

RESEARCH ARTICLE

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The Question of Memory and the Crisis of History in the Novel *Al-Sāq Fawq al-Sāq* by Amin Zaoui

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Abstract:

This article aims to highlight the role of the Algerian novel in narrating the historical and political landscape of Algeria, subjecting it to critique, questioning, and scrutiny. In this way, the novel becomes the central reference that revisits and deeply deconstructs history. Recently, the Algerian novel has sought to reclaim official Algerian history but with perspectives different from those that have been circulated for decades. It has also delved into the obscure corners of memory, bringing forth a generation of Algerian novelists committed to rereading history and amplifying the voices of minorities, the marginalized, the outcasts, and all that has been excluded and silenced in Algerian history. From this perspective, this article seeks to examine the novel *Al-Sāq Fawq al-Sāq* to reveal the distortions of history or the hidden face of the revolution, which, until recently, remained an untouchable domain, shielded from critique and reassessment.

Keywords: Novel, Political History, Revolution, Historical Rupture, Messali Hadj.

INTRODUCTION

There is no doubt that writing history is one of the most challenging tasks a novelist faces in shaping their narrative space. Some of these challenges stem from the nature of the historical event itself and its unique characteristics, while others arise from the fictional elements that construct the event, infusing it with the novelist's creative spirit to transform it into a literary discourse. This process grants the narrative a distinctive artistic identity and dynamic presence within the novel's framework.

The relationship between the historian and the novelist appears closely intertwined, as both engage with historical sources as subjects of study. While the historian approaches events through factual data and objective truths, the novelist may adopt the outward form of these truths and imbue them with imagination. The result is what is commonly referred to as the historical novel. This genre emerges from the fusion of history and fiction, where the historical event serves as a reference for the fictional narrative, forming two interwoven dimensions: one historical and the other imaginative.

However, engaging with history does not mean substituting fiction, nor does historical fiction lie in the nature of the event itself but rather in how it is portrayed. The historical novel does not merely recreate history but attempts to express what history has left unsaid. Consequently, history within historical fiction becomes subject to the novelist's perspective, leading to a literary reconfiguration of historical events—whether to complete a scene, interpret it, justify it, or even correct it¹.

Thus, the historical novel is not a mere reproduction of history; rather, it seeks to reshape and reconstruct it through a process of creative intervention. This approach disrupts the strict alignment with historical reality, deliberately introducing narrative deviations that elevate the historical text to the realm of literary artistry.

The Algerian novel has increasingly engaged with history and issues of memory, reflecting a shift in literary writings toward innovative approaches that break free from the constraints of traditional narratives. This movement also seeks to establish a new form of storytelling that critically revisits history, deconstructs it in depth, exposes its silenced aspects, and subjects it to scrutiny and critique.

Recently, Algerian writers and novelists have sought to reclaim history but through perspectives that differ from the dominant narratives upheld for decades. Their works probe the obscure corners of memory, bringing to light a generation of Algerian novelists committed to amplifying the voices of minorities, the marginalized, the outcasts, and all that has been omitted or silenced. This stems from the notion that “history enshrines the voice of authority, while the novel gives voice to those who have none—the oppressed, the persecuted, and the marginalized. It retrieves voices lost in oblivion, traces their scattered remnants, and weaves them into the fabric of the narrative. The historian speaks with the authority of power, marginalizing the history of the weak, often distorting it to the point of falsification and erasure of truth. Therefore, the novelist reinterprets what the historian presents and reveals what has been deliberately omitted².”

From this perspective, *Al-SāqFawq al-Sāq* attempts to invoke history and reread it in search of answers to present-day questions, aiming to understand the present and pave the way for a future free from exclusion and marginalization. The novel employs techniques that blend reality with fiction, fostering a new awareness in the reader.

Questioning History: A Critical Perspective on the Revolution

The history of the Algerian revolution has been a central question in most of Amin Zaoui’s novels. He is among the most prominent novelists whose works have shaped a unique Algerian literary experience one that delves into the marginalized, the omitted, and the silenced aspects of Algerian history. Unlike his predecessors, Zaoui moves beyond the glorified vision of the revolutionary event.

This critical approach is evident in *Al-SāqFawq al-Sāq*, where the novel conveys a sense of unease regarding its perception of revolutionary history. It challenges previous narratives that adhered strictly to the official, rigid portrayal of the revolution. Through this novel, Zaoui revisits key events from the War of Liberation, the post-independence period, and beyond, attempting to uncover issues deliberately overlooked by Algeria’s official historiography particularly ideological and political conflicts among revolutionary leaders.

