

## The Experimental Narrative: From Visionary Questions to Artistic Manifestation

Nedjar Fawzi<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Abbas Laghrour University of Khenchela, Affiliated Research Laboratory: The Laboratory of Contemporary Critical Imaginary and Modernist Studies in Thought, Language, and Literature, Algeria, Email: [nedjar.fawzi@univ-khenchela.dz](mailto:nedjar.fawzi@univ-khenchela.dz)/ ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0002-3482-1619>

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### Abstract:

Since its emergence, the novel has generated sustained critical debate, particularly in the twentieth century, when literary criticism turned its attention to narrative mechanisms and the internal dynamics of storytelling. This shift led to the development of modern narrative theories, most notably narratology, which exerted a profound influence on both literary production and critical discourse. Central to this transformation is the concept of experimentation, whose emergence became inseparable from the rise of the modern or new novel. This study seeks to investigate the mechanisms of experimentation as they operate within the narrative space of the novel. It also aims to examine the concept of “experimentation” as theorized in both Western and Arab critical traditions, tracing its role in the emergence of narrative texts characterized by heightened awareness and artistic formation. The paper explores how contemporary novels accommodate social transformations and changing relationships within their narrative fabric, and how the internal system of the narrative act—particularly in terms of structure, language, and point of view—functions under the principle of experimentation. Furthermore, it interrogates the meaning of experimentation in light of the new novel, considering its aesthetic, theoretical, and cultural implications. By adopting a critical and theoretical approach, the study argues that experimentation constitutes a defining principle of modern narrative, enabling the novel to continuously renew its forms and expressive possibilities in response to social, cultural, and artistic change.

**Keywords:** Novel, narration, experimentation, new novel, structure.

### Introduction

Since its emergence as a literary genre, the novel has raised numerous issues and questions, particularly in the twentieth century, when critics and critical discourse began to turn their attention to the very mechanisms of narration. The novel came to be regarded as both a creative and technical phenomenon whose quality and value warranted serious critical inquiry. Naturally, the rise of this new art form brought with it new possibilities for understanding and interpretation, giving birth to what became known as *narratology*. The study of narrative structure and storytelling has since left a profound mark on both literature and literary criticism.

Among the most significant manifestations of this influence is the relationship between narration, its mechanisms, and the concept of experimentation, which together confirmed the emergence of the modern novel. As narrative techniques evolved, new approaches to storytelling appeared, probing transformations within narrative composition itself—such as the internal rhythm of the narrative act and the harmony generated by the interplay of objects, consciousness, and perspective (point of view). Similarly, thematic treatment began to shift, differentiating literary genres in terms of form, presence, and absence.

Building on this premise, the present paper seeks to examine the concept of experimental narrative as it has developed in both Western and Arab contexts. It explores the mechanisms through which experimentation manifests in narrative practice, tracing the emergence of experimental texts that reflect heightened artistic awareness and creative innovation. How do contemporary writers perceive experimentation within narrative form in relation to social change and constraints? What does it mean to speak of interior narration and its experimental dimensions? What artistic features characterize the experimental narrative within the framework of the new novel? Finally, how does this experimentation relate to the cultural paradox between Western conceptualizations of the novel and their adaptation within the Arab cultural environment?

Today, when compared to the historical narratives of individuals and societies, the novel appears as the most prevalent and widely circulated artistic form among expressive genres. More importantly, it is a narrative form that resists closure, insisting instead on perpetual evolution and transformation—not for any reason other than its intrinsic narrative nature, which enables it to engage with diverse modes of expression and other art forms. This dynamic interaction has endowed the novel with a distinctive artistic identity shaped by continuous transformation and intergeneric exchange. The novel has long sought to comprehend these varied forms and continues to strive to incorporate human experience and historical knowledge. As humanity progresses, the task of the novelist becomes increasingly complex, and that of the critic correspondingly more demanding. In its ambition to “thread the world through the eye of a needle,” the novel aspires to become a cultural icon.

The structural, conceptual, and thematic transformation of the novel began in the early nineteenth century, driven by the richness of its continuously evolving narrative world. This transformation occurred, first, through narrative renewal itself; second, through interaction with emerging theoretical frameworks; and third, through the expansion of its theoretical and epistemological capacities. These developments gave rise to movements and approaches such as the *nouveau roman* (the new novel), narratology, and postmodern critical trends. Experimentation thus became the cornerstone of this broader trajectory of transition, evolving through both Western and Arab narrative mechanisms and strategies.

