

## A Reading of the Dialogic Structure of the Novel *Lolita's Fingers* by the Algerian Novelist Waciny Laredj

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### Contending Voices ...

At the heart of the significant transformations witnessed in contemporary novelistic art lies the concept of "polyphony" as a quiet revolution that has reshaped the relationship between the author and his characters, as well as between the text and its reader. The novel is no longer merely a vessel in which a single, dominant voice recounts a coherent narrative endowed with ultimate truth; instead, it has been transformed into an expansive artistic space, akin to an open theatre whose stage voices contend and where multiple visions of the world coexist. Contradictory discourses enter into dialogue without "any of them succeeding in subjugating the other to its authority".<sup>1</sup> Within this new literary landscape, which rejects certainty and venerates questioning, the novel *Lolita's Fingers* by the Algerian novelist Waciny Laredj stands as a distinctive marker and a profound artistic model for the embodiment of this complex dialogic structure.

The world of *Lolita's Fingers* is not constructed through a single, unified perspective; instead, it is formed through the intersection and collision of two central voices: the voice of the novelistic narrator and the voice of its heroine, whom he names "Lolita," while she insists upon her own name, "Nawwa." Each of these voices possesses its own consciousness, separate memory, and distinct narration of events and truths. Through this continuous tension between them, the novel is transformed from a mere tragic love story set against the backdrop of a turbulent political reality into a profound exploration of the nature of truth, the struggle of the self to affirm its existence, and the problematic relationship between reality and art, memory and writing, for every literary work of some artistic value.<sup>2</sup> requires a critic endowed with the sensitivity necessary to uncover its particular values.

Through this study, we analyse the autonomy of each narrative voice and trace the nature of the dialectical dialogue unfolding between them to reveal how this multiplicity has contributed to the construction of the novel's semantic and aesthetic world. In this context, the artistic structure "offers the viewer a kind of consolation because it provides

<sup>1</sup> Shukri Mohammed Ayyad, *Literary and Critical Schools among Arabs and Westerners* (Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters, 1993), 131.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 41.

him with a complete artistic world amid the human catastrophe".<sup>3</sup> We thus attempt to address a fundamental question: how did Waciny Laredj succeed in employing this advanced narrative technique not merely as an artistic embellishment but also as an objective necessity for embodying the conflict of identities and selves in a fractured world, and how did this dialogic structure manifest itself in shaping the novel's conflicting discourses, leaving the reader at the very heart of an unending interpretative struggle?

Before delving into the details of the novel *Lolita's Fingers*, it is necessary to pause at the concept upon which its entire structure is founded: the concept of the polyphonic novel. This term, which the Russian critic Mikhail Bakhtin borrowed from music and applied in his pioneering studies of Dostoevsky, describes a unique novelistic structure in which the author is no longer the absolute controller of his characters' destinies and ideas. In the traditional single-voiced (monologic) novel, characters are merely instruments in the writer's hand, echoing his ideas or opposing ideas that he hastens to refute; thus, his voice remains the loudest and the ultimate point of reference for truth within the text. In the polyphonic novel, however, this hierarchical structure of authority collapses, as characters are liberated from the author's grip and transformed into independent "selves," each possessing full consciousness and its own philosophical and ideological vision of the world. The character's voice is no longer a reflection of the author's voice; instead, it becomes a voice in its own right, equal to that of the author himself, fully entitled to express its truth and defend it. Consequently, the novel is transformed from "a long monologue of the author into a vast and open dialogue",<sup>4</sup> in which all the principal characters participate on an equal footing, where "it is impossible to understand such a word in a complete and essential manner if we confine ourselves to considering only its concrete meaning"<sup>5</sup> Instead, it must be understood within its dialogic context.

