



Celebration History in Aissa Aissaoui's Novel Dolmen Narratives

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Abstract:

This paper aims to investigate the historical transfiguration in Narratives of the Dolmen by Aissa Aissaoui. It examines the mechanisms used in the investment of historical stock and its fusion with narrative representation. The novel creates a kind of harmonious fusion between narrative discourse and historical imagination.

Therefore, the novelist delves into the depths of history, recalling its events, moving between past and present, searching for historical material through which he preserves his elements and finds semantic dimensions to serve his ideas and goals. Thus, he manages to diagnose the nature of Algerian reality, drawing upon a number of historical milestones extending from the dawn of history to French colonialism, through the black decade of the 1990s, and up to our present time, relying on fictional characters. The employment of history has had a significant impact on strengthening Algerian identity within the scope of creative writing.

Keywords: Algerian novel, narrative representation, historical imagination, identity, Aissa Aissaoui

L'histoire de la célébration dans le roman dolmen d'Aïssa Aïssaoui

Résumé :

*Cet article se propose d'étudier la transfiguration historique dans *Récits du dolmen* d'Aïssa Aïssaoui. Il examine les mécanismes mis en œuvre pour l'intégration du patrimoine historique et sa fusion avec la représentation narrative. Le roman instaure une fusion harmonieuse entre discours narratif et imaginaire historique.*

Ainsi, le romancier explore les profondeurs de l'histoire, en rappelant ses événements, en naviguant entre passé et présent, à la recherche d'un matériau historique lui permettant de préserver ses éléments et d'en extraire des dimensions sémantiques au service de ses idées et de ses objectifs. Il parvient ainsi à diagnostiquer la nature de la réalité algérienne, en s'appuyant sur plusieurs jalons historiques, depuis les origines de l'histoire jusqu'à la période coloniale française, en passant par les années noires des années 1990, et ce, à travers des personnages fictifs. Le recours à l'histoire contribue significativement au renforcement de l'identité algérienne dans le cadre de l'écriture créative.

Mots-clés : roman algérien, représentation narrative, imaginaire historique, identité, Aïssa Aïssaoui.



Introduction

The novel is one of the most representative literary genres of reality, for it succeeds in embodying the relationship among members of the same society through that linguistic fabric in which those paper-made beings move—beings that often express the novelist's own attitudes, anxieties, and visions. This is achieved through specific mechanisms and techniques that the novelist employs in his text. Perhaps the most significant of these techniques is the invocation of the historical heritage as an expression of such visions and ideas.

Since the foundational stage of the 1970s, the Algerian novel has drawn upon historical material to enrich its contents and ideas. History thus became a central axis in most of the early fictional works. The pioneer novelists sought to connect Algerian society with its past, especially since the historical invocation was dominated by the theme of the Revolution, being the dividing line between the colonial and post-independence eras. The works of Abdelhamid Benhedouga, Tahar Wattar, Merzak Bagtache, Zhor Ounissi, and others stand as narrative testimonies that employed this theme, out of their deep belief in the importance and significance of that historical event.

With the evolution of the novelistic art in the subsequent decades, writers continued to revive history narratively, relying on various historical turning points. The Revolution was no longer the sole historical inspiration; rather, Algerian novels began to rely on the country's history in its multiple phases.

Based on the foregoing, some Algerian novels became distinguished for their use of history, depending on the imaginative narrative material the genre offers. For instance, Waciny Laredj, in his novel *The Prince – The Path of Iron Gates*, refers to one of the most prominent figures in modern Algerian history, namely Emir Abdelkader. As for Mohamed Meflah, he interrogated history in several of his novels—for example, *The Flame of the Table*—which he devoted to discussing the city of Oran during the Ottoman era, the Spanish covetousness, and their attempt to seize it, as well as the Algerian self's resistance to that greed.

Speaking about the historical engagement in fictional works inevitably leads us to Abdelwahab Aissaoui's novel *The Spartan Diwan*, winner of the 2020 Booker Prize, which focused on a historical period stretching from 1815 to 1833—the final years of Ottoman rule in Algeria and the beginning of French occupation. Many other novels have also announced their reliance on history, recalling its events and moving between Algeria's past and present in an effort to preserve identity.

The search for and excavation of suitable historical material has produced a kind of fusion between narrative discourse and realistic historical discourse, generating a fictional text built on historical imagination. As Munif (1994, p. 364) noted, "Even if the novel writes history, it does not become a polished book of history, but rather a lamp that illuminates history through its openness to it, allowing us to see its events and scenes from various developments and multiple perspectives." The novelist often resorts to employing history to serve his ideas and visions.

The novel *Dolmen Narratives* is no exception to this historical employment within its events. What is striking is



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that it relies, in its narrative construction, on a set of pivotal historical events in Algerian history. From the very title to its narrative stages, it becomes evident that the main foundation upon which Aissa Aissaoui built his work is the narrative representation of multiple events, beginning with the dawn of history and passing through the Liberation Revolution—recalling its events and depending on them to convey his ideas to the reader.

