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The Forms of Employing Heritage & the Representations of Woman Issues in the Algerian Feminine Literature

Sara El Nems's Novel Djim as a Sample

أشكال توظيف التراث وتمثيلات قضايا المرأة في الرواية النسوية الجزائرية رواية جيم لسارة
النمس-أنموذجا-

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Abstract:

The current paper aims at shedding light on the phenomenon of employing different forms of heritage, which are included under the feminine narrative literature. In light of the individual text structure approach, this study shall elicit, analyse and assess data, in order to explore the types of heritage, as well as the objectives of employing it. The narrative text foregrounds the feminine self as an active force in shaping social consciousness.

Keywords : Heritage, Women, Popular Culture, El Nems, Djim.

المخلص:

يحاول هذا المقال أن يقترب من مقصده الأساس في ضوء ظاهرة توظيف التراث بأشكاله المختلفة ، التي تنطوي تحت المنجز السردى النسوي، وعلى هدي المقاربة من الداخل للبنية النصية المنفردة، تقوم منهجيتها على الاستنباط والتحليل والتقييم للكشف عن أنماط استدعاء هذا التراث وأهداف توظيفه، من خلال هذا العمل السردى الذي يعتبر رافدا فنيا وفكريا يطمح إلى تجسيد الذات النسوية وإظهار دورها في صناعة الوعي الجمعي، بالتطرق إلى استحضار أحداث وشخصيات تاريخية، وإبراز مدى تجليات الرموز الشعبية والدينية للتعبير عن الانتماء والهوية الوطنية.

الكلمات المفتاحية : التراث، المرأة، النمى، جيم، الشعبي.

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist literature is one of the most complex and controversial issues in the literary and critical arena, as it presents intellectual and philosophical perspectives that differ from the stereotypical image of women and their status in society portrayed by male-dominated literature, and because of its focus on revealing what has been left unsaid regarding related issues, which has led to differing critical perspectives on it. Nevertheless, this literature remains a unique creative experience within contemporary narrative discourse due to the artistic and intellectual values it embodies.

Women have contributed to enriching this genre by employing diverse artistic tools to express the self and national identity, and to create new semantic dimensions that reflect the evolution of feminist consciousness in contemporary narrative. In this context, heritage has emerged as a temporal and artistic mechanism utilized in feminist narratives to interpret and reinterpret contemporary reality by invoking historical figures and events, as well as popular and religious symbols, to highlight the continuity of women's suffering and their subjugation to social guardianship to this very day.

Based on these premises, this study aims to elucidate the role of heritage in expressing women's issues in the contemporary Algerian feminist novel, while demonstrating the extent of its contribution to shaping collective consciousness and revealing the aesthetic and semantic functions performed by its various forms in embodying the feminine self, and to highlight the extent to which folk, religious, and historical symbols are used to express national belonging and identity. This is achieved through an inductive-analytical approach that traces the forms of heritage employed by "Sara al-Nams" in her novel *djim* to answer the following questions:

- - What forms of cultural heritage are employed in the novel?
- -How has the use of cultural heritage contributed to the construction of a narrative discourse that reflects feminist concerns?
- -To what extent has heritage revealed the artistic and semantic dimensions that characterize this complex textual structure?

2. Heritage and Algerian Feminist Fiction: A Theoretical Approach:

The term "heritage" occupies a central position in contemporary literary criticism and plays a prominent role in revealing the hidden and implicit meanings in a novel; it

also represents one of the most important artistic components that contribute to the formation of a cohesive narrative structure.

Although the term “heritage” is used in numerous fields of knowledge—such as history, literature, the arts, physics, archaeology...etc., this does not negate the existence of a fundamental, shared meaning among them, which lies in heritage’s connection to the past and its extension into the present and future through the tangible and intangible traces left behind by humanity. The Department of Heritage and History has defined it as **“...a cultural continuum that coexists with the present era and permeates the lives of contemporary people, thereby influencing political, social, cultural, and spiritual life, as well as interactions with the surrounding built environment”**(¹), Heritage is also defined, as stated by Sayyid Ali Ismail in his book **The Impact of Heritage on Contemporary Theater**, as **“the spirit of the past, the spirit of the present, and the spirit of the future for the person who lives by it; for without heritage, one’s personality would not have been formed nor one’s identity shaped—an identity that dies if one strays from it”**(²). Hence, it is understood that heritage is an active component capable of renewal and continuity; it is not tied to a specific historical era, nor does it end with that era. It exists and is present in every time and place, accompanying humans through all stages of their lives, shaping their identity and building their personality. Therefore, abandoning it may lead to the loss of certain cultural values and beliefs.