The function of the author here undergoes a radical transformation: he is no longer the omniscient creator who knows and directs everything but becomes more akin to an organiser or "maestro" of this grand dialogue, standing alongside his characters, engaging with them, listening to them, and allowing them to clash and debate without imposing his vision as a final, decisive word. The aim of the polyphonic novel is no only to provide a single, definitive answer but also to "present questions in their perpetual becoming"<sup>6</sup>, leaving space for the reader to engage in this dialogue and to form their own position from among these multiple voices. This openness to a plurality of truths constitutes the essence of the artistic and philosophical vision borne by the polyphonic novel, which finds in *Lolita's Fingers* an exemplary embodiment.

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<sup>3</sup> Abd al-Duhayyat, *Western Critical Theory from Plato to Boccaccio* (Beirut: Arab Conference for Studies and Publishing, 1st ed., 2007), 59.

<sup>4</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Jamil Nasif al-Tikriti (Casablanca: Toubkal Publishing House, 1st ed., 1986), 148.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel, Volume 1: Logic and the Philosophy of Nature*, trans. Imam Abdel Fattah (Beirut: Dar al-Tanweer for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, 3rd ed., 2007), 265.

For this polyphonic structure to be realised, it rests upon three principal pillars that interweave to create the complex novelistic texture:

- The first pillar is the autonomy of the characters' consciousness: each principal character in the polyphonic novel constitutes the centre of his or her own world; it is not merely a set of psychological traits or a narrative function but rather the bearer of an integrated ideology,<sup>7</sup> thinking, suffering, loving, hating, and adopting positions towards the world on the basis of one's own vision, which may stand in complete opposition to that of the author or of other characters. This autonomy is the first and fundamental condition for the very existence of a “plurality” of voices; otherwise, what we would hear would be nothing more than the echo of a single voice disguising itself behind different masks.
- The second pillar is dialogism as an all-encompassing structural principle. Dialogue here is not confined to the exchange of direct speech between characters; rather, it permeates every word and every idea within the text. Every utterance is, by its very nature, oriented towards another utterance, whether present or absent, such that "each depends entirely upon the other.<sup>8</sup> Every idea is a response to another idea or a provocation of an idea yet to come. In this sense, the entire novelistic world becomes an infinite network of dialectical interactions between the word of the self and the word of others. There is no isolated voice and no absolute idea; instead, all voices interweave and contend in a perpetual dialogue, endowing the text with sustained vitality and intellectual and dramatic tension.
- The third pillar is linguistic plurality: the polyphonic novel encompasses multiple social languages and diverse levels of discourse. Each social class, profession, and generation possesses its own language, reflecting its particular vision of the world. The novel, without a doubt, is the art form capable of representing this plurality without imposing a single language as a supreme norm; it “includes many essays that have addressed modernist women writers”,<sup>9</sup> each of whom speaks in her own distinctive language and discourse. Language is no longer a neutral and transparent instrument for conveying reality; instead, it becomes saturated with the intentions and visions of others, as the novel is transformed into an arena in which these social languages contend, giving rise to a hybrid, multilayered linguistic structure.

These three pillars, taken together, constitute the backbone of the novel *Lolita's Fingers* and confer upon it its artistic depth and semantic richness. Waciny Laredj does not present an omniscient narrator who stands above events and controls their threads; in contrast, Waciny Laredj places us at the very heart of the consciousness of a central character who is himself a novelist, living the predicament of writing and the anxiety of existence. This choice is not incidental; rather, it is the cornerstone of the construction of

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<sup>7</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *Toward a Sociology of the Novel*, trans. Badr al-Din Aroudaki (Latakia: Dar al-Hiwar for Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., 1993), 231.

<sup>8</sup> Walter Stace, *The Philosophy of Hegel*, cited above, 192.

<sup>9</sup> Deborah Parsons, *The Pioneers of Modernist Novel Theory: James Joyce, Dorothy Richardson, and Virginia Woolf*, trans. Ahmed al-Shimmy (Cairo: National Centre for Translation, 1st ed., 2016), 191.

a polyphonic structure. The fact that the narrator is a writer automatically divests him of the authority to possess absolute truth and transforms him from a transcendent narrator into merely one voice, among others, an unsettled, crisis-ridden voice, rather than the supreme authority governing the world of the text. In this age, "the human character has changed"<sup>10</sup>, and the traditional narrator is no longer capable of representing it.

