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## **REFLECTION OF PROTAGONIST'S WORLDVIEW IN A CONTEMPORARY ARABIC NOVEL A CASE STUDY OF *LATIN QUARTER (AL-HAYY AL-LATINI)***

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### **Abstract**

*Latin Quarter* is one of the famous novels of Suhail Idris, the well-known Lebanese novelist, short story writer, journalist and translator (1925-2008). This novel published in 1954, during a critical period in the middle east and in particular the Arab world. The confrontation between East and West is among the issues that have been reflected in many Arab novels during the 20th century. It is, in fact, part of a series of cultural and social problems in the Third world. In this paper, we have made an effort to elucidate the writer's worldview in this novel. As such, his perspective on the Western and Eastern worlds, especially the conflicts between these two worlds, his idea of Paris, the alteration of his view about the world after making contact with the West, the cultural differences between the west and the east, and finally, the eastern protagonist's excessive admiration for the west is explored in Latin quarter. Our methodology is Sociocriticism based on the Lucien Goldman's point of view. The results indicate the protagonist's return to his native culture and city after all his adulations for the west. It seems

*that this novel reflects the author's experiences, and it is an invitation to Eastern youth to return to their homeland instead of emigration to the west and try to build their own countries and abide by their native traditions.*

### **Keywords**

Suhail Idris, Latin Quarter, World View, Conflict, Contemporary Arabic Novel

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## **1. Introduction**

Contemporary Arab novelists share the same characteristics with French novelists; however, their visions are slightly different from the French ones. Suhail Idris is no exception when it comes to the influence of French novelists on Arab writers. In his novels, Idris writes about human emotions, sense of loss, and alienation in the new western capitalism. These feelings are present in the protagonist of *Latin quarter* (Al-Hayy al-latini) while he lives in Paris (Salehi, 2010, pp15-16)

The confrontation between East and West is among the issues that have been reflected in many Arab novels during the 20th century. This confrontation is a part of a series of cultural and social dilemmas, which in all countries of the Third World have been colonies of The West. From the Philippines in East Asia to the Middle East and North Africa, we see the struggle. Such conflicts sometimes take a violent form and sometimes remain in an internal conflict. (Longtong, 2018, p547-567)

It is noteworthy that this confrontation is not the only aspect of the relationship between Eastern and Arab nations with the West. Another aspect of this relationship is immigration. Like the exodus of many Arab citizens from the Middle East to the west, especially the USA, which began in the late 19th century and continues throughout the 20th century, it is an important part of the citizens of Europe and the United States of Arab origin. (al-Matrafi, 2017: 436-452)

The writer's worldview and his perspective on his native culture and civilization in contrast to the west have turned into the persistent themes in contemporary Arab novels. For Lucien Goldman, worldview is a set of thoughts, ideals, and emotions which unites a social group together, and separates it from other groups. The worldview is different among social classes. In Goldman's idea, worldview should be rational and empirical. (Antaki, 2009, p.270)

Goldman introduces the worldview as a system of thought which imposes itself onto a group of people under similar social and economic conditions, i.e. social class (Goldmann, 1996, p.20). Every individual creates an imaginary world to express his perspective on the world. This

imaginary world is necessarily embedded in the individual's social class, and that is what Goldman calls worldview (Goldmann, 1996, p.14).

Since 1947, Goldman states the basis of his method and never changes it: the underlying factor in the analysis of literary creation lies in the fact that literature and philosophy are the expression of a worldview in different areas. These are not individual phenomena but are social phenomena. At the center of this notion, the notion of worldview is an integrated and coherent view of the reality set. This coherent view differs from one's always changing view, and the intellectual device is a group of people living in a single economic and social situation. (Pooyandeh, 2013, pp 91-92)

It Goldman's opinion the conceptual system embedded in literary work has two functions: it makes unity of effect, and on the other, the worldview defines the awareness of a social group. The literary work is not creation a work, but it elaborates the awareness of a collective group, the interests and social values of a group or class. (Al-Jabouri, 2018, p418)

