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The Alienation of Consciousness and Existential Fragmentation of the Algerian Intellectual in Tahar Wattar's Novel "The Candle and the Corridors"

اغتراب الوعي والتشظي الوجودي للمثقف الجزائري في رواية "الشمعة والدهاليز" للطاهر وطار

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Abstract:

This research paper aims to interrogate the representations of the alienation of consciousness and the crisis of the Algerian intellectual during the violent upheavals of the "Black Decade." To this end, it employs Tahar Wattar's narrative work, The Candle and the Corridors, as a primary text for a critic analysis. The research seeks to deconstruct the crisis-ridden cultural and political paradigm that besieged the character of the "Poet" functioning as an objective correlative for the organic intellectual. The protagonist finds himself in an inevitable confrontation with radical ideological systems within a demagogic society that lacks mechanisms for dialogue and resorts to the exclusion of the Other. Furthermore, the study investigates the manifestations of existential fragmentation and the loss of identity within the crucible of a bitter conflict that ultimately leads to the intellectual's physical elimination, rendering him a victim of his own visionary consciousness.

The reading concludes that the novel masterfully embodies the tragic fate of the thinking subject upon its collision with the tyranny of backwardness and extremism, thereby exposing the trajectory of collapsing human values in the absence of a rational worldview.

Keywords: Alienation of consciousness; Existential fragmentation; Algerian intellectual; The Black Decade; Clash of ideologies; The Candle and the Corridors

الملخص:

تروم هذه الورقة البحثية استنطاق تمثلات اغتراب الوعي وأزمة المثقف الجزائري إبان التحولات العنيفة للعشرية السوداء، متخذة من المنجز السردي "الشمعة والدهاليز" للروائي الطاهر وطار مدونة للتحليل النقدي. ويسعى البحث إلى تفكيك النسق الثقافي والسياسي المأزوم الذي حاصر شخصية "الشاعر"، بوصفه معادلا موضوعيا للمثقف العضوي الذي وجد نفسه في مجابهة حتمية مع أنساق إيديولوجية راديكالية، وداخل مجتمع غوغائي يفتقر لآليات الحوار ويحتكم لإقصاء الآخر. وتتقصى الدراسة تجليات التشظي الوجودي وضياع الهوية في أتون صراع مرير أفضى بالمثقف إلى التصفية الجسدية، ليكون ضحية وعيه الاستشرافي.

تخلص القراءة إلى أن الرواية نجحت بامتياز في تجسيد المآل التراجيدي للذات المفكرة حين تصطدم بجبروت التخلف والتطرف، كاشفة عن مسارات انهيار القيم الإنسانية في ظل غياب الرؤية العقلانية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: اغتراب الوعي، التشظي الوجودي، المثقف الجزائري، العشرية السوداء، صدام الإيديولوجيات، الشمعة والدهاليز.

INTRODUCTION

The novel "*The Candle and the Corridors*" by Tahar Wattar, published in 1993, captures the profound conflict that ravaged Algeria during the 1990s. The narrative delves into the reality of the Algerian individual who found himself lost in a

society that abruptly ceased to recognize human values or intellectual and scientific merit. This existential crisis is profoundly experienced by the intellectual—represented by the character of the "Poet" in the novel—who loses the strength to resist or change the prevailing social conditions. This systemic failure engendered a deeply critical reality that permeated the socio-political life of the intellectual in Algeria. The intellectual is depicted as living in a state of fragmentation and alienation within a novel cultural paradigm dictated by sudden political and cultural upheavals. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the intellectual's relationship with authority to unveil the nature of their ongoing conflict, as well as to explore the dialectic between the intellectual and society.

Undoubtedly, any literary work pursues a specific intent rooted in the desire to provoke the receiver's consciousness regarding its underlying themes (Bouafia, 2025, p. 582). The nature of these conflicts manifests in the relationship between individual self-awareness and the collective confrontation of reality. These elements mutually influence one another, caught between a contemporary epistemological horizon and a traditional, archaic cultural paradigm. For instance, an outdated cultural system that commodified humans into slaves has vanished in modern times because contemporary cultural frameworks promote awareness, encourage education, and uphold the principle of equality among all societal members. Consequently, new discourses have emerged from social factions attempting to justify their right to authority and govern the state according to specific ideological premises and programs aimed at improving socio-political conditions. Viewing traditional approaches as incapable of addressing current realities, these factions advocate for a new cultural and

epistemological paradigm that dismantles rational knowledge and flexible relativity, uprooting them from their historical context into an immediate socio-temporal reality dictated by specific political circumstances (Al-Manasra, 2011, p. 31).

