

Received Date: December 18, 2024

Accepted Date: January 09, 2025

Published Date: February 01, 2025

Available Online at <https://www.ijsrisjournal.com/index.php/ojsfiles/article/view/346>

<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.15006661>

The Names of Destiny: Onomastic Cartography of Identity and Exile in Amin Maalouf's *Les Désorientés*

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ABSTRACT

This article extends and deepens the reflection initiated in “Sesames of Identity and Cultural Portals: Onomastics in *Les Désorientés* by Amin Maalouf,” by offering a thorough analysis of the symbolic meanings carried by choices of personal names. Through a hermeneutic and semiotic exploration, it reveals how Amin Maalouf embeds subtle narratives of multiple identities, inner exile, and cultural dialogue in the names of his characters. This study especially highlights how these names serve as milestones in a literary cartography where individual memory, cultural heritage, and universal aspirations intersect, thereby exposing the ongoing tensions between rootedness and uprootedness.

Keywords: Onomastics, identity, exile, Amin Maalouf, symbolism, hermeneutics, semiotics, cultural cartography.

Introduction

A name, situated at the crossroads of the individual and society, traces a distinctive path toward self-understanding and understanding of the world. Throughout history, naming reality has not merely served to designate, but also to organize and structure existence and to weave connections between people. In Amin Maalouf's *Les Désorientés*, this reflection resonates in a particular way: the first names that appear throughout the story are not simple markers of identity; they are keys opening onto intimate, cultural, and historical landscapes. This analysis builds on the inquiry started under the title: “Sesames of Identity and Cultural Portals: Onomastics in *Les Désorientés* by Amin Maalouf” [1]. In this novel, names operate like a cartography, drawing out a geography of belonging and exile, linking collective memory to individual trajectories. If, in their apparent simplicity, these first names convey complex heritages and unique human journeys, then one might ask: To what extent does Maalouf, through his characters' proper names, reflect the dynamics of identity and culture? What hidden stories, what tensions between rootedness and uprootedness, between the local and the universal, are revealed in this onomastic map?

Indeed, prior scholarship provides a solid grounding for reflection on the importance of name choices in literature. Guizou [2] asserts that the writer, a true onomaturge, leaves little to chance when assigning names; these are integrated into a hierarchical nominative network that structures the story's comprehension. Siblot [3] likewise shows how proper names carry connotations that extend far beyond their identifying function. Lafont [4] and Gardy [5], for their part, discuss the implicit cultural and political dimensions in onomastic and toponymic interplay, demonstrating that names act as significant vectors of individual and collective identities. Furthermore, Hamon [6] addresses the semiotic and symbolic dimension of proper names, describing each literary character as a cluster of signs, while Barthes [7] posits that a proper name functions like an instrument of exchange between a nominal unit and all the traits that characterize a character. Vincent Jouve [8] emphasizes the "character-effect," demonstrating how names profoundly shape a reader's narrative experience by bestowing tangible reality on those fictional figures.

To shed light on the stated issues, our methodology combines a hermeneutic and semiotic approach. Hermeneutics serves to interpret Maalouf's onomastic choices as indicative signs of the author's deeper aims, re-situating them within their own literary, historical, and cultural context. In tandem, the semiotic approach uncovers the profound symbolic meanings of the first names, viewed here as complex signs with multiple resonances. Furthermore, a comparative and intertextual dimension will enrich this reflection by bringing into dialogue the significance of names as found in religious traditions and sacred texts with their literary reappropriation in the novel. Finally, inspired by geocriticism, a cartographic approach will highlight how these proper names contribute to developing a symbolic geography—one that maps out networks of human relationships, cultural affiliations, and identity journeys at the heart of the work.

I. Woven Names, Intertwined Destinies: At the Crossroads of Identities and Cultures

The onomastic arabesque present in this novel offers a panorama of meanings and interconnections crafted by the author, echoing Leonardo Terusi's view: "(the 'ideological and literary' portrait that the author intends to offer of himself) underlies a process of onomaturgical creativity which, beyond the various contingent implications, appears intentional and meaningful" [9]. This perspective sums up how the names and their design in the work, in addition to marking identity, act as tools for in-depth interpretation, actively shaping the narrative and symbolic framework of the story. Indeed, from the incipit onward, the narrator begins with an introspective reflection on

his first name, Adam, phrasing it as follows: "I carry within my first name the nascent humanity, but I belong to a humanity that is dying out, Adam will note in his diary two days before the tragedy. [10, p. 34]."

