

Transformations of Narrative Language in the Digital Novel the Novel "Chat" by Muhammad Sanajlah as a Model

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Abstract:

The last two decades have witnessed radical transformations in the structure of narrative fiction, resulting from rapid technological development and the influence of digital media on literature. The digital novel has emerged as a new literary genre that utilises techniques of interactivity, hypertextuality, and multimedia to create a distinct narrative experience. The novel "Chat" by the novelist Muhammad Sanajlah is considered one of the most prominent Arab models that invested in these possibilities, representing a landmark in the history of contemporary Arab narrative. This study aims to analyse the transformations that have affected narrative language in this novel, focusing on linguistic deviations, hypertextual structure, and interactivity, based on theoretical references from digital narratology and reception theory.

Keywords: Transformations, Narrative Language, Digital Narrative, Linguistic Deviation, Hypertextual Structure, Interactivity.

Introduction:

The digital revolution has brought about a radical transformation in the concept of the novel and its narrative tools, leading to the emergence of what is known as the "digital novel" (or the "interactive novel"). Narrative is no longer confined to paper pages, progressing linearly from beginning to end; rather, it has become a virtual world open to countless possibilities. Digital narrative redefines the role of the reader, who has shifted from a passive recipient to an active participant in the creation of meaning and the shaping of the plot's course. This narrative form stems from postmodern theories that undermine the idea of a single truth and a univocal perspective, instead presenting branching worlds and polyphonic voices. This article proceeds from a problematic that seeks to explore the nature of this new literary genre, its innovative narrative techniques, and the aesthetic and hermeneutic challenges posed by linguistic transformations in digital narrative. All of this is achieved by presenting an analysis of the radical transformations brought about by Muhammad Sanajlah's novel "Chat" on the levels of language and discourse, focusing on direct textual evidence that embodies these transformations, and examining how these transformations contributed to shaping a critical vision of the Arab reality in the age of globalisation and digitalisation.

1. The Functional Deviation of Language in Narrative

1.1. Narrative Language: From Natural Language to Creative Language:

Discussing the creative dimension of narrative language takes on a character distinct from the traditional concept that confines it within the framework of social communication. In the space of narrative, language is liberated from its direct informative constraints to open up to new existential horizons, where it is "not merely a means or an expressive tool serving a specific thematic goal and aspiring towards it, but rather a world in itself, intensely fused with the world of the psyche and perception. It is the space of words through which things come into existence." (Hassan Ibrahim Ahmed, 2009, p. 109). It is not limited to being an expressive tool serving a particular content, but rather constitutes a self-sufficient universe intertwined with the world of consciousness and perception, a space where things are born through the creative energy of words.

This fundamental deviation elevates narrative language above its ordinary communicative level, through its dialogue with the depths of the human psyche via mechanisms of suggestion and allusion, transporting it to imaginary worlds. "The literary use of language, as a distinguished and unique level, makes language transcend the informative function towards the aesthetic, affective, or suggestive function. Hence, narrative language does not differ from natural language in kind, but in quality." (Ahmed Youssef Ali, 1415 AH, p. 32). Consequently, it can only be penetrated through the specific linguistic system imposed by literary creativity, where language shifts from its informative function to the aesthetic, suggestive function, making the difference between narrative language and natural language a qualitative, not a generic, one.

This language is not preoccupied with transmitting reality or literally mimicking it; "The literary use of language, as a distinguished and unique level, makes language transcend the informative function towards the aesthetic, affective, or suggestive function. Hence, narrative language does not differ from natural language in kind, but in quality." (Ahmed Youssef Ali, 1415 AH, p. 32), but rather expresses its own vision of things, rendering reality subordinate to it, reshaping and recomposing it according to a liberated artistic vision. This creative deviation creates in the recipient a state of aesthetic wonder that transcends mere information exchange, establishing an existential dialogue with the text.

