

"I and Hayim" by Habib Al-Sayih: An Analytical Reading of Latent Cultural Codes

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Received: 11/11/2025 ; Accepted: 25/02/2026 ; Published: 17/05/2026

Abstract:

Cultural systems are a key approach in contemporary literary analysis, aiming to reveal both explicit and implicit meanings within the text. This study examines their formation and density in the novel *Ana wa Hayim* by Habib Sayeh, adopting an analytical strategy that probes underlying significations through close textual reading, thereby uncovering a network of conflicts structured by multiple cultural systems.

Keywords: Cultural systems; Signification; System; Implicit systems.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Algerian novelistic experience has demonstrated remarkable distinction, both through the pronounced cultural specificity embedded in its writing and through its ability to engage with local and global events and realities. It has responded comprehensively to the concerns, aspirations, and anxieties of the Algerian individual. Contemporary Algerian fiction has thus succeeded in asserting its presence within both literary and critical spheres after acquiring new artistic forms and entering a stage of aesthetic and modernist maturity. It has become both an archive and a reflective mirror of social reality, while simultaneously engaging with the three major taboos: history, politics, and religion. This has further enhanced the significance of the Algerian novel, rendering it a fertile field for critical inquiry and analytical application, as well as a valuable corpus for scholarly investigation.

Cultural criticism is among the most prominent modern critical approaches that have challenged conventional constraints and sought openness to the Other. Moving beyond the condensed aesthetics contained within texts, it investigates the concealed margins hidden beneath the mantle of beauty. This perspective prompted the present study to explore the implicit cultural patterns embedded in the contemporary Algerian novel. For this purpose, the novel *Ana wa Hayim (Me and Hayim)* by Habib Sayeh was selected, owing to the latent implications suggested by its title particularly the choice of the name "Hayim," the real background underlying this choice, and the relationship between the narrative text and its title. Moreover, the novel's receipt of the Katara Prize for Arabic Novel in 2019 further stimulated interest in examining its underlying implicit structures.

2. System

The concept of *system* is among the most widely circulated terms in the fields of cultural and critical studies, having attracted considerable attention from scholars and researchers across diverse disciplines. Its meanings have varied and multiplied both linguistically and terminologically. Returning to its lexical roots, the term denotes that which proceeds according to a unified and general order among things. One may say that things are arranged in relation

to one another, or that two matters are coordinated and connected. It also refers to speech organized according to a single pattern, and to discourse characterized by rhythmic or balanced expression (Ibn Manzur, 1917, p. 179).

Terminologically, definitions of *system* have proliferated in accordance with differing theoretical orientations and intellectual premises. In general, a system may be understood as a set of coherent and dynamically integrated parts, functionally equivalent and rhythmically harmonious. Accordingly, each critic defines the concept in light of their own background and methodological assumptions. Nevertheless, most definitions converge on the idea that a system is grounded in integration and in elements arranged sequentially within a unified course.

Among the most prominent Western theorists concerned with the notion of system is Ferdinand de Saussure, who defines it as “those linguistic elements that acquire their value through their relations with one another rather than in isolation.” (Hamouda, 1998, p. 184).

This implies that linguistic elements derive their value and distinctiveness only through the coherence and interdependence of their mutual relations. No linguistic utterance carries meaning independently of the signified units that correspond to it; rather, meaning emerges within a structured systemic framework governing the organization of elements through grammatical, morphological, and semantic relations.

Accordingly, in Western critical thought, the concept of system is intrinsically linked to the elements constituting linguistic structure through an interconnected network of semantic and linguistic relations.

Within the same framework, Arab critics have devoted particular attention to the concept of cultural criticism in general and to the notion of the pattern in particular. The Moroccan critic Mohammed Meftah offers a definition of the pattern, stating that, regardless of the variations in its definitions, it consists of a set of elements or parts that are interconnected and mutually related so as to form a coherent organization directed toward a specific purpose. Such a formulation, in turn, gives rise to numerous outcomes (Meftah, 2000, p. 49).

Similarly, the Saudi critic Abdullah Al-Ghadhami regards the pattern as a fundamental pillar of his critical project. He raises a series of questions: What is the cultural pattern? How do we read it? How do we distinguish it from other patterns?

Through these three questions, Al-Ghadhami attempts to delineate the concept of the pattern, as well as its role and function within discourse. He notes that the term “pattern” is frequently employed in both public and private discourse and has become so widespread in writing that its semantic precision is often distorted. At its simplest, it may denote that which follows a single order, as defined in *Al-Mu‘jam Al-Wasit*. It may also be used synonymously with the notion of “structure” or “system,” in accordance with Saussurean terminology (Meftah, 2000, p. 76).

