

Identity and Narrative in Algerian crime Fiction: An Analytical Reading Of Sakarat Najma

الهوية والسرد في أدب الجريمة الجزائري قراءة تحليلية في رواية سكرات نجمة.

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Abstract:

The detective novel is considered one of the most prominent fictional literary genres, built upon structures of suspense and intrigue. It is among the most widespread and popular narrative forms worldwide. Although its emergence and development were more advanced in the Western world compared to the Arab world, it has nonetheless witnessed increasing interest among researchers and readers. The detective novel typically revolves around the resolution of a mystery, most often a murder case.

Crime has been one of the least explored narrative themes in Algerian literature at the early stages of literary consciousness. Literature, as a mirror reflecting the transformations of society and its profound concerns, initially accompanied these changes by engaging primarily with colonial realities and the conditions of the Algerian people. In contemporary Algerian narrative discourse, however, the theme of crime has emerged as an artistic device that reflects the social, political, and identity-related upheavals experienced by the Algerian individual. Through Amal Bouchareb's novel *Sakarat Najma*, the hidden dimensions of crime are revealed as the product of historical and social repression, whereby crime shifts from being an individual act to an expression of collective struggle. The novel highlights how crime becomes a means of interrogating past, memory and present. while simultaneously intersecting with issues of identity and cultural heritage within the broader context of Algerian transformations. Furthermore, the narrative presents crime as a complex phenomenon rooted in marginalization and exclusion, rendering it a mirror that reflects the social and cultural distortions of Algerian reality.

Keywords: Crime, Narrative Discourse, Identity, Marginalization, Social and Cultural Transformations, *Sakarat Najma*.

ملخص:

تعدّ الرواية البوليسية من أبرز الأجناس الأدبية التخيلية التي تقوم بنيتها على الإثارة والتشويق، وهي من أكثر الأشكال السردية انتشاراً وذيوعاً على المستوى العالمي، وعلى الرغم من تطور ظهورها في العالم الغربي مقارنة بالعالم العربي، إلا أنها شهدت اهتماماً متزايداً لدى الباحثين والقراء، وتقوم الرواية البوليسية على حل لغز جريمة وفي الغالب ما تكون جريمة قتل.

ويعدّ موضوع الجريمة أحد المواضيع السردية القليلة الاهتمام في الأدب الجزائري في بداية تشكل الوعي الأدبي، فالأدب بوصفه مرآة تعكس تحولات المجتمع وهمومه العميقة فواكب هذه التحولات فكانت بدايته مرتبطة بالاستعمار وأوضاع الشعب الجزائري، وأما في الخطاب السردى الجزائري المعاصر فقد تجلّى موضوع الجريمة كأداة فنية تعكس الاضطرابات الاجتماعية والسياسية والهوياتية التي يعيشها الفرد الجزائري، ومن خلال رواية - سكرات نجمة - لأمال بوشارب يتم كشف الأبعاد الخفية للجريمة بوصفها نتاجاً للقمع التاريخي والاجتماعي، حيث تتحول الجريمة من فعل فردي إلى تعبير عن صراع جماعي، وتبرز كيف أصبح الجريمة وسيلة لمساءلة الماضي- الذاكرة- والحاضر، وكيف تتشابك مع قضايا الهوية والتراث في سياق التحولات الجزائرية، كما تُظهر الرواية الجريمة كظاهرة معقدة تنبع من التهميش والإقصاء مما يجعلها مرآة تعكس التشوهات الاجتماعية والثقافية في الواقع الجزائري.

كلمات مفتاحية: الجريمة، الخطاب السردى، الهوية، التهميش، التحولات الاجتماعية والثقافية، سكرات نجمة.

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1. Introduction

Algerian narrative discourse reflects the social, political, and cultural transformations of Algerian society, functioning not only as a form of storytelling but also as a means of interpreting reality and revealing its underlying contradictions. Among the major themes of contemporary Algerian narrative are crime and violence, presented as complex social and political phenomena rather than merely criminal acts. Amal Bouchareb's *Sakarat Najma* illustrates this perspective by portraying crime as a narrative device through which the novel explores identity, memory, and the contradictions of Algerian society. From this point, a number of questions arise:

- How is crime represented in *Sakarat Najma*?
- What semantic and artistic dimensions does the novel ascribe to this act?
- Does crime remain a mere narrative event, or does it evolve into a tool of social critique and ideological unveiling?

