

Reconstructing Memory and Decolonizing History: A Critical Study of Andalusian Legacy

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Abstract

This paper investigates the intricate interplay between literary analysis and historical context through the lens of Moroccan historical novels, focusing on Hassan Aourid's *The Morisco*. This study highlights the prominence of integrating historical context into literary critique by decolonizing and reimagining the past. The analysis of *The Morisco* serves as a case study to demonstrate how historical narratives are recontextualized and reinterpreted within the framework of postcolonial discourse. This approach facilitates the text's understanding by employing an eclectic theoretical framework drawing from, but not limited to, Said, White, and Lukács. It underscores the broader socio-political implications of historical representation in literature. This essay argues that *The Morisco* deploys historical fiction to decolonize the past by providing a voice for unrepresented subalterns, to use Spivak's term, the expelled Muslims and Jews from their homeland, Andalusia. It is also argued that Aourid's historical narrative exemplifies a distinct approach within Moroccan literature, where fictional techniques are intertwined with historiographical ones to decolonize the official history, calling upon the urgent need to reread the past, one that has influenced our contemporary history and to rectify the misrepresentation in historical narratives.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Significance and Role of Historical Novel

Historical fiction is a diverse and captivating subgenre of literature in Moroccan academia, representing the rich tapestry of Morocco's history. It is "a literary genre that combines the authors' imaginative creativity," as (De Groot, 2009. p 49) puts it. Arguably, fiction and history are cut from the same cloth because they have a mutual impact (Rodwell. 2013, p 169). Considering Jessica da Silva's statement that "history and narration are weapons of decolonization,"¹ this study explores the intricate interplay between historical context and literary analysis through the lens of Moroccan historical novels, with a particular focus on Hassan Aourid's *The Morisco*. By examining the reimagination and decolonization of the past, this paper underscores the significance of integrating historical context into literary critique. The analysis of *The Morisco* aims to illustrate the way postcolonial discourse reframes and reinterprets historical narratives.

¹ Da Silva C De Oliveira, J. (2019). *Postcolonial Maghreb and the Limits of IR*. Springer, p 91

Influenced by the Hegelian perspective that underscores the solid linkage of the present with the past, Lukács (1962, p 53) argues that the crux of a genuinely great historical fiction rests on the ability to bring the past to life as the prehistory of the present, allocating poetic life for the historical, interpersonal, and human forces that, over time, have constructed our current days as we know it. Lukács, in this remark, stresses the essence of historical fiction that is mirrored in its ability to enliven the past, making it relevant and resonant with the present. The historical novel displays how historical events and causes influence modern society, culture, individual identities, and even characters.

It is worth mentioning that studying history is not limited merely to delving into historical accounts that respond to the primary inquiry of what happened in the olden times, retelling historical and historic tales, passed on from ancestors. There remain additional inquiries that warrant investigation. Readers are more eager to perceive the past in its lively mode than to recognize it as a calcified entity. Belinda Jack argues that “the historical or political novel aims to put readers in a certain context that allows them to see what would have been liked to live at that time in that place under those conditions.”² Put in another way; readers may aspire to approach history as they would watch a 3-D movie whose immersive experience allows its scenes to be more thrilling and engaging, thereby fostering an immersive sense of experiential involvement in the diegetic world, engendering sentimental and perceptual alignment between the audience and the narrative’s kinetic dynamics. By contrast, readers may not appreciate reaching history, the way it is displayed in historical accounts, as if they walked around a museum where history was represented in lifeless remnants. Borrowing Alessandro Manzoni’s metaphor, a historical novelist must provide “not just the bare bones of history, but something more prosperous and complete.”³ In the same reasoning line as Manzoni, historical novelists touch upon certain realms that historians neglect as De Groot (2016. Pp 18-19) states that historical novelists aim to map the unfinished and fragmented history, communicating the unknowability of history to the readers, “enabling an awareness in the readership of the fragmentary, tentative, fragile nature of their relationship with the past.” The historical novel dwells upon history’s humanistic and emotional dimensions, reinvigorating the past by portraying the bygone era in an interesting but enjoyable image. This notion is noted by Cowart (1989. P 19), who states that the historical novel is meant not only to entertain but to instruct as well. Similarly, in “Novelist as Teacher,” Chinua Achebe ascribes a significant role to fictional works, concurring with what Leo Tolstoy states in *What is Art?* that art ought to be educative, imparting insights to its audiences. Achebe argues that the novelist’s role resembles that of a teacher or the indigenous writer who represents the national cause, proposing collective goals, contesting stereotypes, and claiming territories usurped by foreign invaders.

