

The Configuration of Textual Space in the Stream-of-Consciousness Novel A Semiotic Reading of *Harbors of Madness* by Mohsen Ben Hnia

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Abstract:

Paratextual discourse, as one of the constituent elements of the paratext, forms a text alongside the body text proper. It surrounds the main text and brings into view its semantic resonances and aesthetic dimensions. Within the stream-of-consciousness novel, these paratextual elements emerge as semiotic signs endowed with multiple functions: they construct a horizon of expectation for the reader and provide visual and cognitive entry points into the world of the text. In this sense, the paratext becomes an integral part of the novelistic texture.

Mohsen Ben Heniya's Harbors of Madness offers a particularly rich instantiation of the stream-of-consciousness novel, marked by dense textual configurations in which cognitive and ideological perspectives intersect. This makes it especially fertile ground for semiotic analysis, given that semiotics remains one of the most effective critical approaches for eliciting the signifying force of the paratext. The present reading therefore turns to the semiotics of color, the signifying economy of the title, and the architecture of typography. From this perspective, textual configuration appears as a distinctive contribution to the field of novelistic experimentation, moving beyond mere typographic embellishment to become an active structural component that participates in the production of meaning, directs trajectories of reading, and frames the reception of the text.

Key words: *textual space, stream of consciousness, semiotics, Harbors of Madness, Mohsen Ben Hnia.*

1. Theoretical Concepts: Textual Space and the Stream-of-Consciousness Novel

A. The Concept of Textual Space

The paratext is one of the most important components of transtextuality, alongside intertextuality, textual relationality, and metatext. It is the first feature to catch the reader's eye, drawing attention and stirring curiosity about the content of the book. It is, in effect, the paratext through which reading begins, before entry into the worlds of the primary text. In the novel, textual space denotes a visible and material field concerned with the visual shaping of the text on the page. It takes two forms, internal and external, and includes such elements as cover design, titles, dedication, introduction, typeface, the generic marker, the publishing house, the author's name, chapter arrangement, and the spacing between paragraphs.

Every literary work includes a constellation of such surrounding elements. Even when they appear detached from the primary text, they remain implicitly bound to it through a dialogic and communicative relation. In other words, the paratext functions as a mediating zone between the outside and the inside of the text. Western and Arab critics have differed in naming it, referring to it variously as the parallel text, the paratext, textual space, accompanying texts, or the framing borders of the text. Yet despite this terminological variation, these elements remain the textual features that surround the work and carry significations tied to its substance. They are capable of generating meaning through the dialectical relation they establish with the primary text, and they illuminate the body text so that it may be apprehended and interpreted, for they constitute, as one formulation has it, "the sum of texts that carve into the body text and surround it."¹

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A text rarely appears without paratextual elements. Gérard Genette observes that a text, or a book, seldom appears in an ordinary form unaccompanied by a word or an icon capable of producing meaning and signification². Such elements function as the reader's guide to entering the text and penetrating its semantic density and intentional horizon. They are, in his well-known formulation, "everything that enables a text to become a book and to offer itself as such to its readers or, more generally, to the public"³.

Textual space thus works to foreground the poetics of the text, while also contributing to an understanding of character psychology or authorial vision through visual organization. Its functions are multiple. It has an aesthetic and semantic function, but also an appellative one, insofar as it seeks to affect the reader and capture attention by turning engagement with textual space into a visual experience. It also performs a semantic and expressive function, illuminating what remains obscure in the novelistic discourse. In this regard, the distribution of paragraphs and the deployment of white space facilitate access to textual meaning and help bring out the psychological states of characters. Textual space also plays a role in organizing the narrative plot, distributing chapters, and marking pauses, which in turn reinforces textual coherence and structural unity. This falls within its structural and organizational function. As for its orientational function, which is semiotic in nature, it directs the reader toward a particular mode of understanding the work and grants it an initial visual and semantic identity. Through these functions, one may discern the specificity of each writer's human experience.

In sum, textual space is the site through which the reader's gaze moves. It generates new meanings and exceeds the status of a merely technical arrangement of words on the page. For that reason, semiotics has devoted sustained attention to the paratext, since it is the discipline concerned with the study of sign systems and signifying practices. Because the text constitutes a productive, coherent, and internally organized structure, semiotic inquiry has sought to uncover how the text is constructed, moving from its external framing devices inward, with a view to opening closed texts and probing the ways in which renewed readings and divergent interpretations become possible.