2. Crime in Narrative Discourse

The Detective Novel represents a literary genre that has been only rarely addressed in the Arab world. In general, it is built upon a plot structure that shows little variation; it typically begins with a mysterious murder, "The official police take charge of investigating the motives behind the crime, eventually leading to the real unexpected perpetrator". (Al-Oadhi, 2010, p. 209)

Detective novels feature a precise plot structure that start from the end; they begin with a crime and move backwards through interconnected clues to solve the mystery and reveal the perpetrator.

Definitions of the detective narrative have varied, and **Dr. Abdul-Qadir Sharshar** notes the difficulty of determining a precise definition due to its significant development. However, he highlights the Western definition by Frigyes Misák, who views the detective novel as "a specialized genre

above all else for discovering the difference through mental means and precise circumstances of a strange incident.". (Cherchar, 2003, p. 11)

Therefore, the detective novel is distinguished by its structured plot, suspense, and analytical approach, which engage readers in uncovering the truth behind the crime.

3. Detective Writing in Arabic Literature:

The detective novel in Arabic literature did not receive the same attention as it did in Western literature, this narrative type was long viewed as a secondary genre, one that did not ascend to the level of the realistic or historical novel in terms of its artistic or objective value. This can be partly attributed to:

- The detective novel's link to entertainment and suspense made Arab writers reluctant to engage in this field, and Arab critics hesitant to deal with it as a literary text open to deep critical analysis.
- Difficulty in Writing: Beyond the requisite literary talent, writing in this genre demands that the novelist possess a broad culture and be well-versed in legal materials and criminal matters.
- Just as "detective writing cannot be embodied as fiction except against the background of a realistic police environment that begins from its idea and returns to its overall significance, which is what the works of pioneers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Arthur Conan , and Agatha Christie established, as they worked on the illusion of reality in the narrative"(Bahri, 2016).Hence, the reality of the Western environment stimulated the rise of this genre.

The Arabic environment lacked the fertile material needed for detective literature. The Arab novelist tends to focus on themes drawn from their environment, such as pain and war. Nevertheless, this genre has not vanished; there are qualitative literary experiences, including "The Thief and the Dogs" by Naguib Mahfouz, "Honor" by Sonallah Ibrahim, and Nabil Farouk's series, "The Man of the Impossible".

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Some Arab writers deliberately adopted the police procedural format to present critical visions on issues such as corruption, justice, and power relations. This gave the detective novel a semantic dimension that consistently transcends the mere revelation of a crime. Moreover, the shift in the utilization of this narrative genre is evidence of Arab writers'.

4. The Algerian Detective Narrative:

In Algerian narrative, critics and scholars—including Dr. Abd al-Qadir Sharshar and Dr. Muhammad al-Amin Bahri—acknowledge the scarcity of production in this literary genre due to a set of reasons, including:

- This art form requires access to legal and security information, which is often difficult to obtain.
- The colonial control and the post-colonial social and cultural conditions the country experienced created an unsupportive climate for producing this genre.
- Writers' lack of appetite for this genre, believing it to be associated with superficial subjects.

