

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The Oedipus complex in fiction

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**Abstract:** This study aims to know *The Bookseller's Notebooks* intersects with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and *Oedipus Rex*. We analyze the novelist's proficiency at expressing contemporary human issues innovatively and artistically, focusing on the emotional struggle between parents and children. In particular, the study sheds light on the emotional and social struggles suffered by a marginalized, despised, and rejected societal group, namely illegitimate children (foundlings). The study's findings suggest that more comparative studies of intertextuality between non-local works of literature should be attempted. This way, literature and literary criticism may enhance our understanding of other's cultures to facilitate acceptance and peaceful coexistence.

**Keywords:** comparative narrative criticism; heritage employment; Freud's psychoanalysis; Oedipus complex; world literature

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## 1. Introduction

*The Bookseller's Notebooks*, by Jalal Barjas, won the 2021 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, surpassing 122 other Arabic novels. This novel takes place between 1947 and 2019, and its main theme is the unhealthy relationship between fathers and sons. Bookseller's Notebooks' Hero, Ibrahim, is an avid reader who lives in harsh isolation, is affected by global novel heroes he reads about, and suffers from schizophrenia and psychological conflict. An inner voice grows inside Ibraheem, such as a fetus leading him towards achieving justice in an extremist way by committing many crimes, the most serious being killing the father. *The Bookseller's Notebooks* was selected for this study because of its unique, intriguing style and selection of contemporary topics, the use of international novels in its narrative structures (especially on the level of event and character structures), and the creative methods of artistic expression it employs.

This research focuses on the novel's treatment of the issue of foundlings and the inappropriate parent-child relationship and compares this treatment to that in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* to show that the writer has addressed this issue from a new psychological perspective.

This finding of intertextuality, and the use of Western characters from global novels in Ara-

fic fiction, are positive indications of trends that meet human needs of all eras, such as openness, cross-pollination, acceptance, and the expression of admiration for the cultures, literature, and innovations of other nations, which promotes a universal aesthetics. This finding also illuminates the permanence of fiction, its expression of the universality of humanity across time and place, and its contribution to the dialogue among civilizations.

The research aims to analyze the intertextuality in *The Bookseller's Notebooks* on the levels of a topic, narrative structure, character, event, plot, and conflict, by answering some of the following research questions:

Across which topics and characters did *The Bookseller's Notebooks* intersect with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*?

How does the protagonist of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, Quasimodo, intersect with the protagonists of *The Bookseller's Notebooks*?

How do the two novels intersect with *Oedipus Rex*? And how was the Oedipus complex reflected in the two novels?

## **2. Methods**

This paper uses the psychological analysis approach to reveal the psychological reasons for the unhealthy social relationship between fathers and children in the light of the intertextuality technique regarding the theme, characters, and events between Jalal Barjas's *The Bookseller's Notebooks* and Victor Hugo's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*.

Freud's psychoanalytic approach—including the three components of personality (id, ego, and superego) and the Oedipus complex theory—is used to study the characters' behaviors and perceptions.

## **3. Results and discussion**

The novelist created a method of artistic expression by attributing features of characters from world-famous novels to his convincing hero, who could change and renew these literary expressions to shed light on the human condition. In addition, it was found that the human issues addressed in ancient and modern world literature are largely similar.

The intertextuality between *The Bookseller's Notebooks* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* was not limited to the level of character and scene, but we also noticed an intersection at the level of ideas, particularly the expression of humanitarian and psychosocial issues surrounding illegitimate children. The novelist created a method of artistic expression that enabled him to clarify these ideas, some of which are obscure and enigmatic: he gave his convincing hero features that are shared with familiar characters from world-famous novels and embodied the unconscious in a tangible being, which lives in the depths of the protagonist and directs him on the level of instinct and impulse.

The novelist presents the relationship between fathers and children with a boldness that often shocks the reader with its frankness while trying to explain this relationship from the perspective of

Freudian psychoanalysis and the components of personality (id, ego, and superego). He was creative in portraying the complex and thorny relationship between parents and illegitimate children, which boils down to a fundamental conflict in the child: illegitimate children enjoy a strong desire for the presence of the father in their lives, from which they derive a sense of safety, tenderness, care, attention, and importance, but this is contrasted to a forbidden desire for patricide, based on resentment, the perception of maltreatment, and the desire to escape from his oppressive power over them.

