



A Paratextual Semiotic Reading of Aissa Cheriet's La rocade

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Abstract ;(not more than 10 Lines)

*This research paper delves into the complex paratextual elements and the profound symbolism within the novel *La Rocade* (2004) by Aissa Cheriet. It explores how genre categorisation, thresholds, title and cover art serve as gateways to the text, setting expectations and shaping the reader's engagement with the text connecting him to the historical and cultural realities rooted in the narrative. The paper further analyses the novel's characters, who represent a microcosm of Algerian society symbolising societal decay and political upheaval. This paper presents the selected novel as a literary work that amalgamates personal narratives with the historical and political fabric of Algeria, inviting readers to reflect on the past's influence on the present and future.*

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1. Introduction

In the realm of literary exploration, *La rocade* (2004) emerges as a laboratory where the complexities of human experience and societal constructs are easily examined. The novel recalls the writings that anatomise life in the Algerian cities and towns with their complex histories and stories notably that of Tahar Ouettar's *The Earthquake* (1974) and *Al Laz* (1974).

La rocade (2004), is like a river that flows with all the wild abandon of nature, pouring itself into the ocean of reality, bearing with it the echoes of the city and the news of the alleys. On its banks, we find the remains of love and the scattered fragments of lost chastity. A river filled with worries and tragedies as it flows through rough paths and deep slopes singing the song of life. The story captures the day-to-day existence of a society, filled with contradictions and the full range of human experiences. Spanning from the Liberation War to the era of turmoil, it reaches the beginning of what was known as the emergence of the Islamic political movement in the Algerian street (Zahia 2005, 59). Aissa Cheriet says describing the novel's chronotope à la Bakhtinian:

The novel is indeed heavy loaded with events and characters, as it covers many social, political, and even historical events. I chose to set it in the period before the events of October 1988, and I tried to explain some of the phenomena that were rampant in the Algerian society. There are phenomena that we are experiencing now that have historical roots, specifically in the period of the great revolution of liberation and shortly before it. I used all of these events in structuring the novel (Tahir 2012, 41).

The novel is an exploration of the reasons that led the Algerian society to a dead end. In the late 1970s when Chadli Benjedid came to presidency, the Algerian nation entered one of the most turbulent stages of its modern history. Although Chadli's presidency was characterised by a more open political system, liberalising reforms and shift toward a free-market economy, bribery, nepotism, foreign debt, fraud, economic malaise and unemployment plagued the country. Thus, the gap between the elite and the masses grew wider (Takeyh 2003, 07). The rich became richer and the poor poorer. This is how one must understand Cheriet's novel as these events are reflected in the lives of its individuals, their psychological and social contradictions. The story takes place in the streets and alleys that carry many symbols, connotations and allusions, starting with the formation of the stone road called "La rocade" that shaped the neighbourhood's destiny due to its strategic

location. The neighbourhood also had another famous name, the Jewish ghetto, because it was inhabited by Jews who were mostly merchants. The house in this quarter that belonged to the Jews was called "Shish Borich." These Jews left the country reluctantly after the independence of Algeria. So, Aissa Cheriet implemented histories of the Jews in his novel as other Algerian authors did such as Amin Zaoui and Habib Al Sayah.

It is noticed that there is a gradual escalation of cultural, artistic and literary production interested in the Jew character as never before. Authors are trying to rewrite history and to tell us tales that broaden our understanding of the history of Jewish existence in our countries. While some authors present Jews as an important part of the historic fabric of the Arab and North African societies, others consider Jews as traitors, occupiers and the root of all problems.

From the very first lines of the novel, the author introduces his characters painting carefully their physical, social and psychological features. The protagonist of this novel is Al Touhami around whom almost all the events of the novel revolve. He is an influential figure in his community in the la rocade neighbourhood due to his social and financial status. However, as much as he gave, he also took a lot. This character is accompanied by another character, his wife Djamila, who is twenty-six years old, while Al Touhami is sixty years old.

