

The Critical Reading Experience of Abdelhamid Boraïo

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Abstract

This study aims to investigate the critical approach of Abdelhamid Bouraïo, who demonstrated a notable level of critical competence while engaging with Western critical methodologies. His critical discourse addressed a range of issues that emerged from his openness to Western criticism, particularly structuralism and semiotics. These issues underscored his remarkable capacity to activate and control the mechanisms inherent in these methodologies.

Keywords: *Critical Experience, Bouraïo, Structuralism, Semiotics, Methodology, Analytical Approach.*

Received : 08/09/2025 ; Accepted : 03/01/2026 ; Published : 15/03/2026

Introduction

The Algerian critic Abdelhamid Bouraïo made a notable contribution to literary criticism with his early work, a highly significant critical article titled: *A First Reading of the Feverish Bodies* (1982). This article stood out in a period dominated by contextual criticism, an approach that emphasized the relationship between literature and social life. The article, which examined Ismaïl Ghomakat's² short story collection *Feverish Bodies*, was published in *Amal* magazine, issue 55, on January 1, 1982, spanning five pages in a large format.

This article is regarded a precursor to structuralist criticism in Algeria at that time. Bouraïo himself acknowledged that the piece was "not a comprehensive study of the short story collection, but rather a set of observations drawn from my first reading of the collection." (Bouraïo, 1982: p. 6) This statement reveals his intention to apply a fresh perspective on a new text using innovative analytical tools. He explicitly noted that his judgments cannot be final, emphasizing that literary texts cannot reveal their full potential in a first reading.

The article introduces key concepts and terminologies that were uncommon among Algerian critics at the time, highlighting Bouraïo's early engagement with structuralist ideas. He conceptualized the literary text not merely as a reflection of external realities but as a realization of latent possibilities, manifesting in various forms of literary expression. More specifically, he viewed the text as a coherent structure, (Bouraïo, 1982: p. 6) one that could be understood through the identification of its primary units.

Bouraïo's structuralist reading involved dividing the short story collection into major units, which he saw as distinct but interconnected narrative elements. These units, in his view (Bouraïo, 1982), were essential for understanding the story's overarching structure. In fact, he proposed that the short story collection

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² An Algerian novelist (born in 1951) from the city of Guelma. He studied the early stages of his education in Guelma before graduating from the Faculty of Law at the University of Constantine. He worked in the Ministry of Information. Some of his important novels include: *The Sun Rises for Everyone, The Feverish Bodies, Recklessness, The Devils, Al-Massa'id...*

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could be seen as a novel, given the interconnectedness of its sub-stories, ultimately forming a unified structural entity.

A central focus of Bouraïo's analysis was the relationships between the narrative elements, an essential tenet of structuralism. He explored how the different units of the text were interlinked through various laws of relationship. He identified three primary types of relationships: first, logical causal relationships (Bouraïo, 1982: p. 7) that govern the cause-and-effect flow of events; second, temporal relationships that determine the chronological sequence of events; and third, the relationship of inclusion, which the storyteller uses to connect elements that are neither causally nor temporally linked. This third type of relationship added a layer of complexity to his analysis, highlighting the flexibility and richness of narrative structures.

Bouraïo's transition between these concepts was marked by some fluctuation, which may have stemmed from haste, or the limited scope of his initial analysis, or perhaps the wide range of terms he borrowed from the Parisian structuralist school. It is likely that this combination of factors resulted in a lack of precise control over the critical tools at this early stage, in contrast to the greater methodological clarity that characterized his later works.

Throughout this analysis, Bouraïo integrated numerous structuralist terms such as "reversal," "delayed action," "circulation," and others, demonstrating his early immersion in the theoretical frameworks of structuralist narrative analysis. However, that early application of structuralist terms appeared somewhat imprecise and lacked the refined critical control that developed in his subsequent critiques.

A distinctive feature of Bouraïo's structuralist reading is its clear division into discrete units of analysis, though this division was not always presented with the level of precision and consistency that would emerge in his later work. This early critique marks an important moment in Bouraïo's intellectual development, one that demonstrates both his engagement with Western critical methodologies and his evolving ability to navigate and refine these tools within the context of Algerian literary criticism.

