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Experimental Narrative Aesthetics in Modern Arabic Fiction : Said Hafez's *Until My Heart Is Reassured*

التجريب وجماليات السرد في الرواية العربية المعاصرة رواية حتى يطمئن قلبي للسيد حافظ  
Esthétique narrative expérimentale dans la fiction arabe moderne : *Jusqu'à ce que mon cœur soit rassuré* de Saïd Hafed

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## Experimental Narrative Aesthetics in Modern Arabic Fiction : Said Hafez's *Until My Heart Is Reassured*

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### Introduction

Genre overlapping, or the blending of multiple literary genres, represents a significant departure from conventional literary norms, serving as a disruptive force that challenges both traditional readers and critics. While this technique may appear novel in contemporary literature, its roots extend deep into the Arab literary tradition. Historically, Arab literature has demonstrated a long-standing engagement with genre fusion, as seen in classical works such as *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Maqamat*, and popular biographies, which seamlessly integrate poetic and narrative elements (Atiq, 2008).

Moving beyond the constraints of traditional literary forms and incorporating elements from diverse artistic mediums requires a high degree of adaptability. By its very nature, literary form is fluid and dynamic, drawing upon techniques from various disciplines such as poetry, drama, cinema, and oral traditions. This interdisciplinary approach not only enhances the expressive capacity of literature but also enables it to challenge and transcend established aesthetic conventions. Through the amalgamation of different styles and influences within the narrative framework, literature gains a unique ability to subvert its own boundaries and redefine artistic expression (Madi, September 2008).

French literary critic Jean-Yves Tadier emphasizes that the novel, once overshadowed by poetry and theater, has now risen to prominence as a dominant form of creative expression. He argues that the modern novel integrates poetic devices such as metaphor, rhythm, and musicality, while simultaneously borrowing theatrical techniques such as monologue and dramatic dialogue (Tadier, 2006). This evolution has positioned the novel as a highly adaptable and versatile medium that continuously reshapes itself in response to cultural and artistic developments.

Similarly, Virginia Woolf posits that the novel stands as a singular artistic medium, distinguished by its unparalleled ability to encompass all facets of human experience. Unlike other literary forms, the novel possesses the unique capacity to absorb and recontextualize elements from multiple artistic traditions, making it a dynamic and ever-evolving genre.

## **1. Experimentation in the Contemporary Arabic Novel**

### **1.1 Definition and Characteristics**

According to critic Abdelaziz Dhayou, the concept of experimentation in the modern Arabic novel develops as a result of a departure from traditional narrative forms. Rather than adhering to classical storytelling frameworks, contemporary Arab novelists explore various stylistic and narrative techniques to enhance the structure and depth of their works. Dhayou argues that experimentation is a metaphorical approach that enables writers to incorporate elements from different artistic genres and fields of knowledge, including historical references, poetic passages, popular narratives, biographical details, theatrical scenes, proverbial expressions, philosophical reflections, social commentary, literary exploration, and documentary themes. By embracing experimentation, Arab novelists respond to the demands of contemporary literature, characterized by themes of escapism, tension, and diversity, catering to the expectations of modern readers (Dhayou, 2014).

Experimentation in literature is characterized by innovation, a challenge to established norms, and an exploration of new forms and content. It represents a continuous pursuit of creativity and originality, constituting a critical and conscious response to a nation's cultural heritage. Unlike random literary developments dictated by chance, experimentation results from inevitable transformations in reality and is embedded within a deliberate creative approach. The experimental novel's divergence from conventional techniques and structures reflects a heightened awareness of societal changes and serves as an implicit critique of these transformations. By disrupting established norms, experimental literature seeks to question dominant perceptions and deepen readers' understanding of reality. This structural disruption within the novel form also mirrors the writer's evolving self-awareness and perception of the surrounding world.

According to Moroccan critic Mohamed Berrada, literary experimentation does not merely involve an arbitrary rejection of established conventions or a simple adoption of foreign literary forms. Instead, it requires a profound understanding of the theoretical foundations of past literary experiments and the ability to formulate original questions and responses within a given cultural and intellectual framework. By engaging with various literary traditions and cultural contexts, writers enrich their creative processes and contribute to the ongoing literary discourse.

### **1.2 Illustration in *Until My Heart Is Reassured***

We have chosen to explore the theme presented in the novel *Until My Heart Is Reassured* by Egyptian novelist, playwright, and storyteller Said Hafez due to the boldness with which the author challenges traditional narrative conventions and addresses previously taboo political and social issues. For Said Hafez, writing is not merely an artistic endeavor but an existential quest. He declares in the introduction to his novel : "I write, therefore I exist, and when I do not write, I am lost" (Hafez, 2017),

emphasizing his deep connection to writing, which he perceives as a means of raising awareness and serving the homeland.

Said Hafez conceives writing as a dynamic process, far from being merely a sequence of sentences confined to dusty drawers or reduced to aesthetically pleasing layouts that distract readers from the core content. Through his philosophy and acute literary awareness, he significantly shaped Arabic narrative fiction in the 1970s. As a distinguished author and critic, he contributed to the evolution of the novel by integrating elements of history, theater, and social critique. His writing is marked by linguistic richness, a realistic approach, and a meticulous selection of themes.

