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Thematic Practice in Contemporary Algerian Critical Studies:

An Analysis of Mohamed Murtadh's Experience

الممارسة الموضوعاتية في الدرس النقدي الجزائري المعاصر:

قراءة في تجربة محمد مرتاض

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Abstract:

This study aims to uncover the nature of thematic reading according to the Algerian scholar Mohamed Murtadh in his book: "Thematicity in Algerian Children's Poetry: According to Al-Ghamari, Nasser, HarzAllah, Mas'udi", through questioning the scholar's ability to achieve methodological understanding and intellectual awareness of this new critical approach, which intersects with various methods and philosophies such as phenomenology, existentialism, structuralism, psychoanalysis, and others. These intersections have posed significant challenges in mastering its terminological and procedural framework, and how the scholar engages with this approach, either through aligning its theoretical premises and freely applying the thematic critical procedure to children's poetry, or by forming a methodological vision that harmonizes with the nature of the selected poetic texts, for the purpose of revealing the study's epistemic value of its critical experience, which revealed the researcher's serious attempt and his endeavour to inspire from the mechanisms of the thematic approach, despite his lack of understanding of all its epistemological aspects. This resulted in a simplistic reading, a shallow methodology, and a predominance of content analysis of common artistic features among the poetry collection over procedural practice. However, this experience is considered one of the early attempts that adopted thematic criticism in contemporary Algerian literary studies.

Keywords: thematic reading, methodological awareness, Mohamed Murtadh, Algerian children's poetry.

الملخص:

تتغيّا الدّراسة الكشف عن طبيعة القراءة الموضوعاتية عند الباحث الجزائري محمد مرتاض في كتابه: "الموضوعاتية في شعر الطفولة الجزائري، عند الغماري- ناصر- حرز الله- مسعودي"، من خلال المساءلة عن مدى قدرة الباحث على الاستيعاب المنهجي والإدراك المعرفي لهذا التوجّه النقدي الجديد، الذي تضافرت معه الكثير من المناهج والفلسفات كالظاهراتية، والوجودية، والبنوية، والتحليل النفسي وغيرها، ممّا أدى إلى صعوبة كبيرة في الإمساك بمنظومته المصطلحية والإجرائية، وكيفية تعامل الباحث مع هذا المنهج وفق انسجام منطلقاته النظرية وتمثله الحرفي للإجراء النقدي الموضوعاتي في مقارنته للشعر الطفولي، أو من خلال تكوين رؤية منهجية تلاؤم طبيعة النصوص الشعرية المختارة، لتروم الدّراسة البحث عن القيمة المعرفية لتجربته النقدية، التي كشفت عن المحاولة الجادة للباحث وسعيه إلى استلهاً آليات المنهج الموضوعاتي على الرغم من عدم إحاطته الشاملة بكل جوانبه الإبستمولوجية، وهذا ما نتج عنه بساطة القراءة وسطحية المنهج وغلبة التحليل المضموني للخصائص الفنية المشتركة بين الدواوين الشعرية على الممارسة الإجرائية، بيد أن هذه التجربة تعدّ من الإرهاصات الأولى التي تبنت الموضوعاتية في الدّرس النقدي الجزائري المعاصر.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القراءة الموضوعاتية، الوعي المنهجي، محمد مرتاض، شعر الطفولة الجزائري.

1. Introduction:

The Arabic critical discourse in general, and Algerian criticism in particular, has witnessed significant critical transformations due to its openness to Western critical theories, either through translation or direct contact with critics. This openness aimed to interrogate the depths of creative texts and reveal their aesthetic charm and semantic richness with interpretative perspectives, such as thematic theory, which influenced a few critics in the seventies due to its close connection with other critical approaches such as structuralism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, and sociological criticism, which dominated during that period. As a result, this approach did not gain widespread presence in contemporary Algerian criticism. Therefore, this study seeks to focus on the thematic reading of the researcher Mohamed Murtadh in his book: "Thematicity in Algerian Children's Poetry: Al-Ghamari, Nasser, HarzAllah, Mas'udi.", inspiring some mechanisms of critique, such as verification and testing for validity, for the purpose of exploring to which extent the researcher is aware of the epistemological and conceptual foundations and their procedural mechanisms. How did he engage with this new critical approach, the contours of which were not yet fully defined? And how did his methodological vision of thematic reading in children's poetry come to be formed?