A. Temporal structure:

This structure is defined by the nature of linguistic discourse, which consists of three interconnected components: a sender (transmitter), a receiver, and a message, each of which has its own temporal dimension. The critic then distinguishes between two types of time: the time of narration and the time of the narrative. This division clearly reflects his methodological stance, as he adheres to the structuralist framework advanced by French critics in this area.

B. Perspective and points of view:

In line with the established tradition of structuralist theory, which categorizes the controlling perspectives in the narrative process, Bouraïo identifies them as distinct levels. These levels include: the perspective of linguistic discourse level, typically associated with an implied narrator; the perspective of the main story's level, represented by the primary character and narrator; and the level of the subplots, which is presented from the perspective of the protagonist. Each level is then paired with an appropriate point of view: the first level is accompanied by an evaluative perspective, while the second and third levels are characterized by subjective viewpoints, often with a justificatory nature.

C. Philosophical structure:

This division involves an analysis of the symbolic dimension of one of the stories within the collection, focusing on the causal relationships that connect the various issues raised in the narrative. However, this segment of the article appears to diverge from the structuralist approach, which generally refrains from exploring the content of the narrative in depth, irrespective of its intellectual value. Despite Bouraïo's division of the stories into narrative segments according to structuralist principles, his approach seems to prioritize the rhetorical significance of the segments over their structuralist interpretation.

D. Character development in "The Giant Fetus": (Bourai , 1982: p. 8)

In this section, Bourai  analyses the character structure within the narrative. He begins by distinguishing between the traditional view of character in criticism, which ties it to an external personality beyond the text, and the structuralist conception, which examines characters based on their relationships with others within the text, viewing the text as a network of interrelated structures.

From this distinction, he categorizes the characters in the story according to ethical values and mediation, identifying the "aggressor," the "counterpart," and the "victim." He then outlines the criteria that led to this classification, acknowledging that he neglects other characters because they do not represent independent entities but are subsidiary to the main character. A noticeable blending of structuralist and semiotic concepts can be observed in his analysis of character, as structuralism typically does not focus on describing a character's behaviour or interpreting the significance of actions that drive the plot. Instead, it emphasizes justifying the relationships between the narrative components.

E. Causal relationships and evaluative perspectives in "The Forbidden":

In this part of the article, Bourai  addresses the principle of causality as the key mechanism driving the relationships between the various narrative components, as well as its role in shaping the narrator's perspective and the different viewpoints that emerge concerning the ethical values represented by the story. The events of the story are then presented through various perspectives, all interconnected by causal relationships.

Bourai  (Bourai , 1982: p. 9) underscores his complete neutrality in analysing this collection, noting that he refrained from evaluating the short story collection in terms of its artistic completeness or poetic qualities. He also avoids passing judgment on the writer Ghomoqat, as, in his view, it is not the critic's role to assess the author. This stance aligns with the structuralist methodology, which intentionally excludes the author's persona from the critical process. It is evident that this analysis represents a serious effort to apply structuralist tools to Arabic short fiction, adhering strictly to the principles of description and analysis, key tenets of structuralism.

The critical approach employed by Abdelhamid Bourai  has evolved significantly, moving beyond the narrow focus on narrative structures seen in his earlier work. Over time, he refined his methodology and gained considerable expertise in structuralist criticism, eventually extending his reach into semiotics. His later critiques began to take on a more integrated methodological form, especially evident in his book *Folk Tales in the Biskra Region: A Field Study* (1978), considered the first applied structuralist critique in Algerian literary discourse. In this study, as various sources indicate, Bourai  fully embraced the structuralist method, particularly its procedural aspects, demonstrating his mastery of the tools and mechanisms of this methodology through numerous applications.

1. Critical Analysis between Methodological Rigour and Textual Specificity:

The study of folk tales from the Biskra region, which was not published until 1986, marked the threshold of Abdelhamid Bourai 's critical project. This project was fundamentally shaped by Western modernity's influence on the treatment of literary texts.