As for the 1990s, known as “the Black Decade,” it represents the most prominent event through which the novelist recalls all those historical stages that shaped Algeria’s ancient, modern, and contemporary history. Yet, in this text, he does not assume the role of a historian as much as that of an explorer of temporal existence.

Accordingly, the temporal span from which he drew his historical material extends across distant periods. However, he sought to employ them through an intellectual project aiming to explore the temporally extended Algerian identity. This historical continuity expresses the author’s vision through which he announces the birth of his lost paradise. The journey of the seven swans and their quest for the blue river embodies that new rebirth, through which he counters the tragic doubt caused by the assassination of history.

1. The Novel Between Narrative Representation and Historical Engagement

The novel, since its early beginnings, has relied on the historical element, which became a source of inspiration for many novelistic experiences. It enables novelists to summon and employ historical materials to transmit their intellectual projects and projections onto the present time. Hence, the

novel has been one of the earliest narrative literary genres to declare its connection with history, exploiting it as one of the most important objective sources from which it derived its themes and ideas. The novel made use of history and reproduced it, thereby acquiring great significance because it managed to create new and innovative historical images based on the creative imagination that the novel offers to the writer, being “a fictional tale and interwoven scenes carefully composed to uncover the hidden aspects of events and to expose narrative relations” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 89).

Thus, the novelist expressed various historical eras because he was able to free himself from the strict constraints imposed by the discipline of history, which refers to real facts and actual events that cannot be manipulated or altered. The novelist must not fall into the traps of history or be led blindly by it; rather, he should handle historical data with coordinated and reinforced discretion (Al-Shamali, 2006, p. 127), without violating the sanctity, axioms, or documentary characteristics of history. Therefore, he must exercise extreme precision in presenting those events and facts within the novelistic framework.

Rebelling against history narratively does not mean severing ties with it, devouring its historical frameworks, or transcending them, nor does it mean merely reproducing them. Rather, the novel starts from historical discourse and subjects it to various transformations until it produces a new discourse with distinctive features and a message fundamentally different from that carried by history itself (Al-Qadhi, 2008, p. 87). This means that the intersection of history and the novel represents a revival of historical material through imagination, because “writing about history does not necessarily entail glorifying the past and



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placing it in the sacred box; instead, it seeks to grasp what is most sensitive and most human" (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 12).

In its interrogation of history and its inclination toward it in many artistic and aesthetic visions, the novel recalls what serves the author's ideas and concerns, which enhances the special relationship between them. This process results in a work that differs from historical reality: it starts from a historical reference and preserves it without referring to its factual accuracy, for it relies on the imaginative component as the backbone of narrative writing. "The novelist is not a servant to historians, and if history fascinates him, it is because it is a searching lamp that revolves around human existence and casts its light upon it" (Kundera, 2015, p. 72).

This is particularly evident in those moments where history failed to penetrate deeply or to explore its inner layers. In the novel, history is no longer mere entertainment for readers and recipients; it has become a mask behind which the novelist hides, moving freely through its events within the narrative text. He re-narrates historical facts through aesthetic narration nourished by imagination. "Historical imagination is the product of the interactive relationship between narration reinforced by imagination and history supported by facts. Yet it neither refers to the truths of the past nor determines or promotes them; rather, it draws inspiration from them as interpretative pillars and experiential supports for knowledge" (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 5).

No matter how much the novel draws from history, it is impossible for narrative discourse to turn into historical discourse, for "the historical text that merges into narrative becomes the speech of the fictional character narrating historical events, either as a witness to them or as a cultured

figure informed about them” (Wattar, 2002, p. 107). In other words, historical material transforms into the backbone upon which the complementary fictional events are built, giving the work its purely literary form.

“The novel, therefore, works with imaginative material, while history works with factual material. Yet since both belong to the realm of narrative, exchanges between them become possible, and the novel can receive historical materials to construct an aesthetically meaningful narrative entity” (Bouaita, 2022, p. 12). This means that the reinvestment of history in the novel must be modified and transformed, for even though the novel borrows from history and absorbs it within the narrative framework, it can still preserve its rigor. “The novel reweaves its threads within a plot dominated by the imagination of narrative storytelling, which enables the novelist to adapt and reformulate history. Here lies the fundamental difference between the historian and the novelist: while the historian adheres to truth, narrating events as he witnessed them or as they were told to him, the novelist relies on imagination in recounting events—he deletes, adds, advances, and postpones” (Wattar, 2002, p. 102).

Accordingly, history contains real events, yet the novelist cannot be considered a historian, for he reproduces the historical text according to what his narrative imagination dictates. This investment in events and occurrences is closely connected to the ideas the writer seeks to transmit within the narrative text. As Wattar (2002, p. 130) notes, “When history repeats itself in a new form, benefiting from it becomes an urgent need, as if the past has turned into a great mirror reflecting the events of the present.”



For this reason, the contemporary novel has relied on the presence of historical material, since the manipulation of such materials allows the novelist to convey his ideas and visions, revealing the painful and crisis-ridden reality experienced by oppressed peoples in their politicized worlds that have renounced principles established in earlier times.

