

## **Sarcasm Masks and Margin Narratives: A Critical Approach to Nabd al-Nabd (The Pulse Beneath the Pulse) by Muhammad Al-Saleh bin Ali**

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**Abstract---**This study examines the collection of anecdotal flashes “*Pulse Pulse*” by Ben Ali Mohammed Al-Saleh, focusing on the use of the mask of irony as an aesthetic tool for interpreting reality. The study aims to reveal the group’s margin narratives and show how the texts uncover social, political, and cultural conditions. The analysis argues that the anecdotal flash transforms brevity into a critical force that dismantles virtual narcissism, exposes the falseness of political slogans, and condemns superficiality in cultural criticism.

**Keywords---**margin narratives, irony, sarcasm, mask, narratives.

### **Introduction**

Modern Arabic narrative has undergone a structural shift in its forms and techniques in response to contemporary demands and the pace of modern life. The very short story emerged as a condensed and economical literary form that matches the rapid social rhythm and the need for sharp and concise expression of marginal issues.

Abdullah Abu Haif describes the very short story as “a creative text that leaves an impact not only on its own, but also turns into a cognitive text that motivates further reading and research. It is a cultural exhibition that contributes to shaping the culture of the recipient through its intertexts, symbols, and

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readings of reality and through its requirements, as it urges the recipient to research and read” (Bardah, 2016, p. 15). Abu Haif elevates the very short story from a brief narrative form to a cognitive stimulus and cultural trigger. In this critical vision, the text not only leaves an immediate “trace,” but also transcends the limits of the story to become a knowledge source that pushes the reader toward inquiry and investigation. Accordingly, the story becomes an intensified “cultural exhibition”; it is not simply a tale, but a symbolic space requiring engagement with deep intertexts and symbols. In this density, the text does not merely entertain but imposes intellectual effort on the reader to decode reality through layered readings. It is a perspective that values the reader’s intelligence and makes the very short story an inferential bridge that deepens culture, emphasizing that the worth of the text is proportional to the depth of the questions it generates rather than the clarity of the answers it provides.

Criticism rejects viewing the very short story as “a *mode* or a wave in new narrative writing, but rather a new formula in writing that has its intrinsic mechanisms that must be established as constants and transcendentals, mainly represented in linguistic density, depth of meaning, and expansion of vision” (Miskin, 2011, p. 141). This genre is not merely a quantitative reduction but a qualitative transformation in the relationship between narrator, recipient, and reality. It relies on activating paradox, linguistic compression, and the focused ending (punchline) to generate critical meaning in the smallest narrative space: “It is an element (paradox) of the elements that are never indispensable, and depends on the principle of peak emptying and the breach of expectation, but at the same time it is not a blink... It seeks to deepen his sense of people and things” (Hattini, p. 33).

The collection “*Pulse Pulse*” by Ben Ali Mohammed Al-Saleh fits within this framework. It defines itself as “story flashes from the heart of living reality, and the pulse of people’s diaries with all its paradoxes,” and highlights artistic elements such as “paradox, ellipsis, displacement, conciseness, ridicule, symbolization, and semantic and metaphorical intensification.” The collection turns the everyday and ordinary into a field of cynicism and social, political, and cultural critique.

### Research problem

In this collection, ridicule is not merely a stylistic choice but a functional mask that protects the discourse from directness and helps communicate unspoken issues. It is based on “accustoming people and training them to the queen of self-criticism and alerting them to their mistakes” (Al-Hufi, 2001, p. 20). As for the narratives of the margin, “which lie far from care and embrace, and are even being discarded and excluded from the spotlight” (Bahraoui, 2004, p. 9), they refer to reconstructing reality from the viewpoint of forgotten groups and betrayed voices. Therefore, the central question can be formulated as follows:

**How does the writer use the ‘mask of ridicule’ as an artistic and ideological device to convey the ‘narratives of the margin’ and the unspoken issues within the space of the narrative flash?**

From this main question, the following sub-questions emerge:

- What aesthetic and social patterns do the satire masks reveal in the collection?
- How do brevity and intensification enhance the cynical effect and strengthen semantic paradox?
- What types of characters and situations represent the “margin narratives” in the collection, and how is the center criticized through them?

### Objectives

The study gains importance from its attempt to address a gap in literary criticism, which has not given sufficient attention to the very short story as an independent genre with distinct artistic qualities. It also highlights mechanisms of artistic expression and critique in a socially complex environment.