Following this early achievement, Bourai  developed a substantial body of methodological approaches to narrative texts, many of which focused on popular and traditional works. These were gathered into books such as: *Fairy Tales of the Maghreb: An Analytical Study of Meaning, Narrative Logic: Studies in Modern Algerian Fiction*, *The Hero and the Victim in Algerian Oral Literature*, *Semiotic Analysis of Narrative Discourse: A Study of One Thousand and One Nights and Kalila wa Dimna*, *Narrative Path and Content Organization: A Semiotic Study of Selected Tales from One Thousand and One Nights*, *Algerian Folk Literature: A Study of Performance Forms in Popular Arts in Algeria*, and *The Social and Psychological Dimension in Algerian Folk Literature*.

Through this accumulation of knowledge and methodological application, the features of his critical project began to take form. This clarity was further solidified by Bouraïo's practical work, particularly his extensive translations, especially in the field of semiotics. He also supervised the *Methodologies* series, a collection of critical works by Algerian scholars aimed at modernizing Algerian critical discourse through rigorous methodological tools. Bouraïo chaired the Algerian Semiotics Association (1998) and played a key role in founding journals and organizing conferences.

This extensive and multi-faceted activity within Bouraïo's project is centred around "modernist methodology," its tools, and its terminology, which serve as the foundation for modernizing critical discourse and literary studies.

Bouraïo has always emphasized the importance of introducing his critical practices with a theoretical framework and a methodological outline, which act as a guide for readers, typically students, researchers, and academics. He frequently states that his critical discourse is primarily aimed at students and professors. As he notes, "This experience has allowed me to draw the attention of my students and fellow professors to the significance of folk literature when studied using advanced methodological and scientific tools." (Bouraïo, 2011: p. 222)

Every methodological critical analysis operates within the tension between two constraints: adherence to the authority of the method and the specificity of the text, which may sometimes conflict with the method's procedures. In such instances, critical practice requires an awareness that prioritizes the text's specificity over the method, not the reverse. This is precisely the perspective that Bouraïo adopted, reflecting his critical awareness in how he engaged with and assimilated Western critical methodologies.

This methodological conviction remained consistent throughout most of his approaches, allowing him to achieve the originality he sought in each of his critical practices. This belief is echoed throughout his works, where he frequently states, "This study sought to avoid, as much as possible, relying on mechanical application and literal adherence to Western methods and approaches. Instead, I aimed to benefit from them in accordance with the need to consider the global development of scientific research in this field, as well as the necessity for methodological coherence and the nature of the material under study, without strictly adhering to the approach of any specific researcher or branch of the humanities. I also aimed to respect the particularities of oral discourse with its artistic nature" (Bouraïo, 1992: p. 123)

2. *The Critical Vision of Abdelhamid Bouraïo*

In examining Abdelhamid Bouraïo's critical works, one observes his reliance on segmental analysis of narration. He divides the narrative text into several segments, yet does not specify the boundaries between these segments or the manner in which he moves from one to another. Furthermore, he does not present the texts he analyses, seemingly assuming that the reader is already familiar with them and can intuitively grasp the segmentation, its scope, its units, and the mechanisms he employs in his analysis.

The esteemed researcher, the late Houcine Khamri, (Khamri, 2007: p. 17) offered a balanced critique of Bouraïo's narrative analysis method in his book *Theory of the Text (From the Structure of Meaning to the Semiotics of the Sign)*. Khamri argued that Bouraïo's approach involved a systematic study in which he presented functional units in their sequential form, subsequently defining the types of relationships in separate paragraphs. According to Khamri, this method led to a disruption within the analysis itself. This, in turn, prompted Bouraïo to move away from the singular approach of structuralism, which he initially sought to apply universally to all functional units.

As a result, Bouraïo began shifting between different methodologies, searching for the most effective analytical framework or attempting to synthesize various approaches to narrative analysis. He transitioned from the structuralist approaches of Greimas and Lévi-Strauss to the methods of Gérard Genette and Tzvetan Todorov, shifting from a functionalist approach to a formal one, and at times, even adopting the Goldmannian social method. (Goldman, n.d.) This evolution linked the author's cognitive structure to the

forms of literary production, highlighting the relationship between the social content of a literary text and its formal structure.