Textual space, then, possesses a typographic dimension in one sense and a semiotic one in another. It assists the reader in reaching the broader meanings of the text and the creative impulse underlying it through attention to the spaces of writing, their visual form, the distribution of black and white, and the use of color. These elements are not placed arbitrarily by the writer. Rather, they reflect aesthetic sensibility and artistic awareness directed toward multiple symbolic ends. The paratext therefore helps illuminate the specificity of the literary work in both form and content. The same holds true for the paratext in *Harbors of Madness*, which offers the reader a distinctive literary effect through its innovative experimental construction at the levels of both form and content. In this novel, the paratext functions as a reflective surface for the body text, from the cover to the appendix.

B. The Stream-of-Consciousness Novel

The stream-of-consciousness novel is a narrative form concerned with the human psyche as a relatively autonomous sphere. Its primary focus lies in tracing the inner stirrings of the character, the fluctuations of consciousness, and the movements of subjective life at its deepest level. To achieve this, it draws on interior monologue and free association, techniques that allow the reader direct access to the character's psychic interiority. Hence the term stream of consciousness has been used to designate "a method of presenting the mental aspects of character in fiction"⁴. In this kind of writing, the novelist is less invested in delineating the character's outward features than in probing interior depths, memories, and patterns of thought as they unfold in confrontation with a fractured and crisis-ridden reality. As Robert Humphrey notes, "the area of life with which stream-of-consciousness fiction is concerned is the mental and spiritual experience in both its whatness and its howness. The whatness includes the various kinds of mental experience, such as sensations and memories; the howness includes shades of symbol, feeling, and associative processes"⁵.

More broadly, what defines stream-of-consciousness fiction is its concentration on consciousness itself, together with its reliance on a distinctive set of narrative procedures that sets it apart from the classical novel. It is structured around recollection and free association as operations

of memory, memory being both a constituent of consciousness and one of the defining features of the modern stream-of-consciousness novel. These mental processes are generally rendered in a spontaneous, non-linear manner, outside the logic of strict sequence. This is closely tied to the fact that the dominant temporality in such fiction is psychological time. The plot consequently appears fragmented, at least in the first instance, and this fragmentation challenges the reader to reconstruct the order of events.

From this perspective, stream of consciousness may be understood as a mode of expression within experimental fiction that depends on recollection and on free associations sedimented in the depths of the self and transformed into symbols. At other moments, it draws on states of psychic eruption produced by the shocks experienced by the character in lived reality, prompting the latter to construct alternative spaces as a means of escape from inner crisis. For this reason, the stream-of-consciousness novel mobilizes a range of devices, including flashback, interior monologue, imaginative projection, dream sequences, and delirious or hallucinatory discourse.

Harbors of Madness, the novel examined in the present study, by the Tunisian writer Mohsen Ben Heniya, is above all a stream-of-consciousness novel. In it, the novelist adopts a distinctive technique through which textual space reflects the condition of the character and its transformations. Put otherwise, he invests paratextual space, in its various forms, in an experimental manner that unsettles the reader even as it draws that reader in. On this basis, the present study seeks to enter the text of *Harbors of Madness* through a range of paratextual elements, selecting those thresholds most responsive to the procedures of semiotic analysis.

2. The Semiotics of the Novel's Paratext: The Cover

The cover is one of the text's external paratextual components and belongs to the editorial peritext, since the publishing house is responsible for its design, structuring, and final visual presentation. Interest in the cover increased significantly from the nineteenth century onward, alongside the development of printing technologies and typographic practices, because of its aesthetic value as well as its promotional function. It thus constitutes a reading prompt *par excellence*, since it marks the reader's first visual encounter with the book.

The front cover of *Harbors of Madness* functions as a fundamental paratextual threshold that assists the reader in approaching and apprehending the text. The design adopted by both publisher and author reflects a notable development in the visual culture of print, particularly in the way the external space is configured so as to serve the narrative body of the work. The image, title, and colors are not placed arbitrarily. Rather, they derive from a network of meanings and underlying conditions embedded within the text itself, with the aim of attracting the reader and opening the work onto horizons of reading and interpretation. The novel's front cover is composed of four graphic units: the author's name, the illustration, the title, and the generic marker. The focus here, however, will be on the illustration and the title, since both function as iconic signs rich in semantic suggestion, arresting the reader's attention and inviting interpretation.

A. The Cover Image

The front cover of *Harbors of Madness* incorporates a pictorial composition positioned at the center of the front panel within a white frame whose contours remain only faintly defined, while the other paratextual elements are placed outside that frame, thus creating a cognitive distance that sets them apart from the image. The painting was executed by the artist MahfouD al-Zoughbi, and it bears the mark of a distinctly individual artistic imagination.