Fathers' feelings towards their illegitimate children were likewise represented as ambiguous and contradictory: they love their children, are proud of them, and fear for them, but also resent their rebellion and their desire to live differently from their parents.

#### 4. Definition of intertextuality

Kristeva<sup>[1]</sup>, in her essay "The Bounded Text", states that any text is a permutation of texts: intertextuality in the space of a given text, in which several utterances, taken from other texts intersect and neutralize one another. This means that all texts, whether written, oral, formal, informal, artistic, or normal, are somehow related.

Using literary heritage suitably is based on conjuring up the absent traditional text and including it in the current text structure to create cohesion between the two texts<sup>[2,3]</sup>. This activity expands literary heritage's cognitive and cultural aspects in a way that relies on the writer's capacity for using literary tools<sup>[4]</sup>. The novelist requires a great deal of knowledge about literary culture, cognition and heritage in order to use well-known characters in a new fictional context and to give them suitable roles in the text without imposing them upon the text<sup>[5]</sup>. If done successfully, the presence of traditional literary elements does not impose a load on the new text; it is a process of recreation and integration which works like cross-pollination, generating a different text even though it has features of the old texts<sup>[6,7]</sup>.

Knowledge and cognition of the references from which the writer derived his creativity and intertextuality increase the explicitness of meaning, putting the reader in a better position to grasp the deep and accurate meaning intended by the writer<sup>[8]</sup>. It enables the reader to understand and realize exactly what the author means, as predicted by the theory of multiple layers of meaning<sup>[9,10]</sup>.

#### 5. Illegitimate children (foundlings)

*The Bookseller's Notebooks* intersects with *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* regarding idea and subject. Both novels contest pejorative attitudes toward marginalized people, especially illegitimate children, who are unfairly trapped in social categories of contempt. In both ancient and modern communities, in the Arab and Western world, such children have been attacked and robbed of their minimal human rights to live a balanced, peaceful, and secure life. Although this situation has been ameliorated, discrimination against illegitimate children still exists.

The young lady, Layla, in *The Bookseller's Notebooks*, belongs to this vulnerable category in Arab society. People in this category are called a name of abuse that translates to "son of a bitch". Eventually, this became a word to describe people as being devoid of consciousness without principles or religion and thus became an expression of the harshest and most abominable abuse. This

abuse is piled onto a category of people who already lack the minimal human rights of belonging to parents and a family that will embrace and take care of them. Expressing her struggle, Layla says:

From one solitude to another, from one labyrinth to another, I cried: “I want a father, mother, and siblings.” I want those who are able to remove these words that indicate I am an illegitimate child [...] It is not my fault that I am the result of a prohibited orgasm. Oh, “son of a bitch”, this ubiquitous phrase that I cannot tolerate. Are not they fathers? Are not they mothers? How can a man be both monster and meek simultaneously?<sup>[11]</sup>

The orphanage, where Layla was housed after they found her at the doorsteps of one of the mosques as an infant, represents her whole world, despite the bad treatment that she is subjected to there, which includes being harassed by one of the female supervisors. In *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, the same goes for Quasimodo, whose name means “half-formed”. Quasimodo’s adoptive father, Claude Frollo, an archdeacon at the church where he is raised, named him after the world that he loved and coexisted with, despite the loneliness and alienation that he suffered in it. Quasimodo couldn’t leave the church despite being mistreated there, because he feared feeling lonely and hurt by people in the outside world. These were the same feelings that Layla felt when she left the orphanage after turning eighteen.

Layla told Ibrahim, the bookseller and protagonist of the novel, the following about the time when they found her on the doorsteps of the mosque:

I was told when I was 13 years old, that they found me as an infant on the doorsteps of one of amman’s mosques, so they took me to the orphanage. That’s when I started to think about my mother, father, family, and the world outside the orphanage<sup>[11]</sup>.

