

The Contemporary Arab Novel Between the Employment of Cognitive References and Interdisciplinary Strategies: A Reading of Ibrahim al-Koni's Literary Experience

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Abstract:

This paper seeks to highlight the distinctiveness of the contemporary Arab novel as an aesthetic discourse rich in cultural, cognitive, historical, mythological, and other ideational charges. Through the seamless synergistic fusion of various fields within Ibrahim al-Koni's novels, we aim to demonstrate the significance of adopting a comprehensive interdisciplinary approach to investigate the fusion and intersections among these elements, revealing the hidden layers of the text and eliciting its silent voices.

Contemporary critical studies increasingly advocate the necessity of combining disciplines and utilizing methodologies from more than two fields to analyze literary discourse. These studies connect literary production to its analytical frameworks by exploring the intersections embedded within the text. In light of this, we posit that the author's own deployment of such interwoven elements can be considered a manifestation of interdisciplinarity—an effective deconstructive strategy, as we argue—that contributes to meaning production alongside the reader. This approach examines how these intersections enrich the text, multiplying its signs and messages.

Keywords: Contemporary Arab novel, narrative criticism, interdisciplinary studies, cultural systems, Ibrahim al-Koni.

Introduction:

It is widely acknowledged that the Arab critical scene has recently undergone significant methodological transformations—even though these shifts have at times created a crisis for Arab criticism, leaving it unable to clearly define its identity—and the repeated introduction of various Western methodologies throughout the past century. The core point of divergence among them lies in the central issue of the critical process: whether the focus should be on the author, the text, or the reader. Starting with contextual methodologies, moving through systemic criticism, and culminating in postmodern methodologies and reception theory, 'interdisciplinary studies' has emerged as one of the most recent intellectual and critical trends. This approach first appeared in the West (despite having roots in ancient Arab thought), and has evolved into a distinct methodological alternative to the prevailing trends in contemporary criticism

After the emergence of several critical trends advocating for the integration and blending of diverse methodologies and approaches to derive meaning—including synthetic methodologies such as genetic structuralism, psychological stylistics, and cognitive criticism on one hand, and post-structuralist approaches like feminist criticism, cultural criticism, and New Historicism on the other—some critics have adopted a new approach aimed at developing a novel critical framework called interdisciplinary studies.' This trend gained prominence, particularly following the emergence of a new epistemological approach that has demonstrated its efficacy and efficiency in both scientific and humanistic fields. Drawing on postmodern concepts such as openness, tolerance, and dialogue, which reject rigid cultural and intellectual boundaries, as forms of knowledge inherently align with the nature of the material being studied, interdisciplinary studies have emerged as a dynamic and inclusive field of inquiry

It should be noted that the concept of this term is broad, with each scholar offering their own definition based on the perspective they emphasize. Most definitions focus on the idea of transcending disciplinary boundaries, fostering openness, and encouraging cross-pollination of knowledge. This is affirmed by M. Nissani in his definition of interdisciplinarity as: *"a process of interaction and exchange of knowledge between different disciplines, which may lead to the integration of overlapping disciplines into a new one. Interdisciplinarity is a synergistic interaction that occurs between two or more components, each belonging to a distinct field of science or specialization"*².

This epistemological interaction and overlap between fields aim to address the problems and complexities that arise from a single, limited discipline, approach, or knowledge system, which is often incapable of encompassing all the data related to emerging scientific questions. For instance, through "disciplinary interdisciplinarity," new fields of knowledge have emerged as a result of the merging of different sciences and approaches, such as discourse analysis, general rhetoric, epistemological studies, and discourse analysis itself, which was born from the intersection of linguistics and literary texts.

We have chosen this topic in light of the importance of interdisciplinary studies in analyzing contemporary narrative texts, which have moved beyond traditional frameworks and opened up new interpretive horizons that challenge prevailing reading paradigms. The contemporary narrative no longer adheres to the expected assumptions of its reader as it once did; instead, it deliberately subverts these expectations, liberating the reader from conventional reading patterns and rigid traditional perspectives. In this context, the role of the reader/critic/producer becomes crucial. This role requires a diverse set of methodological tools and a broad, interdisciplinary vision, enabling them to delve deeply into the complex structure of the narrative text, deconstruct its symbolic codes, and uncover its hidden semantic patterns. Astute reading here is not merely a superficial engagement with the text but a critical act that intersects with what is known as scholarly or professional reading.