On this ground, this critical essay argues that *The Morisco* deploys historical fiction to reread and decolonize the past by giving voice to underrepresented subalterns: Muslims and Jews displaced from their homeland in the Iberian Peninsula. It is arguable, too, that Aourid’s historical narrative exemplifies a distinct approach within Moroccan literature, one in which fictional techniques are entangled with historiographical ones - in the Haydenian sense⁴ - to decolonize the history of postcolonial nations, highlighting the urgent need to rewrite the past,

²Belinda, J. (2014). “How Truthful is the Historical Novel?” *YouTube*, 17 Oct. uploaded by Gresham College, accessed on 6 Oct. 2024, (02:17-02:30). https://youtu.be/pzETMoqpoWQ?si=fP_4itbLVNrU2zQG

³ Manzoni, A. (1984) *On the Historical Novel* (Translation of Del Romanzo Storico). University of Nebraska Press. P 67

⁴ Referring to the American historian Hayden White who develops a theory of meta-history

which has imparted and impacted our contemporary history, not to mention its proclivity to underscore the Eurocentrism and monolithic narrative of history.

2. Subversive Histories and Voicing Revolt in the Arabic Novel

The emergence of the Arabic novel at large was associated with the rise of nationalism and patriotism in the Arab region. Shortly after the retreat of the colonizing power, be it French or British, the growing engagement and awareness of history rapidly increased. The recently post-colonial nations became conscious of the urgent need to rewrite their history, whose prominent portion was written by the occupier. This necessity has served as a driving force for the flourishing of the historical novel as a literary genre, seeking to fill in the missing gap that historians ignored intentionally or neglected accidentally.

On decolonization and history, Edward Said (1994. P 298) contends that the aftermath of imperialism has lingered even after the colonizers' flags were lowered and troops retreated. It has engendered unhealed cultural, social, and political wounds. Decolonization remains a highly complex conflict that unfolds in two major forms: non-passive battles including strikes, marches, physical attacks, revenge, and counter-retribution and intellectual disputes of various political fates, histories, and geographies, replete with works of imagination, scholarship, and counter-scholarship.

Now that "the colonized nations are left with a legacy of humiliation and degradation of their histories" (ibid. p 46), nationalists, writers, and intellectuals have taken the initiative to diminish the impact of the past colonial policies in their newly independent states through rereading history and deconstructing its 'grand narrative' as Jean-François Lyotard put it. In the Saidian sense, it is a kind of 'secondary resistance' that goes directly after the 'primary resistance,' alluding to the intellectual struggle instead of the armed conflict.

Decolonization, which is the key concept for this pacifist resistance, is defined by Ashcroft et al. (2007, pp 74-5) as a complicated historical, social, and political process of removing power structures and systems developed due to colonialism. It entails resisting and rejecting the oppressive practices and beliefs that colonizers imposed on colonized people, as well as reclaiming indigenous cultures, languages, identities, and histories. In this respect, decolonizing history is a process of negation that aims at challenging power and exposing its biased narratives.