The novel presents a satirical critique of political systems, positioning itself in direct opposition to the dominant official discourse. By maintaining a critical distance, it offers a broader and more comprehensive view of Algeria’s official history. This approach reveals what can be described as shifts in historical consciousness one that critiques official history by shedding light on its silenced dimensions. Here, “official history” refers to the history constructed by state institutions to serve the ruling ideology, making the novel a deconstruction of the ideological framework that underpins this official narrative³.

There is no doubt that the theme of the revolution has been closely associated in most Algerian novels with concepts of freedom and struggle. The collective Algerian consciousness has traditionally viewed it through the lens of heroism and honorable stances, granting it a revered status in the psyche of the Algerian people, who see it as the ultimate model of jihad and sacrifice for the homeland.

However, many historical truths have been omitted from Algeria’s official historiography, remaining confined to forbidden and silenced areas. This has driven some writers and novelists to challenge

traditional notions of power, instill skepticism in what was once considered absolute certainty, and foster new perspectives. Consequently, some literary figures have begun to revisit history, strip it of its sanctity, and question it, transforming political history and the liberation revolution into subjects of interrogation and critique rather than mere remembrance and glorification⁴.

The novel *Al-SāqFawq Al-Sāq* belongs to that category of unsettling narratives that boldly challenge and dismantle the official historiographies of Algeria's revolutionary past. It transcends the epic and lyrical portrayals of the revolution, instead approaching it from a historical perspective that exposes its contradictions and generates a counter-consciousness to the official historical narrative.

Through the technique of recollection, the novel recounts events that remained in the shadows of history and were deliberately silenced, aiming to deconstruct the discourse of power and critically reassess history from an opposing perspective. In doing so, it produces an alternative awareness and stands in solidarity with the suppressed memory that the authoritarian system sought to erase. The novel functions as a counter-memory, carrying within it the voices of the marginalized and the silenced. Its purpose is to delve into the depths of the self in search of the voices excluded from official history.

The revolution is depicted not as a singular, glorified event but as a historical phenomenon shaped by conflicting and contradictory forces driven by interests and steered by nationalist ideologies entangled with ambitions for power and control⁵.

The novel's events unfold within the *Moro* family, whose roots trace back to Andalusia. Their ancestors were expelled by Queen Victoria and her husband, Ferdinand, on the day Granada fell, forcing them to settle in western Algeria. The story follows three generations of the family—the grandfather *Hamdis*, the father *Abd al-Barr*, and the grandson *Bootchal al-'Ariyan*—who are united by a profound love in all its noble forms, especially love for their homeland and their village, *Moro*. However, the tides of history, political and ideological affiliations, and the personal convictions each character forged during the revolution tear apart the once-cohesive family unit, scattering its members in different directions.

The novel *Al-SāqFawq Al-Sāq* strives to create an exception by attempting to reinterpret this historical event through fictional imagination. This imaginative reconstruction serves to restore historical memory and present its events in a renewed form. The novel emerges as a "reformulation of values, a reformulation born from new contexts created by the text itself. Within this framework, the text functions as a perspective through which these values are integrated into a trajectory that generates a new context, leading to a distinct and novel understanding of life⁶."

Thus, this novel posed one of the most difficult challenges for the writer, as it delves into some of the most complex and sensitive issues, particularly when dealing with the history of an entire nation exhausted by wars and crises caused by the recklessness of politicians and leaders, as well as ideological and doctrinal conflicts. This was precisely the case in Algeria during the War of Liberation and the post-independence period. The novel addresses the intense political struggle that escalated into bloodshed among "brother-enemies." The *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN) was fighting both an external enemy and an internal one (in its view), represented by *Messali Hadj's* party and all its members and followers. This party believed in dialogue with the colonizer as a means to reclaim Algeria's independence, leading to a schism within its ranks. A faction that embraced armed struggle and the language of fire to expel the occupier broke away, forming the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN). The narrator states:

"At the height of the war of liberation between the Algerian National Liberation Army and the French colonial army, my uncle Idris found himself in Paris, torn between his work—pasting posters, being involved with women, bars, and meetings—while gradually sinking into union activism and politics.

He was closer to the ideology of the Algerian National Movement, led by Messali Hadj, which was in sharp conflict—indeed, in a declared war—with the National Liberation Front and its army⁷."