The narrator's self-conscious awareness of writing is present on every page of the novel. He does not experience events as an ordinary person; instead, he lives them and observes them simultaneously through the eye of the writer in search of material for his forthcoming work. In postmodern fiction, "cultural forms that are presumed to be 'low' and that possess evident energies can make their way into the realm of great literature."<sup>11</sup> Every moment, every dialogue, and every glance from "Lolita" is transformed into the project of a novelistic sentence or the beginning of a potential chapter. As Goldmann observes, literary work may be "closer to the essay than to the novelistic or epic form".<sup>12</sup> This constant preoccupation with writing creates a distance between him and reality, transforming his lived experience into an object of artistic contemplation. However, this very high level of awareness also constitutes his private prison, as he is incapable of fully immersing himself in life, remaining perpetually captive to his artistic obsessions, which renders his voice charged with hesitation, doubt, and anxiety.

This voice does not present us with definitive truths; instead, it lays bare its questions and obsessions, interrogating the boundaries between reality and fiction, between truth and falsehood, and between love and the desire to possess the narrative. For "genetic structural analysis in the history of literature is nothing but an application, within this specific field, of a general method",<sup>13</sup> which allows for an understanding of these complex relationships. His awareness of himself as a writer practising his craft shatters any illusion of naïve realism for the reader and renders him a participant in the process of artistic creation; we are not reading a finished story but witnessing a writer stumbling through his attempt to fashion one.

The problematic nature of the narrator's voice becomes manifest in his constant attempt to impose control over the surrounding world through naming and writing. It is he who bestows upon his heroine name "Lolita." In so doing, he does not merely name her. However, he seeks to confine her within a ready-made literary mould to refer her to a celebrated fictional character, thereby stripping her of her singularity and reducing her to a mere object within his artistic text and his private desire. This becomes evident in the following exchange between them: "Shame on you, Nawwa, Nawwa, your beloved? By God, until now, I have not known you. Nawwa? Nawwa? Nawwa? Lo... li... ta... better like this?"<sup>14</sup> This desire to dominate the other is further revealed through the narration: "He had formed the firm conviction that writing is a state of astonishment, akin to the

<sup>10</sup> Deborah Parsons, *The Pioneers of Modernist Novel Theory*, cited above, 105.

<sup>11</sup> Jesse Matz, *The Modern Novel*, trans. Latifyya al-Dulaimi (Baghdad: Al-Mada for Media, Culture, and Arts, 1st ed., 2016), 308.

<sup>12</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *Toward a Sociology of the Novel*, cited above, 152.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>14</sup> Waciny Laredj, *Lolita's Fingers* (Dubai: Al-Sada for Press, Publishing, and Distribution, 1st ed., 2012), 161.

moment of crossing the first stair of heaven or hell."<sup>15</sup> It lies at the core of his predicament, for he seeks to transform life into art and to "subject reality to the logic of the novel he writes in his mind."<sup>16</sup>

However, this voice, which appears dominant, is in fact fragile and fractured. His memory is not a faithful record of the past but rather a selective and distorted construction, riddled with gaps and governed by desires and fears. At times, he confesses his doubts and revises his account of events, opening the door to questioning the reliability of what he narrates. Did events truly occur as he describes them, or are they merely a reconstruction by a weary memory striving to confer meaning upon chaos? Narrative identity revolves around "an interstitial narrative function derived from individual and collective history";<sup>17</sup> moreover, this history is not necessarily objective. Is his love for "Lolita" a genuine love, or rather a love for the image he has fashioned of her within his imagination?