Exploring the historical origins of the novel's benefit from history and its adoption of it as the basis of its narrative structure leads us to the works of the Scottish novelist and poet Walter Scott (1771-1832), considered the spiritual father of this novelistic type derived from historical material as its subject. He became one of the greatest and most popular writers of his era, and the influence he exercised over all European literature was unparalleled (Bouaita, 2022, p. 13).

Thus, the merit of Walter Scott and other pioneers of the historical novel is immense, and their influence was not confined to Europe; it extended to multiple worlds. The Arab world's initial acquaintance with this type of novel came through the translation of the works of these Western pioneers, such as Walter Scott and Alexandre Dumas. Later, Arab novelists emerged who wrote about history in their own novels, including Salim Al-Bustani, in works such as *Zenobia* (1871), *Badur* (1872), and *Al-Hiyam fi Futuh Al-Sham* (Passion in the Conquests of the Levant).

Afterward appeared the novels of Jurji Zaydan (1861-1914), whom critics regarded as the true father and pioneer of the Arabic historical novel. He was among the first to write about the history of the Islamic nation in a fictional series that comprised approximately twenty-three novels. Although Zaydan was criticized for his approach to invoking history, for his lack of historical accuracy, and for

his alleged distortions—by integrating love stories within the narrative to attract and entertain readers (Al-Shamali, 2006, p. 121)—his contribution to the Arabic historical novel remains significant and distinctive, as he was able to lay the foundations of this art and elevate it.

After him, Arabic literature came to know many novelists who employed history in their fictional works, though their levels of historical use varied according to each writer's background and purpose behind such historical references. Among these notable figures are Ali Al-Jarim, Naguib Mahfouz, and Gamal Al-Ghitani.

If we turn to the beginnings of the historical novel and its presence in Algerian literature, we must first recall that the emergence of the novelistic art in Algeria came later than in other Arab countries. This delay is attributed to the unique relationship that linked Algeria to everything Western in general, and to France in particular. Therefore, one cannot speak of the Arabic Algerian novel as having been influenced by its European counterparts in the same way as the broader Arabic novel was.

On this basis, the Arabic novel in Algeria appeared in the early 1970s with *The South Wind* by the pioneer of the Arabic Algerian novel, Abdelhamid Benhedouga. From its emergence, the novel was connected to history, for one cannot discuss the independence or autonomy of the Algerian novel apart from the most prominent historical event that shaped the contours of modern and contemporary Algerian history—namely, the Great Liberation Revolution that erupted on the first of November 1954.

Thus, the narrative presence of history in the Algerian novel was tied to a political-historical act, and the Revolution—with its events and characters—dominated the



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Algerian fictional corpus for a long period, even though each novelist's method of invoking this historical event differed. Yet they all agree that these fictional contents represent a re-reading of the past in the time of independence, attempting to expose the concealed aspects, political manipulations, and ideological conflicts that emerged after independence.

In referring to this historical presence in the novel, the study cannot overlook the writings of the novelist Tahar Wattar, who began the process of historicizing through his works, marking the true starting point of interaction between the novel and history within Algerian narrative writing. In the novel *Al-Laz*, for instance, history appears in its various dimensions through those fictional characters that differ in their modes of thinking and orientations. We should also recall the historical works of the novelist Merzak Bagtache, such as *Birds at Noon*, *The Hawks*, and *The Deserts of Death*. Likewise, the novelist Waciny Laredj, in his numerous novels, has invoked and relied upon history from a global perspective. His engagement with history was not limited to Algerian history; rather, it extended to several historical moments linked to the broader human experience.

It is noticeable that most of the pioneers of the historical novel began their creative journeys by writing about history in their fiction. The historical novel, in its early Arab beginnings, was considered "an important channel for education and enlightenment; the purpose behind historical narration was to teach history through an appealing and engaging style, thereby overcoming the rigidity and dryness of the subject. The resort to fiction became a clever artistic strategy for disseminating and internalizing history" (Al-Qa'oud, 2010, p.18).

With the emergence of the new novel and its rebellion against traditional narrative forms, the historical novel also revolted against the conventional mode of historical recall. Thus, contemporary novelists “resorted to history and moved within it through a national, pan-Arab, and political consciousness that drove them to embrace historical periods similar to their contemporary circumstances and to revive elements of heritage that could rekindle hope for salvation from a reality burdened with frustration and pessimism” (Al-Qa’oud, 2010, p.20). This means that they worked to employ history and reshape it in a manner compatible with the nature of their present stage, finding in this literary form a refuge from direct expression and fear of the oppression of ruling regimes—by wearing the mask of history and hiding behind fictional characters that move on paper, to judge reality and convey their thoughts and visions regarding political, social, and cultural conditions.

