

***The Dynamics and Representations of Internal Discourse:
The Case of Hocine Allam's Novel "Khatwa fi al-Jasad" (LIT: A Step in the
Body)***

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Abstract

Contemporary Algerian fiction has become an expansive domain for experimentation and the renewal of narrative techniques across all their constitutive elements. Observers of its evolution note a distinct shift by Algerian authors toward adopting internal discourse mechanisms. This shift imparts a subjective dimension to their texts, translating the depths of characters, revealing their inner worlds, and strengthening their connection to reality as it intertwines with their thoughts and memories-thereby engendering a rich, multi-layered narrative structure.

The novel *Khatwa fi al-Jasad* (A Step in the Body) by Hocine Allam serves as a profound model of this technique. In this work, internal discourse dominates the narrative space, serving as a window that allows the reader to penetrate the characters' internal worlds, access their unspoken thoughts, and examine their psychological dimensions. This facilitates an understanding of their identity conflicts, psychological and social fragmentation, and the crises of alienation and emotional chaos simmering within them.

Keywords: Dynamics, Internal discourse, Representations, *Khatwa fi al-Jasad*, Hocine Allam.

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the contemporary Algerian novel has become a space for experimentation and innovation in narrative techniques across all its components. An examination of its output and a tracing of its milestones reveal a clear inclination among contemporary Algerian novelists toward employing internal discourse techniques. This approach imbues the text with a subjective and intimate character, reflecting the inner worlds of the characters, exploring their depths, and strengthening their relationship with the external world as it converges with their thoughts, memories, pains, and aspirations-thereby creating a rich, multi-layered textual structure.

Hocine Allam's novel, *A Step in the Body* (LIT: *Khatwa fil-Jasad*), has provided a fertile ground for examining this technique, as the narrative is pervaded by this technique from beginning to end. Indeed, it exerts a clear dominance that is evident to readers in general. Internal discourse is considered one of the most significant tools enabling the reader to access the internal worlds of the characters with ease and to decipher their unspoken thoughts. By capturing the boundaries of their psychological dimensions, the reader can

understand their identity anxiety, psychological and social fragmentation, alienation crises, emotional chaos, and the tragedies of soul and body endured within their existential experience throughout the novel.

1. Representations of Internal Discourse in Hocine Allam's Novel *A Step in the Body*

Dialogue in general, and internal discourse in particular—alongside other narrative elements—constitutes "an artistic part of a literary entity in which integrated literary elements are present, making that verbal entity literature and nothing else."¹ It plays a pivotal role in shaping the narrative structure of the text, serving as a significant technique through which the characters' thoughts and inner emotions are revealed without the need to address another person. In this context, speech is directed toward the self, thereby occupying a vital space and acquiring utmost importance "due to its dramatic function in the narration and its ability to break the monotony of the storytelling."²

A close reading of the novel *A Step in the Body* reveals several representations of internal discourse, which are summarized as follows:

A. First-Person Narration

First-person narration is a crucial tool upon which the author relies to convey his anxieties and psychological burdens to the reader. It has been observed that "this is the most prepared means for highlighting the sensation that the storyteller conveys dramatically."³ It also plays a prominent role in manifesting the vision that represents the foundation of the story and the pivot upon which its central idea rests.

The reader of *A Step in the Body* notices an intensive, dominant, and recurring presence of the first-person pronoun, as hardly a single page is devoid of it. Examples include, but are not limited to, the following sequences from a single page: "I did not know,"⁴ "I used to always say that I had triumphed,"⁵ "Before that, I was on the island of the homeland... learning how to preserve my blood,"⁶ "I should not, then, have hidden behind doors,"⁷ and "I am still plowing the sea."⁸

The presence of the first-person pronoun is intensely manifested in these five excerpts, where the "I" transforms into a semantic and aesthetic axis around which the novelistic experience is formed. Here, the narrator does not merely convey events but formulates, through this pronoun, a narrative identity that grows, fragments, and restores its balance, allowing the text to become a space for the character's self-awareness.

By employing this technique, the narrator presents the self to strengthen the relationship between the reader and the narrator. This creates a sense of sincerity and immediacy, as an individual is most truthful when speaking about themselves, being more knowledgeable of their own soul than any close associate. Furthermore, the intention is to bond the reader to the narrative work, often making them feel as though the narrator is speaking to them alone, or even speaking on their behalf when experiences and stories intersect.