This novel represents the fifth installment in an ambitious seven-novel cycle, in which Hafez undertakes a critical rereading of history, exposing its distortions and misinterpretations. He asserts that the manipulation of history is a systematic and longstanding phenomenon. His mission is to restore historical truth, a goal he pursues through seven novels : Nescafé, Plain Coffee, Cappuccino, Dubai Nights, Everyone on It Betrayed, and Until My Heart Is Reassured.

When reading *Until My Heart Is Reassured* for the first time, one might initially perceive it as a purely historical narrative, akin to the works of authors like Jorge Zidane, who sought to educate intellectuals about past events. However, Hafez makes it clear that his novel is not a mere reproduction of history but a critical reinterpretation : “I do not tell you history ; I correct it” (Hafez, 2017). A deeper reading of the novel reveals its engagement with contemporary political, social, and economic issues, framed within the transition from the end of the Fatimid era to the rise of the Ayyubid dynasty in Egypt.

Unlike historians, novelists transcend mere factual recounting by embedding historical events within a subjective and symbolic vision. Thus, the author navigates his narrative along two parallel trajectories that ultimately converge toward a unified purpose, as illustrated by the statement : “Every invocation of heritage in artistic work is not merely a reproduction but a reinterpretation and reconstruction” (Talaba, 2015).

### 1.3 The New Novel and Narrative Innovation

In his novel, titled “Narrativization” or rather, “A Play-Novel”, the author ventures into what is known as the new novel.

“Perhaps the most significant aspect distinguishing the new novel from its traditional counterpart is its rebellion against all established rules, its denial of principles, and its rejection of prevailing values and aesthetics inherent in traditional novel writing. Nothing customary in the traditional novel is deemed acceptable in the portrayals crafted by the new novelists” (Murtad).

The new novel, also referred to as the novel of new sensitivity, as described by Edward Al-Kharrat, is characterized by its dynamism and its ability to absorb other forms of

discourse through experimentation. It embodies a spirit of transition and challenge in both form and content. One of its defining characteristics is its fluid movement between events, places, and characters, avoiding strict linearity. Time is no longer perceived as a rigid chronological sequence but rather as a subjective, collective experience, free from conventional constraints. The traditional notion of temporal progression is abandoned, resulting in overlapping events and, in some cases, the complete erasure of spatial and temporal markers.

Moreover, the subject matter of the new novel does not adhere to a unified or predefined structure, and its language is inherently multifaceted, at times rebelling against conventional linguistic norms and grammatical rules. As Madhi (September 2008, p. 15) notes, this linguistic experimentation is a deliberate attempt to break free from rigid textual structures and to create an interactive and interpretive space for the reader.

Thus, *Until My Heart Is Reassured* is not merely a historical novel but rather an example of the new novel's experimental techniques, where historical events are reconstructed through a modernist lens, intertwining past and present to create a multi-layered and open-ended narrative experience.

## **2. Narrative Aesthetics and Experimentation in Said Hafez's Novel**

### **2.1. Narrative Experimentation and Structural Complexity in Said Hafez's Novel**

The writer introduces the novel with an introductory passage that defines his role as an author, stating:

“The writer’s task is not to intervene in everything but rather to leave space for the heroes to act, to experience life’s joys and sorrows, to embody virtue or succumb to vice, for they are human, not angels... They represent life’s complexities, with its patriots and traitors, the honest and the corrupt, each gesturing towards their morality or immorality” (Hafez, 2017, p. 2).

Here, the writer delegates the responsibility of actions and words to his characters, allowing them to develop autonomously within the narrative framework.

Hafez skillfully interweaves elements of theatrical and narrative arts throughout the novel, with nearly half of its segments structured in the form of theatrical scenes. Additionally, he incorporates television script techniques, often commencing scenes with time and location markers, reminiscent of television programming. Notably, Hafez enhances realism by including references to air temperature and humidity before each scene, allowing readers to immerse themselves in the setting and relate to the characters' lived experiences. This attention to environmental details is particularly evident in scenes set in Dubai, where the oppressive heat necessitates the constant use of air conditioning. Moreover, this stylistic choice extends to historical settings, particularly in marketplaces, streets, and communal spaces, offering a rich and authentic depiction of daily struggles in settings such as the Qaraqosh court.

Regarding narrative structure, it is notable that the progression of the various narrative threads in earlier sections of the novel was uneven. While the historical storyline unfolds in a linear fashion, with clear developments and resolutions, the narratives concerning characters such as Sahar, Fathi, and Munqidh lack satisfactory development and resolution. This disparity results in a structural imbalance that may obscure overarching thematic relationships for the reader. However, in *Until My Heart Is Reassured*, all narrative arcs develop simultaneously and cohesively, ensuring that thematic connections become explicit and the novel's narrative integrity remains intact.