1.2. The Dialectic of Creator and Language: The Birth Pangs of Creativity

The process of language's transformation from its natural level to the creative level witnesses a dialectical struggle between the creator and his expressive tools, where the writer seeks "to generate language from language through language, and seeks to outwit the language within him to express the truth that has no external existence." (Mohamed Tahrici, 2007, p. 136). It is the animation of language in unfamiliar ways, generating new connotations for vocabulary through an internal creative process in search of the invisible truth.

This problem is closely linked to the art of the novel, in which language constitutes "the essential element in its construction and the formation of its artistic world, alongside its other structural elements—characters, space, time structure, narrative vision, and events—from which the literary work is composed. Through language, characters speak, events unfold, the environment becomes clear, and the reader recognises the nature of the experience the writer expresses." (Abdel Rahim Hamdan, 2008, p. 104). It is the core element in shaping its artistic

world alongside characters, space, and time, where events unfold and visions become clear through the interaction of language with the text's components.

The creator faces a great challenge in choosing the appropriate linguistic pattern to build his narrative text, "carrying the burden of writing about the self and the human condition, which places him in a state of struggle and chaos with himself, where language becomes both transmitter and transmitted, a means and an end to embody a human experience fraught with contradictions and complexities, requiring linguistic and cognitive awareness of methods of expression and means of aesthetic and artistic formation based on crashing into the snares of language, tearing apart many threads of its sanctity and majestic fabric, due to this reckless drive that does not care about its venerableness, awe, or purity." (Mona Jamiyat, 2016, p. 17). Language is transformed into both a means and an end simultaneously, carrying the concerns of the self and human existence through an existential struggle with linguistic material that moves from the position of transmitter to that of the transmitted, necessitating a deep awareness of the mechanisms of aesthetic formation. This dialectical relationship produces a hybrid narrative language, oscillating between the real and the imagined to create new semantic dimensions.

1.3 .Narrative Language and Stylistic Multiplicity:

Narrative language cannot be confined to ready-made patterns due to its pluralistic nature that distinguishes the novel genre. The novel is a "phenomenon that is multiple in its styles, diverse in its speech patterns, varied in its voices. The researcher encounters several heterogeneous stylistic units, sometimes existing at different linguistic levels and subject to different stylistic laws." (Mikhail Bakhtin, 1988, p. 09). The novelistic discourse is characterised by its ability to encompass "the author's narration, the narration of characters and witnesses, description of scenes, nature, places, and rare objects, elaborate descriptions, digressions aiming to complete philosophical and ethical themes, as well as aphorisms and imagined tales." (Faisal Darraj, 1999, p. 140). It includes self-narration, character dialogue, detailed description, philosophical digressions, and imagined narratives, creating a complex linguistic fabric that requires supreme skill. "Language is harmony, concord, and system, and narrative language is a wonderful weaving that dazzles and enchants. The great writer is the one who knows how to be gentle with his language so that it distributes itself across levels, but without making his reader feel a misalignment in the levels within the weaving of his language." (Abdelmalek Mertad, 2002, p. 111). This requires a distribution of linguistic levels without causing an imbalance in the narrative structure.

The creative task becomes more complex with the shift from the classical novel, which "takes reality as its base, but presents it as it is. Based on this, it drew its concepts and techniques until they became ready-made templates, fixed laws, and an undeniable phenomenon in novelistic storytelling." (Mona Jamiyat, 2016, p. 17), as it attempts to present reality as it is through ready-made templates, to the modern novel, where "events have become viewable through a number of neutral mirrors and reflectors, and the modern narrator has begun to pay less attention to events and increase talk and ideas until the modern novel has become sayings and ideas." (Abdel Rahim El-Kurdi, 2006, p. 107). It "relies on the multiplicity of visions and the dismantling of the authority of the traditional narrator".

This historical deviation imposes on narrative language "the use of modern means that have replaced old propagandistic means, such as cinematic techniques in presentation, methods of television and journalistic propaganda, and innovative methods in theatrical direction, and so on." (Abdel Rahim El-Kurdi, 2006, p. 171). This is achieved by keeping pace with modern techniques in cinematic presentation and theatrical direction, for example, which raises the ceiling of artistic challenges and broadens the horizons of literary criticism.