However, this doesn't imply its absolute absence. According to Dr. Abd al-Qadir Sharshar, the emergence of this genre is credited to the novelist Youssef Khoddirand his novel *Tahrir Fidaiyya* (The Liberation of a Female Commando) in 1970. This was followed by a number of other novels, including: *Al-Intiqam Yamur bi-Ghaza* (Revenge Passes Through Gaza), *Tawqif Mukhattat al-Irhab* (Stopping the Terrorism Plot), *Al-Jalladun Yamutuna Aydaan* (Executioners Also Die), *Man' Plane Phantom 'an Tel Aviv* (Banning the Phantom Plane from Tel Aviv), and *Al-Numur Tahjum* (The Tigers Attack). Critics also highlight the literary experience of Zohra Oufani with her two works: *Sura Mafqouda* (A Missing Picture) and *Qarāṣinah aṣ-Ṣaḥrā'* (Pirates of the Desert). The detective novel began to crystallize and become clearly evident with the works of Yasmina Khadra (what the wolves dream of), Amara Lakhous (Little Cairo), Al-Habib al-Sayeh (Me and Haim), Said Khatibi (The End of the Desert), Mohamed Benidida (The Folly of the Skull), and Rouia

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Mazkour and her novel *Al-Dalil al-Mafqoud* (The Missing Evidence).(Cherchar, 2003, p. 163)

The novel *Sakarat Najma* (2015) by Amal Bouchareb is considered a complex artistic work that blends elements of the detective novel, cultural history, and social conditions within an Algerian narrative that surpasses traditional molds.

5. The Crime as the Founding Event of the Novel

5.1 The Peculiar Opening of the Crime - The Crime Scene: From the very first page of the novel, we discover that we are facing a non-traditional murder; it is not a transient event or a typical crime whose motive was merely robbery. Instead, it is a narrative sign charged with connotations, where "From the opening scene, the novel presents a symbolic rather than conventional crime. The mysterious setting, the stabbed painting, and the carefully arranged body establish an atmosphere of suspense while suggesting that the murder carries psychological and symbolic meanings beyond the act itself." (Boucharb, 2015, p. 9).

This opening immediately creates narrative tension and invites the reader to question the relationship between art, death, and identity, making the crime both an aesthetic and philosophical event.

The investigator immediately grasped this complexity. Thus, he "warily scanned the room, while the forensic team was busy securing the items and lifting fingerprints"(Boucharb, 2015, p. 9)

The phrase warily scanned (literally, 'flipping his eyes with apprehension')—employs an unusual verb to intensify the feeling of anxiety and anticipation, indicating that something in the scene aroused suspicion or doubt .

This miniature introduction represents a typical entry into an investigation scene, placing the reader directly into the atmosphere of the crime. It establishes the presence of the analytical action (the detective)

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contrasting with the technical work (the forensic team), paving the way for the revelation to progress from the material to the intellectual.

The detective realized his task would not be easy: "The detective's observations reveal that the victim was familiar with the murderer and that the crime scene had been deliberately arranged, indicating careful planning rather than a spontaneous act."(Boucharb, 2015, p. 9)

The detective is an intelligent man who pays attention to details, accustomed to reading between the lines. He attempted to analyze the specific details from the victim's reactions, head position, direction of gaze, lack of panic, and the crime scene . He realized that the victim likely knew the killer and did not anticipate the attack.

The stabbed painting transcends its evidential function, becoming a metaphor for the fragmentation of identity and the violence embedded in collective memory.

The attempted mutilation of the victim's hand symbolizes the killer's desire to erase part of the victim's identity rather than merely end his life.

The novel shifts to a **narrative expansion and a transformation in thought** so the detective moves from observing the corpse to searching for a deeper meaning. He transitioned from the stabbed painting to the other canvases decorating the room's walls. He warily scanned those cryptic paintings decorating the room's walls, all of which bore the signature of Elias Madi. He mumbled in distress as he turned his gaze back to the stabbed painting, becoming convinced that uncovering its secret might be the key to revealing the riddle of the death. "The paintings carried the name of the artist Elias Madi, who is the murder victim. He was a professor of Contemporary Painting Methods and Techniques at the Albertina Academy in Torino, with exhibitions in Paris, Tokyo, Milan, France, New York, and Barcelona.(Boucharb, 2015, p. 11)

5.2 Course of the Investigation: The crime was committed against the artist Elias Madi, and the incident serves as the narrative plot's starting point. The investigation was not easy, and the protagonist's personal history and relationships are revisited through the inquiry. The first thing the detective came across was a translation of a text that had been written to him two days before his murder via Skype: During the investigation, the detective discovers mysterious messages and symbolic documents suggesting that Elias was involved in sensitive historical and cultural issues, which deepen the complexity of the crime.