After Touhami's engagement with Djamila, the restless and fortune-seeking Chouiha saw it as golden chance to achieve his opportunistic goals. Djamila had harboured a secret affection to Chouiha since childhood, and he was also her cousin. He played a major role in convincing her to marry Al Touhami, promising to marry her himself after they manage to steal some of his money to secure their future. Among this web of deceit, there were other relationships and alliances like that of Al Touhami with the pervert Sahnoun, the town's mayor, which led them both to an unhappy end. Both of them are like vultures, they are the emblem of the corruption and decay of their society.

Souad, daughter of Al-Touhami, endures her ill fate alongside her brother Khaled, suffering under the harsh treatment of their stepmother Djamila. This cruelty often drives her to contemplate escape, to abandon everything. Yet, her guardianship of her brother binds her. And there is also the innocent bond with Ismail, the neighbour's son and her high school classmate, an elegant and handsome young man who takes great care of his appearance, which is among his foremost concerns.

Besides, the reader meets another important character, Hussein Al Masrah (The playwright), whom the police officer assists in fleeing beyond the nation's borders, for he is accused of engaging in

A Paratextual Semiotic Reading of Aissa Cheriet's La rocade

opposition political activity. He is the embodiment of the Algerian intellectual who resorts to forced migration and political asylum to save his life. This tableau recalls that of Amin Maalouf's *The Disoriented* (2012), those who left the country refuse to plug their hands in filth; while those who stayed, they survived by wallowing in corruption.

The fabric of the characters in the novel is rich. In this tableau, we find Moussa Al Soukardji 'the drunk' and his relationship with Al Houaria, the prostitute who came from the Algerian west, during the liberation revolution to settle in this quarter. There is also Ali Al Kahouadji (coffee maker), Thamer the hunchback, the public typewriter, and Hadj Said the shoemaker whose nasty odour is invading his shop and is always engaging in quarrels with the Imam. Within the confines of *La rocade*, whispers from some residents are circulating claiming that this Imam (the man who leads people in prayer in the mosque and a spiritual leader), whom Al Houaria seduced, had slept with her dozens of times. These are the features of the characters and in their relationships with each other.

This research paper thus aims to put flesh on the bones of questions surrounding the novel's paratextual elements and the rich symbolism that decorates its narrative structure. Through a careful discussion of genre categorisation, the crystallisation of thematic colours, and the figurative aspects of its characters, we delve into the heart of the novel's identity.

La rocade is not merely a collection of words bound by a cover; it is a living, breathing entity that invites readers to discover its depths. The novel's paratextual features serve as the power connecting the reader's first impressions to the core of the narrative's meaning. As we explore the novel's symbolic cover art and title, we uncover layers of historical resonance and cultural significance that are interwoven with the story's fabric.

2. Paratextual Elements in *La rocade*

Paratextual analysis, a concept pioneered by Gérard Genette, is a critical tool in understanding the nuanced ways novels communicate beyond their core text (Skare 2020). It examines elements like titles, prefaces, and epigraphs, which form a threshold, inviting readers into the literary world while also shaping their interpretation. Julia Kristeva's contributions, particularly her notion of intertextuality, complement this by highlighting how texts converse with a broader literary tradition, enriching the reading experience. Together, their theories underscore the significance of the seemingly peripheral, which, in reality, carry profound implications for the meaning and reception of literary works. In short, these paratextual elements mark the beginning of the narrative that

Edward Said puts as follows emphasising the importance of “thresholds”: “the designation of a beginning generally involves also the designation of a consequent intention” and thus “a first step in the intentional production of meaning” (1975, xi).

2.1 Genre Categorisation

To engage with a text, recognising its genre is essential. The genre is revealed not once but twice: prominently on the cover and again on the title page. This revelation acts as an invitation into the text, sparing us the task of genre identification. Genre is a pivotal factor in shaping the reception horizon and our initial interaction with an artistic work. It introduces a wealth of textual experiences, literary conventions, interpretive frameworks, and intertextual expectations to the reading process, fulfilling some anticipations while others are not.

