

The Narrative Language of Abdelmalek Mourtadh -The Dialectic of Critical Theory and Creative Practice-

Dr. Saïdani Naas¹, Pr. Bouchiba Boubekour², Pr. Belkacem Boudenna³

¹ University of Ziane Achour – Djelfa. Email: naas.saidani@univ-djelfa.dz

² University of Tahri Mohamed – Bechar, Algeria. Email: bouchiba.boubekour@univ-bechar.dz

³ University Center of El Bayadh, Algeria. Email : b.boudenna@cu-elbayadh.dz ; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6325-6164>

Received: 08/11/2025 ; Accepted: 03/01/2026 ; Published: 13/04/ 2026

Abstract:

This article examines the dialectic between critical theorization and creative practice in the work of Algerian critic and novelist Abdelmalek Mourtadh. It argues that Mourtadh transcends classical and formalist approaches by developing a unique theory of narrative language centered on the dual concepts of the natural sign (language as transparent communication) and the artificial sign (language as crafted, poetic, and defamiliarizing). While engaging with Bakhtin's polyphony and heteroglossia, Mourtadh rejects multilingualism or dialectal variation, insisting instead on a unified classical Arabic that accommodates internal stylistic diversity. The study then demonstrates how Mourtadh embodies his own theory in his fiction, using a densely poetic, existentially charged language that blurs the boundary between prose and poetry. Ultimately, the article positions Mourtadh as a rare example of a critic who successfully practices the art he theorizes, offering an integrated model for Arabic narrative criticism.

Keywords: Narrative language, Abdelmalek Mourtadh, Natural sign, Artificial sign, Poeticity, Polyphony, Heteroglossia, Arabic novel.

Introduction: Language as the Essence of the Novel

Contemporary criticism of the novel goes beyond viewing language as merely one element of narrative or as a material vessel carrying the story's details. Instead, language is seen as the primary determinant of the intellectual foundations upon which the novelistic world is built. Language is not simply a tool of communication; it is an organic fabric that permeates the novel's very being, coloring it with its realistic, social, and civilizational character, granting it the specificity that distinguishes it from other literary genres (Adam, 1999, p. 292). It is the primary carrier of the conceptions and

interpretations that shape the details of time and space, and the hidden regulator ensuring the coherence of the entire novelistic structure.

In this sense, language in the novel transforms from a mere carrier of events into a principal agent in shaping collective consciousness. It penetrates the general novelistic entity, imbues it with its social-realist dimension, and gives it its uniqueness and distinctiveness from other literary entities. Adam Schaff emphasizes this idea, arguing that the linguistic system not only influences how its speakers see the world but also determines how they think and articulate reality (Schaff, 1983, p. 293; cited in Bni Amer, 2010, p. 32). Interest in language in this sense means interest in the novel's overall fabric, not just the aesthetics of the phrase.

The relationship between language and thought is dialectical and interpenetrating; they cannot be separated. Language is not merely a tool expressing thought; it is its vessel and fundamental constituent. Ahmed Abdelrahman Hammad confirms this duality, noting that thought "is nothing more than speech that has remained behind the voice... When a person thinks, he speaks, even if this speech is not heard" (Hammad, 1985, pp. 20-21). Therefore, the relationship between language and content must be unified within an integrated critical discourse; content produces language just as much as language produces content, in a reciprocal, equal relationship. Language bestows a semantic and emotional charge upon the other elements of the novel (characters, time, space, event), making those elements – through the power of language – active, both at the level of creation and reception. This implies the infiltration of the linguistic system into collective consciousness and unconsciousness, defining modes of thought and methods of observation (Bni Amer, 2010, p. 32).

Consequently, addressing narrative language in novel criticism acquires a particular complexity due to the intricate foundations from which it draws its conceptions. The linguistic system in the novel is shrouded in ambiguity: on one hand, it is a semiotic system; on the other, it is a central element managing a complex relational network that appears on multiple, different levels, yet remains simultaneously coherent and harmonious. Based on this, the novel constantly strives, through language, to connect the imaginary with the real, and to represent the self as the bearer of other novelistic elements such as characters, time, space, and event.