This indicates that the pattern functions as a linguistic container that defines and frames structures despite the diversity of their projects, thereby establishing linguistic, semantic, and discursive boundaries that differentiate themselves within a unified textual system.

3. Culture

Culture is among the most complex terms, intersecting with numerous related concepts, and it is one of the most widely used notions in contemporary life. The concept of culture

possesses an elusive and fluid nature, as it emerges from the interaction between individual and collective perceptions of science, knowledge, and the various domains of life.

Accordingly, it is necessary to address the definition of culture, given that it constitutes the essence of cultural criticism and a central focus of this study, which examines the mechanisms and concepts forming the strategy of cultural criticism an approach concerned with what lies beyond the lines and what the text conceals. From both linguistic and terminological perspectives, culture is a multifaceted concept that may be described as follows:

4. Linguistically:

If we return to the classical Arabic lexicons in search of the concept of culture, we find that *Lisān al-‘Arab* defines the root *thaqafa* as denoting quickness in learning. Ibn Durayd states: “I mastered the thing” (*thaqiftu al-shay’*) meaning I became proficient in it. In the Hadith of the Hijra, the phrase “a perceptive and intelligent boy” (*ghulām laqin thaqif*) refers to one endowed with discernment and intelligence, firmly knowledgeable about what is required of him (Ibn Manzur, 1917, p. 19).

Thus, the concept of culture in its linguistic sense is associated with knowledge, insight, intelligence, and the capacity for rapid learning and comprehension.

5. Terminologically:

Definitions of culture have proliferated and diverged according to the perspectives of researchers and critics, as well as their intellectual and ideological orientations. Consequently, formulating a comprehensive definition of “culture” remains a complex and somewhat problematic endeavor. The concept continues to be marked by a degree of ambiguity and is regarded by many thinkers and philosophers as one of the most intricate intellectual issues. This complexity stems from the diversity of viewpoints, the multiplicity of theoretical premises, and the expansive nature of culture itself, as it is intrinsically connected to all dimensions of human life. For this reason, identifying a single, universally accepted definition remains difficult.

Culture has been defined as “the set of beliefs, values, and norms accepted and observed by members of society, as well as the guiding power and authority that shapes social behavior, determines individuals’ perceptions of themselves and of the surrounding world. No society can progress and prosper until it recognizes the cultural components that govern it, structure its modes of thought, define its priorities, and direct its activities.” (Chekalov & Kondrashov, 2014, p. 08).

This implies that culture is acquired by the individual within society through a system of beliefs, values, and norms. Cultural components therefore constitute the decisive factors underlying the progress and prosperity of societies.

Culture has also been understood, in the anthropological sense, as the way of life practiced by any society, encompassing its traditions, customs, social conventions, history, beliefs, values, interests, intellectual and emotional orientations, patterns of affinity or aversion, attitudes toward the past and present, and visions of the future (Chekalov & Kondrashov, 2014, pp. 08-09).

From an anthropological perspective, culture is understood as the reservoir into which members of society channel their ideas, efforts, and emotions across generations. It constitutes

the acquired disposition that individuals inherit from their society from birth, encompassing customs, traditions, norms, and values transmitted from one generation to the next.

In *Primitive Culture*, Edward Burnett Tylor defines culture as “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” (Chekalov & Kondrashov, 2014, p. 19). Tylor thus locates culture within the domains of knowledge, customs, beliefs, arts, and the full range of practices and traditions passed from one individual to another.

Similarly, in his work *Culture*, Raymond Williams argues that culture is “a signifying system through which a particular social order is communicated, reproduced, experienced, and explored.” For Williams, culture is therefore a symbolic system shaped by the social order, one that enables communication among individuals and communities while ensuring processes of production, coexistence, and mutual understanding (Al-Ruwaili & Al-Bazei, 2002, p. 104).

John Dewey likewise defines culture as “the outcome of the interaction between human beings and their environment.” (Arif, p. 21) In this sense, culture emerges as the product of intellectual and social exchange among members of the same human community; it is the dynamic synthesis generated through the interaction of individuals with their society and surroundings.

These definitions of culture all of which emerged within Western thought were surveyed by Clyde Kluckhohn in 1952, when he identified more than 124 definitions of the concept. These ranged from viewing culture as learned behavior, to ideas residing in the mind, a logical construct, a statistical fiction, a mechanism of self-defense, an abstraction from behavior, a substitute religion in its role of improving life, or even a utopian promise of self-realization and harmony among groups (Arif, p. 22). Through this broad synthesis, he sought to encompass the concept of culture and the principal meanings that define its essence, boundaries, nature, and reality.

Having examined the Western conceptualizations of culture, it is equally important to acknowledge the flourishing and expansion of cultural discourse in the Arab world, particularly during the modern period with the rise of translation movements. During this era, Arabic terms were selected and detached from their original roots in order to replace foreign expressions, convey their semantic implications, and, at times, marginalize established Arabic meanings (Arif, p. 26).