Similarly, a small, forgotten piece of paper was found in his leather wallet, bearing a phone number and the name of a person, Ben Haroun. This was the only number Elias kept written down, while the rest were saved in his phone. Furthermore, the sight of "the suspicious six-pointed star, and different models of the 'Khamsa' on Elias's computer, some of which were engraved with Hebrew letters, alongside images of the Republic's emblem and old flags of countries that had ruled Algeria, suggested a dark dimension to the case. This indicated that Elias's arrival in Algeria was not only due to his grandfather's death' (Boucharb, 2015, p. 45).

The discovery of Ben Haroun's contact information, together with symbolic references such as the six-pointed star and the Khamsa, broadens the investigation and links the crime to historical, cultural, and religious dimensions.

Elias's journey from the airport creates an atmosphere of uncertainty and foreshadows the danger awaiting him, reinforcing the novel's strategy of suspense and deception.

The narration has mastered the game of deception and illusion, not only by complicating the crime but by deliberately confusing the reader through narrative paths that suggest alternative realities. The kidnapping scenario was the most prominent of these. This involves a manipulation of time, place, and absent characters. The ambiguity surrounding the mysterious return of the

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artist Elias Madhi and the silence surrounding his fate are exploited to convince the reader that there are threads beyond the ordinary and that outside parties are involved. This deepens the suspense and mystery. This strategy not only serves the structure of the detective narrative but also suggests that the truth is not readily available; rather, it is constructed through deconstruction and interpretation.

The novel continues to weave the threads of mystery by multiplying the paths of suspicion. It does not directly present the killer, but instead sprinkles doubts over a number of characters, keeping the reader in a state of continuous anticipation and fluctuation between possibilities. Every character is carefully presented to appear as if they are hiding something: a relative, a neighbor, a friend, an employee, a rival, and figures from the artist's past. The fingers of accusation are pointed at a large number of characters in the novel, including:

- **Monsieur Amziane:** The head of the Academy of Fine Arts in Algiers. Elias had contacted him numerous times over two years about teaching at the academy, but to no avail. Amziane feared for his position, as he only held a license degree in archiving.
- **Madame Sefri:** The head of the Higher Arab Institute for Heritage. She strongly desired to recruit Elias to her team in exchange for a job at the institute, but he refused because he did not see merit in her art.
- **Dr. Chenit:** A university professor and head of an association. He had a bad reputation, having been accused of plagiarism in which he plagiarized a student's thesis and claimed it as his own to obtain his doctorate. He was desperate to include Elias and Damia in his association to impose his influence.
- **His Friend Ermanno Bergonzi:** A professor of Sacred Art at the Albertina Academy and Elias's friend. He attempted to contact Elias when he visited Algiers but failed, which forced him to resort to the Algerian Embassy. He communicated with Elias via Skype and intended to visit Algeria, but his friend's murder prevented him.

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- The Old Woman of the Stairs : Who wore the haik (a traditional veil) and for whom Elias used to buy flowers.
- **Caroline:** His adopted maternal sister. She did not like him and wanted him to leave so she could reclaim her parents' house from him in Italy.
- **Yemma Mariem:** She appeared to be a simple woman who loved everyone. There were no conflicts between her and Elias; she would even call him "Elias, my son." Amidst all this misdirection and narrative dispersion presented by the novel, the biggest surprise arrives: she is the criminal, but she escapes punishment because the case is closed as a suicide, despite the detective's lack of conviction. She appeared throughout the novel with her frail body in simple daily scenes, but she also appeared repeatedly in narrative scenes —holding a knife— for example:
- **Cutting the Bread:** “She rested the grip of her right hand, which held a knife for slicing the bread she had brought, onto Souhaila's desk—the bread thief—at the window's edge, while her left arm remained suspended in the air in an incomprehensible defensive posture.”(Boucharb, 2015, p. 128).