2 .Narrative Transformations in the Digital Novel

The digital novel is fundamentally different from the traditional novel in that it is an "unstable text" subject to change, relying on multimedia and interactive techniques. Researchers define it as "a text created or read on a computer, which cannot be printed without losing its essential interactive or multimedia elements." (Landon, 1997, p. 15). Critics identify several basic types of digital novels, most notably: "hypertext," which relies on links allowing the reader to choose different reading paths, and the "interactive novel," which integrates elements from video games where the reader becomes a player who effectively influences the plot and its ending (Hayles, 2008, p. 3).

Critic Espen Aarseth (1997) refers to this type using the term "cybertext," affirming that "the communicative process here is not limited to transmission from a sender to a receiver; rather, it is a complex system in which the elements of the text, the medium, and the reader interact together in feedback loops. In this system, the reader becomes a participant or a user, not a traditional reader." (Aarseth, 1997, p 21). This shift ends the author's absolute authority over the text and "opens the door to 'interpretive multiplicity' (polysemy), where there is no single correct or final reading of the text; rather, each reading is a unique re-formation of it." (Murray, 1997, p 152).

2.1 .Techniques of Digital Narrative and Their Impact on Novelistic Structure

Digital narrative requires a set of innovative techniques that undermine the traditional linear structure of the novel. The most prominent of these techniques is "hypertext," which transforms the text into a network of "lexias" connected by electronic links. This structure resembles a labyrinth in which the reader wanders, achieving what Janet Murray called the "procedural plot," a computer-generated plot that responds to the reader's choices (Murray, 1997, p 187).

Another essential technique is "multimediality," where the linguistic text is no longer the sole carrier of meaning. "The still and moving image, sound, music, and video clips enter to become narrative elements equivalent to words, working together to create an immersive experience for the reader." (Hayles, 2008, p 44). This shift from literature to multimedia expands the boundaries of literary expression, but at the same time raises a question about the nature of literature itself and the future of the written word in the age of the dominance of image and sound.

In addition, many digital novels rely on "artificial intelligence" to create what is called "generative literature," "where a computer program dynamically and non-repetitively generates parts of the text or its events in each reading session." (Ryan, 2015, p 210). This technique pushes the uniqueness of each reading experience to its furthest extent and embodies the idea that the text is an event, not a fixed object.

2.2 .Hermeneutics and the Problematic of Reception in Digital Narrative

Digital narrative poses a set of profound challenges to traditional literary theory and criticism, particularly concerning the process of interpretation (hermeneutics) and the reception of the text. "The first challenge lies in the 'crisis of authority'; for while the author in the traditional centrality was the sole source of meaning, meaning has now become a negotiable product between the author's (programmer's) intentions and the reader's choices and interactions. This weakens Barthes's notion of the 'death of the author' in favour of the 'birth of the reader-user'." (Gendolla & Schäfer, 2010, p 112).

The second challenge is the "problematic of textual closure," meaning "how can one evaluate a literary work that is open, incomplete, and variable by nature? How can traditional critical approaches (such as structuralism or historical criticism), which assume the existence of a fixed and stable text, be applied?" (Douglas, 2000, p 171). Criticism here becomes directed towards studying algorithms, probabilities, and the general structuring more than analysing fixed discourse.

Finally, there is a challenge concerning the pleasure of reading itself. Some critics warn that "excessive interactivity and too many choices may hinder the reader's emotional immersion in the fictional world, interrupt the sequence of events, potentially leading to distraction and weakening the dramatic impact of the story." (Ryan, 2015, p 98). While proponents argue that this style gives the reader a sense of freedom, thus deepening their connection to the text and making each reading a unique personal adventure.

3. Linguistic and Discursive Transformations in the Novel "Chat" by Muhammad Sanajlah

The novel "Chat" (2007) by the Jordanian novelist Muhammad Sanajlah represents a landmark in the trajectory of the modern Arabic novel, not only because it is experimental in its digital form, but because it carries out a genuine linguistic and discursive revolution. The novel demolished the traditional barriers between standard normative language and the dialects of daily communication, and between serious literary discourse and the transient discourse of the street and virtual space. Here, narrative is no longer a vessel for conveying imagined events; rather, it becomes a space for the collision of ideologies, dialects, and divergent expressive patterns, reflecting a state of instability and deviation experienced by contemporary man.