It is important to recognise that genre serves as a graphic element, guiding the reader to anticipate and prepare for the text's scope. It links a text with its genre counterparts in our collective textual consciousness. As we engage with the text through its genre, we form a pact of readership. The reception of any literary genre involves an unspoken pact between writer and reader, tied to the genre's essence. *La Rocade* is a pioneering text, leading its genre and partly belonging to the dominant literary style of the author's time. It enralls readers, drawing them in with its charm and seduction: “It beckons us to enter through this gateway wide open, so that we may understand it and free ourselves from the anxiety that accompanies the reception of texts in literary history” (Hamad 1997, 54).

Such are the texts that resonated with the era's zeitgeist, serving as a reflective surface for its diverse events. They mirrored the social and economic unrest that Algeria endured before the October 1988 events, and the black decade that come after, marked by trials, turmoil, and a pervasive sense of existential dread.

The text engages with modern Western trends in its style, expression, and narration of events. Moving closer to the text, we examine also the accompanying texts that forge bonds of affection and declare its course, revealing its secrets. Approaching the novel compels us to confront its paratextual elements, the natural entry points. These paratextual elements are the guidelines that prepare the reader for the text, directing him on the correct path. They are also gateways of communication that allow the reader to open up to the text's structure and semantic dimensions. They frame the text's

A Paratextual Semiotic Reading of Aissa Cheriet's La rocade

construction and some of its organisational methods, carrying within them a compositional function that seeks to unveil the writing strategy (Ibid).

2.2 The Cover

As Pr Mortad Abdel Malek says, the cover is the first thing “that greets us, capturing our attention the moment we take hold of the novel. It is the initial paratext of the novel. It’s signals usher us into the discovery of the text through others” (1995, 102).

The cover of the novel contains three graphic units, each bearing significant symbols. The first unit depicts a table in a pale green hue with a jar, in which a plant with withered leaves is planted. Near the table, there is a dark window, and beneath it lies a pool of blood. The second unit is colour, and we shall delve into these two units under this title. Meanwhile, the study of the third unit will be late to a subsequent section as it is a major unit that stands on its own.

2.3. The Picture's Symbolism

The cover's artwork appears reflects a set of symbolic signs. The jar, in one aspect, symbolises civilisation in its luminosity as a torch in the cover. Besides, it is likely that the jar represents Algeria. It is white as a dove, civilised at heart despite the onslaught of corruption imposed upon it (the dry leaves signify this corruption), paving the way for a decade of bloodshed (the pool of blood foreshadows the novel's prediction of a bloody phase). It recalls also another connotation of white used by Assia Djebar used in her 2003 book entitled *Algerian White*. It is the white of tombs and shrouds that envelopes the present and the future of Algeria. Djebar puts it: “Writing to express Algeria vacillating and for which some are already preparing the *white* of the shroud” (2002, 107).

Furthermore, the cover draws our attention to the author's name placed beneath the image, suggesting that Cheriet is part of the scene. He is the engaged intellectual¹ who is not content with mere observation but strives to participate in the movement for change, uncovering the reasons for deviation, and condemning those responsible for the collapse of the Algerian society into the abyss.

2.4. Colours

¹ It is similar to what Jean-Paul Sartre called la *littérature engagée*. This means that the elite members of a given society must go into action and become socially responsible in their writings addressing major social and political topics of their time. Sartre, Jean-Paul. (1989) *No Exit and Three Other Plays*. Vintage International.

Upon first glance, the dominance of white over the cover is evident, as well as the prominent display of black and red. The former is used for the novel's title and the publisher's name, while the latter for the author's name and the genre of the text. This could symbolise something, as symbols, including colours, have become utilised in various fields of life. Elaborating on this, the use of white may represent purity or a blank slate, suggesting a new beginning or a return to origins, which could be reflective of the novel's themes. Black often denotes authority, power, or elegance, which might imply the novel's significance or the gravitas of its content. Red, commonly associated with passion, danger, or urgency, could hint at the novel's emotional intensity or critical themes. The strategic use of these colours on the cover not only captures attention but also conveys the novel's underlying messages before the first page is turned. In the context of Cheriet's *La rocade*, these colours could be interwoven with the narrative's exploration of identity, heritage, and societal transformation within Algeria.