And as she cut, “Yemma Mariem, with her huge, sharp knife, that loaf of bread—the same knife she used to cut everything, starting with meat, moving through vegetables, and ending with bread. She even used it to cut open soft milk bags and stubborn canned goods.”(Boucharb, 2015, p. 135).

The significance of the knife appears in an incident that occurred with Elias as he was ascending the stairs, “Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim, Bismillah ar-Rahman ar-Rahim (In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful), Yemma Mariem muttered nervously as she threw the knife onto the floor. Then she dragged her legs with difficulty until she reached the wall. Moments later, the first floor of the building lit up. She looked at Elias, who stood like a statue, letting out one breath after another as if he had just emerged from a wrestling arena. As for her, she was still stuck to the wall in a gesture of surrender, her hand fixed on the light switch while her eyes darted between Elias, who stood inside the

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building, and her knife, which was impaled on the ground. 'Yemma Mariem,' he called out without comprehending what was happening, yet in those moments, he felt reassured... rather, he felt stupid... He picked up the knife, apologizing again... 'It's nothing, my son, it's nothing,' she said, taking the knife with her right hand. She gently stroked Elias's cheek with her left palm, A trace of sorrow flowed across her features, and she tried to conceal it with her words and her gentle supplications for Elias: ' Khamos and Gabriel(Jibril) protect my son... Khamos and Gabriel(Jibril),' and the sound of her heavy breathing once again filled the place. Now, turning her face away from Elias and clutching her chest, she said: 'I can no longer bear this humid weather. It worsens my asthma attacks,' she said, trying to breathe normally. 'There is nothing left of life... And your grandfather, may God have mercy on him,' she took the edge of her veil to wipe her eye sadly, 'Ah, what a pity.' Then she raised her head to the lamp, whose edges had turned into spider dwellings: 'I thought you were one of the building's residents when you didn't turn on the light. We know our way to our homes in the dark.'"(Boucharb, 2015, p. 193).

The narrative exposes her on page 245, where she is celebrating the wedding of her eldest son, who will settle in the apartment where Elias was staying because it was registered under her husband's name. As she cuts the wedding meat, she recalls that night and the neighborhood young men gathered in her apartment watching the Algeria vs. England match. She was praying for victory for the national team while preparing tea for them. Everyone was engrossed in the game. She went to the adjacent apartment where Elias was lying on his bed. She still remembers his smile as he looked at her and she approached him slowly. He did not seem startled; he had grown accustomed to the sight of the knife she always carried in her hand. After all, she was Yemma Mariem... Mama...

The final revelation exposes Yemma Mariem as the murderer. Motivated by social and personal pressures rather than political conspiracy, she kills Elias and stages the crime to appear as suicide, highlighting that ordinary greed may be more dangerous than hidden ideological plots.

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The novel built a complex world of symbols and possibilities, only to ultimately reveal a far more dangerous truth as the crime, committed in the name of personal interest and concealed by a veneer of innocence and motherhood, was neither an international conspiracy nor a political act. Instead, it was the result of selfish human greed, wrapped in the cloak of the ordinary and the everyday. Sometimes, the real danger is not in the mysterious, but in the ordinary which we overlook in the crime that is born from greed, not from ideology.

5.3 The Crime of Suicide the suicide of Damia Ben Haroun. A young Jewish woman working at the Opti-Media publishing house, whose manager was the opportunistic and exploitative Souhila. Damia was an ambitious young woman who passionately chose to study Arabic Literature and Civilization. She was devoted to her work, starting as a proofreader before becoming the supervisor of Opti-Media's first historical series. Her graduation thesis, titled "The Image of the Self and the Other in the Poetry of Abd al-Rahman al-Tha'alibi," was an unprecedented work that demanded great effort. The novel showed the desire of Madame Sefri and Damia's supervising professor to seize this work. Damia also refused to join Dr. Chenit's association, throwing his membership card back at him. She tried to warn Elias but failed as she didn't have his address or phone number. After his murder, in an attempt to absolve herself and resolve her problem with the painter Ismail, regarding unpaid dues and the lack of a work permit, Souhila falsely claimed Elias had a relationship with Damia, impugns her honor. The young woman commits suicide as a result.