This type of reading is the product of accumulated knowledge and critique, capable of reshaping the conditions for receiving contemporary narrative texts and creating a dynamic dialectic between reading and writing within the context of literary modernity³. Based on this perspective, this research seeks to explore the cultural dimensions and epistemological interactions embedded in contemporary Arabic novels, viewing them as manifestations of an interdisciplinary system that contributes to reshaping narrative structures and deconstructing traditional patterns. To achieve this goal, we adopt a descriptive-analytical approach, focusing on two central questions

Can a single critical approach adequately address the demands of analyzing contemporary Arabic novels with all their structural and semantic complexities, in light of the aesthetic transformations occurring in this literary genre

To what extent do new narrative texts support interdisciplinary methodologies and open the door to infinite interpretive possibilities? Or is there an urgent need to reconsider the tools and traditional methodologies of novel criticism to respond to these transformations

1- :Contemporary Arab Novel (particularities and Transformations)

The contemporary Arab novel has undergone significant transformations in both form and content, with its authors increasingly advocating for experimentation and innovation. This is evident in their pursuit of new narrative frameworks that transcend conventional boundaries, embracing multiple perspectives. Their works now exhibit a rich diversity in narrative discourse, as revealed through meticulous critical analysis. This experimental approach has unsettled contemporary critics, compelling them to develop new methodological tools to uncover the cultural intersections within these texts. On one hand, these tools aim to explore the broader fields of these narratives, while on the other, they seek to reveal the aesthetic innovations in language, structure, and style. The new novelistic text resists singular interpretations; it is inherently pluralistic, embodying what Roland Barthes termed a "plural text" (Texte Pluriel). As such, it demands a similarly pluralistic reading, as the text only comes alive when it

opens up semantically—when it becomes "scriptible," offering itself to the reader
⁴.through multiple entry points

⁵ Among the most notable features of this novelistic experimentation are the following

A/ Celebration of Dialogism: The new novel embraces dialogism's principle by expanding the use of social languages within the narrative framework, thereby fostering multiple perspectives on the world. This is exemplified in Edward al-Kharrat's novel *The Other Time*. As Jamal Hamdawi observes

*«This novel now engages with history, philosophizes about society, and critiques the Arab self through both subjective and objective lenses. It introduces ideological ideas for debate through the use of polyphony and the multiplicity of voices»*⁶

B/ Disruption of Linear Narration: The transformation has disrupted the traditional logic of events, unsettling the rational or causal sequence of narrative events

:C/ Liberation from Stereotypical Characters and Space-Time Conventions

The modern narrative text has broken free from the stereotypical molds of traditional novels. Time and space are no longer mere external frameworks but have become dynamic textual forces that play a central, protagonistic role. Space, in particular, is no longer a static backdrop but an essential collaborator in constructing meaning and guiding the narrative. This shift is evident in the works of Ibrahim Al-Koni, where the desert becomes an absolute protagonist and the driving force behind events. The focus has shifted from the psychological depth of characters in classical novels to an emphasis on actions and events in modern narratives. Characters are now defined not only by their psychological complexities but also by their interactions with space and unfolding events. The rejection of linear narrative structures has led to the fragmentation of spatiotemporal frameworks, transforming space into a dynamic element that interacts with time, reshapes the plot, and actively contributes to generating meaning and steering the narrative

D/ Hybridization of Narrative Forms: The novel incorporates various expressive forms, such as the fantastic, blending elements of strangeness, wonder, and dreamlike qualities to create additional layers of meaning. This integration of different levels of
⁷.consciousness effectively disrupts narrative monotony

E/ Engagement with Multiple Cultural References: These narratives draw upon ⁸"traditional values, identity, and the concept of the "Other

What is particularly significant in this context is that the contemporary Arab novel constitutes a rich aesthetic discourse, deeply embedded with cultural, intellectual, and historical dimensions, as previously noted. This is evident in numerous contemporary works, such as *Zayni Barakat* by Gamal al-Ghitani, *Neighbors of Abu Musa* by Ahmad Toufiq, the novels *Al-'Ibira* ("The Mark") and *Majnun al-Hukm* ("The Mad Ruler") by Bensalem Himmich, and the novels of Ibrahim al-Koni, which we have cited as illustrative examples