3.1 .Deconstructing Normative Language and Dissecting Hybrid Virtual Discourse

The novel is based on a deliberate deconstruction of standard Arabic and its replacement with a "hybrid" language reflecting the language of communication in the digital age. The novel transcended the traditional binary (Classical/Colloquial) in favour of an unprecedented linguistic mixture, blending:

a) Online Chat Language: With its English and Arabic abbreviations. For example, in the dialogues of the protagonist Nizar in chat rooms, he uses expressions like: "Yes you", "Okay", and "LOL" (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 23), reflecting the influence of the digital environment on language.

b) Egyptian Colloquial Arabic: With all its spontaneity and dynamism, especially in dialogues expressing ordinary, daily situations. For example, Nizar says in a moment of

despair: "Ana ta'ban nafsiyan wa jasad... mish 'arif ini layha fen" [I am tired psychologically and physically... I don't know where to find her] (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 45).

c) Remnants of Classical Arabic: Often appearing in a mocking or distorted manner. Official discourse, such as the language of advertisements or work reports, is presented in a false and dry manner to reveal its emptiness. For example, the description of the work environment: "He worked for a multinational company, in a sprawling desert... a life of deadly routine" (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 15).

d) The English Language: Naturally interwoven into the fabric of the Arabic sentence, reflecting the impact of linguistic globalisation. This phenomenon appears in the names of virtual characters like "Neo" and "Guevara," and in the technical terminology used in the text (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 67).

This mixture aims not only at realistic imitation but also at creating a "third language"—the language of non-belonging and the fragmented identity experienced by the younger generation caught between the Arab cultural heritage and the pressures of Western values. This hybrid language is an aesthetic response to the state of duality and linguistic alienation, where deviation from the norm becomes the norm itself.

In a scene that embodies this mixing, Nizar tries to describe his state: "Ana huna fi al-sahra'... the Desert, ya man! Wahid mithl shashat computer mafiha Internet" [I am here in the desert... the Desert, man! Alone like a computer screen with no Internet] (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 32). This short sentence combines Egyptian colloquial (ya man), English (Desert), and a technological metaphor (computer screen) to express alienation using the vocabulary of the age.

3.2. Polyphony and Discursive Fragmentation:

In the novel, the deviations are not limited to the linguistic level but extend to the discursive level, where the discourse of power in all its forms is dismantled. The novel adopts the technique of "polyphony" in an extreme way, not only through multiple characters but also through the multiple, conflicting discourses within the text's space:

a) The Discourse of Patriarchal Power: Represented by the father and the psychiatrist, presented in an artificial, formal language full of repetition and emptiness, revealing its falseness. In the psychiatric consultation scene, the doctor tells Nizar: "You must forget the past and adapt to the new reality... Reality is the only reality. Here, the mixing of languages itself exposes the emptiness of the cliché." (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 88).

b) The Discourse of Commercial Consumerist Advertising: Which invades the hero's consciousness with a seductive and illusory language, turning him into a consuming being. Advertising billboards appear within the digital text, such as: "Buy your happiness now! Unlimited pleasure in the virtual world." (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 102).

c) The Discourse of the Hero/Victim: A broken, fragmented discourse full of speculation, screaming, and curses, expressing an identity crisis and rejection. Nizar narrates: "I am lost... Who am I really? The real Nizar or the digital Nizo? Everything becomes an illusion." (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 56).

This multiplicity does not create harmony but rather creates a state of "non-dialogue" where discourses clash without meeting, reflecting the collapse of genuine communication in society. Critic Samar Radwan argues that the body in "Chat" becomes a site for the struggle of

these discourses—a sick, marginalized body that every power tries to penetrate and discipline (Samar Radwan, 2012, p. 112). The dominant discourse here is the discourse of meaninglessness, absurdity, and mockery of all certainties and grand narratives that offer ready-made interpretations of the world.