Damia was the one who helped Souhila obtain the necessary permits for the historical series after introducing her to Dr. Chenit, who chaired a national non-governmental association called "Ana" (meaning "Our Algeria"), which was supported by a General and had unknown but extensive influence.

6. From Crime to Diagnosis of Social Reality

The novel Sakarat Najma exposes a troubled social reality, steeped in contradictions and brokenness, where traditional values intersect with

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manifestations of superficial modernization. Tensions between social classes, art, power, and religion emerge against the backdrop of the crime. The novel sheds light on the Algerian social reality through:

6.1 The Silent Crime: The novel portrays social realities such as unemployment, housing shortages, and economic hardship as underlying forces that shape individual behavior. Through Yemma Mariem's experience, crime is presented as a desperate response to social pressure rather than merely an individual moral failure.

The novel also presents superstition and witchcraft as expressions of fear, insecurity, and the desire to control destiny. Rather than serving as folkloric details, these practices reveal the psychological pressures experienced by the characters.

In contrast, Elias's aunt, Caroline, also engages in sorcery and Tarot card reading to prevent Elias from returning to Italy, an attempt to control his destiny. Sorcery here becomes a reflection of power dynamics, anxiety, and human frailty, not just a folkloric ritual. This parallel between two characters from different social strata (popular and educated) reveals that resorting to the unseen is not exclusive to the ignorant; it is a deep psychological reaction to loss, fragility, and the desire for possession.

Illegal migration symbolizes the despair of marginalized Algerian youth who see escape as the only alternative to unemployment and social exclusion.

Through Ismail's experience, the novel criticizes the marginalization of talented youth and the dominance of linguistic and social privilege over merit.

The novel exposes different forms of political, academic, and institutional corruption, showing how personal connections and abuse of power replace competence and justice.

As for the academic corruption, Dr. Chenit obtained his doctorate title after paying a huge sum of money for his final certificate. He sighed regretfully, lamenting the 380 million centimes cash—the price of his degree—which he paid to the head of the Scientific Committee in the History Department. This individual then took care of everything, from accepting his PhD registration to

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writing the very last line of his dissertation. But that scoundrel, if he stole it... I'll leave him to God?" He muttered sadly, recalling the three-year-old uproar that accompanied his academic certification, which was a scandal reported in various national newspapers. Although the papers did not explicitly name him when covering the rumor of his thesis theft, all his colleagues in Parliament knew he was the intended subject of the news, leading to constant whispering and winking at him in the corridors of the People's National Assembly, inside closed offices, in private salons, and even by those close to him.(Boucharb, 2015, p. 226).

7.Identity between Fragmentation and the Search for Roots

Elias's identity remains fragmented between Algeria and Italy. Although he legally belongs to Algeria, he struggles to achieve emotional and cultural belonging, making identity one of the novel's central concerns.

Thus, Elias grew up in a dual environment: Italy, where he was raised, and Algeria, his country of origin, yet he lacked a true sense of belonging to either.

8. Linguistic and Cultural Falsehood

8.1 Elias also noticed the linguistic and cultural falsehood in his country:

"The fact was, Elias did not understand why everything in his country did not exactly mean what was written on it. This neglected mummy warehouse was labeled as a library. Those containers of white water at the entrance of a shop, which his grandfather was addicted to drinking every morning, were labeled with the word 'milk.' He sighed, noting that the clothing store selling Chinese garments had the phrase 'Parisian Elegance' engraved on its façade in French."(Boucharb, 2015, p. 120).

The marginalized artist, Ismaïl, felt inadequate because he was not proficient in French. This wasn't because French was a foreign language, but because it was still treated as the language of authority and social prestige in an environment that viewed it as a sign of culture and status. The language of the colonizer had transformed into a cultural tool. Ismaïl's talent was not valued, not for lack of artistry, but because of his language deficit. He only felt his sense of patriotism among friends from the interior regions.