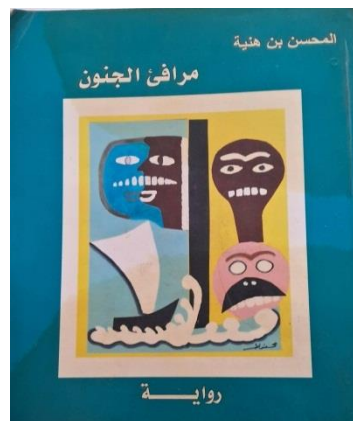
Enclosed within this white frame, the composition presents a cluster of faces at its center and is vertically divided into two sections. The first contains two faces, rendered in brown and pink, set against a yellow background and marked by expressions of astonishment and strangeness. The second contains two partially overlapping faces whose features merge even as their colors differ, one brown and the other dark blue, against a pale blue background. Beneath these faces appears a ship that seems to be struggling against high waves.

The cover design thus assumes the form of a surreal, symbolically charged composition. It offers an iconic sign that raises numerous questions for the reader and visually impels entry into the world of the primary text. These graphic signs and chromatic overlays constitute a condensed

secondary language, one that communicates ideas and significations through form, color, drawing, shadow, and physiognomic detail. The painting may therefore be read either as the representation of a certain reality or as its symbolic transposition, as conceived by Mohsen Ben Heniya.

Figure 1: Novel's Cover

The multiplicity of faces and the diversity of colors that shape both the image and its background intensify the sense of disturbance and disequilibrium experienced by the novel's protagonist, Hussein ibn al-Shadhili. He appears to inhabit a state of disorientation and estrangement that may derive from bodily, cultural, social, or emotional causes, something the narrative gradually discloses. The novelist depicts the protagonist as engaged in a search for the self after returning from exile burdened by thought and fractured in identity. He oscillates between a self open to the other and to the civilized world, and another lost self, suspended between the past and regressive beliefs. He thus endures a state of inner conflict reflected in the painting's features and in its entangled palette. He gives expression to this condition in the following words: "I moved from dreadful circumstances to still more scattered fragments of my mind, the event, the hurricanes of intrigue, destroyed fortresses I had built with would become the grave of our



dreadful ones, gathering the shattered by the earthquake of and the storms of deceit that Sylvie, never imagining they hopes.”⁶

The cover icon represented by the two vertical sections, carries a directly connected to the events of protagonist's ceaseless movement on the intellectual plane or the bodily painting's division into two parts split that governs the protagonist's character, for he appears suspended between two contradictory worlds: one urges him upward through what it offers in the way of culture and civilization, while the other pulls him downward through the negative beliefs and values it contains. This tension emerges clearly in his statement: "They believe in the benefit granted by the dead and in blessings (...) I cannot accept this. Or have I been changed by the civilization of reason and matter (...) until I came to think that what these people live by is backwardness and a form of the legends of the ancients?"⁷

Because the ship is oriented toward the bewildered faces, its movement becomes a movement toward the unknown and toward loss. The protagonist continues to endure a double bitterness: the loss of his Western beloved, Sylvie, and the loss of his childhood beloved, Fatima. The past thus becomes his greatest adversary, stirring sorrow and regret within him each time certain scenes return through the free associative workings of memory.

Accordingly, the image of the ship carries within it a set of semantic binaries linked to the protagonist's psychological and intellectual condition, among them agency and incapacity, consciousness and the unconscious, as well as constraint and freedom. Together, these binaries form a signifying matrix that reflects a troubled society and foregrounds the state of imbalance and dislocation through which the protagonist moves. As he says to himself: "The swing did not stop; contradictions kept following one another; right and wrong overlapped, intertwined, fused; the tongue faltered in determining meanings."⁸

B. The Semiotics of Color and Its Relation to the Novelistic Text

Color is among the most powerful stimuli acting simultaneously upon the eye and the mind, for it reflects, at once, psychic disposition and emotional intensity. In the cover design, the artist chooses a combination of bright, luminous hues alongside darker tones, notably white, yellow, brown, and blue. These are arranged as chromatic binaries charged with multiple symbolic resonances, at times suggesting harmony and consonance, at others tension and opposition. Taken together, they function as visual icons that invite semiotic analysis and interpretive unpacking in order to disclose the meanings and signals, they encode.

• The Significance of White and Yellow

White is not invariably a symbol of purity, chastity, or positive value in the familiar sense. In this novel, it acquires a different inflection, one marked by pessimism and by proximity to the paradox of life and death. The protagonist, Hussein ibn al-Shadhili, repeatedly lapses into states of absent consciousness to the point that he imagines himself inhabiting an intermediate, limbo-like realm, as suggested in his words: "I could scarcely remember the Resurrection or the torment of the gathering, nor could I remember whether resurrection had occurred or not"⁹. Whiteness here becomes associated with a mood of foreboding, especially since the text bears an unmistakably tragic cast. The protagonist lives under the pressure of profound loneliness and a lethal estrangement, feeling himself to be a body emptied of spirit after the loss of Sylvie. He invokes her in the following words: "To whom shall I complain, when my family know nothing of my calamity and do not ward off the malice of those who plot against me? Your family tried to kill me, my beloved, and they killed me with you. They left me this wretched body and stripped me of all my weapons"¹⁰.