B. Soliloquy (*Al-Munajāt*)

The soliloquy constitutes a cornerstone of self-narrative technique. A fine line distinguishes it from the monologue—the latter being defined as self-talk and the antithesis of

dialogue (external discourse), given that narrative discourse, and the novel specifically, is predicated upon a polyphony of discourses and voices.⁹

Accordingly, this type of dialogue functions by portraying and presenting characters through an examination of their inner depths (sensations and emotions), relying on the internal psyche. Thus, the monologue serves as a means of summoning psychological content; however, the internal discourse differs from the soliloquy (self-talk) in that the latter presupposes a listener.¹⁰

The relationship between the two is complementary, producing a dialogic style fundamentally built on the theme of psychological disclosure. This disclosure contributes to revealing the progression of events within the textual fabric and aids in creating a cognitive dynamism with connotations that enrich the text with an artistic aesthetic. This aesthetic relies on the recipient's receptivity by engaging with interpretive aspects related to either the event or the character.

Soliloquy appears in several instances within the novel *A Step in the Body*, where the protagonist employs it primarily to converse with his beloved, Baya—that "near-yet-distant" figure who is often indifferent to his inner turmoil. He says in soliloquy:

*"O Baya... O this heart, how many times has it stumbled, and how much has its blood flowed in the valleys and deserts. Here you are, close to me yet far from me... my hand cannot reach you, though you are within me and of me. Here you are with me, yet I cannot reach you."*¹¹

Through this soliloquy, he discloses an emotional flow and subjective reflections that are not directed toward an external addressee. He continues his soliloquy to Baya, stating:

*"Ah, Baya, O orbit of the spheres drifting toward their end... O a flutter of me... O my beloved fall. How many times has the heart stumbled on its long journey toward its meaning, and how many times has it fallen. Who are you? And what brought you to Tlemcen?"*¹²

This passage reveals an intimate attachment and a kind of brokenness that the narrator celebrates rather than resents, seeking the meaning Baya represents more than he seeks Baya herself.

Most soliloquies in the novel were directed toward Baya, with the exception of very few passages where the narrator addresses others. In a passage where the narrator soliloquizes to his friend, he says:

*"Here I am now, my friend, more transparent than before, and softer than this sand upon which I sit barefoot. I am writing to you from atop the highest sand dune I found... far from the palace..."*¹³

This soliloquy signals the beginning of a new existential phase, as the narrator experiences his self in its lightest state, most closely bonded to nature, sincerity, and freedom. It is a disclosure that places the reader before a character undergoing an internal transformation, borrowing the characteristics of the sand and the details of the setting to represent this transformation with depth and delicacy.

Soliloquy represented one of the most significant representations of internal discourse through which the narrator disclosed the layers of his consciousness. Its passages contain an emotional flow and subjective reflections that could only be directed to the intended party

through this medium. As such, it is considered a structural technique that reveals the secrets and essence of the character, while contributing to the construction of the novel's psychological rhythm and the intensification of its aesthetic and existential significations.

C. Psychological Introspection

Introspection (l'introspection), or inner reflection, is a psychological method extensively employed by the Structuralist school. It is defined as an individual's meticulous, deliberate, and explicit observation of their perceptions, feelings, experiences, and emotions, aimed at describing, recording, and analyzing these states. It constitutes a description of the state of consciousness, a reflection on mental processes, or a "sensation of sensation"—the reflection of consciousness upon itself.¹⁴ Consequently, the discourse on psychological introspection in the novel proficiently embodies the relationship between literary creativity and psychology, or the manifestation of the psychological dimension within the creative text. The latter is not confined to revealing characters in terms of form, nature, or their interconnected and complex relationships; rather, it delves into the finest psychological details, probing their darkest, most ambiguous, and most distressed depths.

In a moment of historical narrative confession, the narrator states:

"Because we are beings filled with hallucinations, colored at times by sanctity and at others by the monstrosity, strangeness, desolation, and bloodiness of the body... Thus we see our faces shattered into thousands of pieces of broken mirrors... Thus we are existence without identity... existence without identity..."¹⁵

Through this, the narrator attempts to introspect the psyche of an entire generation—a generation that has lost even the ability to define itself or to project an image resembling the habitual human form. This description may transcend a specific generation to characterize the Algerian individual in general throughout the successive eras they have inhabited. By reflecting on the inner self, which often serves as the primary driver behind actions, stances, judgments, and worldviews, the technique of psychological introspection furnishes the text with profound philosophical and psychological dimensions through the characters' dialogues. Consequently, the reader's engagement evolves, moving gradually beyond directness toward depth, allusion, and the vastness of interpretation.

D. Self-Narration

Milan Kundera posits that "all novels, of every age and place, are concerned with the mystery of the soul or the mystery of the self."¹⁶ Following this trajectory, Philippe Lejeune defines self-narration as follows: "Self-narration is a retrospective prose narrative produced by a real person concerning his own existence, focusing on his individual life, in particular on the history of his personality."¹⁷

A novel does not necessarily have to be autobiographical to incorporate self-narration; it may appear incidentally or be intentionally employed by the narrator in certain instances when the technique of internal discourse dominates the body of the text. Self-narration is the process of transforming individual identity into a narrative construct, through which the self is reformulated, represented, and interpreted via the mechanisms of storytelling.