2. Reception of Thematic Criticism in Contemporary Algerian Critical Discourse

Thematic criticism did not receive significant attention from critics and scholars in Algerian critical discourse at the beginning of its emergence, except from a few individuals, due to the lack of clarity in its theoretical concepts and

procedural tools. This resulted in some of their studies leaning more toward content analysis rather than adhering to the mechanisms of thematic criticism. Examples include Mohamed Mesaïef's study in his book "The Modern Algerian Arabic Novel: Between Realism and Commitment" (1983), Ahmed Cheribet's in his book "Studies in Contemporary Algerian Literature" (2001), where he extensively focused on children's literature, and Abdelmalek Murtadh's book "Contemporary Algerian Stories", where he focused on content, character, space, and artistic vocabulary, emphasizing social content as the main theme from which other topics branch out, such as migration, land, and housing. Murtadh selected seven story collections as study models "The Writer and Other Stories", "The Seven Rays" by Ibn Haduqa, "The Decision", "Descending Downwards" by Habib Sayeh, "Lights and Mice" by Mustafa Al-Fassi, "Headache" by Ahmed Al-Munwar, "Under the Suspended Bridge" by Othman Saadi, and also addressed national content using stories like "The Seven Rays", "The Return of the Mother", "When Freedom Is in Danger", and "The Small House". He determined the frequency of these themes in the stories and examined the common artistic characteristics shared by certain writers¹.

The researcher Mas'uda Laa'rit, in her book "Children's Stories in Algeria": A Thematic Study" (2006)—originally a master's thesis defended at Annaba University in 1998—sought to apply thematic methodology in her study of children's stories. Despite the simplicity of her critical approach and the predominance of selectivity in her procedural mechanisms, her earnest effort to understand the critical practice was evident. In addition, her book "Thematic Criticism" (2006) addressed the theoretical

aspects of thematic criticism, discussing its philosophical foundations, critical orientations, concepts, issues related to the translation of terminology, and the criticisms directed at this method. She also presented a thematic approach by selecting four models that combined stories and poetry².

Another noteworthy study was presented by researcher Mohamed Essaid Abdeli in his book "The Literary World of Kateb Yacine: A Study Based on the Thematic Method" (2009), originally a doctoral dissertation. In it, he adopted the theories of G.P. Weber, focusing on the major and minor themes in Kateb Yacine's works. He further explored the theoretical frameworks and critical procedures of the thematic method in his book "Thematic Method: Foundations and Procedures" (2011).

The critic Youssef Waghliissi contributed to introducing thematic criticism in Algerian literary studies, dedicating a part of his critical works to it: "Contemporary Algerian Criticism: From Lansonisme to Linguistics" in 2002, "Literary Criticism Methods" in 2007, and "The Problematic of Terminology in New Arabic Critical Discourse" in 2009.

His critical practice was most evident in his book "Thematic Analysis of Poetic Discourse" in 2007, where he analysed poetic texts such as: "The Poem of Children" by Mohamed Al-Akhdar Al-Sa'ih, "The African Obsession" in Mohamed Al-Fayturi's Trilogy, "The Gilgamesh Complex", and "The Fear of Death and Life" in Mahmoud Darwish's Mural.

He excelled in this study due to his clear mastery of procedural mechanisms, his adoption of G.P. Weber's theses, and his reliance on lexical statistics, following Abdul Karim Hassan's approach in "Structural Thematics",

along with his inspiration from some semiotic methodology tools.