Here, the narrator highlights the internal conflicts among the leaders during the War of Liberation, which escalated to the point of assassinations and killings. The claim of collective leadership during the liberation period, though respected and upheld, is somewhat exaggerated and may not fully align with reality, as this principle was violated multiple times. It can be said that the breach of the principle of collective leadership and the rise of authoritarian tendencies intensified after the establishment of the General Command of the Army, which, shortly after its formation, became the true power holder, monopolizing decision-making and opposing any dissenting opinion.

This dark aspect of the revolution's history is presented in the novel by unveiling the realities of torture and conspiracies during the liberation period, as well as the dominance of self-interest among revolutionary leaders. This self-serving spirit led to acts of revenge among them, which eventually evolved into covert and repugnant wars⁸.

The novel delves into the intense conflict that erupted between the so-called "enemy brothers," particularly between the two brothers from the (El-Moro) family—Idris, a supporter of the Messalist movement, and his brother Abdel Barr, who belonged to the National Liberation Front (FLN). The violent and deep-seated feud between them escalated when the FLN assigned Abdel Barr the task of assassinating his own brother, Idris. Idris narrowly escaped two assassination attempts, especially after the FLN learned that he was collecting funds in France for the Messalist Party. Consequently, they tasked a prostitute named Colette, who worked in a brothel he frequented every Wednesday and Saturday, with carrying out his assassination. However, she failed in her mission, possibly because she had fallen in love with him.

The narrator describes this moment:

"One evening, as usual, he knocked on her door in the Pigalle district. When she realized it was him, she slammed the door shut. From behind it, she ordered him to leave and never return to this place... He disappeared for several months, but nostalgia for Khadija—or Colette—drew him back to visit her. This time, out of pity for him, she opened the door and uttered a single sentence while he stood at the threshold: 'Your head is wanted. You must disappear. The officials of the National Liberation Front here in Paris have ordered me to kill you. You are one of Messali Hadj's men'⁹."

Undoubtedly, this narrative passage reflects and encapsulates the suffering and anxiety of the Algerian War of Independence, an unease that persisted even after independence. The rise of counter-revolutionary forces and the setbacks that afflicted the revolutionary project became deeply embedded in the political process. This conflict serves as a symbol of revolutionary fragmentation, shaping the stances of the characters throughout the events.

Through this passage, the narrator seeks to interrogate official history, placing it on trial to expose what has been obscured and silenced. He aims to dismantle institutional discourse and unsettle the certainties ingrained in the Algerian consciousness, ensuring that historical clarity is achieved for future generations. This reveals the fundamental function of narrative: to excavate the forbidden and suppressed aspects of Algeria's revolutionary history and to give voice to issues that state apparatuses have concealed or erased.

By doing so, the novel provides a means to understand the present, overcome its challenges, and anticipate the nation's and society's future. *"The construction of the present society has its roots in the past, and the better our understanding of these roots, the more equipped we become to overcome the difficulties we face today, with all their historical, social, cultural, and ideological weight. This strategy is revolutionary in nature, as it seeks to reassess official history and to destabilize the deeply entrenched assumptions that have shaped the Algerian individual's perception of history—particularly the history of the revolution¹⁰."*

We cannot deny that both the National Liberation Front (FLN) and the Messalist National Movement (MNA) were prepared to launch the revolution. However, the FLN was the first to actualize this idea, calling for armed struggle as the only solution to the crisis. The MNA, on the other hand, did not oppose the principle of armed struggle but advocated for patience until the right moment arrived. This perspective is echoed by the narrator: *"We all love Algeria, but in different ways, and we all strive to defend its sacred independence through different paths"*¹¹.

This ideological divergence intensified the conflict between the two factions, leading to an internal war: *"The two organizations clashed, and brothers killed each other in exile, in the mountains, and in the cities"*¹². While the French enemy was infiltrating deep into Algerian villages and towns, internal divisions among revolutionaries—driven by egotism, power struggles, and leadership ambitions—destabilized the revolutionary project. France, in turn, exploited this internal discord. As the narrator describes:

*"The revolution rages on the other side of the sea, its fire spreading further into the mountains, villages, and cities, consuming everything in its path. Meanwhile, brothers are fighting in the suburbs of Paris and in cafés, divided between supporters of the FLN and those of the MNA. French newspapers write about the clashes between 'enemy-brothers,' conflicts that have escalated to physical assassinations"*¹³.