Such a choice is hardly accidental. Consulting the *Dictionnaire Universel des Noms Propres*, one finds Adam defined as follows: "In the Bible (Genesis, I–IV) and in Jewish, Christian, and Muslim traditions, the first man, created by God and placed in the Garden of Eden (see Eden). Instigated by Eve, he eats the forbidden fruit from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, a sin for which he is expelled from Paradise, and which weighs on all humankind. His sons are Abel, Cain, and Seth" [11, p. 10].

He is thus the primordial figure in foundational narratives of the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, embodying the first man formed by the divine and established in the earthly paradise. This being is linked to the beginning of humankind's knowledge, characterized by a transgression that leads to his downfall and that of his descendants. In another sense, he is also referred to as the "New Adam" [11, p. 10], a metaphor for Christ in Christian theology, symbolizing the advent of an era of redemption contrasting with the era of demise initiated by the original Adam. This dichotomy between the original Adam and the New Adam—"one of the designations for Christ, regarded as inaugurating the time of salvation just as Adam inaugurated the time of the Fall" [11, p. 10]—illustrates the theological and existential nuance associated with this name, resonating with universal themes of sin, salvation, and renewal.

From a toponymic perspective, this name is geographically and mythologically grounded in Adam's Peak: "Adam's Peak. A sacred mountain in the center of the island of Ceylon (2,250 m), on top of which stands an ancient temple that houses a footprint (that of Adam, for Muslims) in the rock" [11, p. 10]. Obviously, this is the sacred mountain in Sri Lanka renowned for what is considered the footprint of Adam—an element manifestly forging a bridge between the spiritual and the material. As Fritz notes, "as a footprint and indentation in the stone, it belongs to writing both in the novelist's view and in that of the pilgrim" [12]. This perspective underscores the symbolism of a footprint as at once a transformation of the religious and a narrative inscription, weaving a substantive link between the onomastic expression and the material and metaphysical spheres of the sacred, allowing a mystical account to emerge.

In *Les Désorientés*, the name Adam is thus loaded with monotheistic religious connotations, in particular biblical, Quranic, and mythological references. Adam, the first man

according to holy texts, simultaneously symbolizes the beginning and the primeval exile of humankind from paradise. From a literary standpoint, this name confers upon the character an archetypal dimension, evoking an ecumenical sense of loss and nostalgia for a lost golden age. Adam's longing for his homeland—bound up with his chosen exile—reflects the modern individual's existential dilemma with respect to origins and identity: "Incurably foreign. On the native soil as much as on the lands of exile" [10, p. 34]. This duality reinforces the theme of personal and collective identity-seeking, making Adam an emblematic figure of the human condition, torn between past and present, here and elsewhere: "The country whose absence saddens and obsesses me is not the one I knew in my youth; it is the one I dreamed of, which never could come into being" [10, p. 67]. He embodies this poignant reality where the country one misses and is haunted by is not the one of lived youth, but rather an imagined ideal never realized.

In *Les Désorientés*, Amin Maalouf immerses the reader in an onomastic reflection from the very first pages. The protagonist, Adam, articulates a thought laden with penetrating lucidity: "I carry within my first name the nascent humanity, but I belong to a humanity that is dying out" [10, p. 11]. This introspection on his first name is introduced through an antithetical turn of phrase, forging a hyphen between Genesis and the apocalypse, with Adam standing at its junction—a vein coursing with potential onomastic and semiotic interpretation. In the various traditions and erudite analyses, Adam is a potent symbol: the first man, an emanation of the divinity. In the order of creation, he is perceived as the pinnacle of humanity—"he is the summit of earthly creation, the supreme being in humanity" [13]. This status is more than a matter of temporal precedence; it denotes an ontological and moral primacy. From this perspective, Adam is not a primitive vestige but a symbolic manifestation of an ascending evolutionary process for humankind, reflecting an ecumenical idea: "I was born on a planet, not in a country." [10, p. 59]. Adam transcends his mere naming to become a deep symbol of teaching and wisdom, aligning with the Quranic account, which presents him as the first being to receive the knowledge of the names, therefore occupying a major didactic role, which one also senses from his frequent use of a moralizing tone. Adam thus stands as the prototype for humanity's capacity not only to know but also to attach meaning to its surroundings—positioning him as a mediator of knowledge, a guardian of memory and continuity in Creation.