Yellow, in its radiance and luminosity, often tends toward white, and its deployment here may serve, at least partially, to temper the darkness of the tragic reality through which the protagonist moves. At the same time, it is also a color suggestive of dreams and illusions. Hussein ibn al-Shadhili repeatedly loses himself in reveries involving his beautiful female companions and his beloved Fatima, in an effort to flee his painful reality, until this psychic state deepens into something approaching delirium. He says: "Open that suitcase of mine ... look and you will see ... from between the covers of the suitcase Clara appeared, then Françoise ... heads emerging from the opening of the suitcase..."¹¹.

Yet in this stream-of-consciousness novel, the signification of yellow undergoes a striking reversal, shifting from clarity toward opacity and indeterminacy when the protagonist sinks into inertia and constriction as a result of his curtailed freedom. The rituals, incantations, and incense in the *zawiya* of Sidi Khalif create a suffocating psychic atmosphere, one that presses upon his spirit and weighs heavily on a body already mutilated by affective deprivation. He bursts out in protest: "Enough ... enough ... of this madness ... of this rabble ... of this backwardness ... this is dervishism ... this is charlatanism"¹². In this context, yellow comes to signify an incapacity for thought and action, generated by the protagonist's fragmentation between two contradictory worlds. It is precisely this split that drives him toward mental derangement under the influence of the magical and superstitious rites performed in the *zawiya* of Sidi Khalif.

• The Significance of Brown and Blue

Brown and blue are both colors closely associated with nature. Brown is the color of soil, and thus evokes origin, strength, and rootedness. It is also, as one formulation has it, "a color in which the pressing activity found in red is diminished; it tends toward greater calm, and its energy is not positively linked to the senses"¹³. The protagonist repeatedly enters states of calm that suggest

relaxation and surrender after the strain of inner conflict, though such calm is no more than a temporary flight from reality. Hussein ibn al-Shadhili imagines himself in the form of the first human being, Adam, created from clay and mud, as though seeking a return to his natural origin, that is, to the earth itself.

Within this context, brown becomes for him a space of freedom and movement, removed from the constraints of urban refinement and social convention. He merges with nature in all that it contains, trees, rocks, and animals, entering into a state of primordial communion and originary connectedness with the surrounding environment. The novel gives explicit expression to this: “I took off the clothes that were on me and stood upon the rock looking at my naked image reflected in the water of the brook (...) Was Adam’s form, when he descended from heaven, like this?”¹⁴

Brown is also the color of fertile, wholesome earth, and in that sense, it symbolizes his homeland, Tunisia, to which he returns despite the difficulty of readjustment. It remains the intimate place that shelters him and receives him with tenderness whenever he is far away. Brown also signifies endurance and continuity. The protagonist is burdened by pain and sorrow, yet remains attached to life, struggling against betrayal and disappointment. In this respect, he becomes an embodiment of the lover’s resilience. This appears clearly in “Tayyib’s prescription,” when his condition is diagnosed and he is told that the days of healing will surely come, between the pastures of youth where he was raised and the paths of childhood where play once flourished. The advice then follows that he should marry Fatima. From that point onward, he gradually begins to recover and regain stability after marrying her and fathering their child.

It is equally clear that light blue dominates the novel’s cover, occupying the largest area of the image both within the painted frame and beyond it. It is a color expressive of illusion, waking dream, and psychic disturbance, and this reading corresponds closely to the protagonist’s unstable condition, marked by sorrow and inward fracture produced by the deadly psychological isolation he endures as a result of his continuous struggle between self and other.

At the same time, blue also carries positive connotations, among them joy, optimism, calm, and stability. This value appears only sparingly in the body of the novel, particularly when the protagonist recalls his mother Zina or his beloved Fatima. In such moments, he resembles the sea in its fluctuations: at times calm, lucid, and stable in thought; at others turbulent, agitated, and lost between a past that seizes his affective being and a constricted present in which he finds nothing beyond attachment to the immediate instant.

Taken together, the cover image chosen by the writer and executed by the artist is composed of several layered pictorial panels, each containing a range of forms and colors that function as key icons for the text of *Harbors of Madness*. Blue occupies the greatest visual space and constitutes the image’s principal background, reflecting the writer’s confidence in the signifying power of color. The white frame, by contrast, forms part of a wider visual field viewed from an illuminated angle, suggesting the possibility that pain and sorrow may one day recede and that a more secure, limpid reality may emerge. Yellow, for its part, points to the intensity of thought and contemplation that may lead the human being toward loss and toward a moment of standing at a crossroads. This is especially visible in the protagonist’s central placement within the composition, where the conflict between brown and blue becomes manifest: the former draws him toward the terrestrial world, whereas the latter directs him toward the celestial one. From this chromatic tension arises instability and disequilibrium, the product of an acute struggle between past and present, reason and ignorance, and belief and religion. It is this struggle that compels the protagonist to live through a series of masks, whether consciously or unconsciously, masks that point to the multiplicity of selfhood within him and to his state of psychic fragmentation. The many faces depicted on the cover painting are the visual correlative of that condition.