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The character Wassila, who is not proficient in Arabic and speaks French despite having studied law at university, serves as an example of alienated cultural identity.

8.2 The Fragmented Collective Memory: Yemma Mariem lived in two worlds while recalling her memories from before the ceasefire in the Telemly neighborhood. She was unsure if she was inhabiting two completely different worlds, and she fully understood that they were antagonistic toward one another, yet she insisted on living inside both of them simultaneously. She felt that there were two worlds that never truly met:

- The World of the French: Built on dominance and control.
- The World of the Algerians: Marginalized and oppressed, but pulsating with resistance and memory.

Even though she recognized that these two worlds were locked in a bloody historical conflict, she insisted on living between them at the same time, carrying the surface appearance of one and the roots of the other. This insistence on inhabiting both simultaneously reveals a divided personality—one that is as inhabited by memory as it is by denial. Her attachment to the past governs her more than reconciliation with the present. Thus, Yemma Mariem transforms into a symbol of a generation that never settled its position between the colonial and post-colonial eras—a generation that chose to live in paradox instead of confrontation, in a dual memory instead of a single cohesive identity.

8.3 Latent Tension in the Composite Algerian Identity: The novel also illuminates the hidden religious conflict or the struggle between religious and cultural identities among several characters (Si Ben Haroun, Isaac, Damia, Dr. Chenit, Madam Sefraoui). The novelist uses the Khamisa or amulet, which embodies the raised, open hand with five fingers. Isaac asserts: “It is the hand of Miriam, the sister of Moses and Aaron,” Isaac said, fixing his gaze with a touch of impudence into the blackness of Si Abdellah’s eyes, as if casting a spell on his head. ‘It is the symbol of the Books of Moses.’ He continued with the same provocative tone, raising his right palm to count the books of the Torah on his five fingers: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuterion—” “Silence!” Si Abdellah sharply interrupted Isaac, as if

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preventing the speaker from raising his five-fingered palm in his face, with all the subtle hostility that gesture carried. Isaac's hand remained suspended in the air, his little finger nervously bent, the gesture of the Khamsa incomplete. 'No, it is the hand of Fatima, the daughter of our Prophet, peace be upon him, and a symbol of the five pillars of Islam!' Si Abdellah shouted into Isaac's face, his veins bulging from the intensity of his emotion. 'It belongs to us!'"(Boucharb, 2015, p. 16).

The text clearly shows that both cultures recognize this amulet and use it to ward off the evil eye and envy, but their interpretation differs: for Jews, it is the Hand of Miriam, and for Muslims, it is the Hand of Fatima and a symbol of the Five Pillars of Islam.

The novel presents the character of Si Abdellah as a devout Muslim, a patriot, and a man knowledgeable about history who refuses to let anyone triumph over the nation's heritage, especially its enemies. He is challenged by a young man barely twenty years old who dares to suggest in his presence that the Khamsa (Hand of Fatima), which adorns the Algerian Republic's emblem, might belong to Israel, merely because samples of it are displayed at the United Nations as part of Hebrew heritage. This is proof that the Khamsa is not theirs, and that they merely stole it, Si Abdellah said, shaking his head with the confidence of one privy to hidden truths.

The novel discusses a host of issues related to Judaism and the Jews of Algeria, confirming that there is a cultural impact of Jews in Algeria. Si Ben Haroun (the father of Damia) was raised on the songs of Mohamed Tahar Fergani. Like all Malouf music lovers in Algeria, he knew that the credit for developing the genre belonged to the Jewish artist, Raymond Leyris. Si Ben Haroun kept rare Leyris records dating back to the colonial era, when Leyris was known as Cheikh Raymon.

Si Abdellah continues his defense of the Islamic imprint in Algeria and his denial of Jewish influence. He does this by recalling the story of the Compulsory Garment (Al-Zayy Al-Ilzami) imposed on Jews during the Ottoman period: There is no better example to demonstrate the Jews' appropriation of others' ideas than the compulsory garment imposed on them by the rulers of Algiers during the Islamic era to distinguish them from others,

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making it easier to monitor them due to their known transgressions. Through careful reading, we observe that the Jews had turned this tool of control into a means of cultural resistance.