2- :Narrative and Interdisciplinary Studies in Contemporary Literary Criticism

This intervention is grounded in the premise that contemporary literature, through its openness to the human sciences that support literary studies, is in dire need of This ⁹.interdisciplinary collaboration for the study and interpretation of a single text openness, particularly evident in postmodern literary criticism methodologies, underscores the importance of engaging with literary texts through a variety of disciplines and fields of knowledge, moving beyond the autonomy of a single methodological approach. These interdisciplinary studies, now celebrated within critical thought, represent an "open methodological approach to literature, analyzed in light of multiple and diverse cognitive disciplines to extract meaning and construct ¹⁰".significance

To illustrate this paradigm shift in critical thinking: literary criticism has evolved into cultural criticism, surpassing its traditional focus on "aesthetics"—its foundational principle—and shifting towards uncovering the latent cultural codes embedded within the linguistic structures of literary texts. This process involves exploring the cognitive weight present in discourse, which emerges from the intersection and overlap of various disciplines such as psychology, sociology, economics, and others. This synergy within the humanities has birthed a new critical horizon known as interdisciplinary studies," with cultural criticism standing out as an "eminent "

interdisciplinary methodology, drawing from diverse sciences both in terms of conceptual frameworks and the critical tools employed for analyzing texts and, more¹¹ ".broadly, cultural phenomena

For example, among the critics who have contributed to "interdisciplinary reading" in the novel is the Moroccan critic Rachid Benhaddou, through his seminal work *The Aesthetics of In-Between in the Arabic Novel*. This work constitutes a foundational critical exploration of the "in-between" concept, defined as the very space of mediation—those margins often overlooked by critics and theorists—where genres and techniques intersect, languages and visions double, temporalities converge, and¹² spaces overlap

Benhaddou highlights the critical neglect of the "in-between space" despite its significant role in generating meaning and aesthetic value. He defines it as an intellectual aesthetic feature inherent in Arabic and Moroccan novels, characterized by "texts oscillating remarkably between two (or more) demands, whether artistic forms, narrative techniques, storytelling languages, cultural codes, worldviews, or¹³ ".other dualities suggestive of contrast

Thus, we observe the breadth of this critical concept, marked by its substantial discursive power and diverse manifestations in human life. Benhaddou argues that this concept possesses a revelatory force with implications across various fields of human knowledge: in psychology and psychoanalysis, in the sociology of migration, in modern gender studies—focusing on the distinction between biological sex and sociocultural gender constructs—in cultural anthropology, linguistics, literary theory¹⁴ .and criticism, and creative writing

Furthermore, Benhaddou illustrates the shift in "modern literary theory" from an exclusive focus on the text itself to an engagement with its peripheries, viewing them as a unique rhetoric of the text's margins. This approach seeks "textuality" in the thresholds and footnotes, in its intertextual connections with other texts, in the pre-text (drafts, editions), in the subtext (reader reception), in the supertext (the overarching genre), and in the post-text (the text's unconscious). This transformation

supports the legitimate inclusion of the "in-between" within the republic of ¹⁵.literature

For instance, in his reading of Edward Al-Kharat's novels, Benhaddou identifies features that shape the aesthetics of the in-between, oscillating between the novel and the anti-novel. He contends that Al-Kharat's experimental aim is to position his texts in a liminal space between being a novel and not, destabilizing genre conventions. Benhaddou employs various terms to describe this interstitial quality that characterizes the thresholds of Al-Kharat's texts, emphasizing the hybridization of the novel through multiple languages, registers, and dissonant rhythms.