In his point of view, the worldview is different from its traditional concept. In his point of view, it is not an act of voluntary and intentional vision, but it is a quality which the author feels, through which he regards as a given reality, or the structure of thought that existed before the realization of the production process of the literary work. (Hosseini, 2015, p47)

Goldman states that we can't understand the literary work well if we only try to understand it as an attempt to answer questions that have made life and culture for us, "Goldman Sachs said. Rather, we must examine the literary effect through the framework within which it has been formed: each literary work has two dimensions: the next to the reality and the imagination. And the social dimension of the group worldview where the writer belongs, directly or indirectly, affects the writer. (Zaytoon, 2010, p236)

In regard to Marxism and formative analysis, like George Lucas, Lucien Goldman takes shelter in the concept of worldview to get free of a mechanistic view which reflects collective consciousness. However, in so far as Goldman's worldview is not aesthetically informed, and is instead absorbed in sociology, there will be contradictions in this concept (Goldmann,1986, p.115). As such, Goldman does not consider a literary work as a reflection of social consciousness. He rejects the term reflection, and uses the term connection to show the harmony between literary works and the worldview of social groups (Khashfat, 1997, pp.11-12).

It should be noted that there is a thin line between worldview and ideology. Ideology is in the interest of a particular group, but worldview alludes to the position of a group inside a bigger one (Khashfat, 1997, p.115).

In the introduction to his Ph.D. thesis, Goldman considers the importance of worldview in literature, art, and philosophy: “All works of a writer or a philosopher are not equally expressive of his thoughts and ideas, and the difference between the main and the marginal should be taken into account. In my opinion, this is the responsibility of the literature, art, and the historians of philosophy” (Khashfat, 1997, p.22). This suggests that worldview shows a group which includes the writer or social class in the works of literature, art, and philosophy. Furthermore, we should not mistake worldview for metaphysical truth. In contrast, worldview is the real emanation of a phenomenon which is called social consciousness in sociology (Kjashfat, 1997, p.42).

The other point is that worldview is not an individualist phenomenon. As mentioned above, Goldman puts worldview in the context of society, so that it is a social phenomenon related to a group or a social class (Goldman, 1986, p.26). If a social class is progressive, its worldview will foster reassessment of all human relationships and the relation of nature to humans. At the same time, if a social class is traditional; its worldview will be dedicated to preserving the current social structures (Fazl, 1998, p.231). Thus, the works of literature which belong to the progressive social classes will be replete with revolutionary and rebellious notions, as it is evident in the trilogy of Suhail Idris, but the literary works which are embedded in traditional social classes will contain bourgeois values.

Suhail Idris returned to Beirut after finishing his first novel, *Latin quarter*, and reviewed his oriental memories. However, there are signs of rebellion against East in his second novel, *Al-khandag al-Gamigh*. In any case, two parallel themes are developed in *Latin quarter*: nationalism and rebellion against the West; and ethnical awakening in Arab nations and rebellion against the West.

At the end of the discussion about worldview, it should be noted that every narrative produces its own worldview, but this worldview is not necessarily the writer’s worldview.

## **2. Suhail Idris**

Lebanese intellectual, writer, novelist, translator, lexicographer and publisher Suhail Idriss passed away in Beirut on Tuesday February 19, 2008. Suhail Idriss was the founder of the

well-known literary publishing house Dar Al-Adab and the literary monthly Al-Adab, which played an influential role in the Arab intellectual and literary scene during the 1960s and 1970s.

Fusing Arab nationalism with modernity, Suhail Idriss was renowned for his promotion of French existentialist literature through his translation and publication of works of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. At the time, many Arab nationalist intellectuals found existentialism to be a philosophy that could serve as an answer to communism.

Suhail Idriss attended Al-Maqasid Islamic College and later the Farouq College of Islamic Canonical Law. He donned the cloth in 1935 only to relinquish it five years later. He started his career as an editor for the daily Beirut and the weekly magazine *Beirut Al-Masa'a* and also worked for *Al-Sayyad* and *Al-Jadid*. He later went to France, earning a PhD in literature in 1952, with a dissertation on “The foreign Influences on Modern Arabic Fiction from 1900-1950”.