Both the first biblical Adam and Maalouf's literary Adam endure hardships. Each, through mistakes, sins, and hopes, yearns for redemption. In this quest for absolution, Maalouf's

axiom "Better to be mistaken in hope than to be right in despair" [10, p. 372] flares up with inspiring sparks, reminiscent of the father-founder's vicarial wisdom. It reminds us that, even in error, there remains an innate desire to progress and gain wisdom. This perspective resonates with Adam's fundamental mission: to persist in the pursuit of knowledge and meaning, despite adversity. By embodying this primordial figure, Maalouf's Adam mirrors the human condition—a reflection of the constant struggle between roots and wandering, the immemorial past and the unrelenting present. In the hues of his name, one finds the echo of a lost golden age and of an identity quest ever relevant. As Maalouf aptly captures through Adam, "Symbols transport us to a completely different level from that of history" [13, p. 7]. Thus, Adam becomes a living symbol, embodying consciousness, reason, freedom, responsibility, and autonomy—the privileges of the human spirit reflecting the divine image without exactly replicating it.

The scope of the name Adam, saturated with these diverse meanings, resonates in the text like an echo of human discourse, of everyday human practice, unconstrained: "The only important thing, for me as for all humans, is being brought into the world. Into the world! Being born means coming into the world" [10, p. 59]. It is not merely an identifier but a conduit toward a deeper comprehension of our humanity, our role in the universe, and our unceasing pursuit of connection and significance. Through his character's name, Maalouf draws readers into a journey of discovery in which the name acts as a portal to richer meaning, mirroring our own experiences and aspirations.

Indeed, Adam returns to his homeland at the request of Mourad's wife—a former friend and notable. Mourad wished to reconcile before dying, yet he passed away before their reunion. The character of Mourad, central to the plot, bears a name meaning "desired" or "wished for" in Arabic—a carefully deliberated choice that matches his hopes and the character's complicated journey. As Bromberger underlines, "The true vocation of anthroponymic research should be to uncover, within a society, the rules for name assignment, the principles according to which people, similar or different, are classified by naming them" [14]. Mourad's moral failing highlights human ideals' fragility in the face of stark realities, offering reflection on the personal and ethical costs of decisions made in extreme circumstances. His progression in the narrative illuminates the complexity of moral and personal commitment, enriching the textual fabric by exploring the nuances of loyalty and betrayal.

The characters Ramzi and Ramez are unveiled not only as fundamental narrative elements through their interactions and

dynamics but also through the semantic analysis of their first names, whose meaning mirrors their profound symbolic role in the story. According to the *Almaany dictionary* [15], “Ramez” is defined as “رَامِزٌ: The active participle of رَمَزَ,” which translates to “the one who symbolizes, the one who indicates” from the verb رَمَزَ, meaning “to gesture, indicate, or symbolize.” This definition underscores the active dimension of symbolizing or indicating, placing “Ramez” as a carrier in symbolic communication. Similarly, “Ramzi” (رَمْزِي) derives from رَمَزَ (“ramz”), referring to something associated with symbols or symbolism, also designating, in stylistic terms, the concept of allegory—suggesting that this character, like Ramez, is himself a symbol within the story, representing broader ideas and ideals that transcend his personal existence in the narrative. Their shared nickname, “the two Ram” [10, p. 31], reinforces this notion of duality and complementarity, underscoring their symbolic pairing at the heart of the plot.

Together, they represent a reflection on themes of friendship, loyalty, and the quest for identity. They act as living metaphors of the cultural bridges and the nuances of composite Arab identity. They also serve as a metaphor in absentia, symbolizing the decline of an Orient once unified and prosperous, where Levantines were perceived as a single entity—just as Ramzi and Ramez seemed to be “as if they were only one person” [10, p. 234]. Today, that world is divided, fractured by the vicissitudes of life that have separated those who once stood united.