“For the novel tells history, but tells it in its own way. When it sails through the depths of history, it seeks to lift the cover from what remains concealed within it” (Al-Qadi, 2008, p.150). The new historical novel is therefore a rebellious and revolutionary narrative form, rejecting the purely informative and declarative function of historical discourse. It seeks instead the aesthetic and artistic function of the narrative language of fiction, shifting from the boundaries of memory to the radiance of imagination. This creative ability—manifested in the fluid movement from memory to imagination—enables the novelist to “fill the gaps and shed light on the critical junctures through which he can expand his movement across the predetermined space of the novel” (Al-Shamali, 2006, p.128).



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Accordingly, the historical novel has gone through two main stages in its formative and developmental trajectory. In the first stage, associated with the writings of early novelists, the dominant style was the traditional one, which relied on historical material and re-employed it to overcome the dryness of historical discourse. It would draw on the historical heritage and extract from it its narrative substance by selecting specific periods and reworking their events, incidents, or real characters in fictional form, adding an artistic touch through focusing on certain elements that increase the readability of the novel and the usefulness of its historical information.

However, the major turning point in the relationship between history and the novel appeared with the new novelists, who adopted realistic representation and relied on imagination to express the transformations of Arab societies. This kind of novel selects historical time periods with events and imagined characters: “the new fictional world exists in a liminal zone—it is neither bound to the reference as portrayed in historical works, nor entirely liberated from it within the realm of imagination” (Al-Qadi, 2008, p.108). The writer, free from the constraints of historical truth, can make the reader live the events of the novel and believe in their historicity, even though their content has no actual relation to those past epochs.

“History, then, insists upon the novelist as part of the nation’s entity – connected to its reality and future and as an active element in shaping its identity and character. The novelist invokes history to navigate its depths, escaping the constraints and censures of reality” (Al-Qa’oud, 2010, p.353).

Thus, the novel that relies on imagined historical recall adopts history and uses it as a means to express contemporary issues—most of which adapt to the current social and civilizational reality with all its political fluctuations. Hence, delving into the depths of history is done without strict adherence to historical accuracy or factuality. The historical document itself transforms from a purely factual record into an aesthetic artistic structure, becoming a narrative utterance subordinate to the historical utterance. With this transformation, “the aesthetic distance shifts from the referential quality to the narrative quality, making the fictional text create an illusion for the reader regarding the historical material produced within the narrative context” (Bouaita, 2022, p.20).

It is clear from this that the contemporary novel has succeeded in subjecting the historical context to its imaginative narrative authority, in a way that aligns with the nature of fictional discourse. Yet, it could not completely detach itself from the fragrance of history—be it through space or time—thereby reinforcing the relationship between the two without compromising the aesthetic beauty of this historical embodiment within the fictional narrative fabric.

Building on the preceding discussion, the term historical novel has sparked numerous questions regarding the referential function of historical data, since this type of novel serves as an imaginative, linguistic, and intellectual vessel for the visions and concerns of the writer who relies on historical recall while simultaneously escaping its rigidity and dominance.

Many critical studies conducted on this narrative form have revealed a variety of concepts and definitions accompanying its emergence and development, shaped by



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each researcher's referential framework, which in turn is influenced by society and its transformations linked to past events. The historical text thus plays an active role in narrative writing by focusing on historical periods and attempting to make intellectual projections consistent with current realities, while the imaginative dimension enhances the narrative field.

As the axis of this creative form, history does not remain purely factual; rather, it faces the fictional narration that constitutes a distinctive feature of the novel. What is written about history should not mirror the historical document exactly, otherwise the novelist becomes merely a historian tracing the footsteps of nations and investigating their temporalities. Hence, the novelist must observe certain standards related to the aesthetic function of narrative language, since it is a form of art founded upon imaginative creation. This means that "the historical material shaped through narration has been detached from its documentary and descriptive function, and has come to perform an aesthetic and symbolic role" (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 5). The experiences of past peoples, when reimagined within their present and contemporary lives, thus turn into artistic narrative stories that guide us toward reflection and the acquisition of wisdom from past life.

Exploring the concept of the historical novel leads us naturally to the earliest definitions that accompanied the birth of this genre in its traditional form, up to the transformations that marked the narrative strategies of the contemporary novel, or what has come to be known as the new novel, which freed itself from classical writing conventions and adopted new mechanisms and techniques

supporting the conceptual evolution of the genre. This shift grants history a renewed and more dynamic context, where the novelist's skill lies in transforming from mere reporting to exploring the aesthetic dimension of historical representation in fiction.

The study will therefore examine a set of definitions reflecting critics' perspectives on the concept of the historical novel, highlighting the differences between the traditional historical novel and the new one. For instance, Georg Lukács presented several notions aligned with the traditional view of historical representation. He defined it as follows:

"The historical novel is a narrative that revolves around actual historical events in order to revive a historical period through real or imaginary characters" (Lukács, 1986, p. 11).

This definition acknowledges the role of imagination by enriching the realistic narrative fabric with fictional characters who may support the plot. It does not depart from being "a true historical novel, that is, the novel of the present lived by contemporaries as their own immediate past" (Lukács, 1986, p. 11). Lukács thus affirms the pioneering role of the novel, which provokes memory by evoking factual historical material without compromising its authenticity, except within the limits allowed by the narrative space.