The women’s novel is a narrative text that has sparked significant debate in critical circles. This is due to the unique nature of this literary achievement, which differs greatly from male-authored works in both form and content; however, this does not prevent the women’s novel from being an integral part of the art of the novel.

As for the emergence of the women’s novel, there is no dispute that a number of factors—including cultural, social, and religious ones...etc., all of which have

provoked and motivated women to seek out texts that represent them and express their very essence. Algerian women, like other women around the world, have also found their calling in writing, crafting fictional works through which they express their perspectives on social issues, and in which they spoke of their active role in the struggle against French colonialism. They also used their pens to rebel against the customs and traditions imposed upon them.

Algerian women’s fiction has undergone two fundamental phases that shaped the distinctiveness of this narrative achievement. “The first phase was represented by female novelists who wrote in the language of the colonizer—a language they were forced to learn in public schools at that time—including Asia Jabbar, Taous Amrouch, and Djamila Debach...”(³) Their works gained widespread fame and were translated into several languages, including Arabic. The second phase, however, was marked by the emergence of women’s narrative texts written in Arabic; critics date their emergence “to the late 1970s and early 1980s, and pinpoint it precisely to 1979, the year in which the novel **Diary of a Free Schoolgirl** by Zohra Ounissi was published, which is considered by critics to be the first Algerian women’s novel written in Arabic”⁴.

During these two phases, Algerian women shifted from writing about the Algerian Revolution and their participation alongside their male counterparts in the struggle for freedom and independence to writing to demand their right to education, work, equality, and justice on an equal footing with men. Amid these diverse issues addressed by women in their fictional works, the term “women’s novel” continues to spark widespread critical debate to this day, as critics disagree on which of the three commonly used terms—(feminist, women’s, or female)—is most appropriate to describe women’s narrative practice. Some have preferred the term “women’s novel” to indicate that the author of the novel is a woman rather than a man, while others prefer the term “feminist novel,” as it appears in its

foreign form, which reflects the intellectual and political movement that defends women and demands their right to equality with men. The third position is neutral; it opts for a third, distinct term that has no relation to the author's gender and is not based on intellectual or political backgrounds—namely, the term “feminine novel” “(⁵) . Consequently, this term remains one of the critical terms that are difficult to define in isolation due to the impossibility of separating it from its surrounding contexts (cultural, historical, social...), as confirmed by the critic Khalid bin Abdulaziz Al-Saif when he spoke of women's literature as one of **“the most important arenas of intellectual and cultural struggles, and it will remain so. Therefore, some terms may become ideologically charged to the point of dominating the cultural landscape, reaching a stage where it is difficult to disentangle them from their connotations”**(⁶) despite their sensitivity and the cultural loss that may result from their use.

3. Patterns of Heritage Presence and the Construction of Women's Issues in djim:

The novel djim employs heritage in diverse forms that go beyond mere evocation of the past, serving instead as a means of expressing women's concerns and highlighting their social realities. The following analysis examines the major heritage forms through which these issues are represented in the novel.

1. Folk Heritage :

Folk heritage constitutes an important part of a nation's identity and essence, and writers have recognized its effective role in constructing creative texts, as it has become an indispensable artistic necessity due to its **“ability to evoke inexhaustible feelings and emotions, and to influence the hearts and minds of the masses, as these elements of heritage live deep within people, surrounded by an aura of sanctity and reverence, because they represent the fundamental roots of their intellectual, emotional, and psychological formation”**(⁷) , Hence, the aesthetic impact that heritage

achieves in the fictional text plays a major role in elevating the cultural and intellectual level of the reader, who shifts from merely understanding and consuming the text to a more active role of participating in the production of new meanings within the fictional text.