### **2.1.1. The Theme of Marital Infidelity and the Psychological Complexity of Characters**

Marital infidelity plays a pivotal role across multiple narrative layers, recurring throughout the novel's three principal storylines. The male protagonists display vulnerability and emotional turmoil in the face of their wives' betrayals, struggling to reconcile their emotions with their circumstances. For instance, Munqidh discovers his wife Sahar's affair with Fathi and suspects that she may be pregnant by him. Despite this betrayal, Munqidh expresses a desperate desire to keep the unborn child, tearfully pleading :

“...the boy in your womb—I want him... I want to be a father...  
even if I am not his father...”

Meanwhile, Fathi, the protagonist in the contemporary narrative, is an Egyptian journalist working in the United Arab Emirates, where his wife, Mabrouka, resides. Mabrouka's idealized perception of her husband is juxtaposed with the reality of his close friend, who happens to be Sahar's lover. Furthermore, Scheherazade, Mabrouka's sister, remains entangled in the novel's historical events as the narrator, reinforcing the novel's multi-layered narrative structure.

Fathi, who serves as both protagonist and narrator, embodies a dual identity, oscillating between his journalistic profession and his role as an observer of historical truths. He grapples with feelings of estrangement from his homeland, despite his deep and unwavering love for it. His internal conflict is further exacerbated by the criticisms he faces for his perceived shortcomings and his frustration with his country's socio-political stagnation.

Despite being married to Mabrouka, Fathi becomes embroiled in an extramarital relationship with Layla, a married Syrian woman. This duality in Fathi's character reflects his inner conflict, as he is torn between his devotion to his homeland and his personal desires. Although he appears settled in the UAE, Fathi's life remains in constant flux due to his work assignments in Iraq. His internal struggle is evident in his hesitation to accept assignments abroad, as he is torn between the material advantages they offer and his deep emotional connection to Egypt, leaving him trapped in a perpetual state of conflict and alienation.

Ultimately, Fathi's journey underscores the intricate tensions between personal identity and national belonging in a rapidly evolving world, where economic imperatives often clash with emotional ties to one's homeland.

### 2.1.2. The Role of Female Characters and Power Dynamics

The novel intricately explores the complex roles of female characters, particularly their influence over political and social decisions. The narrative presents women as key players, capable of shaping the course of events through their intelligence, beauty, and strategic decision-making. One of the most prominent female figures in the novel is Badia, the daughter of Aliya, whose beauty and intelligence attract the admiration of a powerful commander. The commander, in an attempt to win her favor, seeks to provide her with wealth and comfort, expressing his desire to abandon his palace for a simpler life with her in the desert. He states :

“I intended to live with you in a tent in the desert, O noble one, and leave this castle behind...” (Hafez, 2017, p. 73).

Despite the commander’s deep love for Badia, he remains conflicted upon discovering her betrayal and romantic involvement with his son. Rather than punishing her severely, he pleads with her to remain faithful to him, forbidding her from corresponding with her lover. He implores :

“Swear to me that you will not write poetry to him or correspond with him after this...” (Hafez, 2017).

This exchange highlights the powerful agency of female characters in the novel, as well as the vulnerability of even the most authoritative male figures in matters of love and loyalty.

Aliya is depicted as a figure of justice and compassion, particularly in her relationship with the common people. Unlike the commander, who is easily swayed by his ministers, Aliya seeks to amend his unjust rulings and advocate for the well-being of the oppressed. Her beauty and wisdom make her a significant force within the political landscape, influencing decision-making at the highest level.

Similarly, Lamar, another central female character, shares many characteristics with Aliya. However, unlike Aliya, Lamar does not marry Qaraqosh, despite his admiration for her and his willingness to fulfill all of her requests. In an attempt to keep her by his side, Qaraqosh complies with her demand to release imprisoned civilians and even grants her request to free his primary political rival, Ibn Mamati, on the condition that he leaves Egypt. This dynamic demonstrates how women in the novel wield considerable influence over powerful men, shaping political outcomes through their strategic interactions.

### 2.1.3. The Interplay of History and Personal Struggles

Lamar’s historical persona finds a parallel in the modern character of Sahar, particularly through the motif of pregnancy. In both narratives, pregnancy represents an internal conflict regarding identity, lineage, and societal expectations. Sahar is uncertain about the father of her unborn child—is he the son of her Syrian husband, Munqidh, or her Egyptian lover, Fathi? While Sahar grapples with this ambiguity, Lamar, by contrast,



is certain of her child's parentage. However, Lamar struggles with the reality that the father is "*the light of the place*", a man who assaulted her yet whom she paradoxically loves. Despite her feelings, she refuses to recognize him as the legitimate father of her child and instead seeks an alternative father figure. In this regard, Othman, a judge with questionable morals, becomes her chosen substitute. Lamar, through her strength, confidence, and charisma, is able to manipulate Othman, influencing his decisions and aligning him with her interests.

Lamar's ability to sway individuals and exert control over those around her makes her one of the novel's most compelling female characters. Her beauty is portrayed as a source of power, akin to Aliya and Sahar, reinforcing the idea that women in the novel leverage their physical allure to enhance their authority and influence over men. As Hafez suggests, women use their beauty as a tool to navigate power structures, influence events, and, in some cases, even rule.