Hence, researchers must illuminate the relationship between knowledge and authority to reveal the true struggle of the intellectual within his society. This dynamic is central to Wattar's *The Candle and the Corridors*, which maps the ideological conflicts among Algeria's diverse cultural and political formations. The novel portrays an ideological clash between socialist principles aimed at societal development and ideologies rooted in religious movements (Ben Daamouche, 2023, p 386). The intellectual protagonist thus collides with a new reality and a cultural system entirely alien to his worldview. The Poet stands bewildered by the rapid "repentance" of the youth and their sudden, un-theorized hostility toward the European paradigm: "These are the masses, the toiling masses, and whether they are right or wrong, is it permissible for an intellectual like me, who has dedicated his life to serving the masses and defending their causes, to stand against them? What are they doing? What are they up to now? Thus, they took off their trousers, put on *jellabiyas*, grew their beards, and surrendered to the absorbing cellars of the past" (Wattar, 2007, p. 18). In this context, the intellectual's convictions surface—convictions that reject the current reality of the general populace, despite recognizing that these transformations must have underlying justifications (Al-Manasra, 2011, p. 43). The character is undergoing the acquisition of a religious sentiment previously absent, a sentiment that can only be rationalized through genuine belief in its necessity and the inevitability of its realization in reality (Boukhalfa, 2010, p. 180).

This highlights the crisis of the temporal dimension dominating the Poet's imagination, leading to the defeat and temporal dislocation of his sense of self. The loss of the Poet's identity within the novel mirrors the broader loss of national identity, the tearing of the self, and its descent into the dark corridors of orphanhood and alienation. Through this lens, the protagonist views these emerging realities in their unvarnished truth (Meksah, 2024, p. 629). These transformations create an epistemological rupture in the Poet's mind, allowing him to comprehend the depth of the social epochs suffering beneath the surface (Ben Dahman, 2013, p. 136). This dynamic underscores the novelist's adherence to a socialist trajectory with social objectives, rendering the socialist protagonist's sympathy for the popular masses highly understandable, as he perceives this Islamic alternative as a positive step toward opposing the regime (Wattar, 2007, p. 78). Therefore, Wattar places his Poet among their ranks to fathom the inner workings of these groups. The narrator notes: "He wished he could enter their midst and merge with them, allowing the dark corridor deep within him to be illuminated" (Rabehi, 2004, p. 49). Through the protagonist, the author projects the intellectual's stance on this popular movement carrying Islamic principles, monitoring the profound political crisis and its severe repercussions on the status of the intellectual in Algeria (Wattar, 2007, p. 139).

1. The Crisis of the Algerian Intellectual in the Black Decade

Contemporary questions concerning the project of authority drive the narrative in *The Candle and the Corridors*, touching upon the boundaries of political and cultural crises through the journey of an Algerian intellectual. Equipped with a critical

culture, he attempts to remap Algerian reality using modern sociological readings. However, this awareness fails to resonate with the collective consciousness reached by society. The protagonist transforms into a lost entity searching for existence in a time that is not his own—a time characterized by fragmentation and ruin. The narrator articulates through the protagonist: "I will not die for the Algerian homeland because this homeland does not exist. I have not found it; I asked history, I asked the living and the dead, and I visited the graves, but no one spoke to me about it, for a building cannot be erected on sand" (Al-Warfali, 2009, p. 88).

The protagonist navigates cultural dilemmas in a quest for a self that is searching for national identity, attempting to construct this identity through narrative discourse. The narrative time in the text chronicles a genuine historical period experienced by Algeria. The author indicates the present moment when the Poet is abruptly awakened by the sounds of Islamist protesters: "The Poet woke up terrified by voices tearing the silence of the wounded night, illuminated by streetlights varying in intensity from one street to another. He asked himself aloud, despite knowing no one else was there to hear him, simply because he shares this large, state-granted housing with no one else since his teaching days" (Wattar, 2007, p. 11). When he approaches the entrance of El Harrach, bearded men offer their assistance and ask him to accompany them in their car. During this journey, his memory drifts backward to reflect on the past (Al-Qasrawi, n.d., p. 17). The past is the most controversial element in the novel's discourse, marking the emergence of Islamic groups who believe in Islam's capacity to illuminate the vast, deep corridors in the face of the fragmentation afflicting the Poet (Wattar, 2007, p. 25).

