different logic of relationships and structures. The more successfully this logic is constructed with precision, coherence, and complexity, the greater the achievement of suspense and aesthetic pleasure. This is also accomplished when the artistic structure functions as an integrated whole, with its internal elements employed in a way that serves the central idea the author seeks to convey to the reader.

In the novel *The Returnees from Absence*, the narrator begins from a particular point through the employment of the reality in which we live. In fact, all novels—even those belonging to the genre of science fiction—ultimately rely on the transformation and reconfiguration of lived reality. However, the starting point adopted by the novelist reflects the dominant characteristics of contemporary life: tyranny, injustice, governmental oppression, the persecution of peoples, and the existence of secret conspiracies unknown to ordinary individuals. The narrative unfolds within an ambiguous space that combines the characteristics of a detention center, a hospital, or even a psychiatric institution; yet, ultimately, it remains a place controlled by a government or a group of governments.

The essential point is that the setting remains obscure, while the practices taking place within it are familiar due to our repeated exposure to various forms of oppression. Despite the development of modern technologies, these practices continue to resemble the methods of past centuries. Perhaps this is because the idea of torture and inflicting suffering upon others can never be considered a modern concept. The tools of torture may evolve, but they remain rooted in the same ancient idea: the infliction of pain.

6- FORMS OF IMPLICIT OPPRESSION AND CONTROL IN THE NOVEL

In this strange space, which combines a detention center, a hospital, and a research facility, it becomes clear that everyone who enters this place belongs to a group of characters subjected to injustice and oppression. These characters surrender themselves within these spaces to what is imposed upon them; they are oppressed figures, incapable of initiative or action. The writer successfully evokes the entire concept of oppression and the domination of the Other without delving into excessive details. Perhaps one of the aesthetic features of this novel lies in the limited amount of explicit detail provided, leaving a free space, as previously mentioned, for the reader to complete through imagination and interpretation.

In this opening section, the narrator engages in a significant form of manipulation with the reader. Within this extraordinary place, a creature referred to as an “alien” is brought in and imprisoned in the hope of interrogating and studying it. However, an unusual event takes place: this strange being manages to penetrate the glass barrier and reaches another patient who is close to death. Yet, something beyond the ordinary occurs through an exchange of souls; the patient who was expected to die returns to life, while the other, who was supposed to survive, dies. It appears that a kind of spiritual transference has occurred between them.

The patient whose name was “Delgin” becomes “Hasnaa.” At this point, the psychiatrist following the case realizes that a form of overlap between memories and life has taken place between the body of this patient and the soul of the other. The psychiatrist assigned to the case begins a process of free association with this new patient, who recalls scenes of fire that transport us to moments of terror, fear, and trauma that she experienced.

Then begins a process of association and recollection, moving us from an undefined reality to another world: the City of Books. The significance of this designation becomes apparent, particularly since the characters previously mentioned are themselves figures originating from the world of books.

It is as if the writer carries us on a magic carpet into a world of imagination; however, it is a parallel imagination, one based on previous narratives and on the reconstruction of a new novel from them. At the end of the novel, we discover the extent to which the writer connects this imaginary world with the reality in which we live—a reality that ultimately appears more absurd than anything one might imagine writing about, and darker than we might expect.



Within the world of books, the author begins to raise questions about the implied author by presenting a narrative entirely different from the one with which the novel began. This new narrative was not prepared for in advance, except through what was revealed in the stream of free associations performed by the psychologically disturbed patient suffering from a personality disorder, whose mysterious identity the psychiatrist attempts to understand.

The writer does not provide us with any indication of this; rather, he introduces us directly into the atmosphere of narration through a secondary title, namely *The City of Books*. There is another point that prevents this narration from being considered merely a free association produced by the patient whose story we are expecting to hear. This is because the events unfold in the present tense. The narrator's perspective does not move toward recounting the past; instead, it is based on discovery and exploration. We follow the events through a multiple narrative perspective, dominated by the viewpoint of "Miss Marple," whose various roles within the secondary narrative we gradually come to discover.