C. The Semiotics of the Title as Paratext

The title is the principal element of the novelistic work and one of the key components of the authorial paratext. It is the first message received by the reader and, for that reason, the first to provoke curiosity. The title is “the principal gateway to the text, as well as a brilliant and enigmatic illumination, insofar as it poses a problematic question to which the text undertakes to

respond”¹⁵. The novel rests on a single main title, *Harbors of Madness*, without the support of a subtitle, which suggests the writer’s confidence in the title’s capacity to unsettle the reader through a semantic displacement that leads toward the farthest reaches of ambiguity. On the front cover, the title appears horizontally in the blue field directly above the pictorial panel. It is written in white tinged with a pale blue shade, in a bold and prominent script. The straightness and clarity of the lettering may be taken to reflect the writer’s composure and steadiness in approaching human questions, while the bluish white suggests an openness to the inner worlds of others and to the psychological and social conflicts they contain, among them the conflict of values, customs, and civilizations. The color also evokes the seeming limitlessness of feeling and thought, making the protagonist represented by Mohsen Ben Heniya only one instance among many figures in lived reality, each marked by the action of the other and its effect upon the self within the social field.

The title *Harbors of Madness* opens the way to interpretation and obliges the reader to approach it with semiotic tools capable of completing what remains implicit within it. For that reason, one must return to the cover image in order to clarify and interpret its signifying charge. The word *madness*, placed in a genitival relation to *harbors*, exerts its force over the suppressed initial term and over the technique of the novel as a whole. It comes to interpret the protagonist’s condition, that is, the madness reflected in both the external and internal paratexts, together with the conflict between self and other and the state of exile and estrangement so clearly manifest in the events of this stream-of-consciousness novel.

The word “*harbors*” is the plural of *harbor* and denotes the place on land where a ship comes to rest. Despite its apparent simplicity, the word is heavily charged with meaning, and most of those meanings are borne out by the events of the novel. The writer deliberately chose an indirect title structured as a symbolic metaphor, thereby granting it wider interpretive potential. Harbors belong to ships and voyages, whereas madness belongs to the human being.

Any reading of the title requires attention to its semantic dimension through analysis and interpretation, but without severing it from the body text. Each illuminates the other and reinforces its signifying force. The harbors through which the protagonist passes vary as the events, and as the social, political, and ideological situations of the places in which he dwells, also vary. In them he experiences the bitterness of time, sorrow, the pain of exile, and suffering. Most of these are unknown stations, places where he does not know what awaits him. It is therefore significant that *harbors* appears in an indefinite form, whereas *madness* emerges as the inevitable consequence of all that he has undergone.

After a long journey, the protagonist’s ship finally comes to rest in a last harbor, his homeland, Tunisia. There he discovers a profound contradiction between his open mode of thought and the closed mentality of his family, and he is shocked by a reality that has not changed despite the broader transformations taking place in the world. Memories then close in on him from every side, along with the pain of separation. He loses his beloved Fatima, his childhood companion, when she marries her cousin in obedience to custom and tradition, and he leaves his homeland lost and displaced. Later, in France, he loses Sylvie as well, betrayed and killed, while he himself is accused of her murder. This becomes a further emotional shock. As these memories return, the protagonist grows more violent and rebellious, voicing his desire to free himself from every constraint that binds him, whether the constraints of custom and social convention or those of injustice and exclusion imposed by the other. He then begins to suffer bouts of madness, after which he is taken to a psychiatrist. This trajectory is further clarified by the internal chapter titles of the novel: “Fatima’s Voice Summons the Past,” “Sylvie Emerges from the Folds of Memory,” “The Invocation of Sidi Khalif,” “Before the Doctor,” “In the Hospital Bed,” “Bad Suspicion,” “Juha Tales,” and “Jiha Tales.”

Harbors of Madness also exceeds a narrow reading confined to the structure of the protagonist’s unconscious. By returning him to his birthplace and by recounting historical events bound up with human memory, the novel broadens its field of reference. In that process, the protagonist denounces the acts of kings and politicians who spread corruption across the earth. He says: “Look there also at Alexander, how he washed himself in people’s blood and imposed

militarization upon them, all for the sake of his arrogance and his greed for the rank of a god ... Antonio, that madman, who took to the sea carrying his haughtiness in the name of Rome, though Rome is not a city that commands madness and the killing of people ...”¹⁶.