The narrator's political awareness of this historical period—its struggles and setbacks—serves as a socio-historical reference that condemns the failures and fractures of the revolution. Through this portrayal, he seeks to expose the brutal methods of resolving disputes through bloodshed and assassinations, highlighting the deep ideological and cultural rifts that led to such violence. This critical perspective opens the door to new interpretations of Algeria's official history, enriching the aesthetic of historical narrative discourse. The novel thus constructs its own system for expressing reality and crafting an alternative historical truth—one that official historical memory failed to preserve.

To address the scale of assassinations that took place during the revolution—events that Algeria's official history has either remained silent about or deliberately erased—the novel vividly portrays how the FLN systematically eliminated anyone who operated outside its control. This is exemplified through the character of Uncle Idris, who was relentlessly pursued by the FLN, symbolizing perpetual persecution even after independence. As the narrator recounts:

"Along the road, my uncle Idris spoke to me with anguish about how he was hunted by his fellow FLN revolutionaries in Paris, how they shot at him twice but missed—not for any crime, but simply because he belonged to another revolutionary faction, the Algerian National Movement (MNA), led by the father of Algerian nationalism, Messali Hadj."

The narrator delivers sharp criticism of the FLN for its assassinations of MNA members, revealing that these killings were not merely acts of revolutionary discipline but a means to monopolize power and seize state positions under the pretext of revolutionary legitimacy. This critique aims to dismantle and undermine the FLN's founding principles, exposing and deconstructing history to reveal its unfiltered truth.

The issue of assassinations and persecution was not limited to militants and members of the Algerian National Movement (MNA); it also targeted ordinary Algerian citizens who followed the ideology of Messali Hadj. This is exemplified in the case of *Boutachel*, the disciplinary officer at the high school where the narrator studied. He was an ardent supporter of Messali Hadj and was assassinated by the FLN after allowing students to participate in the funeral procession of the nationalist leader. The narrator recalls:

"I remember the funeral of Messali Hadj, in which I marched as a teenager among the legs of the crowd. That day, our disciplinary officer, a passionate supporter of the leader, let us out illegally and

*indirectly encouraged us to take part in the event... The next day, a unit of plainclothes police raided his office, dragged him into an unmarked car, and drove him off to an unknown destination. From that moment, he vanished—swallowed by the earth!*¹⁴"

Here, the function of the novel's narrative emerges clearly—it delves into the forbidden zones of revolutionary history, exposing the silenced issues that the state apparatus either erased or chose to ignore. What lies behind history is the will to speak the truth, no matter its impact. The text boldly crosses the red lines set by the official establishment, which sought to enclose history within a sacred framework. This is where the power and intensity of fictional narration manifest—by creating ruptures in the official historical consciousness through the excavation of suppressed and forcibly obscured realities¹⁵.

There is no doubt that *Uncle Idris* was another victim of assassination attempts, surviving twice—once during the liberation war in Paris and again after independence. The persecution and elimination of Algerian National Movement (MNA) supporters continued beyond independence, as the narrator recounts:

*"One day, he confessed to me—filled with caution and fear—that the car accident he experienced while returning from Tlemcen was no ordinary event... It was an assassination attempt, part of the policy of eliminating the remnants of the Algerian People's Party militants and the supporters of Messali Hadj. If I survived an assassination attempt during the revolution, here I am being hunted down in the days of independence*¹⁶."

The National Liberation Front (FLN) sought to erase all traces of the Messalist movement, pushing it into oblivion, especially after the death of its leader, Messali Hadj. The FLN feared that his followers might attempt to reorganize the movement, prompting security forces to monitor and pursue its supporters.

This is vividly embodied in the character of *Shérif Ben Guelffat*, the "guardian of Sidi Senoussi Cemetery," whom the FLN assigned to surveil and spy on those visiting Messali Hadj's grave. The narrator reveals:

*"He confirmed to me that the cemetery guard, Uncle Shérif Ben Guelffat, was frequently summoned to the military police station, where he was asked to provide information about those who came to pay respects to the leader's soul. In fact, they tasked him with spying on the grave's visitors, recording their identities and family details. They even provided him with a high-precision Japanese camera to take pictures of all those who visited Messali Hadj's grave*¹⁷."

The National Liberation Front (FLN) had always feared *Messali Hadj* during the liberation period, relentlessly pursuing him, exiling him, and working to halt his activities. Their opposition extended even to depriving him of an Algerian passport, forcing him to live out his final years in exile. The narrator recounts:

*"The Algerian regime in the post-independence era refused to grant him a passport—a right that was denied until his health deteriorated. He was only issued an Algerian passport in April 1974, just two months before his death*¹⁸."