When discussing the term *culture* after its translation into Arabic, one encounters a degree of semantic overlap and ambiguity, as it was rendered through two non-equivalent terms: *thaqāfa* (culture) and *ḥadāra* (civilization). This issue was highlighted by Salama Moussa, who is considered among the first to popularize the Arabic usage of the term as an equivalent of *culture* (Arif, p. 27). He states: “I was the first to disseminate the word *thaqāfa* in modern Arabic literature, though I did not coin it myself; rather, I borrowed it from Ibn Khaldun, having found him using it in a sense similar to the word *culture* common in European literature.” (Arif, p. 27).

In the same context, the Algerian thinker Malek Bennabi addresses this concept in his book *The Problem of Culture*, linking its emergence to European society. According to his view, Europe served as the channel through which the term entered the Arab world. No trace of the concept, in its modern sense, can be found during the Umayyad or Abbasid periods, nor in the writings of Ibn Khaldun, who is regarded as the foremost reference in medieval

sociology. Although no explicit works dealing with culture as a distinct concept appeared in those eras, they were nevertheless marked by remarkable development and flourishing civilization. Consequently, the term *culture* came to be adopted as the Arabic equivalent of the foreign word *culture* (Bennabi, 2000, pp. 20-24).

Bennabi defines culture as “the set of moral qualities and social values that influence the individual from birth and unconsciously become the bond linking one’s behavior to the mode of life prevailing in the environment into which one is born.” (Bennabi, 2000, p. 74).

From Bennabi’s conception, culture may be understood as a body of ethical principles and social values acquired by the individual from society from the earliest stages of life. These values gradually become authentic and deeply rooted, manifesting themselves in behavior, conduct, and patterns of interaction with others. They therefore constitute a fundamental axis in the formation of individual identity and consciousness. On this basis, the cultural critic treats culture as the central point of departure for approaching and analyzing both literary and non-literary texts. Cultural criticism seeks to expose and uncover the concealed discourse embedded within texts, viewing culture as a human civilizational practice operative across multiple domains. This perspective invites further inquiry into the origins of cultural criticism and the manner in which it emerged within critical and cultural discourse.

6. Cultural Criticism (*Critique Culturelle*)

The concept of cultural criticism changes according to the contextual and cultural factors shaping the critic’s intellectual orientation. It represents a set of strategies concerned with investigating the latent forms of ugliness concealed beneath the aesthetic surfaces of literary texts. Its aim is to reveal such hidden dimensions, disclose defects, and expose all that is masked by apparent beauty.

Arthur Asa Berger defines cultural criticism as follows: “Cultural criticism is an activity rather than an autonomous field of knowledge. It is a way of interpreting things. Cultural critics apply concepts associated with multiple domains, and cultural criticism, as I see it, is an interconnected, overlapping, and plural task. Cultural critics come from different fields and employ diverse ideas and concepts. Cultural criticism can encompass literature, aesthetics, and criticism.” (Berger, 2002, pp. 30-31)

Arthur Asa Berger’s definition suggests that cultural criticism is a strategy grounded in multiple intellectual backgrounds. It remains open to a variety of theories and draws upon the principles and techniques employed by different critical approaches in order to understand and interpret texts and phenomena. Consequently, it encompasses several domains, including literature, aesthetics, and criticism.

Likewise, Migan Al-Ruwaili and Saad Al-Bazai define cultural criticism as “an intellectual activity that takes culture, in its broadest sense, as the subject of its inquiry and reflection, and expresses positions toward its developments and characteristics.” (Al-Ruwaili & Al-Bazei, 2002, p. 305)

In other words, cultural criticism engages with all critical methods and theoretical approaches concerned with texts and discourses, and is therefore characterized by its comprehensiveness.

7. Cultural Patterns in *Ana wa Hayim*

7.1 The Pattern of the Self and the Other

In his novel, the author seeks to address a highly complex issue: the clash of civilizations. Yet the work simultaneously carries a profound humanistic dimension, embodied in the attempt to coexist with the Other and to respect and value the human being regardless of religious or ethnic background. Throughout its pages, the novel is constructed around the portrayal of the highest forms of tolerance and coexistence between the Muslim self and the Jewish other, achieved through openness to difference, the exchange of ideas and cultural perspectives, and adherence to principles, values, and beliefs whose abandonment would lead to the decline of civilization. At the same time, such openness must not become absolute, lest it result in dissolution into the Other and alienation from one's own identity.