We also encounter a stage of disorder and turmoil within the city, a situation triggered by the burning of the Sage's house. This event represents another symbol that cannot be overlooked without attempting to examine and uncover its deeper significance. The Sage, whose name the author deliberately withholds, becomes a symbol of every intellectual, scholar, and enlightened individual who could have contributed to the progress of societies and protected them from injustice, oppression, and all the negative practices that lead to the destruction of communities.

Talal Murtada begins to depict this dystopian city by distributing roles and tracing the traces of the crime. More precisely, he examines and judges the reality in which we live by following the manifestations of disorder and ugliness and presenting them in their true form within the imagined city, *The City of Books*. Through this representation, we encounter two opposing poles embodied by Bert and the Venerable Guardian.

We also observe the convergence of the forces of good and evil in the murder of the Sage. The masses of people, regardless of their different backgrounds and religions, launched a violent attack on the Sage's house and killed him, thereby symbolically killing the wisdom that existed within themselves. These events remain open to numerous interpretations. They reveal the writer's deep resentment and profound bitterness toward the reality he experiences, a reality marked by contradictions, frustrations, and an unequal struggle between the forces of good and evil.

The most puzzling aspect lies in the collective agreement of everyone to participate in the killing of the Sage, as well as Miss Marple's assumption of the identity of a mysterious woman and her intrusion into the sanctuary of the Venerable Guardian. Through this event, the author presents a shocking image of the world of mysticism and false religiosity. The Sheikh claims innocence and purity; however, in reality, he is a man consumed by the desire to control the entire world. Thus, he and Madame Bert represent two sides of the same coin.

From a political perspective, it can be argued that one of the most prominent issues addressed by Syrian novelists is the treatment of social problems and pressing concerns. This aspect is clearly evident in *The Returnees from Absence*, a novel that coincided with the devastating war that struck Syria, particularly as the writer expresses a longing for his homeland, which he left long ago. Therefore, he writes about the crisis both directly and, in most cases, implicitly, especially in relation to the issue of detention. This is illustrated in the following narrative passage: "Some events took place between the group of the Mountain Prince and an educated young man; they killed his father and humiliated his mentor..." (Murtada, 2020, p. 125).

Another significant aspect relates to the dialectic of death and life. The Sage is killed because he was working on creating a medicine capable of curing all diseases. Thus, goodness, reason, wisdom, and culture are eliminated in the City of Books in favor of the forces of evil that seek to exploit human beings and use them for their own interests.



We also find the character of Fadila, whose name carries a meaning that contrasts with her actual fate. She spends her life as a servant who keeps the secrets of Sheikh Jalil, yet she is killed in the palace under mysterious circumstances: "She was completely certain that Lady Fadila's death did not occur in vain, but rather resulted from the Venerable Guardian's awareness that she would cause him many problems in the future if he did not put an end to her..." (Murtada, 2020, p. 109).

It is also mentioned that she died alone, consumed by grief over her husband Saeed Mehran, who was imprisoned, and who had helped her enter the world of goodness and lawful marriage. Here again, the conflict between good and evil emerges. In the City of Books, evil conceals itself behind the mask of goodness, and the forbidden is hidden within the appearance of what is lawful.

Unlawful sexual relationships are prohibited according to both religious and legal principles; however, within the City of Books, and particularly inside the palace, the Venerable Guardian permits such acts and describes those who commit them as having become purified from all sins. Through his actions, he legitimizes what is forbidden and transforms the women he claims to have purified into objects available to all the men of the palace: "As my lady Fadila said, after we were purified by the water of my master Jalil, we became purified and freed from every sin..." (Murtada, 2020, p. 109).