1. **Deciphering masks:** Identifying and analyzing the mechanisms of the irony mask and its patterns (situational irony, verbal irony, black irony).

2. **Monitoring narratives:** Extracting and classifying the marginal narratives addressed by the collection (virtual criticism, political and social corruption, cultural superficiality).
3. **Structural semiotic analysis:** Examining the narrative structure of the flash and understanding how the concluding paradox functions as a point of critical rupture.

Narratives of the margin focus on representing spaces, characters, and issues excluded by the center (political authority, official culture, dominant media). It is a socio-critical approach that views literature as the voice of the marginalized. The collection adopts these narratives through:

1. **Attention to the ordinary:** Transforming small details (a discussion about Facebook, purchasing sugar) into existential and critical concerns.
2. **Focus on simple characters:** Such as a professor, friend, or accountant—figures not of high status but drawn from the social margin.
3. **Critique of central discourse:** Dismantling grand slogans (such as “seismic change”) by reducing them to trivial acts on the periphery (changing wives and phones).

## Method

To achieve the study’s objectives, a composite analytical methodology is adopted, combining:

1. **Socio-critical approach:** To identify the social context and issues presented in the stories and understand how sarcasm is used as a form of protest against reality (margin narratives).
2. **Semiotic tools from structuralism:** To investigate the aesthetic structure of the explosive flash, analyzing mechanisms of condensation, paradox, and the role of dialogue in constructing the mask of cynicism.

### I. Ridicule as an Antidote to Virtual Emptiness (“What Are You Thinking About?”)

Virtual space—especially Facebook—has become a fertile ground for producing new margin narratives, where individual hypocrisy and narcissism appear away from direct social constraints. The story “*What Are You Thinking About?*” reveals the ironic mask through which the writer confronts the emptiness created by digital technologies.

The story opens with a personal paradox built on the contrast between the narrator’s advice to his friend to “open an account to keep pace with the times”: “*You advised me to open a Facebook account to keep pace with the times and people!*” (Ali, 2024, p. 5), and the friend’s opposite decision to delete the account. This contradiction lays the foundation for the narrative of virtual emptiness. The mask of sarcasm functions in several ways:

#### 1. Verbal and Descriptive Irony:

The irony appears in the list of superficial behaviors that the friend observes, including the man with the “advanced abdomen,” those who photograph their food as evidence of an imagined “famine,” and the spread of eccentric behaviors: “*and I cannot tolerate seeing someone eating and portraying himself as documenting his famine*” (Ali, 2024, p. 6). This list illustrates how a space expected to be a center of knowledge (according to the friend’s initial expectations) has instead become a margin of triviality and showmanship.

#### 2. Ideological Cynicism:

The cynicism reaches a critical point when the narrative links online behavior with a “culture of prohibition”:

*“I do not tolerate seeing those who consider themselves angels and others demons, so they do not accept a contrary opinion, nor an idea that does not correspond to their idea, and they do not master the settings of Facebook except the ‘prohibition’ icon, as they are a ready project for a future dictator.”* (Ali, 2024, p. 7). The text adds that these users embody “*a ready project for a future dictator, where the masses push him to be an unmistakable demigod*” (Younes, n.d., p. 215).

3. Here, ridicule is expanded from a social critique to a deep political warning: authoritarian tendencies begin with exclusion and silencing at the smallest communicative level.
4. **The Concentrated Closing Paradox:**

Ending with Facebook's iconic prompt "*What are you thinking?*" produces a sarcastic narrative lock. A question meant to invite reflection has become a trigger for trivial content. In this virtual "blue space," "*everything around us indicates the flattening of the inspiration and the absurdity of the considered through the excessive use of naïve language and speech*" (Donou, 2020).

5. This closing paradox shows how the flash succeeds in condensing the tragedy of the digital age into a brief dialogue.

## II. The Margin Confronts the Political Center ("Seismic Change" and "I Knew Who Was Responsible")

Critique of political power and elites is one of the strongest margin narratives that literature seeks to expose. The flashes in this section dismantle the official discourse of the center—parliamentary rhetoric, responsibility, and reform—and redirect it toward corrupt and self-serving individual actions.