Therefore, there is a general understanding in the field of literary interpretation about the impact of paratextual elements, such as cover art, on the reception and interpretation of a text. Gérard Genette, a literary theorist, describes paratext as "a zone not only of transition but also of transaction: a privileged place of pragmatics and a strategy, of an influence on the public, an influence that ... is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it" (1997, 43). This suggests that the choice of colours on a novel's cover is a deliberate strategy to influence how readers perceive and connect with the content of the book.

The stark black that insists on its presence within the white is a testament to the will in writing, to not remain silent, to not suffocate the repressed memory within Hussein the playwright. It represents the spirit of expression that refuses to be quelled by the blankness of silence. It represents a defiance, a refusal to let the unspoken truths remain hidden. It is about liberating the black memory—the darkness of the ink—by releasing it onto the expanse of paper and articulating it: "The hour now flirts with midnight... 'Hussein the playwright' continues to coax himself into writing... For hours he has been trying to focus, to weave the threads of his play..." (Cheriet 2004, 211). Indeed, the importance of Cheriet's lies in the testimonial value of the story. Algerian literature during the 1990s and early twenty first century was labelled as Literature of Urgency, the urgency to describe, speak and bear witness of the tragedy, as the Algerian poet Tahar Djaout stated "If you are silent, you die. If you speak up, you die. So, speak up and die!" Besides, since the colour black, as psychologists observe—signifies a psyche in rebellion against circumstances and an exaggeration in

A Paratextual Semiotic Reading of Aissa Cheriet's La rocade

the search for the absolute, (Nabulsi 1991, 87) a clear direction in Hussein Al Masrah (the playwright).

Besides, while words may be free, rebellious, and impetuous, ringing with the truth despite its bitterness, the illustration remains neutral. This significance is present if we consider the reason for choosing to place a small image at the top of the cover. It is small compared to the page size dominated by free white space, within which lies a clear white that nothing obstructs. The image is defined, its boundaries not to be exceeded.

The red colour used for the author's name and the genre of the text is, according to psychologists, distinguished by its "impulsiveness, pursuit of passion, dominance, and desire for competition" (Nabulsi 1991, 87). Perhaps the red may symbolise the author's fervent aspiration to leave a mark in the literary world. It reflects a boldness, a refusal to conform to the norms, and a challenge to the established order. The author's use of red could be seen as a declaration of intent, a readiness to engage in the literary arena not just as a participant but as a contender. In addition to that, this colour choice on the cover serves as a visual manifesto of the author's ambitions, hinting at the passionate and possibly revolutionary nature of the text within. In relation to the novel, the red could be a metaphor for the blood of a society in upheaval or the beating heart of a culture striving to redefine itself. Indeed, the novel won the Malek Haddad literary prize on 2004. It is one of the most important Algerian novels in Arabic as it captures the attention of readers to delve into the M'silian society with its murky realities.

3. The Title

The study of titles, whether in poetry or prose, is a prominent feature of the semiotic approach, given that the title is the identity and the gate of the text, summarising its various meanings. It is not just about the content, but also the references, ideology, and the author's ability to choose a title that is enticing, astonishing, and representative of their work. Therefore, the title is considered one of the most important elements of the paratext (Le Paratexte), which frames the text and serves as the door through which the reader enters the world of the text. John Fisher argues that "titles are names whose purpose is hermeneutical and whose function is to guide interpretation" (Richardson 2008, 69).