In the eleventh section of the novel, the novelist refers to the concept of meaning. After the stranger searched for a book to accompany her, she asked Tanyus to help her obtain it: "This was what caught Tanyus's attention when he saw her looking toward the upper shelf without taking any book. This prompted him to ask whether she needed assistance. She did not answer his question but pointed upward with her hand toward what she wanted, which led him to rise from his place and bring her the book she desired" (Murtada, 2020, p. 112).

Indeed, it is the book *Time Travel*, a philosophical work that explores the search for meaning. This is precisely what attracted Saeed Mehran, as the stranger's words deeply affected him, prompting him to seek answers from his friend Tanyus, who possessed greater knowledge and insight. Tanyus replied: "I am trying to convey an idea related to your question, Saeed. In order for us to continue living this life, we must search for meaning... a goal for which we live" (Murtada, 2020, p. 117).

In his novel, the writer deliberately evokes several characters from seven previous novels, intending through this act to burden these characters with the consequences of their previous actions while distancing himself from their deeds. Moreover, the novelist seeks to encourage the reader to return to those earlier novels in order to understand the characters' pasts and compare them with their representations in *The Returnees from Absence*. For instance, encountering the character of the Hunchback and his beloved Esmeralda arouses the reader's curiosity to explore *The Hunchback of Notre-Dame*, in which the character originally appears as Quasimodo, as well as his relationship with the woman he loved passionately and for whom he was willing to attempt suicide. These are among the many previous narratives that the novelist incorporates and reuses within his own work.

It is commonly recognized that the language employed in novels and literary writings in general is Modern Standard Arabic. However, we notice that some novelists blend formal Arabic with colloquial expressions in their writing. This is evident in *The Returnees from Absence* through certain dialogues that add a sense of familiarity, intimacy, and naturalness to the conversations. This can be clearly observed in some narrative passages, such as: "This belongs to the knowledge of the unseen, my brother... no one knows it except God" (Murtada, 2020, p. 117).

"Children? May God bless you, O Prophet... My son, you are the one who knows Saeed Mehran best, how much he has suffered and endured, and then you come to tell me about a wife and children..." (Murtada, 2020, p. 117).

"May God destroy her father's house; this woman has completely taken the intoxication out of my head" (Murtada, 2020, p. 117).



In addition to this, Talal Murtada employs a new writing style in his novel, dividing it into twenty sections. He begins the novel with the section entitled Clinical Death, in which he narrates the death of the alien woman and the return to life of the woman who had been lying on her deathbed. This unusual event causes the doctors to question the nature of the case, while the physician refers it to psychiatrists, believing that a form of fusion or exchange of souls has occurred. The patient awakens believing herself to be Hasnaa rather than Delgin; thus, Hasnaa now exists within Delgin's body.

Many psychiatrists and researchers in the field of parapsychology have discussed this phenomenon, considering it part of the study of extraordinary human experiences. It is stated that: "...the main cause of human telepathy is believed to be related to alpha signals in the brain. Telepathy occurs under certain psychological conditions in which blood pressure and heart rate change, and a form of harmony is established between the sender and the receiver. Some researchers believe that this human ability can be developed and trained. They also affirm that it is possible, through telepathic communication, to transmit intense emotions from the sender to the receiver. Some even suggest that the state of blood cells can be influenced through telepathic effects, as Doctors Siron and Troussquin reported that the number of white blood cells increases by 1,500 units when a patient is induced into a pleasant emotional state. Since white blood cells constitute one of the body's primary lines of defense against disease..." (Al-Majidi, 1997, p. 423).

Although this phenomenon appears strange and illogical, as previously mentioned, some studies have suggested its existence, along with the existence of even more extraordinary phenomena. Between reality and imagination, the actual and the anticipated, medicine and myth, this study remains an academic attempt through which we seek to uncover the hidden dimensions of human existence and reveal the masks of universality.