In *Ana wa Hayim*, Al-Habib Al-Sayeh presents two contrasting images of the dialectical relationship between the self and the other. At times, he advocates openness toward the Other, exemplified in the relationship between Jews and Muslims, yet without excess so that the Muslim self does not lose its principles and values. At other times, he calls for withdrawal, rupture, and rejection of the oppressive French other, whose aim is to destabilize and fragment identity, religion, civilization, and culture, with the ultimate objective of erasing Algeria and obliterating the landmarks of Arab-Islamic civilization.

The relationship between the self and the Other in this novel is embodied through two prominent manifestations:

- The first manifestation: this appears in the bonds of love, friendship, compassion, and tenderness that unite the two protagonists of the novel.
- The second manifestation: this emerges in the dynamics of conflict, confrontation, and resistance between the self and the Other, where the “self” represents the East (the Algerian, Muslim, Arab self), while the “Other” signifies the West (French colonialism, the Jewish Other, the Western world).

The Other may thus appear either as a friend or as an enemy. Its presence is indispensable to the existence of the self and to the self's awareness of its own identity. The Other constitutes an essential component in the formation of the self, whose existence cannot be fully realized without it.

The novel *I and Haim* directs us toward both of these manifestations. The first conveys a civilizational and profoundly human image, embodied in the exceptional and powerful relationship of love and friendship that binds Arslan and Haim. This is expressed in Haim's words:

“Arslan, my friend. I miss you amid the turmoil of this war. I remember your many kindnesses to me great, generous, and abundant. Not only because you were affluent and came from a well-off family, but also because of your noble soul, the graciousness of your character, and your steadfast, sincere, and enduring loyalty.” (Al-Sayeh, 2018, p. 207).

The novel portrays the differences between the two characters on several levels religion, language, creed, the nature of society, customs, and traditions yet they succeed in transcending all such boundaries and exchanging knowledge and understanding. The relationship between Arslan and Haim is therefore dominated by love and friendship, and the narrator depicts them as humane and civilized figures who embody the spirit of tolerance and intercultural dialogue between Muslim and Jew.

The dividing lines between the self and the Other dissolve between them. Haim comes to love Algeria and remains devoted to it until the final moment of his life, dedicating himself to the service of this pure and noble land during and after French colonial rule.

The second manifestation, by contrast, is represented in the conflict between the Algerian Arab self and the French Western Other. This tension arises when the self-experiences marginalization, oppression, and racial discrimination, as the Other seeks to impose itself and erase the self from human existence through various means. What begins as an ideological and intellectual conflict is transformed into a bloody struggle for sovereignty.

This is what al-Habib al-Sayih illustrates in his novel through his depiction of conflict and resistance between the indigenous Algerian population and the *pieds-noirs* and Europeans. The French Other attempts to exclude and obliterate the Algerian self by dispossessing it of its land and homeland, exercising every form of brutality, barbarism, and degradation in order to impose domination and hegemony while effacing the identity of the colonized. Yet the Algerian self-rejects foreign rule, defends Islam and the homeland, and views the colonizer with contempt, ridicule, and hatred because of their attempts to fragment and destroy it. At the same time, the Algerian self-regards itself with pride and dignity, affirming its identity, Islamic faith, and cultural heritage.

This conflict is clearly manifested in the confrontation with the French Other, who sought to subjugate Algerians and seize Algeria in its entirety, as expressed by the narrator: “Algeria is France, and France will recognize no authority within its territory other than its own, whatever the painful realities may be.” (Al-Sayeh, 2018, p. 131).

In contrast stands the Algerian self, engaged in resistance against a colonizer portrayed as inhuman and demonic, devoid of mercy, striving to reclaim sovereignty and national identity through struggle, perseverance, and rejection of the French Other. This is reflected in the statement: “They now see the man of this land the indigène, as they had always regarded him rising from the ashes of historical humiliation into which they had cast him, confronting them after they had believed they had domesticated him forever.” (Al-Sayeh, 2018, p. 132).

This clash between the Algerian self (the East) and the French Other (the West) thus appears as an enduring historical struggle in which each side rejects the existence of the other and seeks its erasure. The objective of the French Other was to strip the Algerian self of its identity and land, whereas the Algerian self-denounced and resisted this disgraceful colonial act, employing every possible means to preserve its territory, culture, civilization, and identity.

7.2 The Social Pattern:

The social pattern constitutes one of the central principles embodied in the novel, which depicts Algerian society during and after the period of French colonial rule. Every society possesses a distinct social system through which human behavior and social values are expressed by means of customs and traditions that form an inseparable part of its structure and cannot easily be abandoned. These traditions are integral to individual belonging, social integration, and the collective determination to safeguard cultural identity from disappearance.

The novel addresses numerous sensitive social issues, particularly the impact of French colonialism and the negative conditions it imposed upon Algerian society, including poverty, hunger, death, widowhood, and orphanhood. At the same time, it portrays the customs, traditions, and beliefs that characterized Algerian society, while also emphasizing patterns of human conduct, solidarity, and collective struggle among members of the community. As a

result, the novel is rich in diverse cultural configurations, especially through the structural tension between inherited customs and social transformation.