## 1. The Concept of Experimentation

The question of writing in the modern age has become a pressing critical concern, one that raises numerous issues related to the theorization and understanding of literary art itself. Critical practice

has thus evolved into an inquiry into the very methods of writing and the expressive forms it assumes, particularly within the novel, which today stands as the most widespread and resonant of literary genres. Critics have even referred to it as “the modern *diwan* of the Arabs.” In this sense, the new form of writing, to borrow Ricardo’s expression, has shifted from “the writing of adventure” to “the adventure of writing” through what is known as experimentation (Douyou, 2014). Within contemporary narrative, experimentation has become an almost dominant tendency, especially in the fields of the short story and the novel.

In essence, the term *experimentation* encompasses both formal and aesthetic dimensions. It has been associated with a wide range of fields, and its usage has expanded to cover multiple meanings, linguistic formulations, and terminological contexts. Émile Zola was perhaps the first to link the concept of experimentation explicitly to the novel in his seminal 1879 work *The Experimental Novel*. However, this initial formulation was firmly grounded in Zola’s naturalistic project, which sought to introduce scientific rigor into literature analogous to the achievements of natural scientists and physicians in their respective domains (Berrada, 2011). Through this approach, Zola aimed to integrate literature into the scientific paradigm dominant in his era, subjecting it to hypothesis, observation, and inference, and thus aligning literary truth with scientific truth. Consequently, the earliest meaning of experimentation belonged to the scientific and medical fields before migrating to the human sciences, where it came to signify an artistic vision rooted in knowledge, inquiry, and observation. It functioned as a means of reaching conclusions that ultimately enabled the dismantling of rigid conventions, static traditions, and restrictive norms in creative practice and beyond (Ben Djemaa, 2003), in parallel with the sweeping transformations of the modern age beginning in the early nineteenth century.

This terminological shift from the scientific to the literary realm rendered experimentation a general artistic phenomenon among creators, a defining marker that transcended individual arts or disciplines. Critics therefore came to view experimentation as an existential stance—a creative necessity through which the writer seeks not merely to transform art, but to engage with and reshape life itself. If the creative process (creator/text/reader) is understood as an expression of the urgent needs and transformations of an era, then experimentation emerges as the authentic space in which the self interacts with the external world. Accordingly, experimentation has become a shared principle: a mode of articulating alternatives to the dominant order through narrative processes and through the formal and thematic components that constitute them. In this sense, experimentation converges with creativity itself, grounded in an acknowledgment of depth and originality—depth that resists exhaustion or final resolution and defies confinement to a single culture, people, tradition, or geography. As Ibrahim Abdullah argues in *Techniques of Experimentation and Methodology: A Reading in the Dynamics of Experimentation in Theatrical Performance*, experimentation recognizes no boundaries of heritage, territory, or rule.

Experimentation thus originated in the Western context, drawing upon its pioneers and its global literary production. It arose from the necessity for creators to accompany the transformations of their age through writing. Nevertheless, it is essential to distinguish between experimentation rooted in

theoretical awareness of these transformations—what the new novel identified as “the spirit of the age” and “stream of consciousness”—and experimentation based solely on imitation or intuition. The experimental novel, particularly that shaped by the stream-of-consciousness technique, no longer adheres to the traditional logical sequence of beginning, middle, and end. Instead, it has fractured these conventions—not by abolishing them entirely (A‘liyan, 2008), but by embodying a modern consciousness of writing that dares to transgress its own boundaries. It is an open text, embracing all subjects and intertexts: the marginal, the errant, and the unthought.

Experimentation thus emerged rapidly and forcefully within narrative writing, working to undermine linear and traditional forms by adopting fragmentation, free association, temporal disruption, and the multiplicity of narrators and voices. This shift signaled the decline of the monologic voice (Yaqtin, 2012). As a result, the novel acquired features previously absent or marginal, while novelists themselves came to embody a spirit of renewal and resistance to fixed and static models, even relatively recent ones.

Gradually, the concept of the experimental novel acquired further dimensions as literature entered more deeply into the domain of literary theory, which increasingly focused on the function of language and writing and their relationship to reality and history. This development opened the way for an ongoing revolution in literary expression, as each writer embarked on the adventure of seeking unprecedented forms and meanings capable of reflecting the singularity of their poetic or narrative experience (Berrada, 2011).

This trajectory is evident in the works of Henry James, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Franz Kafka, whose seminal texts explored the depths of consciousness and elevated perspective as a defining element of novelistic structure. In *The Golden Bowl* and *The Ambassadors*, Henry James exemplifies how event yields to the meticulous rendering of inner, spiritual reactions. Moreover, the relationship between word and thing ceased to be one of direct equivalence, becoming instead an expression of absence rather than full presence.