We observed this in the novel *Khatwa fi al-Jasad* (A Step in the Body), where we encountered passages in which the narrator explicitly states his name to describe or recount

matters pertaining to himself, thereby precluding any reader interpretation that the first-person pronoun might refer to another. He identifies himself by his name and his father's name, stating: "I, Yousef Ould El-Mehdi El-Kharraz, am still extracting my soul from a narrow-necked bottle I found in a cellar while researching the city's history for an image of its present..."¹⁸

The phrase "I, Yousef Ould El-Mehdi El-Kharraz" does not serve merely to identify the narrator; rather, it establishes a narrative vision that thrusts the reader directly into the character's psychological and historical depths. The presence of the "I" here is both narratological and existential, through which the narrator declares himself as the origin of the story and the source of the consciousness from which the text is formed. Furthermore, he establishes his identity through a formula that brushes the boundary between autobiography and fiction by providing this precise nominal designation, which implies a dual sense of belonging: familial, through his father's name, and professional-social, through the meaning of the craft and social class inherent in the term "El-Kharraz" (the cobbler).

E. Free Association

In our investigation of the internal discourses/representations within the novel *A Step in the Body*, we have once again found ourselves immersed in psychological techniques, having frequently encountered the technique of "free association" manifested in the narrative details and utilized as a writing tool by Hocine Allam. Upon tracing the origins of this technique, many critics attribute it to Freud's student, Carl Gustav Jung, who employed it in his psychological research.¹⁹ Following the transition of the stream of consciousness technique into the art of narrative, it incorporated certain analytical psychological methods, including free association. Paul West defined this by stating: "It is characteristic of consciousness to associate with ideas or images that are sometimes overlapping and sometimes flowing with astuteness, idea by idea, or image by image... but the simulation of association by words often compensates the solitary contemplator with a poignant, creative meaning that compels the association to be a coherent one, thus becoming a style rather than a behavior."²⁰

Here, Yusuf, the protagonist of *A Step in the Body*, drowns in his free association of his childhood haunts, driven by an overwhelming sense of nostalgia:

*"I said to myself: fields that no longer leave a trace, days that have passed, and those summers that used to cast their suns upon those places have extinguished. Suns that would rise upon the grape clusters, transforming them from green verjuice into golden, black, white, and red grapes, brimming with sweet water..."*²¹

He gives free rein to his burdened memory as he borrows images of childhood and the details of days gone by, which have left an indelible mark on his heart. The fields he evokes intensify the theme of loss, serving as a symbol of fertility and the vital cycle that time has swept away, further burdening the psyche with a sense of brokenness when recalling the era of vital abundance that has passed and vanished.

Yusuf continues his association in another passage, describing:

*"The sidewalks were white, the electric poles were white, the trees were white, and life was white as well... The brittle ice crackled under my feet, which were warming up from walking early towards the school..."*²²

The repetition of "white" within a small textual space is not a decorative repetition, but rather an expressive mechanism that establishes a specific psychological atmosphere; "white" here is not merely a color of objects, but the color of primary memory, the color of beginnings that have not yet been tainted by adversity and experience.

Indeed, memory does not leap into consciousness and insist upon the psyche unless the present has disappointed its expectations. This technique frequently creates a sense of overlapping times and places, as it reinforces the nostalgic character of the text, causing memory to become a pivotal factor in the formation of the text's narrative structure and its details.

F. Unreliable Narration

The technique of unreliable narration emerges to manipulate the reader's horizon of expectations and shatter the illusion of their predictions through an internal voice that conveys the narrative details, yet cannot be entirely relied upon to communicate the truth due to ignorance, lack of awareness, bias, or even deliberate lying. The American critic and professor at the University of Chicago, Wayne C. Booth, was among the first to provide a largely precise definition of unreliable narration in his book, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, clarifying that "the reader can distinguish between what the narrator says and what the implied author accepts; accordingly, unreliable narration, which often occurs within internal monologues, is what deviates from the norm in terms of knowledge, morality, or vision."²³

The technique of unreliable narration manifests in the totality of questions posed by the narrator while communing with himself, with another character in the text, or with fate, life, and time—questions which the story often concludes without answering.

Unreliable narration permeates the body of the text at hand, as evidenced in the following example when Yusuf communes with the woman he loved in silence:

"Why did I meet you? And why did I love you? Was it to break the jars in which I aged my soul and body?"²⁴

Here, the sequence of questions reveals an intense internal tension—in which the first-person pronoun represents the emotional center of gravity—where the narrator does not seek answers as much as he reveals an existential wound, exposing the self in a state of painful review of its relationship with the other.