3- The Desert Novel: Between the Stakes of Epistemological Frameworks and the Horizon of an Interdisciplinary Approach:

In this section, we will address a distinctive feature of the "contemporary Arabic novel," categorized under its thematic dimensions, which we term "the chemistry of writing." This involves examining the philosophy of writing in the works of Ibrahim Al-Koni, where multiple epistemological influences converge and merge, bestowing the desert with its poetic presence within the realm of Arabic fiction. This necessitates the application of various complementary methodologies, foremost among them:

3.1 Novel and History in the Works of Ibrahim Al-Koni:

It should be essential to begin by addressing the complexity of defining the genre of the "novel," a challenge rooted in the difficulty of delineating its generic characteristics. Mikhail Bakhtin considers the novel the only literary genre that continues to evolve, with its features yet to be fully crystallized. This fluidity is mirrored in another form of intersection: the overlap between the novel and various human sciences such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and history. History, in particular, has proven to be one of the most fertile and influential disciplines from which the Arabic novel has drawn, both as a source of events and factual narratives that deepen meaning and expand interpretive possibilities.

Moroccan critic Jamil Hamdaoui discussed the concept of interdisciplinarity when examining the different types of historical novels, categorizing them into four types:

"documentary historical novels, artistic historical thrillers, historical fiction novels, and novels with historical dimensions."¹⁶

Ibrahim Al-Koni's novels oscillate between the documentary historical novel and historical fiction, as he employs history as a tool to construct his fictional universe, chronicling the Sahara and its cultural components (especially myths). This duality serves both poetic and aesthetic functions. What concerns us here is the manner in which history manifests within Al-Koni's narrative fabric, a presence realized through two primary modes:

- **The Presence of History Outside the Narrative Context:**

This mode is linked to a modern literary technique known as "paratexts" those brief texts that precede narrative passages, referred to by Gérard Genette as prefaces or epigraphs. These paratexts reflect the intellectual references Al-Koni meticulously selects during the writing process, drawing from a diverse range of sources, including religious texts from the Quran and the Old Testament, as well as classical Arabic literary works.

For example, in the introduction to his novel *The Gold Dust* (Al-Tibr), Al-Koni begins with two epigraphs, one religious and the other historical, the latter taken from Ibn Fadlallah Al-Umari's *The Kingdom of Mali and Its Dependencies*. These serve as rhetorical gateways to the entire novel. The first epigraph is a religious excerpt from the Old Testament, Ecclesiastes 3:

*"What happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and man has no advantage over the beasts, for all is vanity."*¹⁷

This epigraph underscores the central role assigned to the mute animal protagonist, "Al-Ablak" (the dappled camel), emphasizing the profound bond between humans and animals. It suggests a thematic concern with the kinship between humanity and the animal kingdom, highlighting the equality between rational beings (humans) and non-rational creatures (animals) in matters of existence, life, and death. This theme is vividly illustrated in the relationship between "Ukheid" and "Al-Ablak," where the human protagonist sacrifices himself for his animal counterpart, enduring suffering

and existential dilemmas, even tethering himself to the camel's tail in a symbolic gesture of solidarity unto death.

The second epigraph is drawn from Ibn Fadlallah Al-Umari's historical account:

*"In the realm under the authority of this kingdom lies the land of the gold dust. They bring gold to the ruler every year, though they are pagan savages. If he wished, he could seize them, but the kings of this kingdom have learned through experience that whenever they conquered a city of gold, Islam spread, the call to prayer was heard, and gold became scarce until it vanished completely, increasing only in the lands of the infidels."*¹⁸

This historical reference signals the prevailing ideological framework within the novel, alluding to "gold dust" as a symbol of sin, corruption, and idolatry. As the narrator declares within the text: *"Gold blinds everyone, corrupts the best of people. Cursed gold led them astray. Gold is behind every curse."*¹⁹

A profound connection exists between these two epigraphs through their shared metaphysical vision. The novelist places the reader within a dichotomy (purity/sin), shaping a worldview grounded in dualities (the earthly/the transcendent). In Al-Koni's philosophy, worldly life is ephemeral, with the human soul entangled in material desires. Humanity is thus urged to seek the lost paradise, where values of purity and spiritual transcendence prevail, liberating the soul from the prison of the body and material existence. This quest for the eternal is embodied in *The Gold Dust* through the tragic, eternal journey of its protagonists, "Al-Ablak" and "Ukheid."

● The Presence of History Within the Narrative Context:

This refers to the seamless integration of historical and fictional narratives, achieved through a literary technique known as "breaking the linearity of the narrative". This technique involves the use of external analepsis (flashbacks) to introduce information predating the novel's timeline. These flashbacks are divided into two types:

- ✓ Historical flashbacks related to Libya.
- ✓ Mythological flashbacks.