Folklore manifests itself in all aspects of social life—in customs and traditions, rituals, proverbs, folk songs, traditional clothing, and so on— etc., which express a society's sense of belonging and cultural identity and distinguish it from other societies. This makes it a rich source of material upon which creators can draw in **“experimenting and searching for new narrative forms that align with new perceptions and are subject to new techniques that defy easy grasp and are complex”**. (⁸)

Perhaps those who closely examine Algerian feminist narrative works will find that prominent female novelists in the literary scene celebrate folk heritage in all its components—both tangible and intangible—as well as their strong commitment to its continuous presence in their fictional works. Among the most prominent is the young novelist “Sara al-Nams,” for whom heritage in her works was not merely a tool for drawing inspiration from the past, but rather a new springboard for creativity and a bridge to opening up new feminine spaces and worlds within the text: Her novel *djim * is interwoven with numerous forms of folk heritage, rich with meanings and connotations that express the author's vision and her aspirations to transcend stereotypical creative constraints and innovate new artistic, technical, and epistemological approaches. Among the most notable of these forms are:

1-1- Customs and Traditions:

Customs and traditions refer to the set of ideas, beliefs, and rituals practiced by individuals in a specific society that distinguish them from other societies. In their general sense, they represent **“the acquired behavior shared by members of a particular people, as well as a social phenomenon representing a social norm—**

meaning that they can only be formed and practiced through life within society and interaction with its individuals and groups”(9) . They are passed down from generation to generation. Among the most prominent customs and traditions we encounter in the novel *djim * are:

-The dowry:

The topic of the dowry is one of the most prominent issues raised by the author in the text, as the dowry represents a right granted to women by both religion and law; however, the question of determining its value varies from one region to another—it may be exorbitant in one area, while in another it may be a meager or symbolic amount, and this is where social customs come into play. The narrator says: “... **In Tlemcen, the suitor pays a large dowry to marry a beautiful Tlemcen woman from a distinguished family, whereas in the city where my father came from, they do the opposite: the suitor places a large sum on a round tray, from which the bride’s father takes only a single banknote, when Jannat’s father demanded a large sum to prepare the bride...**”(10)

This narrative passage highlights that Sarah al-Nams’s treatment of the dowry in her novel was not intended to emphasize the cultural and social differences between the two families, nor to show the disparity between the two regions regarding the amount of the dowry, but rather to reveal the dominance of traditional structures and their control over social behavior, where customs and traditional values have come to replace religious and humanistic values. Consequently, the dowry has shifted from being a measure of a woman’s worth to a material standard that gauges her status and importance in society based on the amount offered by the suitor, “**Jihad’s father found this insulting; he felt as though he were entering into a transaction through which he was buying a wife for his son. My mother resolved the issue when she intervened, defying her father by stating that she asked nothing of Jihad but a gold ring, and that they would take care of the**

wedding preparations together”(11) Her intervention and the resolution of this conflict through her request for a symbolic dowry clearly illustrate to the reader the ideological conflict between the traditional view of marriage—in which a woman’s personality is nullified and her very being marginalized—and the modern view that grants women the freedom to determine the value of their dowry. Sarah Al-Nams sought to establish this type of discourse in her novel with the aim of challenging these social perceptions and mental constructs that have become entrenched in patriarchal thinking about women—behaviors that cannot be changed in society except through the reformulation of these values and the concepts associated with them, This is what the character “Lamin” affirmed when he spoke of how his view of women had changed thanks to reading “**dozens of books and watching dozens of movies, and sitting with elders to hear the story from more than one source , Here, we are content with our single source to adopt truths we haven’t bothered to seek out; our fathers repeat what their fathers said, and we believe what they believed and are satisfied with that, refusing to accept anything else. Books have benefited me greatly; they taught me skepticism, a love of inquiry, and the pursuit of truth...I used to be among those who believed that a woman should stay at home to serve her husband and raise her children, and that no job suited her better than the natural role God had chosen for her. Like any Eastern man, rebellious women provoked me; it was enough to see a cigarette in one of their hands, or to see her wearing a short dress, for me to judge her as morally corrupt. I admire the young, veiled, well-mannered woman who listens to what is said and doesn’t cause trouble. I look for a woman I can control, because I am a man, and men are the guardians of women....**”(12) . Thus, this discourse constitutes an explicit admission by the other (the man) of the naivety of customs and traditions that reduce a woman’s role to the home and confine her existence to serving

and obeying her husband and raising children, to the extent that this stereotype becomes the standard by which every Eastern man judges whether a woman is morally corrupt or well-behaved. Feminist literary discourse has sought to critique and challenge these social and religious norms that diminish women's value and deprive them of their right to education, work, and creativity.