The narrator's voice is not homogeneous; instead, it is divided against itself, with the artist's desire for creation and control clashing with the frailty of the human being who suffers from solitude, fear, and doubt. This inner division renders him a tragic figure and makes his voice merely one possible version of truth, not truth in its entirety. He represents "a kind of self-centredness in which the self is regarded as the primary point of reference for determining the importance of everything".<sup>18</sup> It is a voice that requires another voice to be completed, or rather, to remain in a state of perpetual dialogue and tension with it. This fragility and this division are precisely what make space for the emergence of the other voice, the voice of "Lolita," as a countervailing and necessary force for achieving dialogic balance within the novel. Thus, the narrator himself becomes a character in search of meaning, just like the other characters in the novel do.

In contrast to the narrator's anxious voice, preoccupied with the labyrinths of art and writing, the voice of "Lolita" emerges as a countervoice that is sharp and lucid, possesses its own consciousness and strives with all its strength to affirm its independence and identity. She is not merely a character sketched by the narrator's pen or an object within his novel; instead, she is an active self and an autonomous voice struggling to impose her own existence and narrative.<sup>19</sup> Her first and most significant battle is the battle of the name: she resolutely rejects the name "Lolita" that the narrator has affixed to her, a name that imprisons her within a literary framework that does not belong to her, renders her an echo of another character, and reduces her complex existence to a mere icon of seduction.

Her insistence on her real name, "Nawwa," is more than a simple change in designation; it is a declaration of existence and an affirmation of her right to define herself. When she

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>16</sup> Hussein al-Manasra, *The Culture of Methodology: The Novelistic Discourse as a Model* (Aleppo: Dar al-Maqdisiyya for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, 1st ed., 1999), 7.

<sup>17</sup> Mohammed Faleh al-Jabouri, *Narrative Identity: Concept and Manifestation* (Sharjah: University of Sharjah, n.p., 2021), 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 8.

<sup>19</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World: Popular Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, trans. Shukrir Nasr al-Din (Beirut: Al-Jamal Publications, 1st ed., 2012), 15.

tells him, "You may call me by my real name, Nawwa,<sup>20</sup> She is not providing him with information; instead, she is challenging his narrative authority and demanding that he recognise her as an independent entity with her own history and unique essence. She goes even further when she offers her own analysis of the meaning of her name; when he asks her about it, she replies: "Yes, dew at dawn, or light rain; I feel it suits my fragility. You came and obliterated everything.<sup>21</sup> This awareness of language, names, and their profound connotations reveals a character who possesses her own vision of the world and of herself, as every narrative character created by the author in the modern novel may rebel against its creator.

The voice of "Nawwa" does not confine itself to resisting the narrator's authority on a personal level; it goes further to articulate a critical vision of the world surrounding her. If the narrator tends to flee from a harsh reality into the realm of art and writing, "Nawwa" compels him and, along with him, the reader to confront this reality in all its contradictions and brutality.<sup>22</sup> Her voice carries the bitterness of lived experience and a profound awareness of the devastation that engulfs the country. She understood that "the world has indeed become culturally unified, yet the differences between cultures persist.<sup>23</sup> When she speaks of the killers whose identities have multiplied and of violence that has become part of everyday life, she does not speak as a fictional character but as an eyewitness, as a voice representing an entire generation whose dreams were consumed in the furnace of political conflicts. She says, "And my fingers that love you will not seek permission from the killers who stole the virginity of your childhood".<sup>24</sup>

In this sense, the polyphonic principle is realised, whereby each character bears a fully articulated ideological consciousness. "Nawwa" does not represent herself alone; instead, she embodies a worldview that contends with that of the narrator. He sees her as "Lolita," an artistic and aesthetic icon, whereas she sees herself as "Nawwa," a woman living at the very heart of hell, striving to survive and preserve her dignity. This conflict between the two perspectives is not merely an emotional disagreement but rather a struggle between two visions of the world, for "action, for him, is activity and movement; hence, his emphasis on the artistic plot as activity and movement in a state of becoming.<sup>25</sup> This becoming is, at its core, a conflict of ideas.

The voice of "Nawwa" is what endows the novel with its profound social and political dimension. Without her presence, the novel would amount to no more than the self-reflections of a writer immersed in his own artistic anxieties. Her voice, however, opens the text into broader concerns, as "the novel should not focus on the subconscious alone;

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<sup>20</sup> Waciny Laredj, *Lolita's Fingers*, 172.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., same page.