People generally feel a sense of comfort in places of worship. They hope that when they leave their child on its doorstep, someone righteous will find them. This is how Layla and Quasimodo came to be left at religious institutions. Their lives followed different trajectories from that point onwards. Quasimodo spent his whole life in the church, and regardless of certain restrictions on his freedom, felt reassured enough never to leave, whereas Layla passed through the orphanage system. However, in the end, Quasimodo found in Esméralda the good girl that truly sympathized with him, just like Layla found in Ibrahim the man that protected, helped, and sympathized with her while expecting nothing in return.

In *The Bookseller’s Notebooks*, another character, Youssef Al-Sammak, intersects with Quasimodo. Youssef is the illegitimate child of one of the country’s powerful men, Eyad Nabil, who denied paternity and refused to marry his mother. Eyad seduced Youssef’s mother and persuaded her that they had a future together, but he let her down and disappeared after he slept with her. The sin was twofold: apart from Youssef, he left behind a broken woman whose virtue was violated in an Eastern society that considers extramarital sexual intercourse a more serious crime than murder, and in which she, therefore, became an outcast. Youssef grew up disgruntled with his father and with a burgeoning desire for revenge. Ibrahim says:

I found a message from Dr. Youssef:

Eyad Nabil spent the night running after me in nightmares. Do you remember the day you came to me wanting me to help you commit murder? Now I am writing to you so that you can help me get

rid of my father's nightmares. My life is moving towards this conclusion at a pointless speed. I can't even get myself to visit my mother, Emily, while she is living in that poor state. She reminds me of my father where she sits, silent and contemplating the white pages of his black book<sup>[11]</sup>.

This example shows that the tragedy of children born out of wedlock is not limited to children. The mother feels pain both for herself and she violated virtue and for her illegitimate child, whom she is committed to raising and caring for, and she spends the rest of her life despised as an outcast.

Ibrahim was trying to collect a sum of money to buy a house for the illegitimate children, in which they could find the safety that society had deprived them of and the family intimacy that was missing from their lives, but this dream was ruined after the municipality demolished the abandoned house that they were using for temporary shelter:

I saw Salam running her way through people and screaming: "There are people inside the house, do not destroy it!" My belly swelled up and kept growing, and my skin slowly tore apart until I saw a child coming out of it. He looked like me, with the same features, running through the people who had gathered there, his umbilical cord still attached to my belly. He jumped on people's shoulders and their heads. At that time, the arm of the bulldozer was reaching upward, and he shouted in a loud voice heard by all the city: "Do not demolish and destroy the house!" The bulldozer's blade fell on the ceiling. It was falling apart, and thick dust rose up from it<sup>[11]</sup>.

Ibrahim's vision of his childhood self, who suddenly grows up into an adult and cries out in protest, embodies the sentiment within every good person who sees such excesses and wishes that he dared raise his voice by protesting, rejecting, and demanding reform. Most of us are content with only wishing for such reform, which is the "least of faith", as our noble Prophet, may Allah bless him and grant him peace, mentioned:

He who amongst you sees something abominable should modify it with the help of his hand; and if he has not strength enough to do it, then he should do it with his tongue, and if he has not strength enough to do it, even then he should abhor it from his heart, and that is the least of faith<sup>[12]</sup>.

The illegitimate children's psychological and social suffering evokes hatred, malice, and hostility towards their parents, whom they perceive to be the direct cause of their suffering. This leads to the emergence of features of the Oedipus complex among these children, as discussed in the next section.

## 6. Oedipus complex manifestation

Ibrahim, the protagonist of *The Bookseller's Notebooks*, and Quasimodo, the protagonist of *The Hunchback of Notre Dame*, face a similar internal conflict: when the father is absent, the son misses a symbol of love, tenderness and kindness, whereas the father's presence brings feelings of sorrow and distress due to his excessive cruelty and his imposition of severe restrictions. Ibrahim's father, Jad Allah, expresses his desire for his son to be the spitting image of himself and advises him in sociability and life behaviors. This makes Ibrahim think:

How familiar, kind, and compassionate he was! He was like the one I dreamed of seeing... I felt a bitter nostalgia. But then my belly swelled, and the voice was more aversive than before:

“Keep in mind, he is one of your executioners.”