Reimagination and decolonization of the past in the historical novel epitomizes oppositional discourse which is identified as a questioning communication. It incorporates dual roles: art and activism, contradicting history's prevalent or mainstream narratives. A salient detail warrants noting that the past reimagination might serve as an escape from the prophecy of Santayana, the Spanish-American philosopher, who stated that "those who do not know history are condemned to repeat it"⁵. By investigating the past, the Arabic historical novel provides alternative perspectives that challenge and disrupt established norms, beliefs, or ideologies in historical narratives and accounts. Arguably, marginalized groups or subalterns in the Spivakian sense frequently utilize history as oppositional speech to decolonize the past. Employing dissident discourse by historical Arab novelists becomes essentially a method of

⁵ Cited in Allen, R. (2017) "The Arabic Novel and History" *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions*. (P 11)

critically engaging with dominant political, cultural, and historical dogmas and providing counter-narratives that highlight alternative experiences and perspectives, thereby, facilitating social change.

3. Genealogy of Arabic Historical Novel

History has been a part and parcel of Arab tradition since the eve of the early centuries in the first millennium. In their study, tracking the trajectory of the Arabic historical novel, Zarytovskaya and Al-Rahbi (2023. p 260) contend that Arabs adopted historical narrative in pre-Islamic Arabic literature from the 6th-7th centuries. Poets celebrated heroes, grieved the deceased, and demonized rivals. This displays how deep history is rooted in Arab literature. Yet, it is common knowledge that Arab literature was based on oral, not written, tradition, which precipitated divergent narratives of history.

There appears to be a consensus, albeit not absolute among critics that the effective emergence of historical fiction in the Arab region was associated with the 19th-century socio-political awakening movement (*Nahda*). In contrast to old literary forms (Poetry, *Makama*, and folktales), the Arabic historical novel has evolved, covering various tropes and historic eras. Apparently, a widely shared critical view about the pivotal role, played by the Egypto-Lebanese author, Jurji Zaydan, who is considered “the official father of the genre in Arabic literature.”⁶ His intellectual engagement in bringing historical fiction to the fore through serializing his twenty two historical novels in a periodical, called *Al-Hilal*, was the foundational endeavor to introduce this genre to Arabic literature. Notwithstanding, Zaydan’s writing style was criticized, on one hand, for bearing a strong trace of Orientalist concepts, especially his dependence on Orientalist literary historiography;⁷ on the other hand, Zaydan was not the only author who should be granted credit. “His Syrian counterpart, Salim al-Boustani, anteceded Zaydan’s works”.⁸

Being a considerable part of the intellectual movement in the Arab-Islamic World, Moroccan historical novelists have contributed to the process of reimagination and interrogation of the past just like their counterparts in the Middle East authors. Ahmed Tawfiq, Abdellah Saaf, Bensalem Himmich, Hassan Aourid, and others are among the most well-known Moroccan historical novelists who have marked the Maghribi literature. *Jārāt ābī mūsi* [Abu Musa’s Women Neighbours] by Ahmed Tawfiq remains an intriguing novel that touches upon different historical issues: sufism and tyranny during the Marinid Sultanate in the 13th century; whereas *Muḥārib al-imbrātūrī al-kḥaiālī* [The Conqueror of the Imaginary Empire] by Abdellah Saaf narrates a different story, taking place in 1591 when Sultan *Mansour Eddahbi* sent an army south of the Sahara to integrate the old Songhai kingdom into the territories of the Land of the Sunset. An empire seemed to be in the making in the west of the Muslim world. Bensalem Himmich, combining philosophy with fiction, manages to be creative and deep in his historical fictional works. Three of his historical novels drew the attention of Roger Allen, the American critic and interpreter, who translated *Majnun Al Hukm* [The Theocrat], *Al Alaama* [The Polymath], and *Hada Andalussi* [A Muslim Suicide]. Each of these works uncovers a

⁶ Zarytovskaya, V.N., and Al-Rahbi, A.M. (2023). "The Evolution of Arabic Historical Literature and its Current Trends: Canons and Invariants." p 263

⁷ Rastegar. K. (2019) “Jurji Zaydan: Avatar of the Modern Revitalization and Worlding of Arabic Literature” in *A Companion to World Literature*. Edited by Ken Seigneurie. P 2

⁸ Halevi, S, and Fruma Z. (2007) “‘ASMA’ (1873): The Early Arabic Novel as a Social Compass.” *Studies in the Novel*, vol. 39, no. 4, p 420. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29533837>. Accessed 23 Mar. 2025.

distinctive era and area of Arab-Muslim history that historians overlooked in their historiographies.