<sup>22</sup> Wendy Leisser, *The Genius of Language*, trans. Hamad al-Shammari (Dammam: Athar Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., 1440 AH), 36.

<sup>23</sup> Shukri Mohammed Ayyad, *Literary and Critical Schools among Arabs and Westerners* (Kuwait: National Council for Culture, Arts, and Letters, n.p., 1993), 167.

<sup>24</sup> Waciny Laredj, *Lolita's Fingers*, 11.

<sup>25</sup> Abd al-Duhayyat, *Western Critical Theory from Plato to Boccaccio*, 77.

it is more fitting that it expresses the entirety of human consciousness".<sup>26</sup> She is not merely a "shadow" of the protagonist or his muse but a central character equal to him, with her own presence and agency in shaping the novelistic world. Thus, the relationship between them becomes not simply a love story. However, a tense dialogue between art and reality, between the self and history, and between dreams and nightmare is the essence of the profound dialogic structure upon which the text is founded.

The voice of "Nawwa" is a voice of resistance. She resists the attempt to reduce her to a mere paper character and resists her confinement within a stereotypical image; she is not a fixed, narcissistic identity impervious to change. She is not a reflection of the narrator's desires or obsessions but a voice that exists in its own right, with its own logic and justifications. This voice is neither dreamy nor immersed in aesthetic contemplation; instead, it is deeply rooted in reality and fully aware of its complexities and harshness. She possesses a keen social and political consciousness that enables her to transcend the limits of her individual emotional relationship with the narrator and to become a witnessing voice of her era, expressing the anxiety of an entire generation living under the shadow of violence and uncertainty: "Do not be afraid, my love; I am capable of enduring hardship, as my mother used to say".<sup>27</sup>

The novel *Lolita's Fingers* does not confine itself to presenting two independent voices; instead, it propels them into a continuous confrontation, in which dialogue becomes not a means of understanding and communication but a symbolic battlefield where memory and interpretation contend. Each party possesses its own narrative of the shared past and strives relentlessly to impose it on the other to establish it as the authorised truth. Thus, the aim of dialogue is no only the attainment of truth but also the assertion of the self through the possession of narrative and control over the meaning of the past whenever it fails to conform to its own vision.

This conflict is apparent in every scene in which they recall their memories: a single event is recounted from two entirely different perspectives, even down to its most minor details. When the narrator perceives herself as a romantic moment, she may experience it as a moment of fear or threat; when she considers evidence of her love, she may regard it as proof of her selfishness: "Love is a beautiful lie, and half-measures turn it into pain".<sup>28</sup> These confrontations resolve nothing; instead, they deepen the rift between them and affirm that each holds a private truth that cannot coincide with the other's. In psychoanalytic terms, "every human behaviour is an attempt to provide a meaningful response to a particular situation".<sup>29</sup> Moreover, this response reflects the self's desires.

This technique places the reader in a state of uncertainty and disorientation because there is no external authority to indicate which of the two narratives is more truthful. There is

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<sup>26</sup> Deborah Parsons, *The Pioneers of Modernist Novel Theory*, trans. Ahmed al-Shimmy (Cairo: National Centre for Translation, 1st ed., 2016), 118.

<sup>27</sup> Waciny Laredj, *Lolita's Fingers*, 11.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>29</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *The Human Sciences and Philosophy*, trans. Youssef al-Antaki (Egypt: Supreme Council of Culture, n.p., 1996), 13.

no omniscient narrator who intervenes to settle the dispute; instead, the reader is confronted with two contradictory testimonies and must decide which to believe, or else recognise that truth may reside not in either of them but in the tense space between them. Thus, dialogue is transformed from a mere exchange of words into "a dramatic act aimed at reshaping reality through narration.<sup>30</sup> She says to him in dialogue: "Did your own literary life not begin with a beautiful lie?"<sup>31</sup>

This struggle over memory affirms a fundamental idea in the novel: that the past is not a fixed, inert entity but a living one, subject to interpretation and perpetual conflict. Memory is not a neutral vessel; rather, it is a battleground upon which the self wages its struggle to affirm its existence and meaning. Dialogue in *Lolita's Fingers* thus constitutes the artistic instrument that embodies this existential conflict in its most acute and tense forms.