In the context of *Harbors of Madness*, madness thus emerges as a central element within the stream-of-consciousness mode. It is not presented merely as pathology or psychological disorder, but as an inner current flowing through the protagonist’s consciousness and disclosing the depth of his psychic conflicts and intellectual anguish. Through this technique, the self becomes split and personality assumes a multiple form.

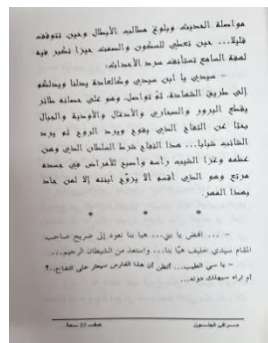
In sum, the title may be regarded as one of the novel’s most prominent semiotic signs, since it offers an additional point of access to the work. *Harbors* and *madness* function as two thematic nodes symbolizing stability and disturbance, calm and chaos, fixity and movement, consciousness and unconsciousness, reality and illusion. Stream of consciousness registers this conflict in *Harbors of Madness*, where feeling intersects with memory moves between one harbor that is turbulent, in other words, between realist illusory narration.

3. The Signifying Function of

Typography is the art of arranging ways that make written discourse visually effective. It may be understood as “the adopted by the author in the novelistic text, used to differentiate one text from another foreground particular meanings or ideas”¹⁷. In the novel, typography is not merely a matter of choosing a typeface. It constitutes a visual semiotic system through which the writer and designer transmit affects and meanings that verbal language alone cannot fully convey. In the preface to the novel, the author explains that he relies on this typographic variation, including italic, horizontal, bold, and other forms, both to depart from conventional narrative patterning and to help the reader register shifts in the protagonist’s psychic condition and patterns of thought. A change in thought thus produces a corresponding change in narrative form, while also allowing other discourses, drawn for example from the Qur'an, history, or myth, to enter into the text. This phenomenon may also be read in relation to the states of madness and unconsciousness that repeatedly overtake the protagonist during the course of the narrative. The discussion here will focus on two forms of typographic configuration: horizontal writing and wavy writing.

A. The Significance of Horizontal Writing

Horizontal writing is the conventional mode associated with prose works and novels in general. Within this typographic field, one detects a relative stabilization in the protagonist’s psychological state. His awareness of what surrounds him intensifies, and he becomes more attuned to his thoughts and more capable of mastering them. This is reflected in the text’s typographic disposition, as the letters appear in a prominent, linear form, signaling clarity of vision and an ordered mental state. At such moments, he directs his critique toward the political class, saying: “In truth, they touched upon dangerous matters such as the fabrication of wars, the feeding of division, the dismembering of states, and the appropriation of the wealth of nations...”¹⁸. In this case, typographic formation functions as a coded textual signal aimed at exposing political and social reality, and it falls to the reader to decipher it in order to uncover the latent structures operating between paratext and body text.



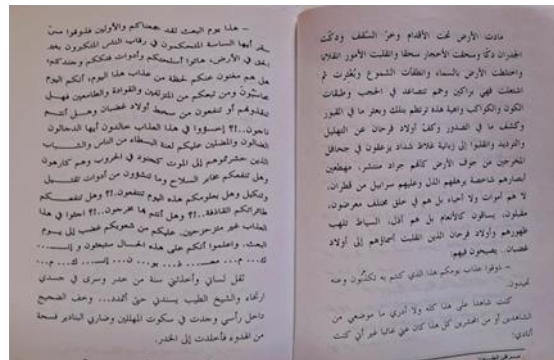
Typography in the Novel

letters and textual matter in perceptible and rhetorically graphic form of writing such as italicized or bold script within the novel in order to

Figure 2: Horizontal Writing

Source: The Novel

At times, one also written in Andalusian script style, as in the image, embedded or absent texts primary text. In such protagonist is at the height of



encounters paragraphs
and in a heavy bold
particularly when
intersect with the
instances, the
consciousness,

coherence, and mental composure. He sometimes recalls Qur'anic diction, as in: "The roof collapsed, the walls were crushed, and the trees were utterly pulverized ..." At other moments, he summons verses from poems he used to recite in childhood: "Blow fiercely, O winds; strike, O thunder; pour down, O rain ..." ¹⁹. Most of these passages are marked by calm, stillness, and longing for the past and for childhood. They also convey a clear discursive intention and reveal the author's control over the articulation of the novel's human concerns, something the reader may detect even before entering fully into the body of the text.

