

Fictionalization of History and Interpretation of the Image of Women in Amin Maalouf's Novel Samarkand

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Abstract: This study examines the interaction between history and fiction in Amin Maalouf's *Samarkand*, positioning the novel within the framework of historical fiction. It argues that Maalouf draws extensively on documented historical events and figures, particularly wars and political conflicts, while reshaping them through narrative techniques to construct a meaningful literary discourse. At the same time, the study emphasizes the inherent subjectivity of historical writing, which is inevitably influenced by ideological, cultural, and social perspectives. The paper demonstrates that *Samarkand* does not merely fictionalize historical reality but actively reworks it, transforming historical facts into symbolic representations. Through this process, Maalouf constructs myths of encounter and reconciliation, illustrating the author's intellectual engagement with history and confirming the novel's significance as a sophisticated fusion of historiography and literary imagination.

Key words: history and fiction, representation, ideological, cultural, and social perspectives.



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Introduction. *Samarkand* contains clear premonitory signs of predominantly historical narratives. The frequent declarations of war and the presence of well-documented political events allow the novel to be classified as historical fiction, or at least as a narrative firmly grounded in real historical occurrences. Before employing the narrative techniques specific to novelistic fiction, it is essential for writers to draw inspiration from human history. Historical knowledge provides the raw material through which authors weave the threads of their fictional plots, relying on their personal relationship with history to reshape and reinterpret past events.

Methods. After engaging with historical sources, the writer often feels compelled to revisit and modify them, adding or removing elements that do not fundamentally alter historical truth but instead confer a distinctive literary flavor. This process of appropriation allows the author to transform factual material into a meaningful fictional construction. As Marguerite Yourcenar argues, recourse to history constitutes a form of intellectual and emotional salvation for human

beings, insofar as knowledge of the past helps prevent the repetition of earlier mistakes. Historical awareness thus becomes both a cognitive and ethical resource.

Yourcenar further maintains that turning toward the past enables individuals to construct an understanding of their destiny and to better comprehend the present. In this sense, history is not merely a record of past events but an active framework for thinking and acting. However, history itself cannot be written with the absolute objectivity traditionally expected of historians. Historical writing is inevitably influenced by the historian's sensitivities and shaped by ideological, religious, ethnic, and social perspectives. Consequently, even the most rigorous historical account cannot fully escape subjective interpretation.

Main part. At a given moment of production, history operates within the text and is simultaneously reshaped by it. Literary discourse does not merely reproduce historical reality but actively reworks it. The literary text fully integrates historical material, transforming social and historical change into both concrete events and symbolic representations. The emphasis is therefore placed not on factual accuracy alone, but on the way historical events are reinterpreted, reorganized, and endowed with new meanings.

In *Samarkand*, Amin Maalouf exemplifies this dynamic interaction between history and fiction. He does not simply fictionalize reality in its entirety; rather, he reconfigures it by blending historical facts with novelistic intrigue in an intelligible and coherent manner. Maalouf himself acknowledges that he draws from history the necessary material to construct myths of encounter and reconciliation. His approach reflects a belief that history is always waiting to be rediscovered and retold, not as a fixed narrative but as a living discourse open to reinterpretation.

The historical elements employed in *Samarkand* – including political conflicts, real historical figures, and documented events – serve as undeniable evidence of Maalouf's intellectual rigor and narrative intelligence. By transforming historical facts into a literary masterpiece, he demonstrates how historical fiction can simultaneously preserve memory, question established narratives, and offer new perspectives on the human condition.

Discussions. In *Samarkand*, Amin Maalouf constructs a narrative that juxtaposes the aesthetic splendor of Eastern cities with the pervasive violence that structures their historical reality. Wars, courtly conflicts, political intrigues, assassinations, revolutions and counter-revolutions, religious fanaticism, and successive forms of domination – first by the Seljuks, then by the Russians, and finally by the British – constitute the background of the novel. Although the majority of the events depicted are deeply unsettling, Maalouf intermittently offers moments of narrative respite, such as Benjamin Lesage's escape and temporary adoption by women in Tehran, which momentarily suspend the omnipresence of brutality.