In the story "*Seismic Change*," we read:

*"I used to listen to them, he said to its owner: Our list carries heavy names, its members will change when they reach the parliamentarians! He replied calmly: I believe they will make a seismic change, by changing their phone numbers, and they may change their places of residence, and they may change their wives!"* (Ali, 2024, p. 9).

This flash uses ridicule to expose the emptiness of political promises. It depends on a bilateral dialogue that stages the clash between two forms of awareness:

- **The first voice** represents the consciousness of the political center, repeating grand slogans such as "heavy names" and "seismic change."
- **The second voice** represents the sarcastic margin, which uncovers the truth behind these claims.

Here, the mask of ridicule dismantles the grandeur of political discourse by exposing its underlying opportunism. The so-called "seismic change" is reduced to personal gains—new phone numbers, new homes, or even new wives—rather than genuine reform.

### 1. Mask of Verbal Irony

The expression "*earth-shattering change*" is dismantled by reducing its elevated political connotation to a set of crude personal actions—changing phone numbers, residences, and even wives. In this way, the notion of change shifts from a national reform program to a self-serving personal upgrade, reflecting a narrative of political betrayal enacted by elites once they enter positions of authority.

### 2. Semantic Intensification

The writer succeeds in condensing an entire political tragedy—namely, the corruption of parliamentarians after elections—into three short sequential statements. This intensification strengthens the cynical impact of the flash, as the margin (the citizen) becomes more aware than the center (the deluded voter).

The Story "I Knew the Official"

The story reads:

*"I found him smiling and he is in a place that does not refer to joy and happiness.*

*— I said to him: It is nice to see the features of joy dancing on your face, tell me what is new?*

*— He said: What is new is that I began to learn and get out of my nation, and I began to rejoice in myself!*

*— I said: How?*

*— He said: Here I know the name of one of the officials, and today I know the name of a second official, and I, as my mother knows me, do not do any good.*

*— I said: How did you know the name of the first official?*

*— He said: I knew him from this long row in which I stand every day under the heat of the sun to win my need, so how can I not know the owner of this great achievement?*

*— I said: How did you know the name of the second official?*

- He said: I heard people talk about his name after he said strange words in one of his statements.
- I said: Indeed, you have begun to learn and memorize the names of some officials, so it seems that you are smart, my friend!
- He said: “I am not smart or nimble, my friend, but this science is the easiest for us, so it is enough for the official to speak so that you know him immediately and be forced to memorize his name.” (Ali, 2024, pp. 18–19).

This anecdotal flash mocks nepotism and reveals the narrative of social corruption. Although the text appears brief, its title becomes a symbolic model for marginal narratives connected to favoritism and administrative decay. In a corrupt social environment, “knowing who the official is” does not improve public service; it merely grants the ability to bypass procedures and gain illegitimate advantages.

### 1. Ridicule of the Prevailing Logic

If competence is the official criterion for employment (the center), the margin narrative demonstrates that the real criterion is personal connections and utilitarian relationships. The statement “*I knew the administrator*” reflects a sarcastic attack on an entire system that marginalizes merit in favor of relational privilege.

### 2. The Latent Mask of Irony

The mask of irony—understood here as an “existential position” (Allah, 2007, p. 190)—emerges through the ready-made expressions used to justify misconduct. The story shows how the official shifts from serving the people to favoring those who “know” him, thereby exposing the falsehood of institutional discourse that claims transparency and integrity.

## ***Cultural and Ethical Corruption Masks***

(Stories of “Objective Criticism” and “Sophistication”)\*\*

The collection’s critique is not restricted to the political sphere—which assumes “*the existence of a power and authority that grants powers to the elite and decision-makers*” (Bouzeid, 2021, pp. 74–75). It also extends to the cultural and moral environment of the citizen. In this thematic space, irony is used to expose contradictions between declared cultural or moral values and superficial everyday behavior.

The story “*Objective Criticism*” reads:

*“After days of trouble and fatigue, he collected a sum of money which he allocated to his only dream at that moment—printing his first poetic divān—and he achieved that, and the divān was issued in an elegant edition*

*The audience, interested people, students, and critics attended the reading evening of the divān.*

*The poet, the owner of the divān, was late. The event moderator asked ‘Feryal’ to read some poems because she excelled in diction and performance, until the poet arrived.*

*Feryal did not complete the first poem before a critic interrupted her:*

– ‘Your hair is as beautiful as your beauty, you really are a poet, and your hair is slim and perfect.’