8. The Paradigm of Rejection and Acceptance

The novel evokes an ongoing conflict between two opposing poles: one seeks to extend its dominance and impose itself upon the other, while the latter represents the marginalized, excluded, and rejected groups subjected to subordination. This tension generates a wave of confrontation between one side striving to secure acceptance through every possible means and another side resisting both its presence and its brutal, hostile policies.

Through his novel *I and Haim*, Habib Sayah seeks to explore the relationships among characters, their behaviors, and their intrinsic dispositions embodied within this paradigm. The narrator promotes a central idea: the possibility of human coexistence despite differences in religion and the distinct nature of societies. He skillfully portrays two contrasting communities: Algerian society and French society.

Algerian society is depicted in its noblest form as humane, mutually respectful, peaceful, and civilized, even under the conditions of war. In contrast, French society is represented as backward, savage, and resentful of the Other, driven by a desire for domination and territorial colonization: “The images of poverty, deprivation, and homelessness endured by the natives saddened me as much as the racism displayed by the majority of the *Pieds-Noirs* and Europeans toward the Muslim inhabitants.” (The Novel, p. 75).

Here, Sayah conveys the condition of a marginalized people suffering poverty, dispossession, and displacement as a result of the racism practiced against the natives and Muslims by Europeans and the *Pieds-Noirs*.

This is further reflected in the passage: “Yet he is not like many of the *Pieds-Noirs* and Christian Europeans who, since occupying this land, have never ceased to despise our people and humiliate them. Their descendants, likewise, do not hesitate for a moment to provoke our feelings; indeed, every day we find them escalating their hostility toward us.” (The Novel, p. 94).

The narrator in *I and Haim* also associates moral decay and the collapse of values with the Western individual, portraying him as devoid of genuine humanity a savage and barbaric people pursuing only their own interests through colonization and the usurpation of indigenous rights by means of killing, intimidation, and torture. They are described as acting outside the bounds of law, showing no respect for human rights, and deliberately seeking to degrade human dignity by every possible means. This is vividly expressed in the following scene: “When I looked at the beautiful face of Hassiba Sal, drenched in blood, her eyes were closed and her lips parted, as though resting after exhaustion. Beside her stood Omar without an arm and Jamal with his chest torn apart. I exhaled; I felt my chest burning and my eyes on the verge of bursting.” (The Novel, p. 186).

The narrator also depicts the methods employed against the local population, who were subjected to torture and brutal killings carried out with savage inhumanity, reflecting the colonizers’ deep hatred and resentment toward them. This is evident in the passage: “I felt throughout my body something like ants crawling, for my heart in the mountains was seized with terror for the two of them, fearing that one or both might be eliminated amid a war that had grown, in its sixth year, ever more ferocious and severe, leaving behind death, ruin, and

sorrow: in the bloody confrontations, in the abuses committed by the French army against civilians in the countryside through displacement, killing, and the use of prohibited weapons, and by the OAS through slaughter and acts of brutality against its own ranks and against the locals upon any suspicion, hesitation, or alleged betrayal.” (The Novel, p. 190).

The novel likewise portrays the solidarity of the Jewish friend with his Muslim companion in the face of colonial oppression and its repeated violations against the people. He is shown siding with the Algerian populace, as in the following passage: “He excused himself and stood up, heading toward the bathroom. I knew he had done so only to conceal from me how deeply affected he was. I breathed deeply, on the verge of breaking down.” (The Novel, p. 162).

Similarly, the narrator states: “He opened his arms to embrace me, and I hugged him warmly.” (The Novel, p. 171).

Here, despite the religious difference between the narrator and his Jewish friend, they remain united by a shared human bond. French violence and repression did not prevent them from practicing compassion or expressing elevated feelings of love and fraternity toward one another. Nor did the harsh circumstances extinguish their mutual affection and emotional connection. This is reflected in the narrator’s words: “I thought only of what might happen to Hayim if his matter were discovered. It was a feeling I buried deep inside me, as I asked the commander of the mountain unit to allow me personally to undertake the mission of descending into the city, fully aware that I was acting out of emotional motives as well.” (The Novel, p. 187).

Through his novel, Al-Habib Al-Sayeh presents an image of a people bound together by solidarity and mutual support a society imbued with affection, love, brotherhood, and friendship. War, savagery, and brutality did not constitute barriers to their humanity. Rather, he promotes the pattern of the Algerian individual as one distinguished by emotional sensitivity and refined human values, despite the absence of conditions conducive to their expression.