Similarly, Saeed Alloush asserted that "the historical novel is a narrative based on historicity, around which are woven modern writings with an illusory cognitive dimension, often tending to establish an educational and moral function" (Alloush, 1985, p. 103).

According to these definitions, the traditional historical novel remained bound by the authority of history – adhering to its events and realities, using historical material



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for epistemic purposes, and granting limited narrative freedom to imagination, which was mostly confined to the creation of fictional characters moving within the pages without altering the course of history.

With the development of the genre, however, the purpose of historical recall shifted from that of the traditional mode. The novelist's aim was no longer mere instruction and education, but rather to "reproduce the historical discourse fictionally within contemporary contexts that do not contradict the fundamental premises of the historical discourse – in an attempt to complete the historical scene from the author's perspective, whether through denunciation or anticipation" (Ech-Chamali, 2006, p. 18).

This new artistic approach directed the novel toward literariness, distancing it from strict adherence to historical events while employing them for aesthetic purposes. As Al-'Ālam observed, "the historical novel did not arise from a void; rather, it is the product of prevailing social, cultural, and existential realities – a product expressed through the language of imagination, not through mere replication or direct reflection" (Al-'Ālam, 1994, p. 13).

Hence, historical engagement is manifested narratively, as the novel – being a linguistic and fictional text – can adapt to the ideologies and references the author seeks to convey through linguistic textures, enriched by the key components of the novel such as time, space, and character, which guide and shape narration. In this sense, the new novel has become "an imagined history with a temporality distinct from objective history – the novel has become creative history" (Al-'Ālam, 1994, p. 16). It has thus freed itself from the authority of history, no longer governed by its factuality, but

rather exploring the truth of narration born from the act of writing connected to past epochs.

Consequently, the novel's engagement with history does not mean that any narrative incorporating real events is automatically a historical novel. Its representation of history may not correspond to factual reality; instead, it treats history as a continuing material, rebuilt in ways that serve the author's thought and aspirations – often questioning history and probing the unsaid and the hidden.

In conclusion, this study finds that the concept of the historical novel lies in its being a fictional narrative representation based on historical engagement enriched by suppressed historical truths, which the writer employs and highlights through symbolism and suggestion, leading to a fusion between history and fiction.

2. Representations of the Historical in the Novel *Sardiyyat al-Dolmen*

Throughout the course of the contemporary Algerian novel, many historical events and facts have been selected, relying on profound human experiences lived by people on this land. Algeria's historical journey is rich with events that extend deep into the past.

The novel *Sardiyyat al-Dolmen* by Aissa Aissaoui transports the reader to decisive periods in Algerian history. What stands out is that, in its revival of historical material, the narrative takes two paths: it employs verifiable historical facts recorded in historical works, while also resorting to historical imagination to freely manage these events. This creative liberty enables the author to convey specific ideas to the reader without being bound by the rigidity of documentation.



2.1. The Historical Reality:

A close reading of the novel reveals that the author constructed his narrative upon a series of historical events and facts related to Algeria. The novelist engages artistically with history through narrative techniques and storytelling. The novel's subject matter recalls various historical eras experienced by Algerian society—from prehistoric times, through the War of Liberation, to the dark decade of the 1990s, which left a deep historical wound.

Aissa Aissaoui situates the events in the city of Sigus , located in eastern Algeria, seeking to employ its local historical truths. He portrays Algeria's tragedy in its multiple forms, turning this city into a locus of dread—delving into the collective memory's wounds and excavating Algerian history through an intellectual project concerned with national identity.

The events recalled in the novel are completed past occurrences linked to Algeria's history. The purpose of employing them is to extract lessons and highlight the ideological conflicts that accompanied the early years of independence—from the summer of 1962 up to the era of political pluralism and the ensuing tragedy of the Black Decade during the 1990s.

Accordingly, the novel chronicles two decisive stages in Algerian twentieth-century history. The writer is deeply concerned with anchoring these events to place. This place takes over the narrative space, becoming the true protagonist. From the very beginning, the text investigates how Sigus might survive those historical collapses and be revived. Thus, the city's features are drawn through its

inhabitants—since human beings embody the essence of time itself (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 60).

Evoking place here expresses the author's attitude toward this city, which bore witness to grand historical experiences. Sigus appears as a city burdened with pain and tragedy, buried beneath stone tombs. The place thus becomes a space of movement and a workshop of vision, "where the features of society and its ideas take shape through the interaction between individuals and place" (Al-Qa'oud, 2010, p. 422). The novel's narrative threads weave the journey of this city through history, grounded in well-known historical references—even though the text does not explicitly cite historical documents or direct sources, except for allusions to real events, such as the Battle of Mount Qaryoun in February 1958.

The author seems to leave room for the reader to dive into the depths of history in search of the seven swans and their blue river. This dreamlike space "tells the story of a people who do not sleep, a people shared by civilizations—from the time of the Dolmen to the time of the Revolution" (Aissaoui, 2020, p. 6). This means that the city's history is presented to the reader from multiple and distant temporal angles, against a spatial backdrop nourished by past events.