Unlike the aforementioned historical novelists, Hassan Aourid's novels emerge with a new literary experience that has received acknowledgment at home (Morocco) and abroad. Aourid's contemporary novels brilliantly transcend the nostalgic utopia model, interrogating and rereading more the dichotomies of "the past and present," "the here and there, and "the historical and the contemporaneous" incorporating an analytical approach.

4. *The Morisco: A Literary Act and an Ideological Activism*

Published in 2011, in a critical time, the Arab or Democratic Spring, that the Arab world hitherto has undergone its repercussions, Aourid's account, *The Morisco*, has raised a scholarly dispute among Moroccan academics and critics who have examined this historical novel from different perspectives. Al-Moudin (2019. p 417) analyzes the question of identity in relation to language in *The Morisco*. It concludes that the distortion of religion and quasi-presence of the Arabic language within the Morisco community has made the suffering of the Moriscos and their dream of returning to the homeland (Andalus) real features of identity in Aourid's account. By contrast, in his article, "*Le Morisque: Du Témoignage Manuscrit au Roman Historique*", Said Bannani (2012. p 65) states that *The Morisco* is a fictional work that brings the tragedy of Moriscos out of oblivion and highlights the collective heritage and common values between Morocco and Spain. In this historical novel, Bannani disputes that the account campaigns for a collective need for a peaceful present and a better future between Islam and the West. Indeed, Aourid declares from the very beginning in *The Morisco*'s introduction that his work is a historical narrative: "It is a novel whose material I drew from history, and from a human tragedy, to deal with current issues (Aourid. 2011.p 9)". This quote investigates the tragic tale of Ahmad Shihab al-Din Afuqai. Fleeing from Andalusia to Morocco during the period of the Inquisition, seeking peace in the Moors' land and support from the Moorish Saadi Sultan to restore his homeland, Al-Andalus. Shihab al-Din represents an eyewitness of the atrocities of the intolerant and zealous Spanish catholic church clergy in the 16th century, headed by Francisco, Cardinal Jiménez de Cisneros, suppressing the Muslim community.⁹ This historical novel highlights the plight of the Moriscos after the fall of Granada and their forced displacement to North Africa, namely Morocco, and the regencies of Algiers as well as Tunis in search of a new life. Shihab al-Din recounts his story, set between 1597 and 1642, of his exile and how he recovered his life, eventually becoming a scribe for the Saadi Sultan, Ahmad al-Mansur. The novel tackles substantial concerns like religious persecution, cultural integration, interfaith cooperation, and public upheavals. With this in mind, the textual analysis of this narrative, that this essay targets, unfolds in two major premises: the present in a historical costume and decolonizing rhetoric.

A- *The present in a Historical Costume*

Aourid, in his *The Morisco*, re-exploits the analogies between Al-Andalus and Palestine. He retells the history of the Moors and re-invents it in a way that expresses, supports, and articulates the Palestinian dream of independence. Analogies between the Palestinian suffering and the Moriscos' plight can be traced everywhere in Aourid's novel. It is a nightmare that occurs twice in Arab-Muslim history. The Jewish state's jeopardy to Palestinian culture and

⁹ See Menocal, M. R. (2009). *The Ornament of the World: How Muslims, Jews, and Christians Created a Culture of Tolerance in Medieval Spain*. Hachette UK. (P 272) and also see 31-30" ص 1980 دبيريس تطوان. قشتاليو، محمد. محنة الموريسكوس في إسبانيا. دبيريس تطوان.

religion was experienced through the Spanish threat to the Moorish rituals, faith, and language. The way the Moriscos are forced to abandon their religion parallels the political coercion in Palestine, where basic rights are denied. The exposition of the Moriscos to torture and detention also informs us about the Zionist violence against Palestinian nationalists and activists, who are routinely tortured, exiled, or executed. The history of Palestinian alienation penetrates almost every Moorish scene in Aourid's novel to the extent that nothing can be defined as a purely Moorish action. With regard to this analogy between the Moriscos and the Palestinians, Aourid himself states:

The Moriscos were victims of what could be considered ethnic cleansing resulting from a zealous exegesis of Christian texts. They were a cautionary indicator of what other Muslims would experience in the context of the Islamic civilization. The Moriscos were the Palestinians of that era, just as you might say that the Palestinian tragedy is a carbon copy of the Morisco's (Aourid. 2011, p 9).