First: The Narrative Language of Abdelmalek Mourtadh the Critic (Towards a Special Theory)

1. Beyond Classical and Formalist Approaches

To discuss Mourtadh's critical vision, we must first review the foundations that shaped the critical study of narrative texts before him. In the ancient Arab rhetorical tradition, most attention was confined to the study of poetry, leading critics to approach narrative and fictional texts with the same tools used for poetry, attempting to observe only partial aesthetic phenomena. However, the novel quickly disappointed them, as they did not find in its language "the same radiance of phrase they were accustomed to in poetic writing or in orations and artistic epistles" (Lhamidani, 1989, p. 5). In Western criticism, during classical periods, language was not seen as an extension of feeling or the embodiment of a separate world, but merely as a turning of verbal technique aimed at "expression" according to rules more beautiful and more social than those of ordinary speech (Barthes, 1953/1980, p. 80).

Then the structuralist linguistic field emerged, treating language as an independent structure with its own systems, significations, and laws. Despite the precision of these studies, applying them to the art of the novel remained difficult because the literary text in general, as the Formalists noted, is a system that determines the function of literary devices, and its object is "literariness" itself, not any psychological, social, or historical object (Ben Driel, 2000, p. 25). Nevertheless, the Formalists' theoretical starting point was based on distinguishing between everyday language and creative language, ignoring the problem of meaning and signification, which led them to treat linguistic facts as material amenable to operational analysis.

Abdelmalek Mourtadh rejects this prevailing view in approaching the language of the novel, which is essentially the stylistics of monologic genres like poetry and philosophy. This view, in his words, constituted a "dangerous critical authority that directed researchers of novelistic language and made them fall captive to conceptions and concepts rooted in the field of poetry (as a literary genre) with its own stylistic laws and imaginative horizons, which necessarily differ from the novelistic genre" (Bouazza, 2012, p. 12). The novel, by virtue of its complex composition that accommodates the writer's narration, characters' narration, descriptions, philosophical digressions, dialogue, and other elements, requires a special critical method that stems from its pluralistic and compositional nature (Derradj, 1988, p. 140).

2. The Natural Sign and the Artificial Sign in Novelistic Language

Mourtadh has transcended the view of novelistic language as merely a tool of expression or a means of depiction, delving instead into the search for the linguistic and suggestive components that constitute the text's world. He seeks to establish a concept of novelistic language that accommodates

the textual reality with composite units that multiply within its linguistic field, supporting his probabilistic conceptions. Mourtadh believes that language in the novel has its own specific semiotic system distinguishing it from the languages of other literary genres. The most prominent features of this system are the natural sign and the artificial sign (Mourtadh, 1998, p. 99; Boujmlin, 2015, p. 109).

A. The Natural Sign: This is communicative language transmitted without significant artificial intention; like the cloudiness of the sky indicating impending rain, or the onset of rising body temperature indicating illness. It includes auditory (e.g., thunder), visual (e.g., lightning), and tactile signs. In the novel, this language performs a direct communication function, acting as a material carrier of narrative elements. Its function is limited to conveying and informing, respecting linguistic conventions and the language system of the recipients. It is standard, reportorial language that allows the narrator to reach his audience without difficulty and deliver the message without stylistic effort interfering between the recipient and the proper reception of the content. In other words, it is transparent language that does not draw attention to itself.

B. The Artificial Sign: This is language that the narrator deliberately refines and crafts creatively,超越 ing the direct communicative purpose. Mourtadh argues that no achievement can be called literature without this sign. The narrator is required to attend to it, to manipulate the structures, styles, images, and deviations it affords him, and to imbue it with symbols and emotions commensurate with the meanings he wishes to convey within the narrative (Mourtadh, 1998, p. 99). For Mourtadh, this is not limited to linguistic signs; the narrator may also use non-linguistic signs (drawings, shapes, sound signals) if they serve the purpose, carry meaning, and create astonishment in the recipient. In this sense, the artificial sign approaches Roland Barthes's definition of literary writing as "degree zero," where the writer exercises his freedom in shaping language.