The novel also presents an unconventional portrayal of historical figures, particularly that of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, the celebrated leader known for liberating Jerusalem. Rather than depicting him as an infallible hero, the narrative humanizes him, stripping away the mythic reverence and revealing his complexities, including his moments of tyranny, violence, and political maneuvering. This perspective challenges traditional historical narratives and offers a more nuanced interpretation of his leadership. This revisionist portrayal has sparked controversy among traditionalists and literary scholars alike, as it challenges both established historiography and conventional approaches to historical fiction.

#### **2.1.4. The Structural Complexity of the Novel : Interwoven Narratives and Thematic Layers**

The novel's narrative structure is an intricate tapestry of interwoven storylines, reflecting the complexity of the themes it explores. Just as its various stories intertwine, the novel also integrates multiple literary genres, creating a cohesive yet multi-dimensional narrative. Each storyline functions as an independent system, retaining its distinct identity while merging with others to construct a broader emotional and thematic whole. The historical narratives of Lamar, Al-Adid Billah, Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi, Qaraqosh, and Amir bi Ahkam Allah are meticulously interwoven, contributing to the novel's depth and richness.

Romantic themes are boldly explored through relationships such as that of Aliya and "The Commander of God's Laws" and Sahar and Fathi Radwan. These relationships are depicted with passionate intensity, driven by internal dialogues of longing and desire. Meanwhile, social themes are at the forefront in Fathi Radwan's storyline, particularly in his struggle with national identity, his experiences as an expatriate, his marriage, and his professional life. The novel also incorporates elements of the miraculous, particularly in the character of Sheherazade, whose deep understanding of Sahar's soul transcends conventional realism.

One of the novel's most innovative techniques is its use of interludes that resemble radio broadcasts, seamlessly blending different narrative forms. These interludes take the form of a fictional radio program featuring historical discussions, poetry readings, and religious reflections. For instance, in some sections, a senior sheikh recites the call to prayer, followed by a discussion on the history of Qaraqosh, a controversial figure from the era of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi. Later, another segment titled "*International Poetry*" features verses from renowned poets worldwide, enriching the novel's emotional and intellectual dimensions. This unique structuring device is employed throughout the novel, appearing in eleven interludes across six chapters, effectively merging diverse thematic elements with dramatic storytelling.

Additionally, the novel incorporates a unique form of narrative breaks, where the writer invokes the presence of literary, political, or historical figures who have influenced him. These figures include Akhenaten, Jalal al-Din al-Rumi, Nizar Qabbani, and Saad al-Din al-Shazly. Each time one of these figures is introduced, the writer offers two rak'ahs (prayers) for their souls, inviting the reader to engage in a reflective act of reverence. This technique serves not only to elevate the significance of these figures but also to deepen the novel's intellectual and spiritual dimensions, intertwining dramatic events with the historical and philosophical legacies of these influential individuals.

### 2.1.5. The Writer's Engagement with Narrative Structure and Reader Interaction

The novel employs vivid and immersive descriptions that bring its characters to life while closely aligning them with the writer's emotions, thoughts, and selected settings. These settings span distant historical periods marked by realism, modernist influences, and speculative visions of the future. The writer anticipates a future audience—whether scholars, critics, publishers, or intellectuals—who may encounter his narrative by chance. With passion, intensity, and remorse, the writer embraces his work, carrying the burden of a wounded homeland and its displaced, oppressed people seeking refuge in foreign lands, distant from the comfort of their origins.

Despite this profound emotional engagement, the writer expresses an ongoing sense of discontent, as words and meanings struggle within him. He writes:

"The letters trouble me, and I am crucified, oppressed, vanquished, and again oppressed, and my heart becomes light... our letters become ignorance, ignorance becomes dust, and all stories vanish into the darkness of my homeland's soul. Situations and pain trouble me..." (Hafez, 2017).

This internal turmoil reflects a deep longing, a sense of displacement, and the challenge of reconciling one's identity with the shifting realities of exile and belonging.

The historical events depicted in the novel serve as a mirror reflecting the political and social upheavals of contemporary Egyptian and Arab societies. The narrative weaves together the experiences of Fathi Radwan, who leaves Egypt in search of livelihood in

the UAE and Iraq, with the struggles of figures like Ibn Mamati. Ibn Mamati, a symbol of heroism, resilience, knowledge, and cultural integrity, finds himself forced into exile by Qaraqosh, a figure embodying authority and political dominance. His words convey a profound sense of sorrow and betrayal:

“The light of the place sold me to Qaraqosh... How can I understand ? The time has come when the Egyptian must leave his country, journey far from it, and escape from rulers who are not Egyptian... Oh, my country!” (Hafez, 2017, p. 411).

This poignant dialogue underscores the anguish of those compelled to leave their homeland due to political oppression and injustice, resonating with contemporary struggles for freedom and justice in the Arab world.