Most of the studies that adopted thematic reading appeared in the form of articles, interventions, or academic theses, and were distinguished by various types³: subjective impressionistic thematic criticism, objective thematic criticism, content-based thematic criticism, and formal thematic criticism. There is also interpretive referential objectivity, and descriptive structural objectivity. Hence "The lifespan of thematic criticism is short in Arab critical culture when compared to other migrated critical approaches"⁴.

3. Thematic Reading in Mohamed Murtadh's Work:

Mohamed Murtadh is considered one of the Algerian critical figures who attempted to adopt thematic methodology in his book "Thematicity in Algerian Children's Poetry" by Al-Ghamari, Nasser, HarzAllah, Mas'udi, published in 1993. The book, which spans 109 pages, is divided into an introduction, an explanatory section, four application chapters, and a conclusion. He surpassed the theoretical methodology aspect presented by its original pioneers, due to the complete absence of original foreign texts and his neglect of serious Arab attempts with a thematic orientation, such as the studies of Abdul Karim Hassan in "Structural Objectivity: A Study in the Poetry of Al-Sayyab" in 1983, Saeed Al-Loush in "Thematic Criticism" in 1989, Hamid Lahmidani in "The Magic of the Theme" in 1990, and others. This neglect of external sources is aside from the study of his brother Abdelmalek Murtadh in "The Structure of Poetic Discourse" published in 1986, which he adopted as the main reference for his study. This indicates that he did not delve deeply into the field of thematic criticism or its

theoretical aspects, as his main focus appeared to be on how to apply it to children's poetry alone.

3.1 The Methodological Framework:

The researcher explicitly acknowledges his adopted methodology in the introduction to his study, saying: "It is worth noting that the term "Thematicity" is a new term in Arabic literature that reached us through the influence of waves that came from the West (...) we have decided to apply this methodology or this attempt that has not yet fully formed"⁵.

He acknowledges the issue of this methodology, which has not yet fully manifested in the general Arab critical discourse, and particularly in Algerian criticism. Despite this, his study is only an attempt in which he seeks to engage with this experience through a new methodological vision, different from the attempts of his predecessors. Although his study benefited from Hassan Jallab's study published in the journal "Semiotic Studies" in its second and third issues, it remained only a reference noted in the margin of the introduction without clarifying the nature of this benefit.

It seems that the researcher's methodological concept does not fully align with the critical procedure of the adopted methodology. This is because the contradiction in defining the nature of the methodology and then distancing from it or neglecting it in the study places both the researcher and the reader in methodological confusion or superficiality, especially if it is disclosed in the title's threshold and then neglected as part of a comprehensive work. This is evident from his statement: "And perhaps it is time to point out that "Thematicity" is a collection of themes whose meanings come together and whose ideas are categorized within a single topic or research... but we considered in our study the generalization, not the

specialization; that is, we settled for the comprehensive title "Children's Literature" and neglected the specific, focused "Thematicity"... so the study remained within the framework of this requirement and did not depart from this methodology"⁶. Also, his failure to distinguish between the terms (Thematicity) and (theme) will lead him into the problem of misunderstanding the term. The former represents a new critical reading of the literary text according to fundamental concepts and procedural tools that reveal the dominant thematic structure in the text. In contrast, the latter represents this dominant and recurring structure, which is referred to as the main theme followed by subsidiary themes. Therefore, the theme is part of Thematicity, and the latter "can only highlight the dominant idea or central theme after starting from a minor reading toward a major reading, recognizing the literary genre, observing its relevant and referential contexts, and breaking the text into lexical fields and statistical semantic tables to identify the recurring words, phrases, and images in the text or creative work consistently and repeatedly"⁷.