These youths propose that the Poet join their movement, telling him: "You are a respectable man, and it is rare to encounter someone like you. If our assumptions about you are not wrong, you are exactly what our young state needs. We are in need of faithful scholars, and you appear to be a scholar. Such courage only comes from a man of strong faith and immense trust in God and himself" (Wattar, 2007, p. 33). This proposition plunges the protagonist into severe psychological turbulence, pushing him into a realm of distraction and loss. He descends into dreams and hallucinations where reality blurs; he envisions fields filled with blood and hears the voice of Al-Khayzuran, the woman with whom he shares a spiritual bond, in an attempt to escape the bleak reality engulfing him (Wattar, 2007, p. 170). The Poet attempts to comprehend the present and history but to no avail, leading to a barrage of existential questions: "Who are you? Are you my isolation and alienation? Are you my hesitation and confusion? Are you the time that slips away from me? Are you the face that was never granted to me? Are you Al-Arem, my aunt's daughter?" (Wattar, 2007, p. 22).

These inquiries reveal the profound state of uncertainty the Poet has reached in his present moment, having lost his intellectual equilibrium and succumbed to profound disorientation alongside memories of the recent past (Mostefa, 2026, p. 352), specifically the era of independence. The narrative dictates that the Algerian people, unlike their brethren in the East and West, lost their agency during the Ottoman era, which confined them to rural, agrarian lives, deliberately excluding them from urban centers and positions of administration and leadership (Wattar, 2007, p. 15). Consequently, the metaphor of descending into the dark corridors signifies a descent into darkness and annihilation. The Poet can no longer keep pace with the political and social

deterioration, resulting in a state of fading and fragmentation at the levels of consciousness and existence, ultimately causing him to lose his psychological balance (Ben Dahman, 2013, p. 139).

2. The Dark Corridors of Injustice and the Death of the Intellectual

The word "corridors" (*dahaliz*) symbolizes the dark tunnels into which the Algerian people were forcibly thrust without warning. They found no exit other than the infighting and hostility that erupted among society's members. This situation spawned deteriorating political, social, and economic conditions where the Algerian intellectual—bearing ideas and principles contrary to the dominant currents—was deemed a criminal and summarily rejected by reality. The Poet expresses his predicament: "I am this criminal whose crime consists of understanding the universe as it truly is, and understanding what is happening around him before it occurs. I transform into a dark corridor of multiple cellars and depths, impenetrable no matter how hard one tries, serving as a punishment to others for their triviality" (Wattar, 2007, p. 7).

This illustrates the tragic, violent, and harsh reality of the intellectual in Algeria. He becomes a dark symbol in the eyes of society because he refuses to assimilate or submit. The intellectual is the "candle" symbolizing the conscious human being preoccupied with the concerns of his people and nation, even at the cost of his own life; he is the candle that burns to light the way for others (Wattar, 2007, p. 7). The tribulation is widespread, and altering it is incredibly difficult given society's inability to grasp facts or comprehend reality consciously: "The Poet knew that there was no ambition to storm the corridors and

cellars, and it sufficed him to realize that his people, and most other peoples surrounding them in what is called the Third or Developing World, are like sheep; if they attempt to storm the corridors, they will be lost for all eternity" (Wattar, 2007, p. 50). Through this narrative utterance, the author implies that these masses lack the critical faculties required to navigate their crises, regressing to an existence governed by force and instinct (Oumekran, 2000, p. 46).

The term "corridors" in the novel encapsulates the reality of the Algerian intellectual who finds himself adrift in a society devoid of humanistic values and respect for cultural and scientific standards. It reflects a society overrun by private interests at the expense of the public good. Unable to confront or alter the prevailing social conditions, the Poet decides to leave his home and head to the gathering square, mingling with crowds he had never engaged with before (Ben Dahman, 2013, p. 142). From this perspective, the Poet's tragedy deepens within a profoundly ambiguous and complex space, exacerbating his sense of alienation and fragmentation. Reality cannot be easily changed; true change requires a cognitive realization rooted in historical origins and general cultural heritage (Wattar, 2007, p. 71). Endowed with ideological values that prevent him from conforming to the socio-political situation, the Poet plunges into a state of fading and loss. He profoundly realizes the intellectual's dilemma: the closer he gets to reality, the more alienated and miserable he becomes due to its glaring contradictions (Oumekran, 2000, p. 49).

The narrator conveys the Poet's distress: "It does not matter whether you are Eastern or Western, for in the West there is the East, and in the East there is the West, but who are you? This is

the condition of the Algerian, caught between generation and turmoil, and I am the one in turmoil" (Ben Dahman, 2013, p. 136). This psychological state reflects a lost soul in a dark reality, incapable of confronting a new system contrary to the one in which he was raised. He continues: "The socialists said enough, either we become Marxist or capitalist. The capitalists said either mosques or taverns. The secularists said how can our children learn the fundamentals of religion by day while being presented with obscene films by night? The defenders of Arabic said either Arabic or French. The Francophones said either a French Algeria or no Algeria at all; we will impoverish it, starve it, dismantle it, and hand it over to the foreigner" (Oumekran, 2000, p. 49). He questions the motives of these actors playing like acrobats, asking whether they act out of a lack of authenticity or an egoism that drives them to hijack the roles of all factions and parties to achieve their selfish ends (Wattar, 2007, p. 181).