## 2.2. The Critique of Corrupt Leadership and Political Decay

Said Hafez’s novel delivers a scathing critique of systemic corruption and authoritarian rule, exposing leaders who neglect their people’s rights and basic needs, thereby plunging society into a state of perpetual darkness. This critique is embodied in the protagonist Fathi’s reflections on Egypt’s dire situation :

“Egypt is a never-ending night... a people who never see the morning... God loves the Egyptians with a special love. He sent them many prophets... Most people in the world have had prophets... God looks upon the Egyptians with mercy beyond imagination... I long to weep over the heart of my homeland, but I can no longer find it.” (Hafez, 2017, p. 151).

The novel meticulously illustrates the consequences of corrupt governance, where economic collapse, political oppression, and societal decay become inevitable outcomes of unchecked power and negligence. The narrative intertwines the historical and contemporary struggles of figures like Fathi Radwan and Ibn Mamati, both of whom—though separated by time—are compelled to leave Egypt in search of opportunity, yet remain emotionally tethered to their homeland.

Ibn Mamati, an intellectual and cultural figure, is exiled under pressure from the state, as he becomes a threat to the ruling elite. His expulsion by Qaraqosh, a figure symbolic of authoritarian rule, illustrates the novel’s central theme of forced displacement and political persecution. His lament reflects the pain of exile :

“The light of the place sold me to Qaraqosh... How... can I understand ? The time has come when the Egyptian leaves his country, travels far from it, and flees from its oppressive rulers who are not Egyptians... Oh, my country.” (Hafez, 2017, p.411).

Meanwhile, Fathi’s journey as a journalist in the Emirates mirrors this historical narrative, emphasizing the modern parallel of intellectuals forced into exile due to oppressive political climates. Both characters, despite being physically removed from Egypt, continue to engage with their homeland intellectually and emotionally.

Ibn Mamati seeks to educate and influence the public through theatrical performances, using the Qaragoz troupe as a means of socio-political critique. Conversely, Fathi leverages digital media and journalism as modern tools of resistance, embedding his critiques within poetic tweets and articles that mourn Egypt's state while calling for reform.

"I write my article as a tweet for the homeland." (Hafez, 2017, p. 148).

Despite their different means of expression, both figures engage in a form of cultural activism, aiming to reshape public consciousness and challenge the status quo.

### **2.2.1. National Disillusionment and the Weight of Criticism**

While both protagonists share an unwavering love for Egypt, Fathi, in particular, struggles with deep frustration toward his fellow citizens. From the very beginning of the novel, the author paints a somber picture of the Egyptian people, emphasizing their disillusionment, passivity, and artificiality :

"I discovered that Egypt's color is gray... and that people's emotions are mostly artificial." (Hafez, 2017, p. 2).

Later, his disappointment takes on an even more self-reproachful tone, as he reflects on his own complicity in Egypt's stagnation :

"As soon as I crossed the threshold of the first page of the novel, I was confronted with memories of an immoral people." (Hafez, 2017, p. 2).

By the fifth chapter, this frustration reaches its peak, evolving into a sense of personal responsibility and guilt :

"I am the son of this ignorant, fanatical people." (Hafez, 2017, p. 169).

This internal conflict encapsulates the tension between frustration and devotion, between critique and longing for national revival. The novel explores this shared sense of detachment from the homeland, likening it to the yearning for a nurturing mother, particularly in times of distress and uncertainty.

Through its portrayal of ineffective leadership, exile, and intellectual resistance, Hafez's novel not only critiques historical governance failures but also engages with contemporary socio-political dilemmas in the Arab world.

### **2.2.2. The Poetic Style and Symbolism in Said Hafez's Novel**

Throughout the novel, the author employs a highly poetic language, a hallmark of his literary style across various forms such as theater, short stories, and novels. His prose often moves beyond direct sentence structures, imbuing the language with a distinct lyrical quality and layers of meaning. In literature, communication demands both elegance and intellectual depth. The language must offer readers a unique aesthetic experience, enabling them to engage deeply with the text, appreciate its beauty, and extract intellectual stimulation. Thus, reading becomes a transformative experience—an invitation to ascend to higher levels of understanding and contemplation.

The opening chapters of the novel primarily focus on historical events, where the writer blends economic concerns with broader crises affecting ordinary citizens. He interweaves political and wartime struggles with the ruler's neglect, the weakening of the state, and the pursuit of personal indulgences. The crisis escalates when the army commander presents the ruler with alarming reports detailing the country's deteriorating situation, including the fall of cities and attacks by Frankish armies, compounded by economic instability and rising wheat prices.

However, instead of addressing these pressing concerns, the ruler's response is shockingly indifferent. Rather than prioritizing the defense of the country and its people, he permits male and female dancers to perform in his court, revealing his misplaced focus. This stark contrast between imminent catastrophe and the ruler's distraction underscores his failure as a leader, portraying him as a figure more akin to a nightclub owner than a responsible head of state.

### **2.2.3. The Weakness and Corruption of Rulers in Historical and Contemporary Contexts**

The narrative further exposes the ruler's incompetence through his obsession with personal pleasures. The dialogue between the ruler and his ministers reveals his complete detachment from the country's dire reality, as he remains preoccupied with women and luxurious indulgences. Meanwhile, his lack of strategic vision allows territories and people to fall into enemy hands.