The cover of the novel itself refers to prehistory through two key paratexts: the title, which contains the word Dolmen, and the central image illustrating it. The dolmen—a megalithic tomb—represents "one of the civilizational marks expressing human thought at a particular stage of its evolution" (Ghanem et al., 2006, p. 51). These tombs narrate the historicity of Sigus by linking past and present, as though the tombs mirror the novel's temporal setting centered on the tragedy of death. The narrative celebrates



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death, giving it voice, and understands that these graves are the gateway to restoring life to a city rooted deep in history. The novel thus builds upon a memory whose reference point is the cemetery, symbolizing “the unity of place, which in turn signifies the unity of a nation’s destiny and expectations” (Darraj, 2004, p. 243).

Therefore, the relationship between the novel and the city’s history is not superficial but rather grounded in historical substance that conveys the author’s stance toward specific eras summarizing Algeria’s post-independence history. The novel’s subtitle, *A Witness to the Assassination of History*, underscores this—since the term assassination implies an unjust death in which the victim has no right to defend himself. Yet, for the novelist, what is being assassinated is not man, but the history of man himself.

Thus, the obsession with death and the fear of it dominate this narrative, turning death into the historical document within which the events and characters move.

The two central events around which the novel revolves both concern death—particularly those following the Ceasefire Agreement with the French colonizer, and the conflicting visions among the leaders of the War of Liberation after independence.

The motif of death intensifies again in the 1990s with the violence of armed groups against fellow citizens, plunging Algeria into decay and deep frustration. The novel confronts this darkness, capturing the city’s inner turmoil. With its symbolic heritage of the dolmen tombs, Sigus becomes a city of tragedies, as if “no longer part of history – for there is no other means but words to reconstruct an image of the places of the past” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 61). The novel thus

seeks to revive a city emerging from the memory of its author – one who takes pride in Sigus 's revolutionary past and its fierce resistance to colonization, while attempting to erase the memory of the bloody decade that celebrated death and scarred his generation.

3. Representations of the Historical in the Novel *Sardiyyat al-Dolmen*

Throughout the course of the contemporary Algerian novel, numerous events and incidents in Algeria's history have been selected, relying on the deep human experiences lived by the people of this land. The historical journey of Algeria is rich with events that extend as far back as its ancient past.

The novel *Sardiyyat al-Dolmen* by Aissa Aissaoui transports the reader to decisive periods in Algerian history. What draws attention, however, is that this narrative work, in its reanimation of historical data, follows two paths: it employs historically verified facts documented in historical works, and at the same time resorts to historical imagination to allow the author freedom in managing events, as there are no restrictions limiting the writer who wishes to convey certain ideas to the reader.

3.1. Historical Truth:

Anyone who reads the novel will notice that the novelist builds his story upon a set of historical events and incidents connected to Algeria. The novelist operates narratively by embodying history, relying on narration and its techniques. The subject and content of the novel take memory back to various periods lived by Algerian society – from the dawn of history, through the great liberation revolution, and ending



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with the 1990s and the so-called “Black Decade,” during which a deep historical wound was carved.

Aissa Aissaoui takes the city of Sigus , located in eastern Algeria, as the setting for these events, attempting to employ local historical truths. He addresses the tragedy of Algeria in its different forms. This city thus becomes a place of dread, as he bases his narrative on excavating the tragedies of memory and delving into Algerian history through an intellectual project that investigates national identity.

The events recalled in the novel are completed events tied to Algeria’s past. The purpose of employing them is to extract lessons and remind readers of the ideological conflicts that accompanied the early years of Algeria’s independence—beginning in the summer of 1962 and leading up to the era of political pluralism and the tragedy of the “Black Decade” during the 1990s.

Based on what precedes, the novel chronicles two decisive periods in Algeria’s twentieth-century history. The writer was keen on linking these events to their spatial setting, which managed to dominate the narrative space and take on the central role in the story. From the very beginning, this text explores how the city of Sigus survived those historical derailments and how life could be restored to it. The features of the city thus emerge through the people who lived in it, for “human beings are the summary of the time that was” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 60).

The evocation of place expresses the writer’s stance toward this city, which once held great historical experiences. Sigus appears as a city burdened with tragedies and pain, buried beneath those stone graves. “The place emerges as a space of movement and a factory of

vision, where the features and thoughts of society crystallize through the interaction between individuals and their environment” (Al-Qa’oud, 2010, p. 422). The narrative threads of the novel weave the journey of this city through history, starting from known historical references—even if the novel does not explicitly state its reliance on historical sources or quotations from documented books, except for a few hints to real events such as the Battle of Mount Qarioun in February 1958.

Perhaps the writer intentionally leaves room for the reader to delve deep into history in search of “those seven swans and their blue river.” This dreamlike space “tells the story of a people who do not sleep, a people divided by civilizations—from the era of the Dolmen to the time of the Revolution” (Aissaoui, 2020, p. 6). This means that the history of this city appears to the reader from multiple, distant historical angles, all nourished by past events.