By juxtaposing the Moriscos' sigh and Palestinian tragedy as illustrated in the excerpt, this historical novel blends the past with the present, demolishing the time wall of more than four centuries and projecting the past onto the present. The loss of Palestine in Aourid's fiction establishes a connection to that of Al-Andalus; and therefore, renders as a prolific chronotype gaining larger symbolic and political dimensions. *The Morisco* represents a cautionary tale for Arabs, be they Muslims or Christians, that "history repeats itself first as tragedy and second as farce"¹⁰, as Marx put it. It is conceivable that perhaps Palestine's destiny bears similarity to Al Andalus'. Aourid conjures up the past albeit with his eyes on the current issues through reclaiming history from a subaltern perspective, employing the voice of the Moriscos. Kassim, the narrator, recounts how Spain dishonored the terms of Granada's capitulation, how the city devolved into an apartheid battleground, and how Cardinal de Cisneros wielded violence to force conversions. *The Morisco*, hence, aims at, on one hand, challenging the Western accounts, and on the other hand, engaging in a dialogue with the West in relation to the prolonged history of suffering and pain that still shapes today. Reimagining the Moriscos' history and dream of recovering Al-Andalus constitutes a pastiche/parody of contemporary history and aspiration to free the occupied land (Palestine).

B- Decolonizing Rhetoric: Resisting memory trauma and challenging historical narratives

An ambivalent nature marks history, as Salman Rushdie delineates in *Imaginary Homelands*. The world's history is merely a collection of discourses and bits of evidence that are read and interpreted ideologically, not to overlook that the past is constructed by victors whose narratives of history are selective, extolling certain accounts while censuring others. In light of this complex essence of history namely from the postcolonial and postmodern perspective, history requires dismantling and decolonizing. Hence, the second premise of this study, decolonizing history in *The Morisco*, unfolds in various rhetoric: first, resisting memory trauma and second debunking historical stereotypical narrative, regardless of whether it is foreign or domestic.

¹⁰ Quoted in Dabash, H. (2012). *The Arab Spring the End of Postcolonialism*. (p xvi)

C- Erasing Memory and Redefining History

It is worth underscoring that the relationship between memory and history is controversial and complex as Pierre Nora (1989. p 13) argues in his seminal essay, “Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Memoire”. Exploring this intertwined bond, he states that: “the quest for memory is the search for one’s history”; thence, memory fracture results in a fragmented and unknowable past.

In this regard, Shihab Din’s father plainly admits the challenge of fighting back by preventing the collective memory from loss and historical narratives from distortion. He states:

“I resist by retaining the memory of my clan and by making sure you are raised well and you do not forget the unfair oppression we were subjected to.” (Aourid. 2011, p. 35).

This quote represents a father-to-son talk, encouraging the offspring to cling to their culture and memory; and it constitutes a powerful reflection on the impact of cultural erasure and how individuals and communities respond to it via decolonizing memory and resisting its trauma. These wounds of memory refer to the psychological ramifications of historical injustice and how these memories are passed down or fail to be passed down through generations. In the same vein, the father proceeds to express his sorrow:

“Our memory has been erased. Our customs and dialects are threatened with extinction. It is a terrible matter for a people to lose its language and its culture” (ibid, p 30).

Informed by the quote above, Aourid’s work constitutes an act of resistance, explicitly calling for decolonizing memory, and thereby corresponding to preventing cultural and historical consciousness from falling into oblivion or decadence. Memory retention ought to remain alive among the upcoming generations because, by so doing, they ensure their continued connection to their identity and historical roots.