The relationship between the novel and history is one of mutual reinforcement. History, as a mask, completes the novel's vision and hidden layers, while the novel

documents history. Both the historical and mythological/mythological approaches stem from the literary phenomenon, aiming to analyze real historical events or to explore the myths of ancient civilizations and their symbolic significance. This interplay necessitates specific critical methodologies that align with the text's unique demands, allowing the critic to uncover the aesthetic dimensions embedded within the narrative without imposing preconceived frameworks.

3-2. The Contemporary Novel and the Socio-Anthropological Reading

The socio-anthropological reading is one of the most important approaches that critics and scholars must employ when analyzing contemporary narrative texts. This is due to its holistic nature, encompassing a wide range of human aspects: cultural anthropology, social anthropology, and biological anthropology (including linguistics and archaeology). This breadth grants it a unique advantage over other specialized fields.

When examining the social and political systems in Ibrahim Al-Koni's fictional world, this reading focuses on uncovering the cultural roots of the Tuareg identity and their way of life (clothing, food, musical traditions, jewelry, etc.). Al-Koni's anthropological-structural vision, evident throughout his works, delves into their origins, lineage, and the various living practices, including beliefs, myths, and their philosophy of life. Readers of his texts find themselves immersed in the multifaceted dimensions of human existence—social, cultural, religious, and more. This underscores the novel's status as an anthropological phenomenon par excellence, expressing and encapsulating social reality while also serving as an aesthetic and creative endeavor that engages the reader's senses.

Among the issues explored are those related to identity, ethnicity, gender, social transformation, and other aspects of the relationship between individuals and their societies. For example, the kinship system is a cornerstone of the broader social structure. Claude Lévi-Strauss, in his structuralist approach, likened the study of kinship laws (governing relationships through marriage or blood ties) to the study of linguistic phonology, as both are systems of communication²⁰. In Al-Koni's novels, the kinship system of the Tuareg society reflects the influence of ancient matriarchal

cultures that revered femininity as the source of fertility. Among the Tuareg, lineage is traced through the mother, who is considered the foundation of society and the holder of authority. Deviating from this matrilineal system is seen as a sin that brings curses, as the narrator states in *The Gold Dust*: *"The result: he disowned him. He said to Sheikh Musa: Tell the fool that the Imuhagh were right to trace lineage through the mother. Tell him to accompany her to the land of sorcerers."*²¹ Another custom governing the desert is the inheritance of leadership within the tribe. Unlike urban societies, where leadership passes to the son, among the Tuareg, it is inherited by the sister's son. Al-Koni highlights this social norm in *The Gold Dust*: *"You have honored our land, noble youth, descendant of nobles. But I regret to say that your chances of leading the tribe after your father are slim. The sheikh has three nephews, as far as I know. But who knows? Miracles can happen, and the door to miracles is always open."*²²

This matrilineal system of inheritance is a recurring theme in Al-Koni's works, where power is transferred through the female line, from the maternal uncle to the eldest sister's son. The kinship and marriage systems are integral to the structure of Tuareg society, and Al-Koni highlights their anthropological manifestations in daily life. These systems influence the dynamics of coexistence within the tribe, revealing the unique intellectual, cultural, and social heritage of the Tuareg through narrative. In doing so, Al-Koni addresses profound human issues related to existence, freedom, destiny, and the origins of creation.

Thus, the cultural-anthropological approach is one of the most important interdisciplinary methods for uncovering the implicit dimensions of contemporary narrative discourse, particularly in the works of Ibrahim Al-Koni. Through these cultural and social phenomena—central to anthropological study—Al-Koni crafts a narrative identity for a marginalized people striving to assert their existence, drawing inspiration from humanistic and sociological insights.

3.3 The Novel and Psychology: The Characters of Ibrahim Al-Koni's Novels

Carl Jung focused on the novel over other literary genres, considering it the most suitable for psychoanalytic analysis through the psychological study of its characters

and their connection to the novelist's life. Similarly, Marthe Robert, in her book *The Origins of the Novel and the Novel of Origins*, links the novel to "*a childish, impossible dream that defies oblivion by clinging to the remnants of buried memory, concealed beneath the thick layers of consciousness in the obscure realm of the unconscious*"²³.