The novel paints a broader picture of a corrupt ruler, depicting him as someone who delegates all governance to his minister, who in turn exploits national wealth by forming alliances with merchants and business elites. The illusion of power persists, even as the state crumbles under its own inefficiency and corruption. The novel repeatedly uses irony and dark humor to depict the ruler's negligence, particularly through his dismissive attitude towards pressing political crises.

One of the novel's most striking scenes unfolds when a delegation of scholars meets with the Caliph, seeking urgent intervention amid the nation's turmoil. Instead of engaging with their concerns, the Caliph forces them to wait while he indulges in leisure, bathing, and dining. His priorities are distorted, detached from reality, and entirely self-serving.

This is further emphasized in his exchange with the head scholar, who remarks:

"We are with you, my lord, in good times and bad," highlighting his unwavering yet misplaced loyalty. The ruler, however, dismisses this, responding :

"No... you are not with us. You are, God willing, the scholars of the country. You deal with religious matters, and we handle worldly affairs." (Hafez, 2017, p. 41).

The ruler's heedlessness of divine laws and moral governance is also evident in his conversation with Emmanuel's messenger, who warns him about an impending invasion. Instead of taking the matter seriously, the ruler is entirely absorbed in his upcoming marriage :

The Messenger : “For war ?”

Commander : “No... for celebrating and holding weddings for my marriage to Princess Aliya.” (Hafez, 2017, p. 44).

#### 2.2.4. Political Critique and the Role of Literature in Challenging Authority

The novel crafts a damning image of a ruler entirely detached from governance, concerned only with self-indulgence and the pursuit of pleasure. This depiction is not confined to the past ; rather, it resonates with modern-day political dynamics, where rulers often prioritize self-interest over the well-being of their people. The abdication of responsibility in favor of ministers and advisors, who then manipulate the economy and deceive the people, serves as a powerful critique of historical and contemporary power structures.

Said Hafez employs satirical elements to emphasize the ruler’s complacency, particularly through scenes where laughter and feigned amusement accompany every situation, both comic and tragic. This technique serves to underscore the absurdity of absolute power unchecked by accountability.

The poet Trad’s interaction with the ruler exemplifies this subservience to authority and the flattery that sustains corrupt leadership :

Trad : “Bow down—I am your servant, the poet of Bani Tai. I have come to praise my lord.”

Rather than engaging in governance, the ruler is more concerned with entertainment and personal indulgence :

Commander : “Do you like poetry, wine, and women ?”

Trad : “Yes, my lord.”

This exchange exemplifies how intellectual discourse is reduced to mere entertainment, stripping literature and the arts of their potential for resistance and critical thought. The novel continues to explore how flattery enables authoritarian rule, demonstrating how literature and culture can be manipulated to serve oppressive regimes.

Hafez extends his critique through a broader depiction of rulers who prioritize pleasure over responsibility, further illustrated by another dialogue showcasing the leader’s incompetence :

Al-Ma’mun : “The court and the notables... everyone has been asking about you for a year while you have been here, and the people, the slanders, and the rumors... The disappearance of the Caliph... The story has become ridiculous...”

Commander : “They are foolish people. What do they want from the Caliph ? The state runs itself... The minister knows his role, the police chief and every employee knows their role. What is required of me... ? Leave me with Al-Alia.” (Hafez, 2017, p. 121).

This passage reinforces the idea that unchecked authority often leads to a detachment from reality, where rulers assume that governance can function without their intervention, while they indulge in their personal desires.

Moreover, the novel draws clear parallels between past and present authoritarian regimes, showcasing how rulers maintain power through manipulation, suppression of dissent, and the use of intellectuals as tools of propaganda. Hafez's depiction of the poet Trad's submission mirrors historical and contemporary examples of artists, writers, and scholars forced to praise tyrannical rulers to secure their own survival.

Through these narrative choices, Hafez critiques not only individual figures of power but the entire system that enables their rule, ultimately questioning the role of literature in either resisting or reinforcing political oppression.

## **2.3. Poetic and Symbolic Dimensions of the Novel**

### **2.3.1. Literary Symbolism and the Role of Sheherazade**

One of the most captivating characters in the novel is Sheherazade, whose name immediately evokes the legendary storyteller from *One Thousand and One Nights*. Sheherazade not only serves as Sahar's confidante and keeper of secrets but also assumes the role of the novel's historical narrator. Much like her mythical counterpart, she weaves intricate and compelling stories within the narrative, preserving history through storytelling.

The author highlights the qualities that make this Sheherazade resemble the classical figure, particularly through a distinctive descriptive passage that introduces her character. In one scene, Sheherazade is depicted as follows :

“Sheherazade grinned and took two sips of coffee. She was wearing a black dress with white dots and a red collar... She opened her handbag and pulled out a black handkerchief with white dots, identical to Umm Kulthum's. It exuded fragrant love stories that spread across the Gulf. She rubbed the corners of her lips, folded the handkerchief once... twice, then kept it in her left hand, tucking it between her breasts. She looked right, left, forward, back, and murmured...” (Hafez, 2017, p. 176).

This passage showcases the poetic and symbolic nature of Hafez's writing, where even a simple act of drinking coffee is infused with meaning, nostalgia, and depth.