Based on this methodological fluidity, which became apparent in several instances, Hussein Khamri offered a strict critical judgment, asserting that in many cases, Abdelhamid Bouraïo fell back into traditional subjectivity, which contradicted the method he had initially chosen for analysis. According to Khamri, this shift was inconsistent with the ideal of maintaining the integrity of the method, which should adhere strictly to its tools and procedures, relying on "analysis and argumentation rather than emotion and admiration." (Bouraïo, 1992: p. 457) This inconsistency, Khamri argued, undermined the methodological introduction as well as the philosophical and methodological foundations upon which Bouraïo's study was based.

What stands out in the methodology employed by Abdelhamid Bouraïo is his numerous attempts to apply the structuralist approach established by the Russian theorist Vladimir Propp in the analysis of folk tales. This is evident in how he divides the tale into narrative sequences, with each sequence further broken down into functions based on Propp's theory. He then proceeds to analyse the characters in order to extract the functional roles according to their effectiveness.

Subsequently, he examines the reciprocal relationships between the agents involved in the action, using a diagram to facilitate a clearer understanding of the entire tale under study. Bouraïo himself acknowledged following Propp's schema in his analysis of folk tales, albeit with certain modifications. He clarified his adaptation of this method, emphasizing the importance of structure: "However, we dealt with it freely, as we considered in distributing its units not only the perspective of the hero, like Propp did, but also the perspectives of the other characters involved in the event."

This suggests that Bouraïo adapted Propp's mechanisms to better suit the unity of the tale in its overall structure, (Bouraïo, 1992: p. 276) as a tale does not depend on a single, isolated character; rather, it is a participant that interacts with the entire narrative universe. This, of course, highlights the positive outcomes of engaging with Western methodologies, which, in Bouraïo's view, should not remain confined to the theoretical and visionary framework laid out by the original founder.

Building on this positive development, we can assert that Bouraïo liberated himself from rigid adherence to Propp's classification and semi-fixed structural analysis. This is apparent in his critical judgments and narrative analyses, which indicate that he enjoyed methodological independence, even while being directly influenced by structuralist narrative analysis. This does not imply that he simplified the analysis; rather, on the contrary, he sought to introduce a specific nuance into his critical efforts through the modifications he made to Propp's method.

This pursuit is evident in his interpretation of functions and their classifications, (Bouraïo, 1992: p. 276-278) his reorganization and arrangement of characters, his analysis of the semantic dimension of the tale, and his frequent engagement in comparative analysis. Bouraïo operates under the conviction that a text cannot be understood in isolation from its entirety, a principle that extends to the procedural mechanisms through which the narrative is analysed and interpreted. Consequently, a single method cannot be relied upon exclusively for analysis; rather, a "methodological confrontation", as he refers to it, is necessary to fully capture all the meanings embedded in the narrative.

Bouraïo's conviction was not merely theoretical. He also invested, alongside functional analysis, in binary oppositions, drawing on anthropological structuralism as proposed by the theorist Claude Lévi-Strauss. In his applied methodology, he analyses the meaning within tales using mathematical relationships and geometric forms.

All of this aims to reach the epistemological conclusion that a tale is not simply an isolated work disconnected from the historical process of society; rather, it is the product of a social system at a particular stage in its historical development. This methodological pursuit of Abdelhamid Bouraïo does not come as a surprise, as we have witnessed it firsthand during his supervision of our master's thesis, where he adhered to these principles both in his lectures and in discussions at scientific and cultural conferences we attended.

In any case, Abdelhamid Bouraïo successfully applied practical critical treatments to dozens of narrative texts, ranging from traditional works such as *One Thousand and One Nights*, *Kalila and Dimna*, folk tales, fairy tales, and myths, to modern texts like short stories and novels.