The cover of the novel refers to the prehistoric era through two main thresholds: the title, which includes the word Dolmen, and the central image on the cover. The Dolmen is a tomb—“one of the civilizational traces that express human thought at a certain stage of its evolution” (Ghanem et al., 2006, p. 51). These tombs narrate the historicity of the city of Sigus by linking the present to the past, as if the graves mirror the time of the novel’s events, which revolve around the tragedy of death.

The novel celebrates death, raising its voice, recognizing that those tombs are an entryway to reviving this ancient city. The narrative is built upon a memory rooted in the cemetery, which “suggests the unity of place that symbolizes the unity of the nation’s destiny and expectations” (Darraj, 2004, p. 243).



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Thus, the relationship between the novel and the city's history is not a passing one but rather founded upon historical material that reflects the author's stance toward certain historical eras summarizing Algeria's post-independence history. Especially as the novel's subtitle, *A Witness to the Assassination of History*, celebrates the act of death—the term “assassination” here denotes a forced, unjust death, where the dead have no right to defend themselves. The assassination, for the novelist, does not concern the human being but rather the history of that human being.

Consequently, the obsession with death and fear of it dominates the text; death becomes the historical document within which the novel's events and characters move.

The two major events around which the novel revolves are tied to the act of death—particularly the events that occurred in Algeria after the ceasefire agreement with the oppressive colonizer, and the differing visions that followed independence among the leaders of the great liberation revolution.

The symbolism of death intensifies during the 1990s, amid the violence of armed groups against the sons of the same nation. Despair and deep feelings of failure overshadow Algeria. The novel resists this darkness, portraying the confusion within the soul of the city. Sigus , with its symbolic historical heritage (the Dolmen tombs), becomes a city of tragedies and calamities – as if it “no longer remains a part of history, for there is no other means but words to reconstruct the image of the places of the past” (Ibrahim, 2011, p. 61).

The novel seeks to revive a city emerging from the memory of the novelist, who takes pride in Sigus 's revolutionary spirit and its fierce resistance to the colonizer. He also attempts to erase the period of the "Red Decade," that bloody and death-laden era he personally lived through, capturing fragments of what clung to his memory.

3.2. Narrative Imagination and the Use of Historical Memory

The fear of death's catastrophe stands as witness to Algeria's ordeals. The novelist Aissa Aissaoui takes the reader through seventeen narratives that lead into worlds filled with scenes of death, shaping the city's crisis and tragedy, for "the image of death has become a lived reality that happens publicly, as if it were something ordinary, despite all its horror and savagery that make bodies shiver" (Darraj, 2004, p. 242). Here, the narrative discourse intersects with the historical one; both denounce a deadly authority and recall people who have lost their former time and fallen into the trash of history—he even describes them as "the adulterers of history." He dreams of a desired time when the course of history would return to its rightful destiny before the journey of the seven swans:

"It was the dream of the seven swans to trace their November journey while wearing on their necks a necklace of a five-pointed star and a crescent filled with the light of peace" (Aissaoui, 2020, p. 10).

The "November path" refers to the course of the Liberation Revolution that united the wings of the national movement in one autumn under its banner, rejoicing in the outbreak of a revolution seeking peace, freedom, and the recovery of the land. This revolution ignited Algeria's long



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history of anti-colonial struggle. Yet the course of the “seven years of summer,” starting from 1962, changed due to disputes among the revolution’s leaders—specifically between members of the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic and the General Staff—over the designation of the new political leadership that would govern Algeria after independence:

“Yes, all those who joined the journey of the seven swans at the dawn of the sixties deviated from the course of the journey; invisible forces had infiltrated the flock and changed its direction” (Aissaoui, 2020, p. 11).

The journey of these swans was founded upon following the traces of revolutionary unity, gathering the fragments, healing hearts, and mending spirits.

Aissa Aissaoui’s openness to historical facts concerning the disagreements among leaders—embodied in reality in the 1962 Summer Crisis, historically known as the Tripoli Charter, held in the Libyan capital at the end of May and beginning of June—is significant, for it “was one of the most decisive events in the history of the Liberation Revolution because it occurred during the transition from the course of the revolution toward independence and the reconstruction of the national state upon the ruins of the colonial system” (Ibn Saadi, 2021, p. 398). After the failure of the Tripoli Conference, Algeria nearly fell into a severe crisis, which led the interior revolutionary leaders to call for a meeting to reunite Algerians. “The situation grew increasingly tense until one of the parties relinquished power to the other after massive demonstrations in the streets of the capital during August and September, chanting ‘Seven Years of Blessings’” (Ibn Saadi, 2021, p. 422).

Thus, the novel is built upon historical material presented according to the rules of imaginative narrative writing, making it distinct from factual historical discourse. The author resorted to symbolism to express this critical stage of Algerian history: “Historical evocation—even with the presence of imagination—may serve to suggest the historicity of what the novelist narrates” (Yaqtin, 2012, p. 165). The novel relied on several mechanisms that allowed history to appear, without binding itself to the scientific rigor of historical documentation, yet containing indicators that define the scope of this historical engagement. It bet on the journey of the seven swans as the stage that determined the historical context around which it revolves—namely, the struggle for power. Yet the wisdom and rationality of the sons of November protected Algeria from the sedition of the 1960s.