3.2 Cognitive Goals:

Mohamed Murtadh did not define the cognitive goals of his critical study, due to his lack of a clear methodological vision. Although he decisively declared the critical methodology in the title and introduction of his book that he would adopt for the study, his failure to precisely define his methodological foundations hinders the reader from understanding his procedural practice on the one hand, and suggests his lack of epistemological awareness regarding the nature of the methodology on the other hand. He attributes this—according to his belief—to the difficulty of this new approach, and his conviction "that our Arabic language and our authentic Arab criticism do not reject this influence nor disdain it, but rather they are

drawn to it and welcome it”⁸. It is true that this influence from Western critical theories brought about a radical shift in the trajectory of the structure of contemporary Arab critical discourse, but this does not negate the multiple problems that arose from this interaction, by imposing its mechanisms on the Arabic literary text without considering its specificities, leading to the distortion and undermining of its fundamentals and the effectiveness of its production. On this basis, many Arab critics have attempted to activate this Western model to align with the Arabic creative models according to the specificity of its writing. Although this Western critical theory is characterized by ambiguity, complexity, and intertwining, as Paul De Man says: “If it cannot be adapted to fit the reality of its subject, it teaches nothing but illusion”⁹, the Arab critic remains more than just a consumer of the propositions of Western critics and their critical theories, along with all of their philosophical, intellectual, and epistemological burdens.

It seems that the researcher, Mohamed Murtadh, tried to avoid the literal application of the critical procedure either due to the absence of the epistemological framework of the methodology or the attempt to form a methodological vision that fits the nature of the selected poetic texts. This raises the following question: Did the researcher manage to adhere to the procedural propositions of the methodology in his approach to children poetry? Or did he try to interpret it according to his critical vision to provide an accurate thematic reading? This is what we will discover in his critical practice.

3.3 The Nature of His Critical Practice:

The researcher chose a unique and distinct literary genre compared to other genres, namely "Children's Literature" and, more specifically, "Algerian Childhood Poetry". He

did not clarify the reasons behind selecting this genre, except through his statement in the introduction of his book: “This research was originally only a part of the Children’s Literature program that some universities began teaching, and then it occurred to me that it required a more detailed study rather than a passing reference”¹⁰. This suggests that this literary genre has been marginalized in Arab studies generally and Algerian studies in particular, despite the fact that the development and advancement of nations necessitate paying attention to childhood, its innocence, and nurturing children properly according to social standards and religious and moral values. They are the future generation and the foundation for the prosperity of societies.

He selected four poetry collections: "The Green Joy" by Mustafa Mohamed Al-Ghamari, "The Dewy Buds by Mohamed Nasser, "Breezes" by Yahya Mas'udi, and "The Conversation of the Seasons" by Bouzid HarzAllah. These collections share a major theme, namely (love), which encompasses: love of God and the Prophet, love of the homeland, love of nature, and love of the school environment.

Tracking his practical application, it is necessary to select some representative samples to uncover their nature, as it is not feasible to mention all examples. For instance, in his study of the theme of love for the homeland, glorifying the revolution, and honoring the martyrs, he employed the bibliographic enumeration method by listing the collection and noting the frequency of this theme in the poets' poems, organized sequentially by page numbers and presented in a clarifying table. He then provided a simple analysis that spanned no more than a page and a half, written in clear and accessible language. For example, when discussing the poems of Al-Ghamari, he stated: “Al-Ghamari dedicated fourteen complete poems out of the eighteen that

comprise the collection, which makes his collection devoted to the Algerian revolution through concise and brief hymns celebrating victories and recounting exploits, not through topographic recording but rather via artistic hymns. This abundance of celebration by the poet for his revolution reflects his sincerity, his revolutionary spirit, and his patriotism"¹¹. The same approach applies to other themes, where he employed the method of thematic summarization, with relative variation in the number of pages. For instance, he dedicated three pages to the theme of love for nature, pausing to highlight its distinctive features and artistic qualities that appeal to both adults and children alike, especially the celebration of spring with all its birds, plants, and flowers, such as the rose. He described this word as: "which signifies diversity in colors and fragrant aromas (...) conveying a world filled with dreams, evoking emotions, and adding beauty, delight, and a certain charm to the pronunciation of the word (...) It is a symbol of love, friendship, loyalty, sincerity, purity, and clarity... Its symbols vary among red, white, yellow, violet, orange, and others"¹².