This diversity in narrative texts was matched by a corresponding diversity in his methodology, enriching the nature of his interrogation of narrative texts from both cognitive and socio-cultural perspectives. His work contributed to the exploration of textual structures, revealing the relationships that govern them, and symbolically linking them to the context of their production and circulation. Throughout all of this, Bouraïo was not exempt from certain methodological challenges, although he remained steadfast in his commitment to minimizing these challenges as much as possible.

Abdelhamid Bouraïo is also recognized as one of the most influential Arab critics who contributed to the establishment of semiotic criticism within Arabic literary discourse (Bouraïo, 1992: p. 276-278), particularly in Algerian literary criticism. He embraced a critical project that welcomed Western critical modernity without neglecting the distinctiveness of the Arab critical environment and the Arabic texts under analysis. His critical experience added significant value to the field of semiotic studies in Algeria, positioning his analyses within the broader framework of semiotic knowledge, which largely remains consistent with its foundational principles and methodologies.

Bouraïo's interest in semiotic studies in Algeria began early, as he was a founding figure of the modernist critical movement, which included the promotion of the semiotic approach. He advanced this through lectures at the university and numerous contributions to scientific conferences and intellectual seminars since the 1980s, where he demonstrated his deep interest in narrative texts both theoretically and analytically. (Loukam, n.d.: p. 241) Undoubtedly, he played a pivotal role in applied criticism, successfully transitioning the critical perspective from a traditional to a more academic one, drawing on Western references. This shift mirrors the approach of many critics who pursued advanced studies in French universities, especially in Paris.

3. *The Methodological Approach of Abdelhamid Bouraïo:*

Abdelhamid Bouraïo's critical project is grounded in contemporary Western theories within the field of narrative science. Notably, his analysis of narrative texts stands out for its clear separation of critical approaches, unlike many critics of his time who often conflated different methodologies. As a result, his works have remained consistently aligned with the semiological and semiotic orientations.

It is worth noting that while his initial interest was focused on the sociological approach, his engagement with the Paris school led him to pivot toward semiotics. He articulated this shift in his focus on Greimasian semiotics, stating: "Most of our methodological tools are derived from texts that belong predominantly to the same semiotic school, which we can call the Greimasian school with its formalist orientation. This school has played a significant role in the development of narratives, or 'narrative science', from the 1960s until today (Loukam, n.d.: p. 327)." Thus, the direction of Bouraïo's critical project is semiotic in nature, drawing heavily on Western tools and procedures, yet adapting them to suit the specificities of the Algerian literary text.

Bouraïo's reputation grew as he became known in the Algerian critical scene as a pioneering figure in modernity and postmodernity in the Arab world. His strong connections with both the Arab East and the Paris school enabled him to adopt the semiotic method with remarkable expertise, evident in his numerous studies of novels and folk tales. His specialization in popular literature further helped him assimilate this approach, which originally emerged from the work of the Russian theorist Vladimir Propp on folk tales.

However, this does not suggest that his methodological perspective remained confined to this orientation. On the contrary, his critical output reveals that he was well-versed in Western methodologies and adept at adapting them to the cultural and literary nuances of the Arabic text.

From this perspective, Bouraïo advocated for the necessity of keeping abreast of developments in the West and delving into their methodological foundations, grounded in modern human sciences and mathematical logic. He pointed out that Maghreb countries were able to apply formal semiotics, or Greimasian semiotics, due to the Maghrebi critics exposure to the Paris school, where Greimas was a leading figure in semiotic studies.

As for Bouraïo's standing in the Algerian critical scene, his approach to text analysis is rooted, as he explains, in the fundamental principle of narrative semiotics: "to establish logical models that govern the structural construction of the narrative course and the emergence of meaning." (Bouraïo, 2003: p. 5) He applied this logical framework through four models for analysing narrative discourses, which are as follows: (Farahtiya, 2020: p. 35)

- A. The model of the narrative course
- B. The model of the actors
- C. The model of the purposive course (i.e., the course related to objectives)
- D. The model of the semantic structure

The goal of defining these models was to provide a semiotic approach to various literary texts by applying these models, which recur in every act of narration or storytelling. This approach marks a distinct departure from traditional perspectives that analyse texts through external factors, interpreting them based on prevailing socio-cultural or ideological views. Bouraïo's vision led to the establishment of an Arab critical foundation that diverges from the standard Western-originated semiotics. (Boukhatem, 2005: p. 22) This is particularly noticeable when comparing it to the work of many Arab critics who simply replicated Western models and attempted to apply them to Arabic texts, often without adapting them to the particularities of Arab culture.