Idris wrote three novels – *The Latin Quarter* (Al-Hayy al-Latini) (1953), *Al-Khadaq Al-Ghamiq* (1958) named after a Beirut neighborhood, and *Our Fingers that are Burning* (1962) – and six collections of short stories. He compiled the French-Arabic dictionary *Al-Manhal* with Jabbour Abd Al-Nour, and for more than quarter of a century worked with Sheikh Subhi Al-Saleh, and his son Samah, on Arabic-French and Arabic-Arabic editions. He also worked as an instructor in translation and Arabization at the Arab University of Beirut. In all, he translated over twenty books, many among them works by Sartre, Camus, Debray and Foucault. (Khashan, 2008)

### **3. Summary of the novel**

The protagonist is a Lebanese youth who leaves Beirut to Paris to continue his study in Sorbonne University. Afterward he falls in love with a French girl was called Janine. Protagonist intends to marry her, but on the one hand she refuses to marry him, and on the other hand, after a long struggle for staying in France or returning to Beirut and an internal conflict between Western values and Oriental traditions, protagonist eventually returns to his homeland, prefers Oriental manners and traditions to the culture and traditions of the West, and marries a Lebanese girl.

### **4. Analysis of ‘Latin Quarter’**

One of the most prominent issues in the worldview of contemporary Arabic novels, including *Latin quarter*, is the conflict between self and the other, or between East and West. It is

here that the search for identity is triggered (Ben Ganisat,2009, p. 59).

*Latin quarter* is the story of a journey, starting from Beirut as the representative of east, landing in Paris as the representative of the west, and returning to Beirut. If we accept Elias Khori's interpretation of this journey as a circle, the east would be in the center of the circle (Al-zahrani,1990, p.104).

Suhail Idris has consciously focused on this conflict. Drawing on other Arab literary figures such as Tayyeb Saleh, Refah Tahtaavi, and Taha Hossein, he remarks that "it is natural for our literary figures to get inspiration from the east-west conflict in this era of Arab movements; as a result, the type of novel that has emerged is the outcome of such a conflict. Also, the external conflict has been internalized. The people who have lived for a long time in the west and then returned to their countries, find an opportunity to compare the two worlds. It is remarkable that all of them have chosen the east and their fate in it" (Idris,2000, p.123).

During his residency in Paris, the protagonist of *Latin quarter* faces a dilemma: should he return to his homeland or not. All this time, he tries to preserve his Arab identity in the face of western influences. When he asks his French friend, Janine, to marry him, she rejects him and asks him to return to his country. Rejection of the protagonist by the French friend is symbolically showing that even if the east wants to have interaction with the west, the west will not accept it unless the east completely surrenders to the western power and culture (Abd al-Gani,1994, p.111)

In the novel's perspective, the contemporary protagonist rebels against both eastern conservatives and western colonizers. He is in the heart of the society, faces all the challenges, and rebels against the unwanted rules. He is often a witness to the society's isolation, rootlessness, and desolation. Thus, the main characteristic of the contemporary Arab protagonist is conflict (Idris,2000, p.115).

Idris is inspired by the long history of the clash between east and west, and his own experience. He has graduated from Paris, and the experience of living in Paris is vividly presented in the novel. The conflict is between surrendering to the western culture and fighting it. In such an environment, these two cultures cannot co-exist peacefully. One side is the culture, tradition, and religions of the east, and the other side is the freedom and technology of the western civilization.

The roots of such a conflict can be found in the beginning of the twentieth century when the Arab world met the westerners. Western colonization resulted in the rebellion of nationalist

leaders. It is reflected in the national debates and continues to inspire novels in an effort to encourage people on the route to the freedom from western oppression. Arabian mentality was awakened during the interaction between the east and the west. There is a paradoxical view about the west in this conflict: the west is both attractive and dreadful (Idris,2000, p.116).