3. Linguistic Multiplicity (Between Rejection and Adoption)

It was previously noted that the novel's style constitutes a linguistic center for the sum of styles included in the novelistic text, resulting from human discourses (narrator, storyteller, character...). Mourtadh bases his discussion of the multiplicity of language levels on three fundamental premises: First, the character's discourse is not transmitted neutrally but is artistically characterized. Second, the discourse of the novelistic character can become one of the factors for classifying language and an entry point to it. Third, one cannot ignore that the novel and its characters' opinions and conceptions are an ideological product (Mourtadh, 1998, p. 102).

However, it is striking that Mourtadh differs in his conception from Mikhail Bakhtin and Julia Kristeva. Despite acknowledging polyphony and dialogism, he rejects the multiplicity of languages or dialects within the novelistic text. He considers this a matter of variation in levels and styles of language within the framework of a single tongue, not a multiplicity of languages or dialects (Mourtadh, 1998, p. 102). For Mourtadh, the language of the novel is a “mosaic” based primarily on social contrast through its polarization of various levels of language and styles formed through multiple manifestations: the multiplicity of linguistic levels of the narrator and his characters according to their diverse social, cultural, psychological, historical, and ideological backgrounds.

This multiplicity and variation stem from the differing intellectual and social premises of individuals, enriching the textual space. Here, language translates intellectual and referential difference, presenting it in linguistic levels and usages that represent the consciousness, vision, and specific belonging of each character. It is a linguistic mosaic necessitated by the novel by virtue of its ever-open specificity. This disagreement with Bakhtin is fundamental; Bakhtin sees the novel as inherently “heteroglossic,” containing sharp linguistic diversity reflecting social and cultural diversity. Bakhtin states: “At any given moment of its historical existence, language is heteroglot from top to bottom” (Bakhtin, 1975/1981, p. 291). He even argues that novelistic genius lies in its ability to “dialogize” these different languages. Kristeva extended this vision with the concept of “intertextuality,” considering that any text is a mosaic of quotations, a transformation and absorption of another text (Kristeva, 1980, p. 36).

In contrast to this view, Mourtadh insists on unity of tongue (Classical Arabic) while allowing multiplicity in usages or functional “languages” such as “the language of law,” “the language of religion,” and “the language of education.” In doing so, he preserves the eloquence of the mother tongue while enriching it with its internal stylistic diversity. This leads us to discuss the presence of other literary genres within the novelistic text, or what is known as intertextuality and the use of heritage (e.g., invoking the Qur’an, *One Thousand and One Nights*, and *Maqamat*). The novel, as Mourtadh describes it, is “a language of layered strata, linguistically multiple in its tangible appearance that is semantic and expressive in the eyes of others” (Mourtadh, 1998, p. 107). This linguistic layering leads the novel to borrow decorative tools from other genres, only to soon seize them, exercise possessiveness, adapt them for its own benefit, and appear in its finest attire (Goreib, 2010, p. 6).

4. The Narrator’s Style (Deviation and Poeticity)

Alongside these varying levels reflecting the multiplicity of characters, another no less important level emerges: the narrator's own style. There are distinctive stylistic levels created by the narrator motivated by "poeticity," a desire for estrangement and transgression, a quest for semantic expansion, and a wish to delight and attract recipients on an aesthetic level. Mourtadh points to "the specific language he [the narrator] adopts, which he tries, often – like major writers of the world – to take from the mechanical lexical level of signification to the deviational level that allows him to harness his language for new meanings that revive its dead aspects and expand its signification, by stirring it into distant turbulences with which lexical language is unacquainted" (Mourtadh, 1998, p. 107).

This distinction between the characters' levels and the narrator's higher level reflects what critic Dan Shen calls "covert progression" behind the overt plot, where style can carry moral or philosophical implications deeper than those suggested by surface events (Shen, 2013, p. 5). It is the poeticity of narration that makes language both an end and a means simultaneously, creating a gap between the linguistic signifier and its direct meanings, thereby widening the horizon of interpretation for the reader.