I was waving my hand in the air, looking furiously for the owner of the voice before screaming in dismissal at what he had said:

“No, we unconsciously practice self-flagellation. Furthermore, we do it for those we love.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Plenty of evidence in *The Bookseller's Notebooks* suggests that the novelist was inspired by Freudian psychoanalysis. According to Freud, every human being has an unconscious, which ranges from the ideal superego to the instinctive id, where internal conflicts such as this are normally hidden. In Ibrahim, the novelist makes the normally intangible unconscious explicit in the form of a small being those lives inside his belly and whose arrival is heralded by symptoms of flatulence. This being, which towards the end of the novel, acquires fully human features, has a clear and loud voice that it uses to give expression to repressed feelings and sentiments:

Suddenly, there was movement in my belly, and I saw it puff up little by little until it became swollen like a woman's belly in her ninth month.

I got up, terrified, turning around in a circle, my hands touching my belly, not understanding what was happening to me. I took off my clothes and rushed towards the mirror to confirm whether what I saw was a dream or reality. How does this happen? What the hell is going on? I rubbed my eyes to make sure I wasn't dreaming. I ran terrified towards the door, tripped over the books, and fell<sup>[11]</sup>.

By using this inventive literary device, the novelist was able to create a strange protagonist who dares to do and say things that the reader can only whisper. This helps to move the reader away from the narrative monotony and gives the tale humor and a captivating sense of novelty. It also enables the novelist to address important humanitarian issues in an artistic, imaginative and innovative way.

Ibrahim's ambiguous feelings towards his father lead to another internal conflict as he begins to experience murderous impulses towards him: a conflict between what he desires and what is allowed by the customs of society and his religion. Freud famously observed that every boy has the unconscious desire to kill his father and copulate with his mother<sup>[13]</sup>. He explained this in his theory of the Oedipus complex, named after and inspired by the *Oedipus Rex* epic, which deals with the same theme. Patricide is a common feature of *The Bookseller's Notebooks* and *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* and contains elements of the sexual motivation claimed by Freud. However, it is primarily inspired by non-sexual motives of revenge.

Ibrahim woke up to his father, Jad Allah, wrapping a rope around his neck in the kitchen to commit suicide in response to the shock of disappointment and loss that possessed him. Jad Allah had deceived and let his father down for years after he mortgaged all of his assets to secure the expenses of his medical studies. Consequently, his father tried to kill him with a rifle, but he did not die. Later, Jad Allah was arrested for security reasons and tortured for three years. This left him with an intense fear of people, so he moved with his family to a city where nobody knew him. For Jad Allah, the straw that broke the camel's back was his two sons: after Mujahid abandoned him, he heard Ibrahim babbling in his sleep that he desired to kill his father to get rid of his control and power. Jad Allah was tough on his sons because he feared so much for them, so he decided to end his life and suffering to liberate his children from his oppressive influence. However, he changed his mind when he saw Ibrahim watching him. The neighbor, who witnessed the scene, admitted that Ibrahim was

the one who pushed the chair out from underneath his father. However, Ibrahim, having not been fully conscious at the time, remembers the incident as a nightmare:

I stand in the kitchen door. I see him standing on the chair. One end of the rope is tied to the ceiling, and the other end is wrapped around his neck. He is breathing calmly and takes a meditative look into the abyss as he gets ready to throw his body off the chair. The knife falls from my hand. I walk towards him. He sees me and thinks of aborting his plan. I was suffering from blurry vision and mixed voices in my head. I step back; I step forward. I cry, I cry brutally. I kick the chair with my foot. My father falls. I faint and fall unconscious<sup>[11]</sup>.