Considering the works of Suhail Idris, we can find a pattern which is consistent in all his works: his excessive focus on his personal experiences (Khorri,1991, p.102). His life is the sum of all conflicts between the generations, and the crisis that exists in the relation of the new and the old generations (Khorri,1991, p.102). Latin quarter revolves around all these conflicts. The conflicts are also present in characters. In terms of imagery, the picture of the other, the west, is presented by the east. Also, its picture is smeared with expansionism, exploitation, and colonization. It should be also noted that the picture of the east presented by the west entails a similar ideology (Olush,2009, p.31).

Protagonist of the novel suffers from the conflict between Eastern traditions and Western freedoms. He travels to Paris from Beirut, which is the representative of the East and its traditions, hoping to reach his freedom and dreams. But the missing is not found in the West. " You escaped your wounds in the Eastern world, " he thought. What did you gain from your travel to the West, except the wounds that were worse and more painful? The West and Paris are nothing but a desert worse than the desert in the East. You 're still a prisoner". (Idris,2006, p26)

The Protagonist admires Paris and its various cultural centers and is deeply fascinated by them. - such as cafes and cinemas and theatres in Paris, especially the Paris Opera and the famous Champs - Elysees (Idris, 2006, pp13, 25,126), and freedom and vitality (Idris,2006. p17). He regretted that the East was deprived of these facilities. In recognition of these manifestations of culture, he is fascinated by Paris (Idris,2006. pp 110, 111).

Nevertheless, he's also homesick. When his friend Sami returns home and follows him, he says, " I wish I were him. in those three weeks, there is nothing in your mind except the picture of dark and sad walls, and in your breast except a desire to escape and go away from this environment. You envy Sami coming back and wish you were him " (ibid, p. 48)

Janine Montrose, the protagonist's girlfriend, plays the role of an enlightened and colonizing woman. Paradoxically, the rejection of the protagonist puts an end to his dilemma (i.e. protagonist's internal conflict over choosing either eastern traditions or the western sexual freedom). Janine is disillusioned about men because of the betrayal by her boyfriend, but her confidence in men is restored when she meets the protagonist. It is possible to argue that the

interaction between the colonized and the colonizer restores the latter's confidence (Tonus,2009, p.217).

Upon his return to Beirut, the conflict between east and west is again triggered within him. Here, protagonist's mother is the symbol of the east and its traditions, while the French girl symbolizes the west and its freedom. His mother reprimands him for hiding his relationship with a French girl for so long – a Christian girl who is pregnant and abandoned by her husband. Alluding to the eastern traditions which prohibit having such relationships with a girl in that situation, he thinks about how people will react to this. He is proud of being a member of an honorable and noble family (Idris,2006, p.215). However, finally, his love of Janine defeats the eastern traditions which are verbalized by his mother. He is hopelessly in love with the western girl. To his surprise, this time the western girl does not accept him and considers him a fitting member of an eastern Arab society rather than the west: "O my Arab love, return to your east which is waiting for you as a young and strong man. I don't belong to you and your culture so I won't come with you" . (Idris,2006, p.262).

On the other hand, his mother warned him about being deceived by the French women, and asked him to return to Lebanon and marry a Lebanese girl. She fears the West should take his son away from him. (Idris,2006, p 162)

The protagonist of *Latin quarter* has traveled to Paris to study science and technology, but carries the eastern religious, social, and cultural values with him. The conflict arises when he finds himself deeply rooted in the east and its values while being attracted to the west and its appealing women. As a result of this struggle, the eastern traditions and values overcome the attraction. He does not find any motivation from Janine's part to perpetuate the love between them. Furthermore, Janine realizes that she cannot dominate the protagonist's mind which ultimately belongs to his mother, the east and its values (Idris,2006, p.192).

Suhail Idris develops a set of characters who have physical and sexual differences: Arabian male and western female, swarthy Arab and blond westerner. He has made an effort to highlight the cultural differences between Arabic and western societies. Arabs are poor, deprived, oppressed, under-developed, and chained by conservative traditions, while westerners enjoy freedom, science, and desire for life, though in a materialistic and immoral manner.