Second: The Narrative Language of Abdelmalek Mourtadh the Creator (Embodying the Theory)

Language has become one of the most important markers of modernity in the Arabic novel, evident in the merging of the novel's language with that of poetry, the shrinking of boundaries between them, and the novel's borrowing of poetic methods and techniques. The novel attempts to exploit poetic language for its charm and beauty, as well as its capacity to contain forms of cognitive anxiety and existential tension that traditional prose language might fail to carry. Through the following lines, we attempt to uncover the embodiment of this poeticity in Abdelmalek Mourtadh's novelistic language. Here, Mourtadh tries to transcend himself as a critic and theorist, mounting the novel as a linguistic, artistic, creative reality that refuses delimitation and confinement to fixed rules, celebrating multiple readings and infinite interpretations.

What makes Mourtadh's novelistic works unique is language as a pliable tool in the hands of an artist who considers it "the backbone of the novel's structure, where no problem can exist except through the existence and activity of language" (Mourtadh, 1998, p. 18). Accordingly, what distinguishes his writings is that creative language grounded in the specific function performed by poetic language, as a means of expressing reality and imagined experience, capable of making the

past present. A writer can only achieve this by starting from language as “the basis of the novelistic work and the material of its construction. If you remove it or remove something from it, the building collapses and its pillars crumble into shards” (Ben Salem, 2013, p. 219).

Mourtadh’s poeticity of language is embodied in its evasion of the grip of direct lexical meaning, carrying within its semantic depth an aesthetic charge and existential tension. Consider this novelistic passage:

...“And you see the sun heading towards its inevitable sunset, a sunset that carries your own sunset with it. An inevitable sunset. The sun and you set together. Together, as you both descend. Together. Towards nothingness, towards the unknown end. Together... Your end, you who do not know, nor does anyone know, who you are?... But why do you see it descending without stopping? Did you not ask it to stay, even a little, so you could offer it a final farewell?...” (Mourtadh, n.d., *Shattered Mirrors*, p. 14).

Here, language transcends its informative function to become an existential meditation on death and time, where the description of nature (sunset) intertwines with self-reflection (the setting of the self). This intertwining creates a kind of “estrangement” (*ostranenie*) discussed by the Formalists, making the familiar (sunset) appear new and surprising by linking it to human destiny. This type of language, as Jean Cohen argues, relates to the unreasonable, not by violating linguistic law, but by interpreting and restoring harmony and reasonableness at deeper levels (Cohen, 1966/1986, p. 6).

Undoubtedly, Mourtadh, in his novelistic oeuvre, selects a poetic language carved from the depth of his experience first as a critic and second as a novelist, allowing the text to transcend the familiar and touch the worlds of imagination overflowing with pleasure and aesthetics. He considers language the property of the writer, to be spent as he wishes; “spending” here is linked to our understanding of what we intend through words, to use them in new usages and breathe into their folds concepts previously unknown to people (Mourtadh, 1968, p. 201). This poeticity manifests in its most precise forms through his wordplay and masterful arrangement, seeking aesthetic and cognitive pleasure that captivates the reader and disrupts their horizon of expectation. This distinction stems from his mastery of language and his command of argumentative mechanisms and proofs, granting him a degree of transcendence enabling him to deploy language individually, distancing it from the direct communicative function.

Conclusion:

Abdelmalek Mourtadh has worked to investigate the linguistic and stylistic components that constitute the world of the novelistic text, seeking to uncover the issues of the narrative text that multiply as the premises multiply. His vision holds that narrative language must be eloquent and rich with diverse linguistic levels within the framework of the same eloquent language. He justifies this with two points: First, the multiplicity of functions performed by narrative language according to the diversity of situations, worlds embodied, and persons with their social and cultural levels. Second, regarding the narrator through whom the novel comes, who seeks to win over recipients and delight them with levels of deviation and departure, exploiting language's potential for multiplicity, variation, and renewal.

The discussion of narrative language in Mourtadh's work – whether as a critic observing from outside or as a creator living inside language – reveals an integrated critical project. It is a project that rejects the binary of form and content and establishes an Arabic novelistic theory emerging from the specificity of the Arabic language and its critical heritage, while benefiting from modern Western approaches (such as structuralism and pragmatics), but without dissolving into them. In this sense, Abdelmalek Mourtadh remains a prominent figure in Algerian and Arab literary criticism, not only because he wrote the theory of the novel, but because he applied it creatively, proving that the true critic is one who can create the literature he analyzes.