The intellectual in Algeria failed to change the prevailing conditions or even influence those around him. Instead, he suffered a severe internal schism that led to the negation of his existence as an effective force, making reality the sole influencer over him (Wattar, 2007, p. 184). This state marked the initial phase of the independent Algeria's social failure. The policies implemented and the rapid social movements disrupted the structure of the Algerian mind. The reforms the state sought to achieve immediately after colonization aimed to revitalize the nation, yet politicians failed to conceptualize the optimal method for realizing this project (Wattar, 2007, p. 211). The phases of the Poet's life encapsulate the intellectual's enduring crisis, revealing a pluralistic society where unity cannot rely on uniformity, yet which continually suffers from internal crises.

The Algerian individual is distinguished by a complex amalgamation of traits, leading the Poet to observe the near impossibility of navigating the multifaceted historical and ethnic burdens—Berber, Arab, Phoenician, Roman, Vandal—that curse the Algerian identity with a legacy of both heroism and profound tragedy (Wattar, 2007, p. 180). Despite decades of independence, the society remained plagued by oppression and violence. Early attempts at democratic pluralism only exposed the narrow visions of political factions, leading to mutual hatred and systemic sabotage rather than collective uplift (Wattar, 2007, p. 211).

3. The Political Crisis and the Intellectual's Ordeal

The Poet's ordeal, as depicted in the novel, is an intellectual one, serving as the root cause of his alienation, misery, and fragmentation. The Poet laments: "Here I am, a member of this people who has attained knowledge and understanding, referred to as its intellectual. Here I am on the edge of the river; I must either descend with those descending or remain a spectator until they throw stones at me. The color or nature of the water they bathe in does not matter; what matters is that they bathe completely immersed, and I cannot be like them unless I am with them" (Ammari, n.d., p. 218). The Poet's inability to confront and influence others leads to his surrender to the status quo. The political crisis of the 1990s turned the intellectual's daily life into a horrifying tragedy, rendering him a constantly monitored suspect: "I noticed that I have been monitored since the first day I entered the Great Mosque and prayed the afternoon prayer in the morning; there were two men taking turns watching me" (Wattar, 2007, p. 211).

This relentless surveillance transforms the Poet into an accused figure facing multiple charges:

1. Contacting malefactors attempting to overthrow the republican regime and providing them with financial aid and books in prison.
2. Practicing witchcraft and sorcery, seducing a young girl, and corrupting her relationship with the security apparatus employing her.
3. Heresy, advocating for the Mu'tazilite doctrine, and claiming the Quran is created rather than eternal.
4. Refusing to speak to security personnel in the mosque under the pretext of being a thinker and researcher who should not be treated like the common populace.
5. Harboring hostility toward the West in general and France in particular.
6. Bearing the responsibility of declaring his stance against tyranny.

The novel concludes with the martyrdom of the Poet, his body torn by daggers and bullets. He lies lifeless amid massive crowds filling the cemetery, chanting, "There is no God but Allah, and Muhammad is the Messenger of Allah; upon it we live, upon it we die, and upon it we shall meet Allah" (Wattar, 2007, p. 211). The novel does not attribute the terrorist act to a specific faction but rather points to the extinguishing of the national intellectual's candle. This deliberate death results from the fact that society no longer senses his presence or draws warmth from his intellect—the very intellect capable of foreseeing the inevitable outcomes of the unfolding premises (Ammari, n.d., p. 218).

CONCLUSION

Based on this analysis, we arrive at the following conclusions:

1. In this novel, Tahar Wattar successfully depicts the new cultural paradigm imposed by the socio-political conditions of the 1990s, capturing the tragic fate of the Algerian intellectual within this system.
2. The novel exposes the diseased reality of the Algerian intellectual, identifying the causes of his alienation during a period when power dynamics were blurred, and socio-political life diverged into a new, unfamiliar cultural paradigm.
3. The narrative illustrates the intellectual's fear, anxiety, and bewilderment, diagnosing his condition during a sudden crisis where he faced myriad accusations, ultimately leading to his death.
4. The scene of the Poet's murder encapsulates the clash of ideologies stemming from deep-seated animosity. His refusal to align with religious ideologies or fight under banners contrary to his principles made him a target for armed extremist factions.
5. Tahar Wattar embodies the life of the Algerian individual through the Poet, who endures fragmentation, loss, and terror at the hands of Islamic groups. He lives in a vortex of psychological anxiety, only to be judged and executed by masked men despite his innocence.

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