If we examine the structure of the actual dialogues between the narrator and "Nawwa," we find that they are rarely exchanges aimed at clarification or mutual understanding. In contrast, they most often assume the character of interrogation, accusation, or challenge. Questions abound, yet they are not questions seeking answers so much as questions that cast doubt upon the other's narrative and place it under indictment. Each party employs questioning as a weapon to unsettle the other's certainties and to undermine his or her narration; narration thus becomes a problematic act that embodies the poetics of indeterminacy.

This dialogic structure, founded upon incessant questioning, places the entire text in a state of perpetual motion and prevents it from settling upon any definitive truth. The novel offers not answers but rather questions, and every potential answer is swiftly confronted by a new question that dismantles it. This causes the relationship between the two characters to revolve within a vicious circle of doubt and mutual accusation. This circle reflects their existential impasse and their inability to establish a shared ground of trust and understanding. "Every idea is, in any case, akin to all other sectors of human behaviour".<sup>32</sup> Moreover, it is subject to the same complexities.

This mode of constructing dialogue situates the reader at the very heart of the interpretative process. Rather than receiving ready-made information, the reader finds himself implicated in a game of doubt and inquiry. The narrator's hesitation and persistent doubts about the nature of his relationship with "Lolita" and the truth of the events he recounts open the door for her voice to offer a counternarrative. Every gap left by the narrator's questioning is filled by her voice and her vision, generating an unending

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<sup>30</sup> Nizar Musnad Qubailat, *Narrative Representations* (Amman: Kunooz Al-Ma'rifa for Scientific Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., 2017), 28.

<sup>31</sup> Waciny Laredj, *Lolita's Fingers*, 179.

<sup>32</sup> Lucien Goldmann, *Toward a Sociology of the Novel*, 231.

dialogic dynamic in which the "interpretative act"<sup>33</sup> becomes the very essence of the act of reading.

Thus, the novel ceases to be a mere vessel for a closed narrative and instead becomes akin to a philosophical activity that seeks to explore the very nature of understanding itself. The multiplicity of voices is not simply a technical device but an expression of a worldview that rejects absolute certainty and celebrates plurality and difference as fundamental conditions of human existence. It is a narrative structure that makes the act of questioning itself a primary engine of meaning and affirms that the search for truth is more important than its possession.

Moreover, the plurality of voices in *Lolita's Fingers* is not confined to the explicit dialogue between the two principal characters but extends to encompass the very structure of language itself. The novelistic text becomes a crucible in which diverse linguistic levels and social discourses fuse, creating a rich and complex linguistic texture that reflects the composite nature of the reality the novel seeks to represent. This interweaving of languages and discourses is what grants the novel its depth and its truly polyphonic dimension, as "language is saturated with experience, adorned with images, and charged with emotions".<sup>34</sup>

Within the novel, the language of literature and fiction stands alongside the language of violent political and social reality. The narrator's language, replete with metaphors, aesthetic reflections, and literary allusions, collides with the more direct, realistic language of "Nawwa," which draws on the harshness of everyday life and prevailing political discourse. Thus, we hear within the text expressions such as "the colonel's wolves," "the coup," and "the killers," terms that intrude upon the intimate and emotional world of the two characters and remind them and remind us that their personal story cannot be separated from the bloodstained collective history that surrounds them.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Deborah Parsons, *The Pioneers of Modernist Novel Theory*, 70.

<sup>35</sup> Mahmoud Amin al-Alam, *Consciousness and False Consciousness in Contemporary Arab Thought* (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina Forum, n.d., n.p.), 218.

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