There are differences and conflicts among female characters too. Janine Montrose, the protagonist's lover, is a loyal woman who treats love with honesty. She is responsible and defends the east and Arabs. She is also eager to visit the eastern countries after reading the works

of orientalist writers, such as Lamartine and Goethe (Idris,2006,94). In contrast, Françoise, Fouad's lover, is an educated but racist woman who defends French colonialism. At the same time, Fuad is a patriot and defender of Arab world, necessarily despising French colonialism.

There are other licentious women, like Margareta, who abuse eastern men because of their naivety. In their own thoughts, eastern men try to take revenge from the west by sleeping with western women. However, these women delude the eastern men and rub them off their money.

Another example is a French woman who calls Arabs a bunch of wild animals in the presence of the protagonist and his friend, Fuad, in Louie Grant restaurant. Later, Fuad remarks that "she was a really indecent woman", adding that he has been a witness many of those situations since he has come to Paris in 1974 (Idris,2006, pp.81-82). Then, an Arab woman is introduced to the narrative. She is an example of an honorable and chaste Arab woman who conforms to the values and traditions of eastern families and society. So, the readers encounter several conflicts: east/west, male/female, and independence/surrender.

Paris has long been an attractive place for Arab enlightened writers. It has been also a destination for travelers and science-seekers. One of these Arabs describe Paris in the following fashion: I love Paris a lot. Paris is not constructed by a nation. It is not the outcome of an age. In contrary, it is the outcome and the gist of past civilizations with all their artistic, scientific, and aesthetic artifacts. Paris is a paradise, providing anything that a man desires. The food for body and soul is abundant in Paris; there is a cure for all illnesses. Whatever that humans need, from serious issues, such as science, literature, and freedom, to corporal gratifications are available in Paris. If paradise is going to have a capital city, it would be Paris (Fahim,1989, p.183).

Since the protagonist chooses Paris for his doctoral education, it is evident that Paris plays a central role in the novel. It is a center for social freedom, science and art, and also resembles the western developed countries. Paris does not just fascinate the contemporary Arab writers, it has also a unique position in western literature. It is one of the few capitals which attracts writers' attention around the globe because of its aesthetic and cultural values. As a multi-cultural and international city, Paris is the source of inspiration for the civilized world (AL-sheikh,2008, p.17).

The main goal of the protagonist of *Latin quarter* for traveling to Paris is courting French women and enjoying their company (Tarabeyshy,1997, pp.72-73). Even after spending a week in his hotel, when he goes to cinema for the first time to watch a movie about such towering figures

as Jean Paul Sartre, André Gide, and Picasso, he is distracted by a French woman who is sitting next to him. As such, despite his great attraction to the film, he loses his attention to it due to the presence of the French woman (Tarabeyshy,1997, p75).

Upon his arrival to Paris, everything seems beautiful. He constantly compares this city with the eastern ones, just to emphasize the superiority of Paris. In his view, everything in this city is at the peak of beauty, including the women. But after spending three weeks in Paris, and especially due to his unsuccessful attempts at courting the French women, he feels lonely and distressed. This is more obvious when he farewells his friend, Sami, in an autumn day. During his short residence in Paris, he has not seen anything but the dark walls, gloomy autumn days, cloudy sky, and rain. Such a condition does not amuse him, and indeed make him sad and scared (Idris,2006, p.48).

Sorbonne University and the scientific conferences hold in it are the reasons for the protagonist to consider Paris as an important cultural center. He loves participating in these conferences, and adores them. Sometimes, early in the morning, he goes to Sorbonne and listen to scientific conferences (Idris,2006, pp.43-86).

Museums, cinemas and theatres in Paris provide even more reasons for him to believe in the prominence of this city in terms of culture. Such places provide him with the soul food, so that he feels the love of Paris from the bottom of his heart, especially since his friend, Janine, is culturally a literate woman. He is also in love with the shops in Opera square and Champs-Élysées. Around Christmas, he would go out of his hotel just to visit these shops and see their attractive products. While walking down the Champs-Élysées avenue, he would be full of joy and delight (Idris,2006, p.126).