Among the customs and traditions that "Sarah al-Nams" depicts in her novel are the funeral rites that Lamin witnessed in their home on the day of his father's death, as he recounts:

"...I saw my mother collapsed on the floor, eight months pregnant with my sister Ikram, wailing with eyes swollen from crying. I saw the women covering their faces and reciting the virtues of the deceased..."(¹³).

This narrative passage presents a traditional portrait of funeral rites, as the narrator does not limit himself to describing the mother's collapse and grief over her husband's death, but rather seeks to reveal the presence of customs and traditions in these painful occasions by depicting the women as they share in the widow's grief and weeping for him, thereby highlighting the role of women in transmitting cultural heritage and embedding it in the collective memory.

1-2-Traditional Attire:

Traditional dress is considered one of the important elements of cultural heritage that reflects a society's cultural identity. In the novel, we find this form of tangible heritage represented in the main character "Jim's" recollection of images of her grandmother as they left their homeland to live in Paris, as she says:

"I have a good memory; images of the past are still clear, like my grandmother's tattooed face, her slender body as she wore the colorful tribal dress, tying the striped scarf around her waist, showing me the olive trees and vineyards, the orchards and shops, the plains and bends in the road. She didn't realize that while she was striving to imprint the

details of those places in my memory, I was distracted from those details by her. I came to remember her as if she were not a real woman, but rather a character from a novel or a lady I had met in a brief dream that remained etched in my memory"(¹⁴).

This narrative excerpt offers a unique window through which the reader can glimpse the depth of Algerian cultural heritage, as the retrospective narrative—in which the narrator focuses her descriptive lens on her grandmother's outward appearance (tattoos, colorful dress, striped headscarf) without paying attention to the descriptive details of the setting (olive trees, vineyards, orchards...), to the role of women in preserving heritage and passing it on to future generations. Thus, the image of women in the collective consciousness is shaped as a temporal bridge that weaves the past anew in service of the present, thereby helping to bridge the temporal gaps and cultural differences between generations. This is what feminist writings have sought to highlight; they have focused on documenting women's presence in society and presenting them to the reader as an active and influential element in shaping national identity.

1-3 Proverbs and Folk Songs:

Proverbs and folk songs are forms of traditional art that have withstood the test of time and been passed down from generation to generation, and collective memory plays a major role in preserving this oral heritage from extinction. Although these two forms of folk art are scarce in the novel, their use in these two narrative instances has helped reveal the image of women and highlight their value in the collective consciousness. For instance, the folk proverb **"Whoever has tasted the honey will not be satisfied"** (¹⁵), spoken by Lamin as he discusses his relationship with his neighbor, reveals the Eastern man's exploitative view of women, in which he sees her merely as a means to fulfill his desires; once he has obtained what he wants, he discards her and replaces her. This is what feminist literary works criticize, as it reduces women to tools for achieving pleasure and fulfilling desires rather than

treating them as beings with psychological and physical dimensions.

As for folk songs, the author did not have her characters perform them, as we see in other narrative texts, but merely mentioned their titles, as “djim” put it: **“I’m not a woman interested in music; music doesn’t move me.... There is one exception: memories. I listen to music only when it relates to my own past; Fairuz reminds me of my mother—so how could I not love her? Suleiman Azim reminds me of my grandmother, who would drop everything and sit in front of the radio to listen to his songs; Ait Mangalat reminds me of my father and the story of his first love with Jannat; Matoub Al-Wanas reminds me of another period in our lives, the time when he taught me the Amazigh language, and we would discuss history and politics, always ending the discussion with one of his songs:”**(¹⁶). This candid female voice in this narrative passage seeks to deconstruct stereotypes and critique the system of values, customs, and traditions entrenched in society regarding women, as the narrator presents herself to the reader as an intellectual with a refined appreciation for art and music and a deep understanding of history and politics—in contrast to social norms that have stripped her of the capacity for independent thought and confined her role to her biological function. Thus, the theme of self-affirmation in feminist narrative works has been one of the most distinctive features of this literary genre.