Other passages likewise reveal the narrator’s admiration for the Algerian people, as in his statement: “I miss you amid the turmoil of this war. I remember your kindness toward me ... your noble character, the generosity of your spirit, and that steadfast, enduring, and sincere loyalty.” (The Novel, p. 207).

He also says: “I have not forgotten our years at the University of Algiers with you ... You were not content merely to pay the rent of the studio apartment and provide money for food, cinema, and theater most of the time. You bought not only your own books, but also some expensive pharmaceutical dictionaries for me. ... We would buy two seasonal outfits or two pairs of shoes, and when paying on my behalf, you would gently tell me that you would recover it the day I opened my own pharmacy. I smile at you, despite this war and its tragedies; I greet you with all my heart and soul.” (The Novel, p. 207).

These statements demonstrate that the Algerian people are portrayed as civilized and humane, skilled in treating both themselves and others with dignity, while preserving their own honor and that of others. Hayim, the Jewish character, describes his Muslim friend Arslan as loyal and devoted to their friendship, a man of noble character who supported him with university expenses without ever wounding his dignity.

9. The Pattern of Conflict between Identity and Existence:

Along the same trajectory, another pattern emerges that links the idea of conflict to the tension between identity and existence. Algerians seek to affirm their identity through their customs and traditions; however, the presence of the Other does not fully welcome or accommodate this aspiration.

If we return to the novel, we find that the narrator seeks to introduce the culture of the conservative Algerian society, which continues to preserve its customs, traditions, and ancient popular heritage. This heritage is manifested in traditional clothing, regarded as a national and popular symbol of pride in local culture, as well as in traditional foods and dishes considered part of the collective folk legacy. This is reflected in the following passage:

“Except for those moments I spent with my grandmother in the courtyard, I would often hear her telling me stories of jinn, ogres, spirits, and sorcerers, while revealing her leg as she turned the wool spindle, or roasting coffee and grinding it in the metal mortar, or preparing for me the dish of *raqaq*.” (The Novel, p. 27).

It is also evident in another passage:

“She wore her finest cloak and adorned her ears, neck, and wrists with her light gold jewelry. She lined her eyes with kohl, chewed the miswak, and dyed her hair with henna. She brought out the earthenware dishes and silver spoons from the kitchen cupboard, items she would only use for distinguished guests. She then prepared for me delicious sweet and savory foods *baghrir*, *msemen*, *mbasses*, *maqroud* with honey, and soup or *harira*, seasoned with *ras el hanout*...” (The Novel, p. 51).

Through these descriptions, the narrator highlights the customs and traditions of Algerian natives, particularly within his own family. Following his success in the baccalaureate examination, his grandmother prepared an array of traditional dishes and brought out utensils reserved for honored guests. Such practices reflect enduring Algerian social customs, whereby adornment and the preparation of sweet and spiced foods are integral to receiving guests and celebrating success.

The narrator also regards traditional clothing as a distinguishing marker that sets this society apart from others, as expressed in the following passage:

“Only rarely would one see among them a Muslim native woman wearing the *melhafa* or the *haik*, her traditional attire when going out; or a man in his traditional dress as well, wearing a cloak and *qanbush*, or a *chechia* on his head, while another would often wear a fez.” (The Novel, pp. 151-152).

Through this portrayal, al-Habib al-Sayih foregrounds the garments worn by Algerian Muslim natives when appearing in public such as the *haik*, *melhafa*, cloak, *qanbush*, and *chechia*. These garments are presented as national and popular symbols, and abandoning them is implicitly associated with the loss of Algerian identity.

Another custom represented in the novel appears in the narrator’s statement: “When I returned to the alley after the fortieth-day memorial of my grandmother’s death, which had been held with the *salka*.” (The Novel, p. 136). This refers to a religious and social practice observed in Algerian society upon death. The *salka* denotes the complete recitation of the Qur’an in its sixty sections, divided among six simultaneous circles of reciters, followed by the distribution of food as an act of charity and mercy offered for the soul of the deceased.

The novel also addresses other social issues, particularly the condition of education and the colonial project of erasing identity and denying the existence of the Other namely, the

indigenous Algerian population during the colonial period. These concerns were intertwined with poverty and socioeconomic backwardness. Yet the cultural problem remained among the most serious threats on the social level. From the outset, colonial authorities sought to eliminate indigenous centers of learning, including schools, *zawiyas*, and mosques. The French administration deliberately transformed educational institutions into centers for the dissemination of French culture rather than local Algerian culture. This is reflected in the narrator's words: "The large number of teachers astonished me, especially since they were unlike the instructors in their appearance and authority. Yet they also instilled in me a certain unease, because some of them as I later realized did not look upon the few native pupils in the classroom in the same way they looked at the others. Even Hayim himself, in his features, bearing, and accent, despite his flawless French, was not exempt either... like me, excluded because we came from the wasteland of the world..." (The Novel, p. 23).