The act of “making a sign,” derived from the verb رَمَزَ (ramaza) and defined in the *Almaany dictionary* [15] as “the person makes a sign: they wink, or gesture with the head, lips, eyes, eyebrows, or anything else, without making any sound, to be understood,” extends beyond verbal expression to include a rich array of nonverbal communication, comprised of gestures and silences. This approach has a particular resonance in the effort at mutual comprehension among the characters, highlighting their search for meaning and the creation of significant bonds across distances. They have chosen this life that brought them material prosperity but triggered their spiritual downfall. Formerly called “the associates, the inseparables, or simply the two Ram,” they finally fell out due to Dunia. The *Almaany dictionary* offers multiple definitions for دنيا (Dunia), including “the worldly life,” signifying the ephemeral, material dimension of the world, in contrast to spiritual or eternal values. Ironically, each ended up marrying a woman with the same first name—a homonymy that proved devastating, akin to a torrent overturning a ship and leaving only wreckage on the shores of the soul. “The similarity of their first names appeared to him at the time as a sign from Heaven, but it was actually a trap

laid by Hell” [10, pp. 242–243]. What they saw as a heavenly sign turned out to be hell’s snare. The deliberate choice of “Dunia” intensifies this irony, emphasizing the tension between the characters’ material and spiritual aspirations. The first name “Dunia,” meaning “world” or “earthly life” in Arabic, becomes a prism through which the unpredictabilities of life are explored, embodying the multiple facets and contradictions of human existence. These two women, despite bearing the same name, dramatically diverge in their outlooks and responses to relationships and values: “Unfortunately, our two women only resembled each other in their first name.” [10, p. 236–237].

The first Dunia exemplifies a supportive approach to life, symbolizing possibly the positive aspects of “Dunia”—solidarity, trust, and encouragement in adversity. “My wife immediately realized how important Ramzi was to me [...] and encouraged me to follow his advice. She never missed a chance to remind me that he was a true friend and that I was lucky to be associated with someone so honest, intelligent, and devoted” [10, p. 236–237]. Her ability to value the profound friendship between her husband and Ramzi, and to recognize the latter’s integrity and worth, stands in contrast to the husband’s own ironically instinctive jealous impulses. This is poignantly phrased by Ramez: “I’m the one who should have felt jealousy hearing my wife speak so highly of another man, right?” [10, p. 237]. This rhetorical question loaded with irony suggests that, even when fortunes appear to turn in our favor, underlying dynamics and emotions may reveal a more complex reality, in which expected roles or anticipated reactions are often inverted or questioned. In this light, Dunia’s attitude embraces a view of life that enhances harmony and collective well-being, aligned with values of integrity and dedication.

By contrast, the second Dunia represents a darker and more disruptive side of “Dunia”—jealousy, doubt, and discord: “Conversely, Ramzi’s wife kept telling him to beware of me and to keep his distance” [10, p. 238]. Her pathological reaction to her husband’s friendship with the narrator highlights the trials and pains that “Dunia”—worldly life—can inflict, especially when integrity and trust collide with insecurity and suspicion. “She wanted him to scrutinize the accounts more closely. She was convinced that I was not giving him his full share” [10, p. 238]. This constant worry, described by Ramzi as “Awful! For me it was a nuisance; for him it was a daily torment” [10, p. 238], illustrates the suffering wrought by a corroding distrust that gradually destroys the very foundations of trust and friendship. This Dunia’s insistence that her husband meticulously oversee finances, believing she has been wronged, sheds light on the challenges posed by worldly life, particularly when

individuals confront ordeals that undermine their integrity and trust. Thus, by juxtaposing two women bearing the same name but embodying diametrically opposed values, the novel explores the diverse facets of “Dunia”: a world where harmony and discord, love and suspicion, coexist, testing the bonds that unite us.