The desire for revenge plays a central role in the violent impulses that illegitimate children experience toward their parents. This is also the case with Salam and Youssef. After Salam got kicked out of the orphanage when she was eighteen years old, she sought out an abandoned and ruined house, and Layla followed her there:

At the door, Salam hugged me and burst into tears. She sat on the ground crying and insulting people, governments, and her parents who were the cause of all the bad things that had happened to her. She grabbed my foot, and she screamed:

“If I knew my parents, I would kill them. I swear, I would do that.”<sup>[11]</sup>

Salam surprises us with her murderous wish in a loud voice without equivocation or fear. Her parents had no grace left in her mind. On the contrary, they were criminals because they gave birth to her and left her in a world in which she lived in a lonely state of humiliation, without dignity or belonging, beaten down by feelings of deficiency and inferiority, especially when she met with children who lived with their parents and enjoyed the warmth of family. Youssef expressed similar sentiments to Ibrahim:

Yesterday, I saw myself killing my father in a dream. I woke up sweaty and breathless. When I thought of what I saw, I had an implicit desire for this, not only because of his great cruelty but also because of what he did to my mother. Since I met him at his home, I hate him so much, and I hate all forms of parenting, but the question that I still ask is: would we feel more comfortable and relaxed if we killed our parents? It seems that we are exhausted by parenting. Although it may sound satisfying, this is what I have come to believe now<sup>[11]</sup>.

In answer to Freudian psychoanalysis and the play *Oedipus Rex*, Ibrahim’s desire to kill his adoptive father was indirectly completed in a scene where he accidentally met his stepmother, whom he did not know. He fell in love with her and pursued her for a time, looking to marry her, before she told him they could not marry because she was his father’s wife.

How did I fall in love with the woman whom my father had loved? What drove me to this weird situation? What fate has brought me to this woman that there is a cloud saturated with sadness on top of her soul, which my father has removed from himself to liberate in her sky?<sup>[11]</sup>

In Ibrahim’s case, the sin has not completed the way it was for King Oedipus, who married his mother and had children with her. Nevertheless, the event leaves Ibrahim in a state of shock and astonishment. Out of all the women in the land, what strange impulse had led him to fall in love with his stepmother? We recall a similar scene from *Oedipus Rex*, in which Oedipus marvels at the

crimes he unknowingly committed before expressing regret by gouging out his eyes:

She was, ah, woe is me! She was my mother. I knew it not, nor did she; and she, my mother, bore children to the son whom she had borne: a birth of shame<sup>[14]</sup>.

Quasimodo's story of patricide contains similarly incomplete Oedipal elements. Quasimodo is surprised when he finds his lover Esméralda after she had hung herself. Esméralda was the only one who genuinely sympathized with Quasimodo and treated him as human. When Quasimodo discovers that his adoptive father, Claude Frollo, had masterminded Esméralda's murder because of his unrequited love for her, Quasimodo reacts by pushing Claude Frollo off the roof of the church. Claude hangs onto the side of the wall, but Quasimodo stares down at him until he falls and dies.

The bell ringer retreated a little behind the priest, and then Quasimodo suddenly swooped on him. He threw him into the abyss with his peasant's hands. The priest shouted: "Holy shit!" and fell into space<sup>[15]</sup>.

Perhaps these incomplete Oedipal elements in Ibrahim and Quasimodo's stories suggest that their willingness to commit patricide results from the basic, repressed motives identified by Freud, which combine with their more dominant desire for revenge. After all, in both cases, accumulated abuse eventually leads to an extreme and abnormal retaliatory response, which is complimented by underlying sexual undercurrents. Such repressed desires may remain to hover within a barely perceptible space for those who experience them, like dreams, daydreams, slips of the tongue or pen. They may respond to these feelings by seeking calm away from the situation that inspires such passion, as in the case of Youssef and Salam, or they may go beyond this and commit patricide, as Ibrahim and Quasimodo do.

The symbolism of the forbidden desire for patricide shocks us with its discourtesy and brutality, like a smack in the face, but by the same token, it doubly imposes responsibility on cruel fathers: to be more merciful and, if only because of the status and pride of place which their children accord them, to make sure that love and kindness prevail over cruelty and violence. By the same token, there is a burden on illegitimate children to forgive their parents. At a particularly difficult time in his life, Ibrahim could glimpse an implicit kindness in his father despite his cruelty. He says, "There is a lot of good in him, although I see it from afar, like one who sits and watches from a dark corner."<sup>[11]</sup> Sadly, in the end, Ibrahim remembered his father's potential for salvation too late. After his father had died, there was nothing left but to lament the life he had spent without receiving a warm embrace from his father, in whom he had glimpsed the kind that might have made it possible.

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## **Conflict of interest**

We have no conflicts of interest to disclose.



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