Si Abdellah, the character who carries the weight of national memory—not merely as an old mujahid (war veteran), but as a symbol of a generation that lived through colonialism and is knowledgeable about Algeria's history and its minute details—begins to realize the true identity of his friend, Si Ben Haroun. His eye once falls on the six-pointed Star of David and the name of his friend's daughter, Damia. He had explained the meaning of her name to the girl, relating it to the Jewish Queen known as Al-Kahina in Algerian history. He had always treated his friend as an ordinary Algerian, and religious identity had not been a divisive factor, until the truth emerged as a part of a veiled and suppressed memory.

She was the one who diligently working on a project about the Women of Algeria, including Al-Kahina, but as a Jewish queen who resisted the Islamic conquest: "Al-Kahina is a great woman and deserves a book dedicated to her in our publishing house, even though I know that her Judaism might be a source of some sensitivities if a book about her were published within the framework of 'Algiers, Capital of Arab Culture.' (Boucharb, 2015, p. 66).

Religious coexistence is evident in the novel through the character of Father Albert Bernard, a Christian who managed the White Fathers' Library in the Telemly neighborhood for over twenty years. He knew the neighborhood's residents individually and had maintained a long, close relationship with them. The library he ran occupied a small, elegant colonial villa in the district, but it functioned more like a university-level cultural center. (Boucharb, 2015, p. 34)

8.4 The Homeland as a Source of Inspiration: The novel showcases the existential and psychological conflict experienced by Elias Madhi, a global artist confronting fundamental questions. Elias had lost his inspiration; his brush hadn't moved for three years. For a painter, losing the ability to paint means losing the self. He meets a Sufi figure named Burhan al-Din in a

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Buddhist monastery, who gives him clues about the source of his inspiration, thus beginning Elias's journey of searching for the self and for inspiration.

In Algeria, his motherland, Elias finally finds his muse. He drew inspiration from the Old Woman of the Stairs—to whom he gave roses every morning—from the Jewish girl Damia, from the walls of the Casbah, and from the streets of Algiers. In truth, Algeria was his muse and the source of his creativity. This is why, "He quietly carried his canvas and settled on the old bed—Bunk Al-Qubba—where his deceased grandfather used to sleep. He now heard a faint rattle at the door but ignored it. He was seized by an intense desire to immerse himself in the completeness of that white canvas and unite with the simplicity of its secret. A strange feeling of serenity overcame him."(Boucharb, 2015, p. 399)

He found his muse after he began reading about the life of Emir Abdelkader. This was not an arbitrary reference, as the Emir represents the memory of resistance, and the novel states:

He hid Abdelkader's life.

He felt the strength of the ideas.

He found Algeria bleeding, itself...

Algeria's breath was enough.

Enough to drive away the flies.

And then Algeria itself became....

It became, embraced by betrayal, a fly.(Boucharb, 2015, p. 354)

The Nedjma novel , which suggests a wounded Algeria. Elias reads Kateb Yacine's Nedjma, becoming possessed by its spirit and devouring its pages throughout the night... Her presence as a symbol of the nation. The word Najma [Star] in the title of the current novel is a direct reference to Kateb Yacine's novel, allowing the narrative to enter into dialogue with the Algerian narrative heritage, especially with texts that founded its identity, such as Nedjma, which embodied the wounds of the nation and identity. Sakarat Najma may therefore signify the agony of the nation or the agony of belonging.

9. Conclusion

In conclusion, this analysis demonstrates that the novel Sakarat Najma presents a complex narrative open to multiple dimensions of identity, crime,

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and collective memory in contemporary Algeria. Through fragmented characters like Elias, the crime transcends the boundaries of the body to touch upon values, memory, and identity.

Ultimately, mediocrity triumphs, beauty is marginalized, the innocent die, and the killers live on. The novel here exercises an act of narrative resistance, offering a dark but honest discourse that re-examines the concept of justice and the meaning of belonging in post-independence Algeria.

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