The novel opens with an ironic scene in which scholars accuse Jaber the Tall, a former student of Ibn Sina (Avicenna), of being a *filassouf* (philosopher). Omar Khayyam's decision to defend him brings him into direct confrontation with the Qadi Abu-Tahar. This episode immediately establishes the tension between rational inquiry and institutionalized authority, a tension that persists throughout the narrative.

Confronted with systemic violence, Omar Khayyam ultimately chooses withdrawal. Although his status as a renowned scientist and poet grants him access to the powerful elites of his time, he consciously rejects wealth, prestige, and political engagement, distancing himself from courtly intrigues. His response to Djahane's proposal – when the latter volunteers to intervene in the conflict between Nizam and Hassan Sabbah – clearly reflects this position. Omar sarcastically refuses any form of involvement, invoking astrology as a symbolic refuge and rejecting the violent mechanisms of empire, repression, and execution.

Throughout the novel, Khayyam consistently refuses official duties and titles. Rather than attempting to reform society from within, he renounces his faith in humanity and retreats into wine and poetry. This attitude can be interpreted as an evasion of moral responsibility, bordering on ethical egoism – comparable to an individual who refuses to assist an injured brother on the grounds of a principled rejection of violence. This raises a fundamental question: would Omar Khayyam, eight centuries later, have taken up arms to defend a revolutionary movement advocating democracy and universal human dignity? More broadly, what is the most appropriate response to the apparent inevitability of violence in human societies?

Samarkand invites reflection on these profoundly philosophical questions without offering a definitive or prescriptive conclusion. The figure of Omar Khayyam remains ambiguous: is he a coward, or a lucid intellectual who understands the limits of individual action?

When seeking to avoid violence, Khayyam prioritizes dialogue and rational debate. Logic and reasoned argument constitute his primary tools, and his eloquence impresses Abu-Tahar from their very first encounter. In contrast to Hassan Sabbah, who instrumentalizes knowledge to provoke anger and mobilize followers, Khayyam uses intellectual persuasion to promote ideals of freedom and justice, occasionally even humanizing the most cunning tyrants. His influence is not insignificant: he fails to prevent Malik Shah from ordering Hassan Sabbah's execution, yet he succeeds in eradicating violent intent in Vartan, the soldier tasked with assassinating Hassan. Moreover, Khayyam's quatrains consistently promote values of love, tolerance, and individual freedom.

Nevertheless, Khayyam's approach ultimately proves insufficient in the face of entrenched violence, leading to disillusionment. The story of the Three Friends exemplifies this failure, portraying Khayyam as someone who avoids direct confrontation, a stance that may appear cowardly despite his acknowledged wisdom. It would therefore be naïve to assume that the "Khayyam paradigm" alone could eradicate global brutality.

From a sociopolitical perspective, the establishment of lasting peace requires collective action supported by strong institutional and societal commitment. Individual moral will is meaningful only when embedded within a firm social decision implemented by individuals willing to assume responsibility and authority. This explains the historical impact of figures such as Baskerville and Schuster, Martin Luther King Jr., and Mahatma Gandhi – individuals prepared to risk their lives for their convictions and to leverage positions of influence for the welfare of their communities. This is precisely what Omar Khayyam, due to his deliberate withdrawal from power and responsibility, could not achieve.

Ultimately, all cultures distinguish between those who act and those who contemplate. Societies require both categories. Some individuals steer the course – the politicians, artists, writers, philosophers, and poets – while others provide the momentum – workers, merchants, entrepreneurs, and engineers. Both roles are indispensable to the collective journey.

The Female Figure of Terkan Khatoun in *Samarkand*. In *Samarkand*, Amin Maalouf constructs the character of Terkan Khatoun as a complex and ambivalent representation of female power within a profoundly patriarchal political system. Far from being a passive consort, Terkan Khatoun emerges as a strategic political actor whose agency challenges traditional gender expectations in medieval Islamic societies, while simultaneously reproducing the mechanisms of domination and violence that structure imperial authority.