4. *Renewing Analytical Mechanisms*

From this perspective, Abdelhamid Bouraïo's contributions to semiotics are considered among the few Arab studies that successfully surpassed the technical nature that often dominates semiotic theory. This is acknowledged by numerous scholars who have critiqued and evaluated his work. The clear epistemological framework within which he positioned his approaches does not significantly deviate from the foundations set by narrative semiotics or the conditions it places on its various branches. He internalized the methodology of analysis, maintaining a lucid and consistent vision. (Abu Haif, 2000: pp. 275-277)

His work constantly aims to introduce something new compared to prior experiences, respecting the text's specificity to avoid generalization and oversimplification. This careful attention to the text's nuances demonstrates his rejection of rigid adherence to theoretical classifications. Instead, he remains attuned to what the text itself communicates. (Rawiniya, 1999/2000: p. 12) A critical judgment from a prominent academic in the Algerian university scene confirms that Bouraïo succeeded in laying the foundations of semiotic methodology in Algerian critical discourse. This success can be attributed to his ongoing revision of the method's developments and his conscientious consideration of the linguistic and cultural distinctiveness of the Arabic text.

Abdelhamid Bouraïo holds a pivotal role in the Algerian critical scene, particularly for his efforts to diversify his approach to literary texts. He consistently sought to adapt semiotic tools to the texts he studied, using their theoretical concepts without mechanically imposing them or projecting them onto the texts. As he explains, his goal was to "listen to the text's pulses, distinguish its voices, understand how it functions, and recognize its semantic manifestations." This suggests that he treated the text as a living entity, diagnosing it with semiotic tools that respond to the critic's examination (Bouraïo, 1992: p. 5). The effectiveness of the critical tools, alongside the critic's ability to activate the method's mechanisms, made this process possible. These elements converged to form a critical vision capable of analysing and interpreting narrative texts.

These qualities were clearly reflected in his applications to narrative texts, most of which were folk tales or works from the narrative heritage. What added further value to these applications was that Bouraïo provided an introductory explanation of the methodology, detailing the steps he would follow in his analysis. He explained the objective behind each step and how it relates to the subsequent one, making his process transparent.

Additionally, he highlighted the differences between his approach and those of others who adopted the same method, pointing out what he would contribute to the existing body of studies (Bouraïo, 2003: p. 11). He made it clear that his aim was to avoid mechanical applications that might end up as mere projections, lacking new insights or a deep, informed reading of the text within its cultural context.

Finally, in light of the foregoing, it is crucial to recognize the significant contributions of the critic, Abdelhamid Bouraïo, who distinguished himself through his high level of critical sophistication in engaging with Western critical methodologies, particularly semiotics. His adept mastery of the procedural tools of semiotics enabled him to approach literary texts rigorously. The objective nature of his analyses demonstrated his exceptional ability to activate and control these methodologies, imbuing his work with a scientific dimension derived from a vision that synthesized various bodies of knowledge and analytical methods.

Through this integration, Bouraïo was able to articulate the contours of a critical movement that aligned with the broader, global intellectual developments across multiple fields, including literary studies and criticism. His efforts played a pivotal role in shifting critical discourse from simplistic, descriptive approaches toward more complex and comprehensive critical horizons.

This shift allowed for a more nuanced engagement with literary texts, especially narratives, and laid the groundwork for a critical project that sought to establish theoretical foundations for various critical approaches. By drawing on Western methodologies, Bouraïo enriched the Algerian critical landscape, contributing to the development of a critical discourse that is both deeply attuned to Arab cultural particularities and in dialogue with global scholarly trends.

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