*The moderator said: Thank you very much, ‘Feryal’, for reading, and here comes the poet to present his divān himself.*

*The critic was pinned in his seat and did not say a word until the evening ended.”* (Ali, 2024, pp. 24–25).

1. This flash functions as meta-literary criticism that satirizes the cultural field itself, particularly because the critic represents a central figure in the cultural hierarchy. The artistic milieu—supposed to critique the world and its issues—becomes instead an object of critique. The story exposes a foundational flaw within the cultural system: a space expected to uphold standards of artistic judgment becomes a site of superficial admiration based on appearance rather than substantive evaluation. **Paradoxical irony:** The critic commits a systematic error when he links the text to the body by saying, “Your hair is as beautiful as your beauty.” This verbal paradox shows that his judgment is not “objective,” but sensory and personal. The critic appears as a character with a double mask: the mask of alleged objectivity and the mask of flattery, revealing his true superficiality.
2. **The narrative of the margin (exposing the center):** The story explodes when the real poet, the owner of the divān, appears, exposing and discrediting the critic. This silence becomes an

eloquent condemnation: the critic was not moved by the text but by the reader's appearance. The flash successfully demonstrates how fringe cultural narratives—compliments, personal relations, and hidden agendas—dominate the cultural center and disrupt genuine, objective criticism.

In the story "Ruqay," the text states:

"Every day she goes to the public supply store to obtain her daily needs before leaving for work. She went to the place where the sugar is and took a five-kilogram bag, along with other items she needed. Then she went to the cashier, and the accountant said to her: — Professor, it seems you do not know that we are approaching a sugar shortage and a scarcity crisis!

— She replied: Are you sure, or is it only rumors as usual?

— He said: I am sure. If you take my opinion, buy more sugar and store it at home.

— She said: As long as your news is certain, I will buy *one kilogram* of sugar to contribute to solving the upcoming sugar crisis."

(ʿAlī, 2024, pp. 23–24).

This flash text highlights citizen behavior in the face of an economic crisis and offers a unique moral narrative.

**The situational irony mask:** The accountant represents the voice of the market and the spread of rumor, pushing the consumer toward greed and hoarding. The irony emerges in the professor's unexpected response, which reverses consumerist expectations.

**The narrative of moral awareness ("Ruqayy"):** Instead of following the dominant consumer drive (the center), which reflects "*the impulse to buy and accumulate things even when they are not needed*" (al-Sharīf, 2017), the professor adopts a conscious moral position from the margin. She chooses to buy only one kilogram of sugar, declaring that her aim is "to contribute to solving the upcoming sugar crisis." This transforms consumer behavior from a selfish instinct into a responsible and ethical choice.

3. **The title as a semantic paradox:** The title "Sophistication" reaches the peak of irony regarding public consumer behavior. Here, sophistication is not defined by luxury or status, but by awareness and responsibility during crises. This elevates the story into a model of the moral margin narrative.

## Conclusion

This critical reading engages in an anatomy of the flash structure in *Nabd al-Nabd* by Muḥammad al-Ṣāliḥ ibn ʿAlī, showing that the short text becomes a laboratory for the explosion of consciousness, where language abandons redundancy to embrace the aesthetics of paradox. Irony is not a decorative device but an ideological procedural mask that protects discourse from directness and legitimizes the entrance of deceptive margin narratives that feed on the remnants of the center.

The writer performs a counterfactual anatomy through his masks:

- **Decoding the virtual ego:** Digital narcissistic satire—embodied in the "What are you thinking?" culture—is exposed and transformed into a warning of future tyranny that begins with the simple "ban" icon.
- **Erosion of political rhetoric:** Grand slogans ("seismic change") are dismantled by linking them to trivial marginal acts (changing wives or phones), proclaiming the failure of elites and revealing the narrative of nepotism as a substitute for true merit.
- **Condemnation of cultural shallowness:** Mockery is directed toward the self in order to expose the critical positivist milieu in which the body becomes the text instead of the word, forming a contradiction that collapses the illusion of "objectivity." At the same time, the moral margin is elevated, recognizing that "sophistication" is not a luxury but a conscious, responsible stance against consumerist dominance.

As a result, the minimalistic flash writer amplifies critique with the smallest narrative space, making the margin a powerful fulcrum that destabilizes the central position.

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