D- Challenging the Established Historical Narratives

In his essay “The Evolution of Moroccan Intelligentsia”, Al Jabiri aligns with Laroui’s assumption that Morocco’s history was constructed either by nationalists, restricting the core of history to the state’s struggle against foreign interference, or by colonial scholars who sought to legitimize their imperial interest. Al Jabiri argues that the third party (people) was neglected, implying that people’s history, which was intentionally marginalized, ought to be reconsidered; and thereby, documented. Echoing this intellectual sentiment, Aourid’s historical novel seeks to challenge the unspoken past narrative, bringing the subaltern’s voice in the Spivakian sense to the fore. Put differently, in its endeavor to rectify the historical narratives, the understudy text, *The Morisco*, both reconstructs the past and writes back to the West. To illustrate more, as the historical accounts, be they fiction or non-fiction, that were written by the imperial powers about their subjects are fraught with ideological representations, Aourid’s work attempts to unravel their biased perspectives on the Moors.

Given that, the Moorish naval fight is generally portrayed - under the title of *The Barbary Corsairs*¹¹ - as barbarous piracy attacks, conducted by outlaw robbers, confiscating cargoes and capturing crews who would be either sold as slaves on the shores or ransomed by relatives. *Finnich*, one of the expelled Moriscos, who settled in the Moroccan coastal historic city of *Salā*, states:

“They [the West] should not equate piracy with banditry but on the contrary with a noble fight of people who have been expelled from their homes” (ibid. p 202).

The passage sheds light on the unsaid part of the past, rectifying the twisted historical narrative about the piracy movement along Morocco's coast, namely in Sala and 'New *Salā*, Rabat.'¹² A crucial practice that is overlooked by Western historiographers lies in vilifying the protective measures, that were undertaken by the disenfranchised Moriscos. Put simply, the naval attacks operated by Moriscos refugees back then were just legitimate self-defense endeavors to restore what used to belong to them. Morisco people were deported to the unknown and their treasure was confiscated, not to mention the merciless killing of innocent children and women. The text, therefore, decolonizes the Western historical narratives that seek to turn a blind eye to the oppressors' cruelty; while demonizing the legitimate reaction of subalterns in fighting back. This implies that Aourid's novel reconsiders the piracy narrative from the perspective of the margins whose version of the story has been ignored in Western historical accounts. Today, it is the subalterns' turn to speak and spell out their suppressed feelings and suffering.

5. CONCLUSION

Reading between the lines, we discern that *The Morisco* provides insights into the complex process of decolonization of history and memory through literary writing that seeks to reimagine and interrogate the past. The key points of this essay center on three focal conclusions to bear in mind: First, understanding history is essential for comprehending and addressing present-day issues, as it introduces a foundational context for current events and challenges. History remains neither an intellectual luxury nor a form of abstract knowledge; it represents the first step towards coming to terms with the present and achieving a thorough understanding of it. Second, *The Morisco* reimagines the past to trigger our intellectual curiosity and refresh our memory, debunking the fabricated claims of the sterility of Arab civilization. Last but not least, it implicitly proclaims that the ongoing instability of the Arab region is a temporary phase of history that can be changed for the better if we could adopt the archetype of the progressive Golden Age, represented by al-Andalus. This essay, indeed, deepens the discourse on decoloniality by illustrating how Aourid's work serves as a vehicle for reclaiming marginalized narratives and underscoring the instrumentality of diversifying literary perspectives for the sake of more inclusive representations of history. Yet, several open queries remain uncovered in which future research might investigate how different genres, such as memoirs or poetry, contribute to the decolonial reimagining of history.

¹¹ Clark, G. N. (1944). “The Barbary Corsairs in the Seventeenth Century.” *The Cambridge Historical Journal*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 22–35. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3020800>. Accessed 24 Mar. 2025.

¹² Rabat used to be named New *Salā*. Check Jayyusi, S. K, et al. (2008). *The City in the Islamic World* (2 Vols.). BRILL, P 652

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