European colonial occupation and the *Pieds-Noirs* settlers sought to distance the people and the indigenous population from education and culture through various means. They began by destroying centers of learning, imposing French culture in the remaining schools, and enforcing heavy tuition fees that prevented natives from enrolling due to their harsh living conditions. Colonial forces thus attempted to eradicate Arab culture, suppress it, and spread illiteracy among the population. Nevertheless, all these efforts failed to prevent the narrator and his friend Hayim from pursuing education.

10. The Religious Paradigm

Religion constitutes a dynamic civilizational component among the many elements that shape human civilization. It is a phenomenon inseparable from humanity wherever it exists and remains one of the most complex dimensions of social life. It may be regarded as the principal normative framework that ensures the continuity and preservation of life despite the diversity of religions and their doctrines. Al-Tahatawi defines religion as a divine ordinance guiding rational beings who choose to follow it toward righteousness in this world and salvation in the next. This encompasses both beliefs and practices. The term may refer to the creed of any prophet, though it may also specifically denote Islam, as expressed in the Qur'anic verse: "*Indeed, the religion in the sight of God is Islam.*" It is attributed to God as its source, to the Prophet as its messenger, and to the community by virtue of their adherence and submission to it (Al-Tahanawi, 1996, p. 814).

Religion expresses the existential philosophy embraced by peoples and societies, and it represents one of the most fundamental elements in the formation of collective identity. The novel *I and Haim* is imbued with a religious paradigm manifested in the relationship between Muslims and Jews under the broader idea of religious coexistence. Haim is of Jewish origin, whereas Arsalan is Muslim; ostensibly, the two identities appear irreconcilable. Yet their friendship proves otherwise. This is articulated by Habib Sayah in the passage: "I wondered what I should say to a Muslim guarding a Jewish cemetery. Should I declare that Haim and I had once been friends?" (The Novel, p. 333).

Thus, Arsalan and Haim transcend barriers, imposing the legitimacy of their friendship upon society and living together in coexistence despite differences in belief and custom. The novel also contains other passages intended to illustrate the principles of Islam and foreground

its doctrinal values. This is reflected in the statement: “We are stricter than you in matters of sexuality before lawful union.” (The Novel, p. 123).

The narrator’s remark suggests that Islam adopts a more rigorous stance regarding relations between the sexes outside the framework of legitimate marriage. Islamic teachings prohibit illicit relations between men and women regardless of the labels attached to them whether emotional or intimate since such relations are considered extramarital and potentially conducive to fornication. They are therefore viewed as alien to the moral structure of Muslim society.

However, despite the religious principles invoked by the narrator, the novel simultaneously presents situations that contradict these norms, such as Arsalan’s unlawful relationship during his university years prior to marriage, as well as the relationship between Haim and Golda.

This is reflected in the narrator’s statement:

“Do you know, Hayim, that there is a woman with whom I am deeply in love?” (The Novel, p. 123).

He also says: “Whenever I remembered one of the tender moments I had shared with Céline during dinner, in bed, or in the bathtub ...” (The Novel, p. 140).

The rituals of Islam are among the most distinguished, well-founded, and rationally justified religious practices when compared with those of other faiths. They are fundamentally oriented toward human welfare, permitting what is beneficial and wholesome while prohibiting what is harmful. Among the practices addressed in Islam is the consumption of meat. As stated in the Qur’an: “*This day all good things have been made lawful for you. The food of the People of the Book is lawful for you, and your food is lawful for them*” (Qur’an 5:5).

The verse explicitly permits the food of the People of the Book, while the food of non-believers outside this category is deemed impermissible. Accordingly, meat sold in non-Muslim countries is lawful for Muslims if it is known to come from animals slaughtered by the People of the Book in accordance with legitimate religious practice.

The narrator foregrounds these religious principles in the novel in order to highlight the teachings of Islam, stating: “In a low voice, when I replied that my family, like Hayim’s family, did not eat such meats. But why would I feel nauseated if the manager asked me to set aside some of those meats by name, as I sometimes saw them in the butcher shops of non-Muslims and Jews, skinned and hanging by their legs on hooks, or cut up on the display table?” (The Novel, pp. 22-23).

He also says: “I invited him to lunch at the Ali Baba Cave restaurant on Michelet Street, reassured that its Jewish owner did not serve pork.” (The Novel, p. 128).

Both passages remain firmly situated within the framework of Islamic religious observance, according to which individuals are expected to follow and uphold the teachings of their faith in all aspects of life, including dietary practice and the types of meat they consume. Certain foods are categorically prohibited, most notably pork and any food over which the name of God has not been invoked.