Terkan Khatoun, the younger sister of Nasser Khan, Sultan of Samarkand, is born into a prestigious family of Kashgarian origin. Her physical appearance, described as "Chinese," marks her as ethnically distinct within the Seljuk court, reinforcing her status as both an insider through marriage and an outsider through origin. Married to the Seljuk Sultan Malik Shah at the age of eleven, she becomes his first wife and gradually transforms her symbolic marital position into

concrete political influence. Her trajectory illustrates how dynastic marriage functions not only as a personal alliance but also as a gateway to power for women capable of navigating court politics.

Motherhood constitutes a central dimension of Terkan Khatoun's political identity. Having given birth to three sons – two of whom die in infancy – she becomes obsessed with securing the throne for her surviving child. Malik Shah's refusal to designate an official successor, due to the existence of another son from a second wife, intensifies the rivalry within the harem and positions Terkan in direct opposition to the vizier Nizam al-Mulk. In this sense, Terkan's maternal role is politicized: her ambition is not merely personal but dynastic, reflecting a biological legitimacy transformed into a political claim.

Terkan Khatoun's conflict with Nizam al-Mulk reveals her mastery of manipulation and persuasion. She attempts to remove him from power by proposing Omar Khayyam as a replacement, exploiting Khayyam's reputation while underestimating his moral resistance to political intrigue. When this strategy fails, she escalates her methods, ultimately soliciting Hassan Sabbah to orchestrate Nizam al-Mulk's assassination. This progression from persuasion to violence illustrates how Terkan internalizes the logic of power in an imperial system where ethical considerations are subordinated to political survival.

Her actions following Malik Shah's death further emphasize her ruthlessness and political pragmatism. By concealing the Sultan's death under the pretext of protecting the empire, she temporarily monopolizes authority and proclaims her four-year-old son as Sultan upon her return to Isfahan. This act represents a direct challenge to institutional authority, particularly the Nizamiyya officers, who support Barkyaruq, Malik Shah's eleven-year-old son. The resulting siege of Isfahan exposes the fragility of female power when it lacks institutional legitimacy, despite its strategic intelligence.

In her attempt to maintain control, Terkan Khatoun deploys gendered strategies of negotiation, promising marriage to various governors in exchange for military support. This instrumentalization of marriage highlights both the constraints imposed on women and their capacity to subvert those constraints for political ends. Additionally, her alliance with the Ismailis of Hassan Sabbah, who help her organize defensive militias, demonstrates her ability to forge unconventional coalitions beyond traditional state structures.

Terkan's eventual kidnapping of Barkyaruq and her subsequent assassination on the same night mark the tragic culmination of her political struggle. Her death symbolizes the ultimate limits of individual ambition within a violently competitive system dominated by male elites and institutional power. Despite her intelligence and determination, Terkan Khatoun remains vulnerable to the very violence she helped perpetuate.

From a moral and psychological perspective, Terkan Khatoun shares significant similarities with figures such as Abu Tahar and Nizam al-Mulk. All three characters embody the art of persuasion and manipulation, employing any means necessary to achieve political objectives. Terkan is portrayed as cunning, articulate, and fiercely adversarial toward her rivals, driven by resentment and an acute sense of injustice. Her belief in astrology and superstition – mirroring Malik Shah's own reliance on celestial signs – further underscores the paradox of a ruler who combines rational calculation with irrational faith. Notably, she consults Omar Khayyam for her horoscope, reinforcing the novel's thematic tension between scientific knowledge and political instrumentalization.

In conclusion, Terkan Khatoun represents a powerful yet morally ambiguous image of femininity in *Samarkand*. She is neither idealized nor demonized; rather, she is depicted as a woman who adopts the violent and manipulative tools of male-dominated politics in order to survive and prevail within it. Maalouf thus offers a nuanced portrayal of female authority, revealing both its

potential for agency and its entanglement with the ethical compromises inherent in the exercise of power.

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