### **2.3.2. Poetic Language and Lyrical Expression in the Novel**

Said Hafez employs poetic language extensively throughout the novel, infusing both dialogue and narration with lyrical intensity. This stylistic choice blurs the line between prose and poetry, transforming the text into a rich, immersive, and musical experience.

One striking example is Al-Aliya's evocative and rhythmic speech, which resembles classical Arabic poetry :

“O Ibn Mayyah, O Ibn Al-Khaymah... O poor as water and wealthy as air, your heart is as vast as the desert...” (Hafez, 2017, p. 34).

Similarly, the dialogue between Trad the poet and Ahmed reflects how economic hardship is interwoven into the novel's poetic discourse :

Trad : "The city is empty."

Ahmed : "Pockets are empty." (Hafez, 2017, p. 35).

These succinct lines not only convey economic distress but also encapsulate the broader themes of emptiness and loss, demonstrating Hafez's ability to distill profound meaning into concise poetic exchanges.

However, the poetic dimension of the novel extends far beyond dialogue—it permeates the introspective world of the protagonist, Fathi. As a journalist, Fathi transforms his writing into a form of lyrical resistance, describing it as : "I write my article as a tweet for the homeland."

His poetic reflections are often structured as short, impactful bursts of emotion, resembling modern digital poetry. One of his most striking lyrical expressions states :

"Record that I tore up my identity, abandoned the foolish dialect, and erased the chants stolen from the generals' pockets. Record that long ago, I shouted with the voice of an eloquent prisoner's rooster..."

His language changed all languages. Record."

Through such passages, Hafez subverts traditional narrative forms, turning Fathi's introspective monologues into literary compositions rich in imagery, rhythm, and emotional depth.

Fathi's poetic expression reaches its peak as he rejects intrusion and dismisses rumors about the end of the era of prophets, asserting his vision as a seer who foresees a procession of prophets illuminating the earth. His introspective musings take on a mystical and transcendental quality, as he likens himself to a bird soaring above the world, witnessing the unseen movements of history. This poetic vision concludes with a profound admission : "I do not know..." (Hafez, 2017, p. 148).

Hafez masterfully integrates Fathi's poetic and reflective voice into the novel, referring to his lyrical musings as "tweets"—brief but powerful insights that encapsulate the protagonist's internal struggles. These reflections are described as "the whispering of the soul", emphasizing their deep emotional resonance and introspective nature.

One of the most striking examples of this poetic introspection is the following passage, which reads as a prose poem, combining sensory imagery, rhythm, and emotional intensity :

"And I heard your voice in my imagination flowing through my soul, in my blood, in my letters, in my rock and my clouds, in the folds of the soul and the earth, diving into me, enveloping me, besieging me so that I return to being a child carrying a flower or a madman carrying a guitar at the gate of lovers of history. And your impossible love, Lady of Palaces, is born in my heart and my feelings, a longing to sing in your hands under a tree or the sea or



in a sanctuary... Women are the sky's gift to men, and you are my gift. On the Night of Destiny..." (Hafez, 2017, p. 235).

These passages elevate the novel beyond traditional storytelling, demonstrating Hafez's ability to intertwine personal longing, historical reflection, and poetic musicality. By merging journalistic realism with poetic abstraction, the novel transforms into a meditation on identity, exile, and the power of words.

Through his intricate use of poetic language, Hafez not only enhances the aesthetic quality of the novel but also employs poetry as a tool of resistance, self-discovery, and social critique. Fathi's poetic introspections offer an alternative to conventional storytelling, reinforcing the idea that language itself holds the power to transcend limitations, reconstruct identity, and challenge reality.

### 2.3.3. Cultural and Linguistic References in Said Hafez's Novel

The novel also incorporates intertextual references, particularly from Islamic scripture and historical narratives. One of the most poignant examples is the parallel drawn between Fatima's loss of sight after being separated from her daughter, Lamar, and the story of Prophet Jacob (Yaqub), who lost his eyesight from grief over his son, Prophet Joseph (Yusuf).

The narrative recounts :

"Fatima became blind from excessive weeping over her daughter's absence. Meanwhile, her father, Abu Bakr, vowed to search for Lamar across all lands, just as Jacob once searched for Joseph. He swore that he would not return until he brought Lamar back to her mother and restored her sight." (Hafez, 2017, p. 11).

This passage mirrors the Quranic story in which Prophet Jacob's vision is restored when he places Joseph's shirt over his eyes. The incorporation of such religious and historical symbolism adds depth to the novel, emphasizing themes of exile, longing, and eventual reconciliation.

The novel is rich with Egyptian proverbs, which serve to portray everyday life with authenticity, spontaneity, and wit. These proverbs not only add realism to dialogue but also reflect the cultural and social wisdom of the Egyptian people.

For instance, in a conversation between Ahmed and Zaatar Al-Attar, Ahmed remarks :

"Tomorrow you will die, O Zaatar, O Attar, and the people of Burjawan will walk behind your coffin. Sheikh Shaaban and Qandil will dig your grave... and the drum and the flute and the wailing women will follow your expensive coffin. They will chant: 'Oh my seventies, oh my camels!'" (Hafez, 2017, p. 22).