He continues his questions, communing: "Why, my solace and my wound, my lapse and my awakening, my intoxication... my pleasure and my harm... why do you pierce my body with bones sharpened like needles? Why do you assassinate me on the bed of our ordeal, and why do you not resurrect me from the dead so that I may save you from the [Wagzan]²⁵ within you? Why?"²⁶ The text is thus founded on the energy of the suspended question without an answer, and on a language laden with sensory and physical metaphors, showing the narrator exposed as he recites his explosive emotional confessional discourse. He uses addressing the other as a means to reveal his helplessness in confronting his love for her—which is inherently unreliable—and the strained relationship that oscillates between adoration and wounding, between the desire for understanding and the desire for salvation.

Consequently, unreliable narration is a technique that allows the narrator to embed his questions within the body of the text without being required to answer them, which opens the

space for the reader to reconstruct the truth and understand the characters' inner lives from their own perspective, rather than accepting the narrative as a mirror reflecting reality.

Conclusion

This research has endeavored to uncover the dynamics of internal discourse and its representations in the novel *Khatwa fi al-Jasad* by Algerian novelist Hocine Allam. In light of the preceding chapters, the study concludes the following:

- ✓ The first-person narrative technique emerged as a mechanism enabling the narrating self to reconstruct its experience from within, transforming this pronoun into a domain for generating meaning and a space for dialectic between the real and the imaginary.
- ✓ The monologue technique established a suspended zone between perception and silence, where the self turns into a solitary interlocutor, reframing the world from a purely internal perspective.
- ✓ Psychological introspection formed a space in which repressed emotions and affective tremors intensify, transforming internal discourse into an epistemological tool that reveals the deep structures of character rather than merely describing transient states.
- ✓ Through the technique of self-narration, the deep individual experience became manifest; the narrative material opened itself to the fictionalization of identity and a constant negotiation between the lived experience and the told narrative.
- ✓ The employment of free association contributed to granting the text greater emotional density and semantic breadth, as it participated in the fragmentation and disruption of time in favor of the logic of memory and its flows.
- ✓ The unreliable narration technique revealed the dynamics of doubt within the text's fabric and its internal discourse; the reader's trust diminishes through a proliferation of unanswered questions, and ambiguity transforms into an aesthetic component that enriches interpretation and multiplies the levels of reception.

Footnotes

¹ Hassan Bahrawi, *The Structure of the Novelistic Form*, Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 1990, p. 166.

² Mamdouh Rizk, *The Temporal Structure in Narrative Discourse (Models from the Contemporary Egyptian Short Story)*, Internet: <http://www.arabicstory.net/forum/index.php?s=9dd79238>.

³ Percy Lubbock, *The Craft of Fiction*, translated by Abdul Sattar Jawad, Ministry of Culture and Information Publications, Baghdad, 1981, p. 121.

⁴ Hocine Allam, *A Step in the Body*, Arab House for Sciences and Al-Ikhtilaf Publications, Beirut, Lebanon, Algiers, Algeria, 1st ed., 2006, p. 92.

⁵ *The Novel*, same page.

⁶ *The novel*, same page.

⁷ *The novel*, same page.

⁸ *The novel*, same page.

⁹ See: Tzvetan Todorov, *Intertextuality*, trans. Fakhri Saleh, *Foreign Culture*, no. 4, 1988, p. 8

¹⁰ Kadhim Hammoud Mohsen, *Civil Dialogue* - no. 4596 - 2014/10/7 - 11:03

¹¹ *The Novel*, p. 138

¹² *The Novel*, p. 138

¹³ The Novel, p. 192

¹⁴ See: Wael Al-Sudaimi, Introspection in Psychology (Its Types, Importance, Advantages, and Disadvantages), an article published in the electronic blog, June 13, 2022 <https://blog.ajsrp.com/>

¹⁵ The Novel, p. 103

¹⁶ Milan Kundera, The Art of the Novel, translated by Badr al-Din Arrouki, Africa East 2001, p. 29

¹⁷ See : Phillipe Lejeune - The autobiographical pact, Paris, Le Seuil, 1975, p 46 (approximate translation)

¹⁸ The Novel, pp. 167-168

¹⁹ Abdul Aziz Al-Qousi, Psychology (Its Foundations and Educational Applications), Al-Nahda Library, 1st Edition, Cairo, n.d., p. 362

²⁰ Paul West, The Modern Novel, trans. Abdul Wahid Lu'lu'a, Dar Al-Rashid Publishing, n.d., Baghdad, 1981, p. 22

²¹ The Novel, p. 123

²² The Novel, p. 159

²³ Wayne.C.Booth , The rethoric of Fiction, University of Chicago Press, Second Edition,Chicago,1983, p 211-212

²⁴ The novel, page 139

²⁵ Meaning "ghoul" in Berber (according to the novel)

²⁶ The Novel, p. 139

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