Consequently, the experimental novel has become one of the most prominent creative forms, distinguished by its openness to other arts and modes of expression. This prominence derives from experimentation itself, which has enriched the genre and enhanced its capacity to handle character, event, time, and description, as well as to integrate other artistic forms such as music, cinema, and theater. These narrative experiences are marked by diversity and continuous transformation.

Through experimentation, the Arab novel has likewise freed itself from the confines of fixed models and rigid concepts, becoming dynamic despite variations in terminology and application. In Tunisia, this trend is often referred to as experimental literature or counter-writing; in Egypt and Morocco, as the new sensibility; and in Algeria, as the new novel or the experimental school.

Edward al-Kharrat, in his reflections on narrative experimentation, insists on the term “new sensibility” rather than modernism or postmodernism as employed in Western criticism. This choice, he argues, enables a more accurate tracing of the revolt against inherited sensibilities within the Arab literary context (Douyou, 2014).

Similarly, Ben Jomaa Bouchoucha maintains that the experimental novel derives its most visible signs of modernity from the very features that distinguish it from dominant narrative modes—namely, its alternative poetics and the qualitative innovations it introduces. These innovations vary from one writer to another, yet remain unmistakable indicators of counter-writing (Ben Djemaa, *Narrative Experimentation and the Modernity of Narrative in the Algerian Arabic Novel*, 2005).

In contrast, Mohamed al-Bardi advances the notion of the “novel of freedom,” which creates its own laws, celebrates the power of imagination, and embraces the principle of perpetual transcendence (Al-Bardi, 2000).

Mohamed Barada further argues that the experimental current in the Arab novel has generated multiple directions, to the extent that narration itself has become characterized by a constant impulse toward transgression and boundary-breaking—a belief in the freedom of creation and of things. He emphasizes that form plays a decisive role in shaping meaning, regulating the interplay of illumination and obscurity, and drawing the reader closer to the implications the novelist seeks to suggest through a carefully crafted artistic process. This is evident in the pioneering works of Sonallah Ibrahim (*That Smell*), Ghaleb Halasa (*Laughter*), Elias Khoury (*The Little Mountain*), and Waciny Laredj (*The Kingdom of the Butterfly*).

Conceptually and terminologically, experimentation may be understood as beginning with a mode of consciousness and evolving into a technique—a necessity to deviate from and displace dominant narrative forms through play with narrative structures and the artistic body of the text. This practice has been designated by various terms, all converging on the same core idea: the experimental novel, the new novel, new narrative, new sensibility, experimental literature, new memory, and transgeneric writing.

Ultimately, experimentation and creativity form a dialectical and complementary relationship. Continuous experimentation is what grants writing its legitimacy and justification, as it embodies exceptional qualities and limitless horizons rooted in the essence of writing itself—its relentless pursuit of difference (Ben Djemaa, 2005).

Experimentation has thus opened new horizons for the contemporary novel, both formally—through techniques such as blank space, fragmentation into independent sections, and the integration of other arts—and thematically, through strategies such as embedded narratives, dualities, and temporal fluidity, all of which contribute to the texture of the novelistic work.

Finally, when comparing experimentation in its modern sense with its earlier manifestations, clear distinctions emerge. In Western culture, experimentation arose as the inevitable outcome of an evolving spirit of the age—a persistent effort to align literary production with historical transformation. In the Arab world, however, its emergence was shaped by two principal factors: first, the defeat of June 1967, which redirected Arab thought toward modern challenges and the search for new modes of existence, as discussed by Mohamed Barada; and second, the tendency—at times—to emulate or engage with global experimental practices through translation, adaptation, and imitation.

## 2. The New / Experimental Novel

Once the concept of experimentation entered the realm of art and its various genres, and after it acquired critical legitimacy, it expanded beyond its literal meaning to assume broader conceptual dimensions encompassing a wide range of ideas, visions, and creative attempts. Experimentation came to be understood as “a project founded on its own internal logic, aesthetic principles, and infinite possibilities. Among its foundations are the wager of questioning and self-inquiry, the choice of openness and dialogism, and the principle of self-renewal that allows creative desire to adapt to cultural necessity. Its strength lies, on the one hand, in penetrating artistic fields and endowing them with structural interconnectedness, and on the other, in remaining dynamic as long as the process of experimentation itself continues” (A. Mansour, 2006).