A psychological reading of Al-Koni's texts reveals that one of the predominant emotional traits in his characters is psychological anxiety—an emotional distress stemming from profound sorrow. This is evident in characters like "Adah," who rejects structures and walls, even if they were in paradise, choosing instead her lost Eden, which she finds in the vastness and expanse of the desert: "*What is this eternal migration if not an escape from shackles, land, stability, and oases?*"²⁴.

The spatial setting in Al-Koni's novels—the focal point of other narrative elements—affects the characters' thoughts and psyche, whether positively or negatively, through its openness or confinement. The word "vast," used by the narrator, signifies tranquility, peace, and serenity: "*It expresses a vital, intimate conviction, echoing the hidden retreats of existence*"²⁵. Additionally, "*it is a word that brings calm and unity, opening boundless spaces to dreamers, allowing them to breathe the air of horizons far from the illusory prison walls that cause anxiety.*"²⁶. Thus, space is considered a fundamental psychological construct.

Another example is found through the technique of internal retrospection in *The Gold Dust*, where the narrator recounts the miserable childhood of the character "Ukhayd" and his relationship with his father: "*He sought his father's advice, only to be met with a shocking response: 'May God not bless it for you.' He never knew his father, never lived with him. All he knew was that women dominated his life, with his mother occupying the second place. A black woman oversaw his upbringing, and his father married another woman from the tribes of followers before assuming leadership, but they had no children together*"²⁷.

Childhood is considered the most critical phase in shaping the novelistic character's identity, vision, and emotions within the narrative. The narration employs the past as a tool to revisit a complex stage of life, shedding light on the current narrative's content

and revealing a lack of communication between father and son. This presents a purely psychological portrayal of the protagonist: the illegitimate son with no family, who chooses to break free from his father's authority and tribal traditions, rejecting both his advice on marriage and the inherited leadership. Ultimately, he is expelled from the tribe, left alone: *"The result: he disowned him [...] then deprived him of inheritance. Thus, he separated from the tribe"*²⁸.

Ukhayd is an introverted character who opts for solitude and peace over inheritance, leadership, and material wealth. He abandons worldly concerns that fuel intense conflicts and psychological instability, choosing instead the companionship of "Al-Ablak" from childhood over human relationships, and seeks freedom in the desert.

This familial situation embodies the Oedipus complex; both Ukhayd and Oedipus share a hatred for the domineering father, a desire to break free from him, and a quest for freedom away from familial injustice. *"Psychoanalysis allows us to view fictional characters as projections of the author's fantasies, reflecting psychological processes that enable us to move from the work to its creator. Here, we observe that Ibrahim Al-Koni exemplifies the archetype of the 'illegitimate son,' according to Marthe Robert's classification of novelists, placing him in the same category as Daniel Defoe, Cervantes, and Kafka. Like them, he escapes from history at its peak of dominance to the primordial, eternal time, fleeing from existential dimensions to reconnect with the lost metaphysical realm"*²⁹.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, we can assert that the Arabic novel today necessitates a reevaluation of critical methodologies, as it is a cultural practice par excellence. Narration is no longer merely a linguistic form or framework but has become a communicative act of fundamental existential value, as critic Abdullah Ibrahim argues; that is, it has become an act, not a form, in contrast to the views of classical narratology.

Therefore, it is imperative to adopt an integrative/interdisciplinary approach, combining two or more methodologies to deconstruct the structures of the new novel, which carries within it a vast intellectual weight that a single methodology cannot unravel without the assistance of approaches from other humanities disciplines. For

instance, we have chosen history, the anthropological/cultural approach, and psychology to arrive at a shared meaning, requiring a methodological interaction where each approach complements the other.

Ibrahim Al-Koni is among the contemporary novelists who have drawn from various humanities disciplines in constructing his fictional world. He has utilized the studies of archaeologists, anthropologists, and sociologists on societies to deconstruct the structures that shaped Tuareg culture and beliefs over time, recreating them anew as themes for his texts, making these knowledge-rich texts an essential reference for anyone seeking to explore the ancient identity of the Tuareg.

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