Indeed, the contrast between these two Dunias and their divergent impacts on the central characters sets the stage for a deeper focus on the profound transformations and shifts in their lives, underscoring how the significance and influence of a name can profoundly shape one’s destiny. This idea resonates powerfully with the assertion “It is always from the past that the choice of a first name arises, bearing its mark, its destiny, and its burden” [16], reminding us that each first name, along with its connotations and heritage, shapes the life journey of the person who bears it, steering them through a labyrinth of unpredictable choices and consequences. In this sense, the names Dunia, laden with echoes of worldly life, desires, and conflict, become a mirror for the ordeals the characters face, leaving their imprint at key junctures of their development and in their relationship to the surrounding world. The shared journey of these two inseparable friends takes an unexpected turn, exposing deeper facets of their personalities and fates. The contrast between them, symbolized by Ramzi’s symbolic approach and Ramez’s inclination toward symbolism, grows increasingly complex, moving beyond the initial duality into a richer array of identities and affiliations, even while narrowing some of their possibilities.

This gradual shift from an initial identity toward deeper existential territories invites renewed reflection on the revealing power of names. Far from being a mere social label, the proper name emerges as a dynamic space where tensions between rootedness and uprootedness, between memory and forgetting, are played out. Hence, some characters cross a decisive threshold, abandoning their original identity in favor of another one—chosen and assumed—signaling a genuine existential rupture. This phenomenon, simultaneously symbolic and existential, is precisely the core focus of the next section.

II. Onomastic Cartography of Identity and Exile

Exploring the cartography of names in *Les Désorientés* means delving into the profound bond between identity, memory, and exile. While we have thus far examined how first names reveal cultural affiliations and collective destinies, it is now crucial to investigate their power to mark a radical break, triggering an existential metamorphosis. In this perspective, the singular path of Ramez offers a particularly eloquent illustration: his

change of name is far from a simple linguistic variation; it is a genuine existential act, bearing witness to a deep quest for meaning and authenticity.

Yet Ramez’s life, after marriage, enters a larval phase foreshadowing a profound transformation—one that transcends his personal evolution to result in a complete metamorphosis, especially after his wife’s death, which paves the way for this transformation. His reflections—“What has changed in me,” [...] “are not my religious beliefs, but the conclusions I draw from them” [10, p. 381]—reveal this interior process: slow and gradual, resembling a gestation that will birth a radically renewed being endowed with a new name. This name, Basile, is no accident; it symbolizes a complete rupture with his past and the adoption of a new identity, marking a fresh start. This radical name change and life transformation—from Ramez the “businessman” to Basile the priest—highlights the scale of his search for meaning and redemption in the face of the disillusionments and failures of his married life. Ramzi’s transformation into Basile can be viewed as the most dramatic expression of the human desire for renewal and purification. After going through times of doubt and despair, Ramzi chooses to reject his previous life in its entirety and to adopt a new identity that reflects his longing for a more authentic and spiritual existence: “What changed in me,” he finally tells me, “are not my religious beliefs, but the conclusions I draw from them” [10, p. 322]. This metamorphosis does not merely mark a change of direction in his life but stands as a resurrection—a self-creation that shows how personal crises can spawn transmutations.

The choice of the name “Basile” for a character seeking spiritual rebirth is rich in meaning, especially in light of its signification in Arabic. “Basile” (باسل [17]) connotes courage, fierce struggle, and victory over formidable adversaries. This name, which also means “lion” in Arabic, symbolizes strength, bravery, and heroism. Phonetically, “بازل” (“bazil”) in Arabic refers to an expert or a seasoned individual. However, it likewise carries more bitter connotations, linked to unpleasant tastes such as sour milk or vinegar whose flavor has changed. Hence, while this “Basile” name resonates with ideas of power and challenge, it also alludes to bitterness and altered flavors, perfectly reflecting the character’s tumultuous journey. It is marked by moments of brilliant success and harsh disillusionments (e.g., the misfortune of his marriage and the dullness felt in fleeting triumphs). This complex blend of sensations aligns with his courageous decision to abandon his formerly opulent life and his comfort zone for the path of asceticism—an arduous road toward spiritual renewal. Indeed, in the context of his profound transformation, his new name, “Basile,” symbolizes both the inner struggle he wages to free himself from the past and the bitter trials he must overcome.

Ramzi's transformation into Basile is not just an altered identity; it is a quest for purification, a battle to conquer his inner demons and the illusions of material wealth that once dominated his existence.