This conceptual expansion is particularly evident in the novel, which began to assert itself both as a literary genre and as a theoretical framework from the eighteenth century to the present day. This development was most clearly manifested in the emergence of what came to be known as the *new novel* and its cross-cultural expressions. The new novel is distinguished by an artistic construction that seeks to convey the fullness and intensity of life, as well as by writers’ continuous pursuit of creative refinement through artistic realism. Accordingly, narration shifted “from chronologically ordered events to emotions spontaneously erupting from the depths of the human psyche. Writing became, to a large extent, a stream of associations rising from the unconscious, transcending the conventions of plot and story. The novel was no longer concerned with familiar themes of love, comedy, tragedy, or the rise from poverty to wealth, but rather with the exploration of inner realms previously untouched. This transformation marks one of the most significant moments in the evolution of the novel, its style, and the relationship between author and reader” (Shahin, 2001).

In this context, proponents of the new novel mobilized all available artistic and intellectual resources, both formal and thematic, in order to elevate the novel beyond its earlier functions. Its engagement with social representation, psychological depth, and even escapist or mythical dimensions—whether directly or indirectly—became material upon which the new novel drew. Readers from diverse social, intellectual, and religious backgrounds increasingly sought authentic representations of the world they inhabited: their historical moment in all its truth, beauty, and ugliness. As Albert Béguin observes in *The History of the Modern Novel*, “In reality, the ‘new novel’ employs every possible device to escape the artificial sweetness and pretense that characterized realist fiction and narrative art. It strives to shatter the continuous noise of conventionality and the academic vision of social and psychological depiction. It relies on the art of simultaneity, as seen in Michel Butor’s *Passing Time*, influenced by Joyce and Dos Passos, where, within the span of a single day, the social life of a Parisian building is portrayed through a blending of adventures and perspectives. The narrative is no longer the continuous flow of a single consciousness—whether that of narrator or hero—but rather the spirit of the tribe or community, as sociologists might describe it” (Albérès, 1982).

The writers of the new novel were initially heirs to English post-Impressionism and closely aligned with the imaginative currents of speculative fiction—those that transformed scientific enigmas into aesthetic mysteries. In this sense, they were aesthetes rediscovering the baroque play of form by

dismantling the traditional visual order of the literary canvas. Their shared objective was to foreground the gap between vision and reality, between intellect and beauty (Albérès, 1982). Central to their project was an ethics of the novel: the more the novel expressed authentic, living relationships, the more ethical it became, regardless of the nature of those relationships.

For a time, the new novel followed this ethical-realist trajectory, demonstrating that novelists were more invested in the moral act of storytelling than in purely aesthetic experimentation. Yet, as an institutional form, the new novel also assimilated the lessons of major literary figures such as Dostoevsky, Thomas Mann, James Joyce, Marcel Proust, and Franz Kafka. Through this synthesis, the novel came to be regarded as the book of life itself—the distilled essence of human experience.

By contrast, the French *nouveau roman*, as Roland Barthes observed, elevated language to the position of the primary protagonist, privileging lexical play over character, perspective, or description, particularly in comparison with American fiction. The term “new novel” first emerged in France around 1953, and by the late 1950s, the United States experienced a comparable surge of imaginative experimentation that intensified throughout the 1960s. Similar developments took place in Germany and Italy, while English fiction largely remained regional and relatively untouched by these innovations (Bradbury, 1996).

What unites these diverse national trajectories is the new novel’s increasing focus on the relationship between text and reader, mediated by the moral and aesthetic substance the writer sought to communicate. It was as though narrative form itself sought liberation—a project that, for more than half a century, had attempted to break free from various manifestations of bourgeois realism (Albérès, 1982). Yet this raises a critical question: did this condition persist, or did the new novel undergo further transformations in both form and theme?

Historically, signs of renewal had already appeared in the novel following the First World War in Europe and America, driven by writers who could no longer bear witness to humanity’s tragic experience without rethinking the very form of writing. As Mortad notes, “Philosophical thought shifted with the rise of existentialism, critical thought with structuralism, and the form of the novel itself with the emergence of a new mode of writing—around the mid-twentieth century” (Mortad, 1978).

The most striking characteristic of this new narrative mode was its rebellion against established norms: “There is no longer character, no event, no time, no space, no language—nothing that the traditional novel once considered essential remains acceptable within the imagination of the new novelists” (Mortad, 1978).

Such a narrative approach demanded new subjects and relationships—social, spatial, and psychological—that had not previously been explored. Indeed, as Alain Robbe-Grillet observes, “the appearance of the novel in the modern world, since the European Renaissance, was linked to a shift from representing traditional heroism—kings and knights—to focusing on the middle class, and at times even the poor.” The novel thus evolved into the epic of the bourgeoisie, mirroring rapid transformations in society, thought, economy, politics, and in the very concepts of time, space, and character. In *The Future of the Novel*, Henry James famously remarked: “The novel reached consciousness of itself late, but since then it has done all it could to make up for lost time” (Bradbury, 1996).