Another proverb is used humorously to describe how someone might navigate a difficult situation unnoticed :

"I will make you pass between the guards like a hair through dough." (Hafez, 2017, p. 79).

These expressions serve a dual purpose, offering both comic relief and profound social commentary. They also ground the novel in a distinctly Egyptian cultural context, enriching its historical and political themes.

## Conclusion

In *Until My Heart is at Peace*, Said Hafez stands out for his innovative approach, where he skillfully combines experimental and narrative aesthetics on multiple levels. Through a sophisticated fusion of prose, theatrical scenes, and popular discourse, he shapes a nuanced vision of reality. This process, marked by bold narrative choices, demonstrates his commitment to literary innovation. By drawing on historical, cultural, and political references, the author infuses his work with a reflective dimension that transcends mere storytelling.

Far from being a linear narrative, the novel aligns with an experimental dynamic that deconstructs traditional novelistic conventions. By adopting an intertextual approach, Hafez engages with various fields of knowledge, creating a rich dialogue between past and present, fiction and reality. This narrative strategy not only allows for deep immersion in the story but also fosters a critical reading of the contemporary socio-political context.

The novel stands out for its historical depth and the complexity of its references. By incorporating interactive storytelling elements, Hafez enhances the narrative with a polysemic dimension that challenges the reader and encourages profound reflection on concepts of identity, memory, and power. His writing, blending historical realism with stylistic experimentation, illustrates the evolution of contemporary Arabic literature as a space for innovation and dissent.

Thus, *Until My Heart is at Peace* goes beyond mere historical reconstruction ; it becomes a tool for questioning dominant narratives. By challenging conventional storytelling norms and offering a critical perspective on history and politics, Hafez positions his work within a literary tradition where experimentation serves as a vehicle for aesthetic and intellectual renewal.

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## Abstract

In his novel *Until My Heart Is Reassured*, the Egyptian novelist, storyteller, and playwright Saïd Hafez presents his interpretation of contemporary Arab reality through historical projections, employing historical, mythological, religious, and cognitive references. This study aims to examine the manifestations of experimentation and the aesthetics of narration in this literary work, which the author refers to as a “narrativization.” Hafez blends narrative and theatrical arts, with nearly half of the novel structured as theatrical scenes while also incorporating television scriptwriting techniques to narrate multiple sequences. The study concludes that Saïd Hafez successfully establishes a distinct creative presence through his novel by employing both narrative and experimental aesthetics on multiple levels. His work integrates political, historical, and cultural elements, offering an insightful interpretation of reality while conveying profound messages to the Arab reader.

## Keywords

Narrative experimentation, Narrative aesthetics, Contemporary Arabic novel

## المخلص

في روايته حتى يطمئن قلبي، يعرض الروائي والقاص والمسرحي المصري السيد حافظ رؤيته للواقع العربي المعاصر من خلال إسقاطات تاريخية، معتمداً على مرجعيات تاريخية وأسطورية ودينية ومعرفية. تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى تحليل تجليات التجريب وجماليات السرد في هذا العمل الأدبي، الذي أطلق عليه المؤلف اسم “مسرواية”، حيث مزج بين الفن الروائي والفن المسرحي، فجاء نصف الرواية تقريباً على هيئة مشاهد مسرحية، بالإضافة إلى توظيفه لأسلوب كتابة السيناريو التلفزيوني في سرد العديد من المشاهد. وتوصلت الدراسة إلى أن السيد حافظ نجح في تسجيل حضور إبداعي متميز من خلال توظيفه لجماليات التجريب وجماليات السرد على عدة مستويات. كما أن روايته تجمع بين الأبعاد السياسية والتاريخية والثقافية، مقدمةً رؤية تحليلية للواقع العربي، وناقلةً رسائل عميقة للمتلقي العربي.

## الكلمات المفتاحية

التجريب الروائي، جماليات السرد، الرواية العربية المعاصرة

## Résumé

Dans son roman *Jusqu'à ce que mon cœur soit rassuré*, le romancier, conteur et dramaturge égyptien Saïd Hafez propose une lecture de la réalité arabe contemporaine à travers des projections historiques, en mobilisant des références historiques, mythologiques, religieuses et cognitives. Cette étude vise à analyser

les manifestations de l'expérimentation et l'esthétique du récit dans cette œuvre littéraire, que l'auteur qualifie de « narrativisation ». Hafez associe les arts narratifs et théâtraux, structurant près de la moitié du roman sous forme de scènes théâtrales, tout en intégrant des techniques d'écriture scénaristique inspirées du format télévisuel. L'étude conclut que Saïd Hafez parvient à instaurer une présence créative marquante à travers son roman en exploitant à la fois l'esthétique narrative et expérimentale sur plusieurs niveaux. Son œuvre fusionne des éléments politiques, historiques et culturels, offrant une interprétation originale de la réalité et transmettant des messages significatifs au lecteur arabe.

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### **Mots-clés**

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Expérimentation narrative, Esthétique narrative, Roman arabe contemporain

### **Introduction**