B. The Significance of Undulating or Oblique Typography

The typography of undulating, or oblique, lines in the novel constitutes a mode of narrative experimentation in which the visual organization of the page intersects with the text's semantic economy. This typographic formation is unusual in prose fiction. Mohsen Ben Heniya may therefore be said to introduce an additional experimental procedure into the contemporary novel, while also endowing the stream-of-consciousness novel with a further distinctive feature: the possibility of foreshadowing the protagonist's disturbed psychic state from the reader's very first visual encounter with the text. In this sense, typography in the novel becomes the "visual voice of the text."

Figure 3: Oblique and Undulating Typography

Source: Novel

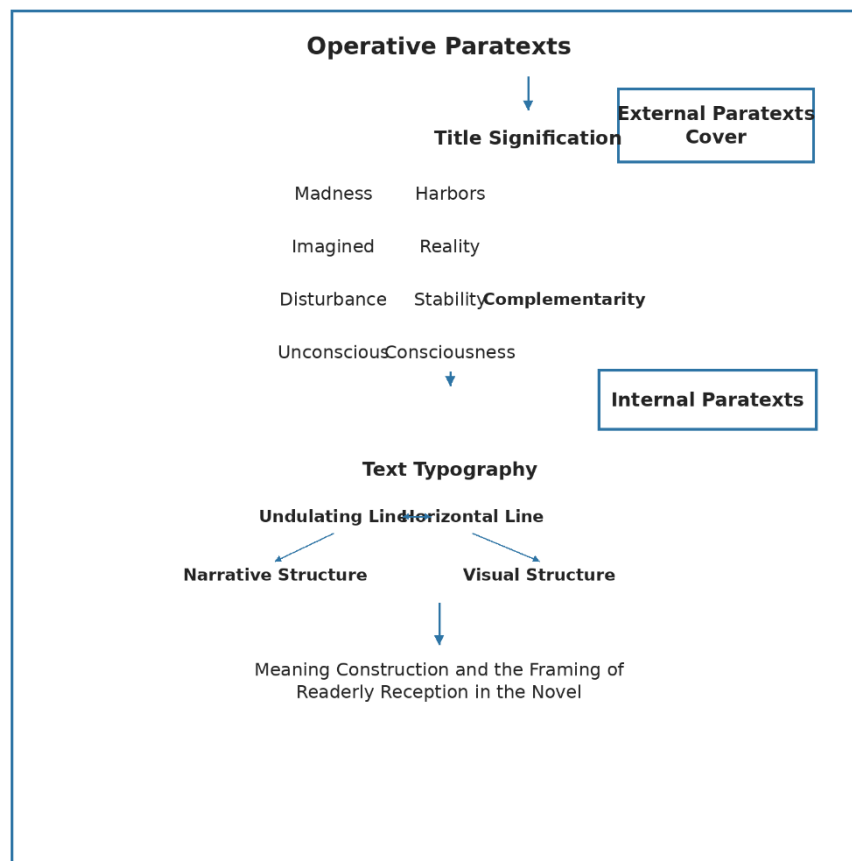
It is hardly surprising, then, that within this textual space the narrator exercises an almost absolute freedom in thought and conduct, moving beyond the bounds of the ordinary. This

condition embodies one of the forms of madness signaled by the writer in the novel's title. The protagonist enters a state of un-consciousness, and another voice begins to surface from within, charged with memories and associative currents that stand in sharp contradiction to his outward voice and lived reality. Released from the restraints of consciousness, he says what cannot ordinarily be said and does what reason and logic would refuse: he summons the dead and speaks with them, or strips off his clothes and runs naked among trees and valleys. Then, quite suddenly, he returns to his ordinary state, and what emerges instead is a balanced and judicious figure. That latter condition is expressed through horizontal lines. The typographic device thus becomes a set of visual signs carrying meanings tied to the plurality of narrative levels.

The novel's typographic variation, including typeface, the straightness or slant of lines, the size of letters, the distribution of paragraphs, and the arrangement of white and black space on the page, is transformed into a system of visual icons signifying split subjectivity and psychic division. At work here is a conflict between opposing poles distributed across the novel's events as a whole: stability and disturbance, past and present, consciousness and unconsciousness. These oppositions point to shifts in narrative voice, the fragmentation of time, and the plurality of character within the text. Typographic form thus becomes a sign of divergence, parallelism, or intersection among the novel's narrative trajectories. This formal diversity contributes directly to the modulation of the work's visual narrative rhythm. Typographic configuration in *Harbors of Madness* may therefore be understood as a second language, one that works alongside the narrative discourse to convey psychological, social, and cultural meanings to the reader.