Then, his exploration of the thematic aspect of children's poetry, as he claims in the title of his study, was notably absent in his critical work, except for the occasional appearance of the term within its contents. His extraction of the "big theme"), according to his terminology—more accurately referred to as the main theme "Le Thème Principal"—shared among the poets' collections, lacked deep analysis or any mention of the relationship between this theme and other elements through secret affinities. The critical language was absent from his study, which did not go beyond summarizing the content of the poems with all their religious and ethical values, as well as their psychological, social, and national dimensions. Additionally, the concepts of thematic discourse

were missing, as none of its components—such as: the main theme, the insistent image, the root, secret affinities, interpretation, the dominant idea, the poetic function, childhood unconscious, linguistic derivation...etc.—were found.

Mohamed Murtadh searched for artistic imagery and its shared characteristics in children's poetry and he found it to be less prevalent compared to adult poetry, "because if poets in children's poetry extend their reach, it becomes difficult for them to achieve the results they aim to reach"¹³. Moreover, writing aimed at children is considered a challenging endeavour that has not yet fully established its features, as evidenced by his statement: "we struggled to find an image that would be more beautiful and magnificent for the poet Mas'udi, to no avail. The reason may lie in the coldness and scarcity of imagery in his work, stemming from an immature experience that has not yet crystallized. Perhaps it is his first collection or his first attempt at poetry. It has become clear to us that writing for children—whether in poetic or prose form—is not an easy task"¹⁴. Based on this foundation, the concept of artistic imagery found in the poets' collections was limited to the simple meanings commonly understood by society. This constrained the study to superficial interpretations without delving into deeper, implicit meanings, except in a few instances, such as (pledge, blaze, palm trees, embrace). The reason for this lies in the nature of the corpus the researcher worked on, as it was written in simple language devoid of symbolism to align with the children's limited cognitive abilities and modest cultural background. The researcher concluded that there are five shared characteristics of artistic imagery in the poets' collections: (roses and flowers, water, afforestation, revolution, animals).

The researcher also discussed the characteristics of space and its diversity in poetic

discourse due to the variety of themes and artistic imagery. This diversity manifested in six types: “infinite space, confined space, dynamic space, closed space, space surrounded by dangers, and multi-dimensional space”. He elaborated on the content of the poetic verses that included various spaces and diverse descriptions. The researcher also addressed the literary concept of time, which varies according to the contexts in which it appears and can be summarized as¹⁵: “time of self-pride, time of mockery and irony, time of boasting and grandeur, time of optimism and hope, time of challenge”. He provided explanations, but a careful observer might notice the absence of language specifically directed at children, except occasionally. This suggests that while these poetry collections were written explicitly for children, the researcher, during his analysis and descriptions, often connected the meanings and connotations to society and the world at large.

After identifying the major themes upon which children's poetry is built, as well as its shared imagery, varied spaces, and different temporalities, the researcher revisited the artistic lexicon's characteristics within the poetic discourse of (The Four Collections of Poems) He provided some detailed explanation, highlighting topics such as: “the homeland, the national flag, the revolution and its equivalents, martyrs and sacrifice, jihad and sacrifice, blood, suffering, killing, misery, pain, tears, fire, and related topics”. He also employed the structuralism method to study the structural characteristics of the poems in the four collections. This approach reflects the openness of the thematic method to modern critical methodologies, including structuralism. He utilized statistical tools and tables to determine the frequency of structural components such as: time and space prepositions, conditional tools, demonstrative pronouns, past tense, present tense, imperative forms, definite and indefinite articles, etc.) in the

poetic texts. However, the explanation and commentary on these tables were limited to a single page (p. 97), presented in a simplified manner that did not reflect a true thematic-structural orientation due to the researcher's insufficient application of procedural tools.