References:

- Barthes, R. (1980). *Le degré zéro de l'écriture* [Writing Degree Zero] (M. Berrada, Trans.). Dar al-Tali'a lil-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, and La Société Marocaine des Editeurs Réunis. (Original work published 1953)
- Ben Driel, A. (2000). *Al-naṣ wa al-uslūbiyya bayna al-naẓariyya wa al-taṭbīq* [Text and Stylistics Between Theory and Practice]. Publications of the Union of Arab Writers.
- Ben Salem, A. (2013). *Binyat al-ḥikāya fī al-naṣ al-riwā'ī al-maghāribī al-jadīd* [The Structure of Story in the New Maghrebi Narrative Text]. Dhafaf Publications, and Ikhtilaf Publications.
- Bni Amer, A. M. A. (2010). *Athar al-shafāhiyya fī tawjīh al-khiṭāb al-naqdī* [The Effect of Orality on Directing Critical Discourse]. In *Al-Marja'iyyāt fī al-naqd wa al-adab wa al-lugha*, Proceedings of the 13th International Criticism Conference (p. 32). Yarmouk University, Alam al-Kutub al-Ḥadītha.
- Bouazza, M. (2012). *Ḥiwāriyyat al-khiṭāb al-riwā'ī: al-ta'addud al-lughawī wa al-būlīfūniyya* [The Dialogism of Novelistic Discourse: Linguistic Multiplicity and Polyphony]. Publications of the Union of Moroccan Writers.

- Boujmlin, M. (2015). *Ishkālīyyat al-lugha al-sardiyya* [The Problematic of Narrative Language]. *Majallat Ru'ā Fikriyya*, (3), 109. University of Souk Ahras.
- Cohen, J. (1986). *Structure du langage poétique* [Structure of Poetic Language] (M. al-Omari, Trans.). Dar Toubkal for Publishing. (Original work published 1966)
- Derradj, F. (1988). *Al-kalima, al-lugha, al-riwāya* [The Word, Language, the Novel]. *Majallat al-Ādāb al-Ajnabiyya*, 140.
- Goreib, R. (2010). *Al-riwāya al-jazā'iriyya al-mu'āshira wa tadākhul al-anwā'* [The Contemporary Algerian Novel and Genre Interference]. University of Constantine.
- Hammad, A. A. (1985). *Al-'alāqa bayna al-lugha wa al-fikr: dirāsah li al-'alāqa al-luzūmiyya bayna al-fikr wa al-lugha* [The Relationship Between Language and Thought: A Study of the Necessary Relationship Between Thought and Language]. Dar al-Ma'rifa al-Jami'iyya.
- Lhamidani, H. (1989). *Uslūbiyyat al-riwāya (madkhal nazārī)* [The Stylistics of the Novel: A Theoretical Introduction]. Publications of Semiotic, Literary, Linguistic Studies.
- Mourtadh, A. M. (1968). *Al-qīssa fī al-adab al-'arabī* [The Story in Arabic Literature]. Dar Maktabat al-Sharika al-Jazā'iriyya.
- Mourtadh, A. M. (1998). *Fī nazariyyat al-riwāya: baḥth fī taqnīyāt al-sard* [On the Theory of the Novel: A Study in Narrative Techniques] (1st ed.). World of Knowledge Series, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters.
- Mourtadh, A. M. (n.d.). *Marāyā mutashazziya* [Shattered Mirrors] (Novel). Dar Houma for Printing, Publishing and Distribution.
- Bakhtin, M. M. (1981). *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (C. Emerson & M. Holquist, Trans.; M. Holquist, Ed.). University of Texas Press. (Original work published 1975)
- Kristeva, J. (1980). *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (L. S. Roudiez, Ed.; T. Gora, A. Jardine, & L. S. Roudiez, Trans.). Columbia University Press.
- Rimmon-Kenan, S. (2002). *Narrative Fiction: Contemporary Poetics* (2nd ed.). Routledge.
- Schaff, A. (1983). *Language and Cognition* (O. Wojtasiewicz, Ed. & Trans.). D. Reidel Publishing Company. (Original work published 1964)
- Shen, D. (2013). *Style and Rhetoric of Short Narrative Fiction: Covert Progressions Behind Overt Plots*. Routledge.