How could a leader with such a long history of struggle—the pioneer of the idea of independence—have his jihad and patriotism erased, relegated to the pages of oblivion, and even classified among the great traitors?

What the official Algerian history failed to mention is that this leader endured immense suffering due to his nationalist stance and the ideology his parties upheld—an ideology deeply rooted in politics and the call for armed struggle. His opponents fought him with all their political might because he drew his moral and political strength from the values of the Algerian people. They were unsettled by his extensive and continuous activism, particularly his efforts to internationalize the Algerian cause

abroad. As a result, they launched a fierce smear campaign against him, even accusing him of treason—not because they genuinely believed he was a traitor, but because they sought to eliminate him physically¹⁹.

The narrator states: *"With the death of Messali Hadj, the regime breathed a sigh of relief. It was finally rid of an unsettling symbol—a charismatic figure who raised embarrassing historical questions"*²⁰.

With Messali Hadj's passing, Ammu Idris returns from exile after security restrictions on the militants of the nationalist movement and the Algerian People's Party were eased, leading to many receiving Algerian passports.

With a mix of sorrow and astonishment, the narrator recounts the events of Messali Hadj's funeral, saying: *"Today is June 6, 1974. The city of Tlemcen is under tight security—no one enters, no one leaves... The Sidi Senoussi cemetery in the city was searched twice last night, and it was thoroughly inspected again this morning, just an hour before the burial. A strange funeral for a strange man—one capable of provoking such terror in the city even in death. What if he were still alive? The unease extends even to Oran and the capital"*²¹.

This same sense of unease is what the author seeks to instill in the reader regarding Messali Hadj—a figure whose patriotism was questioned by certain political factions and who was labeled a traitor. Yet, he was far from it.

Despite gaining independence and freedom, the National Liberation Front (FLN) continued to persecute those affiliated with the Messalist nationalist movement. This is evident in the case of Ammu Idris, who returned to his homeland after independence, only to meet a tragic fate—losing both his legs after an assassination attempt by the FLN. The narrator recounts:

*"Ammu Idris was driving his car calmly and cautiously when a massive military truck attempted to overtake him. He tried to evade it and escape, but to no avail—it rammed his vehicle off the road into an abyss... He was taken directly to the surgery ward, where doctors decided to amputate both of his legs"*²².

This narrative passage reveals the price Ammu Idris paid for his affiliation with the nationalist movement. It also underscores the FLN's rejection of political pluralism, demonstrating its determination to impose a one-party system through force—prioritizing its own agenda over the grandeur of the state and the will of the people.

CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that the novel *"Al-SāqFawq al-Sāq"* has disrupted collective memory and reexamined Algerian history from a different perspective, given the distortions and deliberate omissions that have affected this history for clear political motives. The novel offers a new understanding of the revolution, which, according to its perspective, was distorted by many who falsely claimed to uphold its principles. It also critiques the National Liberation Front (FLN), which was represented by opportunists who prioritized personal interests over national integrity, deviating from the revolutionary ideals of patriotism and selfless devotion to the country, free from personal ambitions and the desire for absolute power.

The author attempts to deconstruct historical events with a conscious historical awareness, aiming to define the *"nature of conflicting ideological orientations, their structures, ambitions, and underlying motives."* Additionally, he seeks to penetrate the revolutionary discourse to expose the critical conflicts and setbacks that have marked Algeria's untold history. The issue here does not revolve around an individual's fate but rather the destiny of an entire nation—with all its identity, history, civilization, and culture. It is difficult to accept the horrors of this concealed reality and the suppressed aspects of the Algerian revolution's history, which cannot remain unspoken. However, official history

presents facts that provoke skepticism and doubt, particularly concerning the key figures of the liberation movement, their deaths, and assassinations—deepening the sense of ambiguity and prompting a reassessment of the nation's history.

Accordingly, this novel emerges as a *cry against the falsehoods of official history* and a *call against the disintegration of the dream* once held by the independence generation—one that was subjected to historical distortion no less violent than colonial falsification. The narrative takes the reader back to the liberation period and its intense political conflicts among revolutionary leaders, followed by the independence era, which saw the continued persecution and elimination of the Messalist nationalist movement's supporters, accused of treason and opposition to the ruling authority. These events and narrative scenes compelled the author to employ various expressive tools that allowed him to vividly engage with these conflicts and provide detailed portrayals. Through a range of narrative techniques, he successfully addressed crucial and sensitive issues, subtly embedding them within the ideological discourse of the independence generation.

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