The researcher, Mohamed Murtadh, attempted to adopt the thematic method in his study; however, this adoption remained superficial due to the lack of theoretical concepts necessary for a thematic approach and the absence of a clear understanding of its features at the time. Moreover, he did not adopt a specific framework aligned with the pioneers of the methodology, such as the propositions of Jean-Pierre Richard¹⁶ (J.P. Richard) or G.P Weber. Consequently, his study reflected his simplified methodological vision rather than a comprehensive thematic analysis.

Nevertheless, this does not negate his sincere attempt to analyse the four poetry collections by Al-Ghamari, Nasir, HarzAllah, and Mas'udi, and his effort to uncover the shared themes and artistic characteristics among them. As a result, his study leaned more toward artistic authenticity and was far from critical procedures.

4. Conclusion

This detailed examination has led to several conclusions, summarized as follows:

-The researcher Mohamed Murtadh, in his book "Thematics in Algerian Childhood Poetry", sought to form a critical vision for the thematic approach. However, his practical application did not go beyond methodological simplification due to the lack of adoption of the concepts and procedures of the approach, in addition to his choice of children's literature, which is characterized by simple language, a lack of symbols, connotations, and semantic density, not

to mention the weakness of the poetic imagery compared to literary works directed to adults and the dominance of psychological and social content.

-Despite the procedural shortcomings of this study, this does not diminish the value of his critical work, which is considered one of the earliest attempts to address thematics in the Algerian critical arena. The same applies to other critics such as Mohamed Mesaif, Cheribet Ahmed Cheribet, Abdelmalek Murtadh, and their critical practices, which indicate the features of this approach. This is in addition to the studies of Mas'uda Laa'rit, Youssef Waghliissi, and Mohamed Said Abdeli, as well as their serious attempts to understand its theoretical and procedural principles. The studies are not limited to these names alone but also include academic research, presentations, articles, and more.

The scarcity of studies that adopted thematics in its Arab framework in general and Algerian in particular is due to the significant inclination towards other critical approaches such as linguistics, structuralism, stylistics, semiotics, and others. However, this does not negate the efforts of some critics and their effective contributions to establishing the features of thematics, such as Abdel Karim Hassan in his book "Structural Objectivity", benefiting from the theories of J. P. Richard, making it an important reference for any scholar wishing to explore this experience. This is in addition to the studies of Mohamed Meftah, Saeed Alloush, Hamid L'hamdani, Mohamed Azzam, and others.

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⁶Same source p.c.

⁷Jamil Hamdawi, "Subjective Critical Approach" p.10.

⁸Mohamed Murtad, "Thematic Criticism in Algerian Children' Poetry" p.b.

⁹Meghan Al-Ruwaili and Saad Al-Bazighi, "The Literary Critic's Guide: Shedding Light on More than Fifty Contemporary Critical Movements and Terms", 1st ed., The Arab Cultural Centre, Beirut, 2004, p. 187.

¹⁰Mohamed Murtadh, "Thematic Criticism in Algerian Children' Poetry" p.a.

¹¹Same source p.12.

¹²Same source p.17.

¹³Same source p.28.

¹⁴Same source p.38,39.

¹⁵Same source p.71.

¹⁶The critical project of J.P. Richard is reflected through his distinguished works in the field of thematics, according to their chronological appearance: "Literature and Sensibility" published in 1954, "Poetry and Depth" in 1955, "The Imaginary World of Mallarme" in 1961 (originally a doctoral thesis), "Studies on Contemporary Poetry" in 1964, "For a Tomb of Anatole", "The Landscape of Chateaubriand" in 1967, "Correspondences of Mallarme", "Studies on Romanticism" in 1970.

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