It seems Maalouf conceived this character as the fruit of an existential resurrection, insofar as Basile's story—embodied in his metamorphosis and his deliberate choice of a new name—hints at the hagiography of Saint Basil, suggesting a meaningful spiritual and emotional parallel. In *La personnalité de saint Basile à travers sa correspondance* [18], one can clearly observe this parallel: "Basil's hasty departure was the first cloud darkening their friendship: [Jean-Robert Pouchet cites Grégoire] 'It was, as Gregory would later admit, like a body cut in two, it was death for both of them. More clouds would come, but none would obscure the fundamental fidelity of their friendship, whose roots had grown too deep to be destroyed by a gust of wind.'" [19] In Saint Basil's separation from his close friend Gregory—depicted as a body cut in two and likened to death for them both—one finds resonance with the break that our story's character experiences with his past and former self. Ramzi's journey to become Basile mirrors Saint Basil's experiences and friendship with Gregory, underlining a parallel in the ruptures and transformations in their respective lives. The echo of this rupture also surfaces in the relationship between Ramzi and Ramez, where Ramzi's departure signals a decisive turning point similar to that endured by Saint Basil: "Yes, I wasted a lot of time in vanity, and I lost all my youth in the vain work I devoted myself to in pursuit of what has been declared folly by God" [19, L. 223, p. 2, 1–10]. The citation referring to Gregory, who felt like a body cut in two after Basil's departure, finds a counterpart in Ramez's words, expressing his sense of loss and disorientation without Ramzi. Ramzi/Basile's decision to change his name and his life is characterized by a chosen isolation and an unwillingness to share his "internal turmoil," even with those closest to him. This attitude is encapsulated in his own words: "But I should have explained my decision to him. The problem is, at the most critical moment, I had no desire to argue with anyone" [10, p. 324]. His refusal to speak, to share his internal transformation, hints at a profound loneliness in his journey toward his new identity.

Moreover, Ramzi/Basile sees his transformation as more than an existential crisis; rather, it is a deliberate and rational step toward a new way of life. "I think reason is what persuaded me to come live here. [...] Certain threads in my life had just snapped" [10, p. 323]. These words highlight his intention to sever the ties anchoring him to his former life—symbolic "invisible threads" [10, p. 323] that bind a person to their past and that he consciously chooses to break to embrace his new self. The parallel between these two Basils underscores that,

even amid intense sorrow and loss, the roots of fidelity and genuine friendship remain intact, weathering life's storms. For our Basile, separating from his past, though painful, becomes a critical stage in his pursuit of redemption and spiritual renewal. It enables him to reconstruct his identity on more authentic foundations, searching for deeper harmony with himself and the world around him. Loyalty to oneself and to one's deepest convictions thus becomes the bedrock on which Basile rebuilds his life. Like Saint Basil and Gregory, whose friendship endured despite hardships, our Basile discovers in his own transformation the strength to forge new bonds, grounded not in external circumstances or attachments but in a deeper grasp of what is truly essential and lasting in human existence.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, an onomastic analysis of *Les Désorientés* reveals that each name resonates like a "language within the language," weaving invisible threads between individual destinies and collective history. Beyond their labeling function, these names open subtle portals that bind past and present, harmonizing heritage and modernity, personal memory and shared transmission. Through them, we perceive echoes of a Levant marked by fractures and exiles, by perpetually reimagined "Sisyphean" spiritual quests, and by a plural identity that seeks reconciliation with the world's forward march.

Far from being mere linguistic labels, names function like fragments of a mirror: fragile and fragmented, yet reflecting the possible unity of a region whose richness is rooted in the polyphony of its narratives. Each piece serves as an echo chamber for a singular experience while alluding to the broader horizon they share, as if each individual path carried within it the destiny of everyone. Thus, in the tapestry of *Les Désorientés*, the act of naming becomes the act of connection: an invitation to gaze at the past in order to better imagine the future, in the hope that the sum of these identities, far from forming a simple mosaic, might illuminate the promise of a shared sense of belonging. In brief, this approach will be extended in a future study that widens our perspective on how names fundamentally shape our collective memory and our relationship to place.

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