The novelist dispensed with realistic characters; the figures framing this tale are imaginary. As previously mentioned, the place itself dominates the frameworks of historical memory. The novel does not narrate the factual existence of characters but the true existence of place, which moves in continuous historical motion—a spiral movement that remains present and enduring. It recounts the truth of the historical place. When the author recalls events, he recalls them through the city of the Dolmen (Sigus), through its swans and its blue river, where these swans symbolize the path of the seven years of the Liberation Revolution, whose course nearly changed during one summer.



4. The writer continues to invest historical memory within the narrative text, declaring openly:

“How similar today is to yesterday—history repeats itself! And what is strange about history is that they practice these follies and filth upon the villagers living at the foot of the mountain, slaughtering their sons and taking their women captive before their very eyes” (Aissaoui, 2020, p. 27).

Algeria of the 1990s was struck by a bloody crisis that consumed everything over a decade. The novel recounts this struggle and these disillusionments. Aissa Aissaoui “selected significant events from the nation’s historical journey, relying on deep human experience and drawing upon its path filled with harsh trials, some defeats, and tragedies” (Belhiya, 2017, p. 191).

A sorrowful, tragic tone dominates the events, casting its shadow upon the novel’s characters—burdened by the nation’s sorrows yet saturated with love for it. The author “imagines that the characters and heroes of his novel live within the depths of history, without possessing an actual historical existence” (Al-Qa’oud, 2010, p. 347). Characters such as Si Ammar, Si Bouarrouj, El-Hajj Mihoubi, and Si El-Arbi are fictional beings breathing from the fragrance of the history of the city of the Dolmen—majestic like the stone graves that stand as witnesses of history. Despite the crises, they remain steadfast, clinging to their existence: “This civilizational heritage of the Algerian nation, with its depth and richness, grants it a saturation with the self-identity of this nation that resisted all forms of tyranny” (Belhiya, 2017, p. 185).

The Black Decade crisis occupies the novel’s temporal space, for unraveling the knot of the story relates to the act

of death—specifically the character of Si Bouarrouj, the revolutionary who held an important position in independent Algeria and was assassinated by armed groups hiding in the city’s mountains and caves—mountains rich with their symbols of revolutionary resistance to colonialism.

In Algerian history, the mountain is what forged the nation’s glory. Mountains such as Aurès, Fratas, and Qarioun stand as testimonies of freedom. Yet during the Black Decade, they turned into spaces of terror and darkness:

“This mountain, until recently in our blessed revolution, was the impregnable fortress and the majestic stronghold of the revolutionaries, and now it has turned into a black spot and into centers of darkness and fire” (Aissaoui, 2020, p. 26).

This shifting reality—hidden behind the novel’s imaginative surface—expresses the historical derailment Algeria underwent during the 1990s, which nearly swept away the efforts of the sons of November. Yet the vigilance of the fortress’s leaders and their determination to protect it restored the course of the blue river, whose waters revived life with the return of the seven swans to its banks:

“The seven swans returned from their long journey carrying in their necks the banners of victory. There remained no black spot for the bats of darkness. The years of embers were gone, and the martyrs returned carrying the dreams of our remains” (Aissaoui, 2020, p. 105).

History thus managed to fulfill the promises it once made, as it still possesses the power to correct the path. The bats of darkness could not undermine the principles of the



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Liberation Revolution, which proclaimed the birth of a new Algeria, fragrant with the scent and essence of history.

Conclusion

It seems that the novelist Aissa Aissaoui has attempted to chronicle several historical milestones through the lens of narrative imagination, recalling the painful periods experienced by the Algerian people – periods during which the nation was on the brink of fragmentation and disunity, were it not for the vigilance of the falcon-eyed guardians protecting the walls of the historical fortress. It was there that the “assassination of history” was proclaimed, yet the place – the City of Dolmen, deeply rooted in history – refused to surrender to the savagery of time and continued to resist in order to preserve its revolutionary glory.

Accordingly, this study concludes that the novel is a call to rewrite and revive history, particularly those episodes that have been concealed within the implications and metaphors of narrative language.

The novel *Sardiyyat al-Dolmen* is not a historical novel in the strict sense of the term, but rather a work that evokes the historical discourse intertwined with the narrative discourse to express reality during two decisive phases of Algeria’s history. Through it, the novelist appears exhilarated by Algeria’s enduring capacity for triumph despite the great challenges it faces. He thus celebrates the recovery of history and the resilience of a land of civilizations that refuses to succumb to defeat. Like the phoenix, it rises from its ashes after the “years of embers” that time stole from the spring of

its blossoms. The place has now been purified from the stench of the bats and is once again perfumed with the musk of the loyal guardians watching over the fortress's shadows.

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