As the Almighty states: “*Forbidden to you are carrion, blood, the flesh of swine, that which has been dedicated to other than Allah, animals killed by strangling, by a violent blow, by a fall, by goring, and those partly eaten by beasts except what you are able to slaughter*”

properly and those sacrificed on stone altars, and that you seek divination through arrows. That is grave disobedience.” (Qur’an 5:3).

This verse explicitly indicates the prohibition of certain forms of slaughtered animals, including carrion, blood, pork, and anything consecrated to other than God; whoever engages in such acts departs from obedience to Allah.

The novel also foregrounds religious values rooted in Islam, such as charity (*sadaqah*). Charity is a religious concept established as a means of drawing closer to the Creator and providing support to those in need. It exerts a profound influence on the social fabric by fostering solidarity and fraternity among individuals. This is reflected in the narrator’s statement: “As for all her clothes, she instructed that they be given as charity.” (The Novel, p. 137).

The novel *I and Haim* also highlights another principle strongly emphasized in Islam: religious coexistence. All human beings were created from a single origin and therefore share a common human essence. Accordingly, it becomes imperative to acknowledge the Other regardless of religious affiliation, to treat others with kindness, and to reject coercion. Difference in faith does not justify unethical conduct or hostility. This is illustrated in the narrator’s words:

“I found Haim in his bed, with the Torah in his hands, from which he would often read whenever he was overcome by sadness or tension. I smiled and said to myself that it was a sacred night. I knew that Haim had washed his hands and face before taking up his book. I entered the bathroom, performed ablution, then returned and took my Qur’an from the wardrobe my mother’s precious gift. Sitting on my bed, I opened the first pages and read silently for a few minutes. Then it occurred to me that Haim and I had never truly discussed what each of us read from our sacred texts except, from time to time, matters relating to the stories of the prophets, creation, death, and graves. Nor had either of us ever attempted to turn the other away from his religion, for we had seen such mutual respect in the conduct of our families, of others, and especially among neighboring Muslims and Jews in the quarter.” (The Novel, p. 123).

This passage clearly indicates that Arslan and Hayim shared the same room and practiced their respective religious rituals despite their differing faiths one Muslim and the other Jewish. They also engaged in refined and respectful dialogue, reflecting openness toward and curiosity about the other’s religion, without either attempting to persuade the other to abandon his beliefs or rituals. Such attitudes appear to have been inherited from their families and from the broader coexistence between Muslims and Jews.

In the same vein, the narrator states:

“Even their extremists still did not conceal their hostility toward Jews who dressed like the natives, like Muslims, and shared their food, dialect, and songs to the point that it was difficult to distinguish between them. Both bought the same meat from the same butcher. Nor did any of them frequent restaurants serving pork, although some Muslims occasionally visited taverns, as Hayim and I did on Saturday evenings.” (The Novel, p. 75).

From the foregoing, it can be argued that the narrator in *Ana wa Hayim (Me and Hayim)* conveys a set of implicit messages intended to strengthen the reader’s moral and spiritual consciousness and to promote coexistence with the Other regardless of religious difference. The narrative also reminds individuals of the importance of self-awareness, virtuous conduct,

and resisting the distortion of other faiths and beliefs. Human dignity is presented as inherent, independent of religion, ethnicity, color, or origin, while all members of society are depicted as belonging to one human family. Pride and arrogance, by contrast, are portrayed as destructive forces that erode social bonds and fragment relationships.

Within this framework, the religious pattern assumes a central role in creating balance and stability within society, as it serves as a fundamental regulator of social behavior. Equally important is the need to understand the culture of the Other and to open channels of dialogue. These themes are explored with notable artistry by the novelist through a rich interplay of implicit and explicit cultural patterns.

11. CONCLUSION

This study has yielded a number of key findings following analysis and critical examination, which may be summarized as follows:

The concept of the cultural paradigm does not appear to have emerged by chance; rather, it is the product of cumulative intellectual, philosophical, epistemological, and critical developments. In this regard, we highlighted the critical movements that foregrounded culture as a central field of inquiry.

Our application of the mechanisms of cultural criticism to the novel *I and Haim* revealed several significant latent paradigms embedded within the text. This is attributable to the novel's engagement with a range of ethnic and ideological conflicts whose roots extend back to earlier historical periods. It also seeks to trace the historical residues deeply inscribed in the collective memory of the Algerian people, in which French colonialism constituted one side of the conflict, while the other consisted of local collaborators who betrayed the land in pursuit of narrow personal interests.

The novel likewise highlights multiple fractures and the differences between Islam and Judaism, while simultaneously exploring the possibilities of coexistence between the two communities. Some readers have interpreted the text as an attempt at normalization.

In conclusion, it may be said that the novel remains an open text, receptive to multiple interpretations and diverse readings, and capable of generating numerous further studies. It is a work that remains open to many other intellectual and interpretive horizons.

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