The title therefore enjoys the primacy of reception. Since semiotics is concerned not only with meaning but also with the ways of its formation, the one studying the title delves into the structure

and contents of the title to understand the author's method in crafting it. One must resort to interpretation because the title, according to Umberto Eco, is an interpretive key (1984, 306). In short, the title is not just a label, but a bridge to the deeper currents of the narrative, inviting readers to explore the layers of meaning within. It can be an indirect hint or a bold declaration, guiding the reader's expectations and shaping their understanding of the text. A well-crafted title resonates with the themes and emotions of the story, becoming an integral part of the literary conversation between the author and the reader.

The title of the selected novel, *La rocade*, immediately signals that the term is of Franco-Arabic origin, entering common usage during the colonial period and remaining in use to this day. It is an attempt to pidginise language. In this case pidgin is more than a literary marker. It becomes a code marker. Cheriet uses Creole and pidgin as a way to conventionalise the non-conventional language (literature), an attempt to make his novel look like real world and his characters speak like real people in real life. These exophoric references illustrate the hybrid nature (nativisation of language) of the style, and stand as cultural markers too, they hook the reader's attention.

The title thus refers to the fourth route constructed by the Allies during World War II for passage through Algeria, starting from Morocco, joining Tunisia, and from there to the Libyan desert to encircle the Desert Fox, Rommel, who inflicted notorious defeats on their armies. The site then became strategically important, surrounded by several population centres, despite all its inhabitants being nomadic Bedouins. It housed a centre for monitoring that belongs to the roads and bridges department, and the person in charge of the centre was a Jew who was soon joined by his family members. This led to an influx of Jews to the area, where they established their neighbourhood, known and still referred to as the Jewish quarter or *La rocade*. The Jews at that time controlled all the services and business in this area (Cheriet 2004, 32). Thus, the title evokes a rich history, intertwining the local with the global, the personal with the political.

The title thus appears dense, charged, and deceptive. Its significance as a text parallel to the novel, and its method of conveying meaning, are numerous and complicated. Considering the lexicographical meaning provided by the novelist, the word "La rocade" generally signifies three purposes:

A Paratextual Semiotic Reading of Aissa Cheriet's La rocade

1. According to the word's etymology, it seems to have been chosen to achieve a promotional objective for the title. It suggests a deliberate attempt to attract readers, hinting at the novel's potential to stand out in the literary marketplace.
2. It is the fourth route connecting the West and the East. The reference to a route that connects two major regions of the world implies a narrative that spans cultures and histories, perhaps suggesting a journey or a bridge between different worlds within the story.
3. It is the neighbourhood/city that served as the setting for the events of the novel. The title grounds the reader in a specific locale, one that is likely to be rich in history and significance, both within the novel and in the real world. This symbolic title serves as a prelude to the themes and explorations that await the reader within the pages of the novel.

The novel's title is not merely a name but a symbol loaded with meanings that have solidified over time to dominate the narrative. It has evolved from a neutral term to an emblem of societal decay and corruption, representing communities that are devoid of the essence of civilised cities. It attracts every alien thought rejected by the society in which it was established. It is a symbol of torment, oppression, rape, and the absence of freedom of choice. It stands for the suffering and suppression of choice, an ideological stance that reveals itself by unmasking those who distort the history of the Algerian revolution and benefit from economic liberalisation under a veil of bureaucracy and false brews of religious discourses. The novel's narrative structure, mirroring the cyclical or spiral nature of time, suggests a deep engagement with the past and its impact on the present and future.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, *La rocade* stands as a profound literary work that encapsulates the tumultuous journey of Algerian society through its rich variety of characters and the symbolic use of paratextual elements. The novel serves as a laboratory for exploring the intricate interplay between individual narratives and collective historical experiences. It crystallises the essence of societal upheaval, the struggle for identity, and the quest for moral clarity amidst chaos. Through the careful examination of genre, colour symbolism, and the novel's title, this paper has illuminated the ways in which Cheriet engages readers, inviting them to traverse its depths and uncover the layers of meaning woven into its narrative fabric. The characters emerge not merely as figments of fiction but as embodiments of the human condition, each reflecting the figurative aspects of their society.

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