The protagonist recognizes Paris with its famous characters, events, and places, and this in turn forms his idea about the western world. His often visits favorite spots of Arab and Paris youth, Latin town, and Sorbonne University. He also visits some people from Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, and Tunisia in cheap restaurants. However, he does not like to meet these people because he believes that they talk about useless topics and waste their time (Idris,2006, p.26). When he tells his friend, Fuad, about the improper behavior of other Arabs in restaurants and cafes, it becomes clear for Fuad that he is making a mistake. The protagonist adds that he tries to avoid any kind of interaction with his fellow Arabs, but Fuad explains to him that such a behavior is not appropriate since his fellow Arabs are also struggling to define their own identity in Paris. "I think you are making a mistake. They are not despicable; just remember that they are

also some anxious young people who are trying to define their identities, and they do not hate you. We, Arab youth, are all lost, and therefore we are looking for ourselves. Inevitably, before finding ourselves, we will make some stupid mistakes” (Idris,2006, p. 81).

The fact is that the image of Paris is repeated by different visitors in a slightly different manner. The reason is that most of these people have inferiority complex in the face of the western culture, but switch to superiority complex when faced with the common people who are bereft of old or new cultures (Al-sheykh, 2008,p.8). The inferiority complex hunts the protagonist of *Latin quarter*, as if he is a lonely man in Paris. The feeling of loneliness in turn fosters this psychological complex, and the eastern anxiety never leaves him except when he meets his French friend. One of the symptoms of inferiority complex in the novel is that he constantly feels he is shrinking, and will finally turn into a filthy insect or a fly (Idris,2006, p.106).

Fear and a feeling of lack is always present in eastern men and women. The protagonist thinks that the traditions have turned women into ghosts who are afraid of men, and this in return gives rise to a masculine society which oppresses women. As a result, men have no choice but hiding and being afraid of women. Ultimately, a deep chasm emerges between men and women which deepens every second under the load of suppression and deprivation (Idris,2006, p49).

Suhail Idris clarifies his perspective on the eastern protagonist in the following manner: “The protagonist of this new novel is trying to know himself during his experiences in the west. He is lost, anxious, and distressed. Like the protagonist of *Latin quarter*, he travels long distances, courts many women, sins, betrays, falls, and embraces both corporal and platonic love, but fails in all of them regardless of where he is – in Paris with French girls, or in Beirut with eastern girls. However, he starts it all over and struggles again” (Idris, 2000, p.114).

At the end of the novel, he turned back to Lebanon and to his family and his mother. And he informs his mother that other friends will return soon. And when his mother asks him " Is everything finished? " he responds" No it is just the beginning " (Idris,2006, p 264). These words elaborate a message to similar Lebanese and eastern generations about the necessity of concentrating more on maintaining their own culture.

## **5. Conclusion**

The worldview Idris has presented in *Latin quarter* is challenge-oriented. Conflicts make the pillars of this worldview – conflicts between eastern and westerns cultures and values, self

and the other, males and females, dominance and surrender. As a man raised in a noble eastern family, the protagonist is persistently struggling to decide between eastern life and western life. Like many other eastern students, he starts his journey to France with a fantasy about the west. Later, he falls in love with a French girl and even comes to love Paris. However, at the same time, he has an inner struggle. He cannot determine his right place: would he have a better life in the west with the French girl or in the east with a traditional girl who adheres to the eastern culture? Finally, he prefers the east with its values and traditions.

It is possible that the emotional conflict between the eastern protagonist and the French girl is symbolically representing the greater conflict between east and west. These conflicts which are drawn from the worldview of Suhail Idris are not extreme or prejudiced. Rather, the writer keeps the middle ground to avoid extremism. That is why the protagonist finally decides to live in the east, but he is no enemy of the west. It depicts the protagonist's moderate worldview which rejects prejudice and extremism. It is also a reflection of the writer's experiences. After all, he was a cleric who discarded his religious robes and left his country for Paris to earn his Ph.D.

It seems that this novel reflects the author's experiences, and is an invitation to Eastern youth to return to their homeland instead of emigration to the west and try to build their own countries and abide by their native cultures. Furthermore, he invites to tolerance and avoids bias and extreme views.

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