2- Religious Heritage:

Religious heritage is one of the rich sources to which many writers turn in shaping their creative texts. The presence of this type of heritage in poetic or prose discourse is manifested in the writer’s evocation of religious figures or events (¹⁷) that reflect their intellectual and ideological backgrounds. Female writers have also celebrated this form of heritage in their narrative works; however, their use of it was not merely to enrich the narrative with profound intellectual and artistic meanings; rather, it served as a means of self-affirmation

and of highlighting the dominance of social norms that use religion as a pretext to control women and diminish their importance in society by limiting their role to serving and obeying their husbands.

One example of this in the novel *djim * is found in the narrator’s recollections of her father, Jihad, after her mother’s death, when he would always tell her about his relationship with her mother and how their differing religious and intellectual beliefs never affected their relationship—in fact, they became even more attached and connected to one another than before: **“... I told her about the village where I grew up, my childhood, and my strained relationship with my parents, who were anything but proud of me because I am not as religious as they are. It bothers them greatly that I do not fast during Ramadan, nor do I recognize the Quran as a divine book, nor other scriptures. As for my beloved Jannat, she was a being of light—a kind and spiritual woman who finds joy in prayer and in depriving herself of things in the service of God and humanity. She feels the suffering of others to an extreme degree and has the heart of a saint—a heart so vast it can hold the whole world. She respected my differences from her, and in fact, it was not a fundamental difference, for I have always believed in God and loved Him without imposing upon myself the obligation to adhere to a specific religion...”**(¹⁸) This narrative passage presents a different image of the Arab woman than the one we are accustomed to seeing in feminist discourse—as a rebellious voice that rejects any kind of restriction imposed on her by social norms under the guise of religion. In the absence of this conflict, she presents herself to us in a unique and novel light, through which she reinterprets the religious experience away from inherited practices, in order to promote the values of tolerance, coexistence, and respect for others’ differences—a perspective consistent with the intellectual orientation she adopts in her fictional works.

This aspect of her heritage is embodied

in the novel through the strange relationship between Jim and her father; after her mother's death, her father became eccentric. **"...His religious beliefs changed completely; he no longer believed in God, and he even forced me to renounce my faith as well. I was never given the chance to discover God for myself and make a decision about whether to believe or to be an atheist... To him, all religions were stupid myths invented by humans, and that God was nothing more than an illusion created by humans to justify their existence and seek refuge from their own weakness..."** ⁽¹⁹⁾ The issue of paternal authority is one of the most prominent themes in feminist literature, as the narrator did not merely reveal the internal conflict that Jihad was experiencing with himself, his thoughts, and his relationship with God after his wife's death; but she also sought to highlight the transfer of this conflict from the self (the father) to the other (the daughter), through the tyrannical character embodied in the father's control over his daughter. He did not merely impose atheism on her but also deprived her of the freedom to think and discover religion for herself. From this, we conclude that the text did not treat religious heritage merely as an aesthetic icon but also served as a critical tool that helped unearth the implicit meanings that reshape the collective consciousness regarding women's right to expression and choice, free from paternalistic control.

3. Historical Heritage:

Heritage represents one of the manifestations of the past's presence in the present, as it is clearly evident in our way of thinking and in our daily lives; Its presence is not limited to customs, traditions, songs, folk proverbs, and religious practices alone, but also appears in the series of events that occurred in past eras and the historical figures who remain etched in the collective memory to this day. Hence, history emerges as a form of heritage relied upon by politicians, philosophers, sociologists...and others in understanding the dynamics of reality and reinterpreting it anew,

The writer is no different from these figures in his use of history in his literary works; he does not treat it merely as an artistic tool to describe what happened in the past, but also employs it as a means to bridge the past and the present, to convey his ideas to the reader, and to preserve national identity and nationalism⁽²⁰⁾. In this way, historical heritage becomes an important narrative component that serves the artist's artistic and intellectual vision.