The novelist then moves on to introduce the City of Books, the city that serves as the setting for the events of the novel and which is expected, by its very designation, to represent an ideal city. However, the reality proves to be the complete opposite of these expectations. The events taking place within this palace are characterized by deviation, absurdity, and indifference. In another sense, it is a city that does not promise a hopeful future.

The section entitled "The Beginning of the End" introduces the summoning of the investigator Miss Marple by the ruler of the City of Books to investigate the murder of the Sage. This crime had not been prepared for or foreshadowed beforehand, which represents one of the narrative strategies that pushes the reader to become immersed and lost within the worlds of the novel. It requires the reader to carefully examine every detail, no matter how small, in order to fully comprehend the text and uncover its hidden meanings.

The following sections are entitled: "The Thread's Beginning," "Return," "The Inn," "The Purifiers," "Absurdity," "Birthday Celebration," "Faces," and "The Search for Meaning," whose significance has already been discussed. Then comes "Fulfillment" and "Night Conversation", where the inhabitants of the palace awaken to the tragedy of the journalist's kidnapping, followed by Bert's accusation against Saeed Mehran, claiming that he was the last person to meet her.

After that comes "Curiosity," "Confession," "A Final Visit," and "An Absent Memory." In this section, the novel presents Tanyus's recovery of his memory after the blow he received from Jean-Baptiste Grenouille. This is followed by "The Trap and the Oppressed," where Saeed Mehran reveals to the investigator the reason behind the killing of the Sage: he had been preparing a medicine capable of curing all diseases, an achievement that conflicted with the personal interests of Mawla Jalil and others.

The section "The Interwoven Threads" represents the point at which the writer returns to explicitly declare that the novel is indeed The Returnees from Absence. Finally, on the last page, the author introduces the outbreak of a pandemic and the transformation of a hospital ward in order to receive new patients suffering from an unknown virus whose origin remains unclear. Through this ending, the writer seeks to establish a historical connection between the novel and the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, as Talal Murtada dated the completion of the novel on 06/04/2020 (Murtada, 2020, p. 206).



7. CONCLUSION

This study concludes with a number of significant findings concerning Talal Murtada's novel *The Returnees* from *Absence*, revealing a genuine renewal in contemporary Arabic narrative writing.

First, the novelist successfully employs advanced modern narrative techniques, particularly in the field of narrative embedding. He incorporates characters from seven well-known international novels and reshapes them within a new context, creating a rich intertextual text that requires the reader to possess broad cultural knowledge and to actively participate in the production of meaning.

Second, the study demonstrates that the novel carries profound symbolic dimensions that transcend superficial narration. It addresses contemporary philosophical and existential questions and critiques political and social realities through symbolic representation. The City of Books is not merely an imaginary setting; rather, it represents a symbol of contemporary Arab reality with all its contradictions and conflicts.

Third, the writer succeeds in artistically blending realism and fantasy through a carefully constructed narrative approach, employing techniques such as free association and internal monologue. This allows the text to operate on multiple levels of meaning and interpretation.

Fourth, the study reveals the writer's deep awareness of contemporary transformations, whether cultural, political, or even health-related, particularly the COVID-19 pandemic. This makes the novel an important literary document for understanding the contemporary Arab condition.

Fifth, it is evident that the writer does not limit himself to formal experimentation; rather, he presents a critical vision of reality by employing literature as a means of revealing the implicit structures within Arab culture, especially those related to power, oppression, and exploitation.

This novel represents an important model of new Arabic narrative writing that seeks to transcend traditional forms and raise fundamental questions about identity, existence, and destiny. It confirms that contemporary Arabic literature is capable of engaging with global intellectual and artistic developments while preserving its own cultural specificity.

The study recommends conducting further research on Talal Murtada's other works and expanding the study of narrative embedding as a phenomenon in contemporary Arabic fiction. It also calls for greater attention to experimental novels that may not achieve widespread popularity but nevertheless offer significant qualitative contributions to the Arab literary landscape.

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