On this basis, it becomes clear that textual space constitutes a signifying field in which visual and narrative dimensions interact in a complementary relation. It is not merely a formal choice or a typographic embellishment. Rather, it is an active structural component that participates in the production of meaning, guides the act of reading, and shapes interpretation. Accordingly, the paratexts, both external and internal, may be regarded as indispensable parallel texts in the interpretation of the body text and the elucidation of its events, insofar as they function as semiotic signs that frame the process of reception. This complementary relation between title and typography is illustrated in the following diagram:

Figure 4:complementary relation between title and typography



Source: This study

4-Conclusion:

This semiotic reading of Mohsen Ben Heniya's *Harbors of Madness* brings into view a number of central conclusions.

To begin with, Ben Heniya accords the paratext a distinctive status. Far from functioning as a peripheral supplement, it becomes a generative textual zone that produces narrative questioning through its figurative richness and dense semiotic charge. In this way, the discourse is elevated to a heightened level of signification. The novelist thus constructs a markedly experimental textual space through a rich and varied paratextual apparatus whose principal achievement lies in the interplay of the cover, the image, color, and the dedication, all of which converge around meanings shaped by the tragedies of exile and estrangement.

Equally important is the fact that the novel's different spatial registers, geographical, textual, and semantic, work together rather than in isolation. Their convergence deepens the signifying structure of the narrative and produces the cohesion and coherence through which the work secures its overall unity.

The typography of the paired line formations, moreover, cannot be reduced to a merely formal device. It functions instead as an aesthetic and semantic mechanism that actively contributes to the production of meaning and to the articulation of vision in the stream-of-consciousness novel.

Ben Heniya also turns graphic variation into a major iconographic and interpretive feature of the work. It demands pauses, close attention, and a willingness to read its signs as part of the novel's signifying economy. At the same time, it draws the reader into questioning the relation between typographic configuration and the title-space of *Harbors of Madness*, and then the relation between both of these and the narrative text as a whole. In that sense, textual space becomes a genuine partner in the production of meaning.

The paratexts in this novel likewise operate as a parallel visual language whose significations are bound up with the plurality of narrative levels. They orient the reader and guide

reception through abrupt shifts in narrative trajectory. Since the stream-of-consciousness novel depends on the disruption of temporal linearity, the interweaving of interior monologue, and the fragmentation of consciousness, these thresholds function as structuring intervals that organize the movement of events and furnish the reader with interpretive keys for approaching the obscurities of experimental narration.

What emerges, then, is that these paratextual thresholds succeed in containing the dispersal intrinsic to stream-of-consciousness writing and in transforming novelistic experimentation from a purely formal venture into a coherent signifying structure. Whitespace begins to speak, color acquires interpretive force, and typographic arrangement directs the reader toward the core of Mohsen Ben Heniya's creative experience.

Finally, *Harbors of Madness* remains a particularly fertile model for semiotic inquiry because it remains open to multiple readings of a wide range of paratextual elements, including the preface, the introductory statement, internal titles, typographic patterns, and appendices. These thresholds constitute diverse aesthetic components that illuminate further dimensions of the text and make it possible to extend the present study through the use of other analytical procedures.

References

Footnotes:

¹Bilal Abd al-Razzaq, *An Introduction to the Thresholds of the Text: A Study of Prefaces in Classical Arabic Criticism* (Casablanca: Afrique Orient, 2000), 21.

²Abd al-Hak Belabed, *Thresholds (Gérard Genette: From Text to Paratext)* (Beirut: Arab Scientific Publishers, 2008), 27–28.

³Belabed, *op. cit.*, 44.

⁴Robert Humphrey, *Stream of Consciousness in the Modern Novel*, trans. Mahmoud al-Rabie (Cairo: Dar Gharib for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, 2000), 22.

⁵Humphrey, *op. cit.*, 33.

⁶Al-Muhsin Ben Heniya, *Harbors of Madness* (Sfax: Dar al-Tasfir al-Fanni, 2003), 21.

⁷Ben Heniya, *op. cit.*, 32–33.

⁸Ben Heniya, *op. cit.*, 33.

⁹Ben Heniya, *op. cit.*, 54.

¹⁰Ben Heniya, *op. cit.*, 127.

¹¹Ben Heniya, *op. cit.*, 46.

¹²Ben Heniya, *op. cit.*, 51.

¹³Ahmad Mukhtar Umar, *Language and Color* (Cairo: Alam al-Kutub, 2007), 230.

¹⁴Ben Heniya, *op. cit.*, 60.

¹⁵Jamil Hamdawi, "Semiotics and Titling," *Alam al-Fikr* 25, no. 3 (1997), 108.

¹⁶Ben Heniya, *op. cit.*, 84

¹⁷Murad Abd al-Rahman Mabrouk, *The Geopolitics of the Literary Text: The Topography of Novelistic Space as a Model* (Alexandria: Dar al-Wafa li-Dunya al-Tiba'a wa al-Nashr, 2002), 127.

¹⁸Ben Heniya, *op. cit.*, 113.

¹⁹Ben Heniya, *op. cit.*, 92.

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