The use of historical heritage in feminist fiction is a highly prevalent phenomenon, as women have drawn upon this form of heritage in their works by invoking historical figures, names, and events—whether to highlight women's status and role throughout history or to reveal their suffering in the wake of the historical transformations experienced by Arab society. "Sara al-Nams" drew upon this form of heritage in her novel through the character Jihad's account of his friend **Dehia, whose real name was Jamila but who chose this name to fight for and defend her principles. The character introduced her to the reader as "a true Amazigh woman—free, rebellious, loving, and loyal to her friends"**⁽²¹⁾; This makes her a character of symbolic and historical significance, as the author's use of the name "Dehia"—the Amazigh queen known for her resistance against the Arab Islamic armies and her defense of her land—in the text is not limited to evoking the collective memory of the immense sacrifices Algerian women have made throughout history for the liberation of their homeland, but also to affirm women's presence in society as active, independent agents who have the freedom of expression and the freedom to choose their cultural identity. This is highlighted by Dehia's decision to abandon her real name in order to construct her own identity and link her existence to the history of female heroism in steadfastness and resistance.

This historical event is also reflected in the novel through the narrator's account of the "Black Decade" and how they followed the events and were affected by what was

happening in Algeria despite their distance from it:

“We were concerned about what was happening in Algeria—the bombings and massacres during the war. You’d see my mother covering her mouth with her hand, deeply moved, while my father cursed the Islamists”^(22).

This historical event—the civil war that Algeria experienced in the 1990s—highlights the extent to which the mother was affected by the horror of the massacres and crimes committed daily against unarmed civilians. Although the narrator focuses on depicting the mother’s simple, spontaneous reaction—placing her hand over her mouth—upon seeing this news, the text carries a symbolic significance that points to women’s role in preserving historical memory and documenting the human rights violations associated with this national crisis.

3. CONCLUSION

In concluding this study, we can affirm that heritage, in Sarah al-Nams’s novel **djim **, serves as a central means of expressing the feminine self, an essential tool for understanding reality and coexisting with its contradictions, and a fundamental pillar for highlighting the role of external contexts in shaping feminist consciousness. The study has reached a set of conclusions, the most important of which are:

- The use of cultural heritage served as a new springboard for creativity and an artistic and intellectual bridge to open up new feminine spaces and worlds within the text.

- The author drew upon both tangible and intangible folk heritage to highlight women’s role in transmitting heritage and embedding it in the collective memory.

- The novel’s exploration of the dowry allowed for a critical examination of the social perceptions and mental constructs regarding women that have become entrenched in patriarchal thought.

- The tangible heritage, as exemplified by the description of traditional dress, presents women as an active force in shaping national identity.

- Despite its modest presence in the

text, the folk proverb opened up a wide scope for interpretation and for exposing the patronizing patriarchal view that reduces a woman’s value to her body while ignoring her intellectual and psychological dimensions, thereby marginalizing her from the cultural and social scene.

- The religious heritage employed in the novel revealed the intellectual orientation adopted by the feminist narrative, through the articulation of a discourse of tolerance, coexistence, and respect for others’ differences as an alternative to exclusion and domination.

- Religious heritage enabled the author to produce new meanings and enrich the text with diverse literary devices that helped elicit implicit meanings, thereby reshaping the collective consciousness regarding women’s right to expression and choice free from patriarchal censorship.

- The use of the name of the historical figure Deihya helped free women from the patriarchal siege that sought to exclude their intellectual and cultural production, presenting them as active and independent agents with the freedom to express themselves and choose their cultural affiliation.

- This historical event carries symbolic significance that reveals women’s role in preserving historical memory and documenting the human rights violations associated with this national crisis.

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(⁷)- Ashri Zayed, On the Structure of the Arabic Poem, Youth Library, Cairo, Egypt, 4th ed., 1995, p. 137.

(⁸)- Saleh Mafquda, *Studies in the Arabic Novel*, Publications of the Research Laboratory