In a discussion within a chat room about the concept of freedom, discourses collide: one says, "Freedom is responsibility" (traditional ethical discourse). Another replies, "They exhausted us with this talk! Freedom means you do what you want without anyone standing in your way" (a discourse of violent rebellion). Meanwhile, Manal writes: "True freedom is being able to love" (an emotional, idealistic discourse). (Sanajlah, 2007, pp. 124-125). This collision shows the impossibility of a single truth.

3.3. Narrative Deviation and Artistic Construction as a Representation of a Crisis of Consciousness

This linguistic and discursive fragmentation is reflected in the artistic and narrative structure of the novel, which rejects the traditional linear form. The structure is distinguished by several innovative techniques:

a) Temporal Fragmentation: The time of the novel is not linear; it is an interjective psychological time, cut by the hero's mental leaps, his scattered memories, and the atemporal chat dialogues. The reader suddenly moves from a gloomy description of the desert to an enthusiastic dialogue in a chat room without clear temporal breaks (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 18).

b) Crude and Mocking Intertextuality: The novel consumes other texts and reproduces them sarcastically, from the Holy Quran and prayers to Umm Kulthum's songs and soft drink ads, in a process of "textual appropriation" reflecting the hero's alienation. In a moment of despair, Nizar repeats lines from Umm Kulthum's song "Al-Ard ya Salam" [The Land, Oh Peace] but with altered words: "Al-Sahra' ya Salam... ya rimal bila nihaya" [The Desert, Oh Peace... oh sands without end] (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 92).

c) Deviations in Typography and Visual Formatting: The use of different fonts, sizes, white spaces, and symbols (@, #) to create a visual experience that brings the text closer to a computer interface, making it a "graphic text" on the page. The novel begins with a scene of "binary digits (0/1) raining down from the top of the screen to the bottom" (Sanajlah, 2007, Introduction), affirming its digital nature from the very first moment.

These techniques are not mere formal decorations; they are a visual and fundamental representation of the crisis of consciousness. The fragmented structure reflects the mind of the shattered hero drowning in a flood of linguistic and visual stimuli imposed by the digital age without finding a unifying meaning. Thus, the novel succeeds in transforming psychological and linguistic disorder from mere subject matter into an existential narrative structure, where chaos becomes the only existing system. (Tahri, 2025, 537) Here, narrative does not just tell about the crisis; it is an embodiment of it.

In one scene, the dialogue text explodes into a visual formation:

"Nizar: Who are you???"

Manal: I am what you want me to be...

Nizar: Words... words... all words that appear on the screen and disappear...

The word 'words' appears dozens of times, in varying sizes and fonts, then dissolves one by one, leaving a black void." (Sanajlah, 2007, p. 145).

This scene not only conveys the dialogue but transforms the experiential emotions (confusion, emptiness) into a visual image with which the reader interacts sensorially.

Conclusion:

Muhammad Sanajlah's novel "Chat" was not merely a recording of a new reality; it was an anticipation of profound transformations in language, discourse, and collective consciousness. Through deconstructing normative language and creating a hybrid, fragmented discourse, it succeeded in presenting a literary form that reflects the instability experienced by contemporary man. Through its rich textual evidence, the novel depicted how Arab identity has become fragmented, battered by conflicting discourses, invaded by foreign languages, and where classical Arabic has lost its hegemony in favour of a hybrid global dialect.

"Chat" proved that linguistic and narrative experimentation is not an aesthetic luxury but a vital necessity to express the complexities of reality and its existential condition in the digital age. This novel opened the door wide to new expressive forms in Arabic literature, challenging fixed narrative traditions and embracing a creative chaos that reflects the spirit of the age. Through its linguistic fragmentation, polyphonic discourse, and unconventional narrative structure, "Chat" presented itself not only as a novelistic work but as an existential and critical stance towards a world where communication loses its lustre and words are transformed into transient digital units. Thus, it inaugurated a new phase in the relationship between literature, language, and identity in the Arab world.

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