From this point onward, questions emerged concerning the nature of the novel itself—its form, essence, and content—in a world propelled by scientific and technological progress. The static, traditional text gradually lost its authority, giving way to a shared agency among writer, reader, and critic. In literary criticism, the novel was liberated from the assumption that it was a minor genre; instead, it became the object of sustained theoretical and historical inquiry. Critics began to question whether the novel consisted merely of plot, character, and time, recognizing instead its reliance on structure, composition, and form. They came to understand that the novel does not merely critique life but actively creates it, functioning as a linguistic imagination that organizes and interprets experience in order to reveal reality (Bradbury, 1996).

As narrative forms evolved under this renewed vision, the reader was released from the dominance of the omniscient narrator. Narrative logic shifted, and multiple voices entered the text, each possessing its own mode of expression, thereby sustaining the novel's dynamic state. Time, once governed by linear progression, escaped this horizontal order, as did other narrative components such as space, character, and event. The internal structure of narration itself transformed in accordance with the subjective vision of the narrator and the thematic concerns under exploration.

Language, finally, assumed a central role—not merely as a vehicle of narration but as an object of artistic representation in its own right. It came to reflect fragmentation, multiplicity, and transformation at the core of narrative practice. These features continue to shape experimental fiction today, both locally and globally.

## Conclusion

Based on the preceding discussion of the operation of the concept of experimentation within the domain of the modern novel and experimental narrative—and its impact on novelists and their creative production—several theoretical conclusions may be drawn:

- 1. Conceptual Status of Experimentation**  
The conceptual grounding of experimentation has occupied a central position in the critical discourse of both Western and Arab scholarship, particularly during the formative stages of the novel. Initially, experimentation emerged as one of the most rigorous intellectual practices before extending into other artistic fields. It arose both as a consequence of and a response to transformations in Western—and subsequently Arab—social and cultural realities, reflecting a dynamic engagement with the world in its complexities and contradictions. Across its varied definitions, experimentation intersects with modernity and renewal through their shared departure from conventional modes of writing and expression.
- 2. Experimentation and the Evolution of the Novel**  
Since its engagement with experimentation, the novel has consistently sought to articulate its own vision of reality, particularly through realist traditions, while addressing social, political, and ideological contradictions. This has been achieved through the combined principles of modernity and experimentation, which together marked a decisive break from traditional

foundations of novelistic writing. Consequently, novelists were compelled to explore contemporary issues and lived experiences with heightened artistic depth and innovative expressive strategies.

3. **Formal and Thematic Transformation**

The diverse investment in experimental narrative has led to a profound transformation of the modern and contemporary novel, both formally and thematically. In response to this creative dynamism, new modes of narration emerged that fulfill the dual demands of modernity and experimentation. These modes are characterized by a multiplicity of styles, languages, genres, and artistic forms, increasingly incorporating visual, technological, and digital dimensions into the very structure of the text.

4. **Reading Experimental Narrative**

To fully grasp the meanings and implications of experimental narrative, readers must engage deeply with the text's linguistic structures, as well as with the external, intertextual, and contextual frameworks that accompany its production. This includes close attention to the sociocultural transformations that parallel narrative innovation within broader scientific and technological developments. Such an approach aligns with contemporary forms of narrative interaction, including what is now referred to as the interactive digital novel.

5. **Western and Arab Trajectories of the Experimental Novel**

The Western new/experimental novel emerged as a direct reflection of, and response to, the intellectual, social, and economic transformations of the modern individual. It therefore developed as a multifaceted project shaped by aesthetic, historical, generic, philosophical, and scientific concerns, functioning simultaneously as both a condition of modernity and a reaction to it.

By contrast, the Arab new/experimental novel arose primarily as an artistic response grounded in the assimilation of Western philosophical and theoretical frameworks and their adaptation to the Arab creative context, particularly at the level of language. Through this process, experimentation opened new artistic and thematic horizons for the Arab novel.

6. **Primacy of Language and Dialogism**

The new horizon of experimental narrative, as manifested in the works of diverse writers, lies in the expansive freedom it granted to experimentation across all narrative components—time and space, character, event, and plot. Among these elements, language has assumed a particularly central role. Dialogism, in its various forms—hybridization, stylization, and pure dialogue—stands as clear evidence of this linguistic primacy.

As a result, multiple perspectives have emerged within narrative discourse, reflecting a plurality of voices, ideologies, and viewpoints. This multiplicity has, in turn, generated a significant critical shift devoted to deciphering textual codes—especially linguistic ones—and restoring their meanings in relation to the broader constellation of narrative elements.

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