

The Dynamics of Meaning Production Through the Local Spatial Imaginary: A Thematic Approach to Bachir Mefti's Novel Ghosts of the Murdered City

Les dynamiques de la production du sens à travers l'imaginaire spatial local : Une approche thématique du roman Les Fantômes de la ville assassinée de Bachir Mefti

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Abstract:

The contemporary Algerian novel has occupied a prominent epistemological and aesthetic position within the literary field, evolving into a narrative genre capable of absorbing the transformations of local reality and representing its contradictions. It achieves this through imaginative structures that internalize implicit ideological systems and latent discourses concealed within the fabric of language and the pathways of narrative expression. Based on this premise, this study seeks to approach Bachir Mefti's novel *Ghosts of the Murdered City* from a thematic perspective. It aims to deconstruct the dynamics of local spatial formation and explore the representations of Algiers as an urban space charged with historical, cultural, and symbolic density, which ultimately contributes to consolidating the theme of locality within the narrative corpus. Furthermore, the study endeavors to uncover the ontological and conceptual dimensions of space, tracing their operational mechanisms in producing narrative signification. By analyzing the interconnections between space and the other components of novelistic discourse,

the study highlights how the city transforms from a mere geographical given into a semantic structure that generates meaning and frames the experience of novelistic writing

Keywords:Spatiality, Theme of the City, Novelistic Discourse, Ghosts of the Murdered City.

Resumé:

Le roman algérien contemporain occupe désormais une position épistémologique et esthétique de premier plan au sein du champ littéraire. Il s'est érigé en un genre narratif capable d'assimiler les mutations de la réalité locale et d'en représenter les contradictions, par le biais de structures fictionnelles qui intériorisent des systèmes idéologiques implicites et des discours latents dissimulés dans le tissu textuel et les méandres de l'énonciation narrative. Partant de ce postulat, la présente étude entend aborder le roman *Les Fantômes de la ville assassinée* de Bachir Mefti selon une approche thématique. Celle-ci vise à déconstruire les dynamiques de formation de l'espace spatial local et à mettre en lumière les représentations de la ville d'Alger en tant qu'espace urbain imprégné d'une forte densité historique, culturelle et symbolique, contribuant ainsi à l'enracinement du thème de la localité au sein du corpus narratif. En outre, l'étude s'attache à dévoiler les dimensions ontologique et conceptuelle du lieu, tout en retraçant leurs mécanismes opératoires dans la production de la signification narrative. Par l'analyse de ses intrications avec les autres composantes du discours romanesque, cette recherche vise in fine à démontrer comment la ville transcende son statut de simple donnée géographique pour se muer en une structure sémantique génératrice de sens, encadrant ainsi l'expérience de l'écriture romanesque.

Mots-clés : Spatialité, Thème de la ville, Discours romanesque, *Les Fantômes de la ville assassinée*.

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INTRODUCTION:

The contemporary novel has successfully secured a central position and established a definitive presence on the map of Algerian literature. As a narrative corpus characterized by its flexibility, constant renewal, and openness to numerous local issues -particularly in tracking the fluctuations and recent developments of local reality- it has become a highly suitable art form for expressing the realities of life, human anxieties, and aspirations. The novel possesses the capacity to hoard a reservoir of hidden intellectualities, implicit systems, and embedded ideologies by extracting fragments of local reality. This capability has allowed it to spearhead the recognized narrative arts in expressing the local givens from which the creator derives their artistic and thematic experience.

Local space, or spatiality, is precisely one of those prolific reservoirs within the novel, giving rise to a corpus that merits rigorous scrutiny and critical approach to uncover the secrets buried within the fissures of narrative discourse. Several studies have already demonstrated the centrality of space/spatiality in establishing the foundations of a novel's locality. It is the domain that intersects and interconnects with the components of the narrative text. This realization prompted the researchers to approach a contemporary Algerian narrative text bearing a spatial system with its own unique centrality: the city of "Algiers." The city, with its accumulated heritage, civilizational depth, and artistic dimensions, firmly entrenches the theme of locality within this novel.

From this standpoint, our research paper is grounded in a thematic approach to BachirMefti's novel *Ghosts of the Murdered City* (Ashbah al-Madina al-Maqtoula). It seeks to search the folds of this narrative corpus for manifestations of locality and to capture snapshots of Algiers as a local spatial environment. We examine the city as a fundamental component that marks this novel with the stamp of locality, uncovering both its ontological and conceptual dimensions while investigating their significations. We are keen to highlight the role of the spatial realm in cultivating creative faculty and preserving local specificity without leading

to isolation or total immersion. To achieve this, the study addresses the following questions:

To what extent is local spatiality linked to the contemporary Algerian narrative corpus?

How did BachirMefti engage with the geography of Algiers?

How is the space of Algiers formed -semantically and narratively- within the novel *Ghosts of the Murdered City*? And how did the other narrative components interact with it?

01 :The Locality of Space in the Contemporary Novel:

01-01 -The Functional and Artistic Characteristics of Novelistic Space:

Human perception of space occurs through direct sensory experience, and continuous interaction with it reinforces and solidifies human identity. The space we inhabit derives its significance from our personal perception of it, and our subjective value manifests through our interaction and integration with it. On this basis, "we can view space as a network of relationships, visions, and perspectives that act in solidarity to construct the novelistic space in which events will unfold" (Al-Bahrawi, 1990, p. 32).

Consequently, the focus on local space in the contemporary novel is not limited merely to its structural function in shaping the text, nor its semantic function in denoting the narrative material it contains, nor even its capacity to define the genre of the novel situated upon its white pages. Rather, it encompasses its ability to execute the functions assigned to it by the novelist. Assigning functions to space is a structural technique harmonious with the logic of spatial structuring. It is the product of the conditional correlation between the elements of spatial formation, the narrative it houses, and the underlying purposes of its construction. When space fulfills its assigned functions, its formation becomes complete, allowing the receiver to fully grasp the novelist's effort in linking the fictional space to local realities. Through this, the credibility of its construction is manifested, and the aesthetic of its reception is realized (Murshid, 2005).

The French critic Roland Bourneuf is among the most prominent scholars to have raised the issue of spatial functions in the novel. He questioned the internal necessities governing spatial organization, suggesting an emphasis on the functions of space in relation to characters, situations, and time, in an attempt to uncover its symbolic and ideological values. Based on this, spatial functions have varied from one critic to another. Examples include, but are not limited to:

The Anthropological Function: Discussed by Philippe Hamon, who argued that the space described in the novel influences the character, motivating them to initiate events and propelling them into action, to the extent that describing space can be seen as describing the character's future.

The Aesthetic-Decorative Function: Addressed by Gérard Genette, who observed that description fulfills an aesthetic, decorative function within the text. Consequently, describing certain places serves as a pause or break in the narrative trajectory, playing a "purely" aesthetic role.

The Communicative Function: Proposed by the Italian philosopher Umberto Eco, who, drawing directly from the core of semiotic thought, found that space achieves a communicative function (*transmettre un communiqué*) (Bghibegh, 2010, p. 26).

Perhaps Gaston Bachelard's study *The Poetics of Space*, published in 1958, was what alerted critics and researchers to the importance of studying space in Arab novelistic creation. Ghalib Halasa was arguably the first to study space in his book *Space in the Arabic Novel*, where he examined the reciprocal influence between space and its inhabitants, demonstrating that space is not static but subject to change over time. He categorized space into four types (Azzam, 2005, p. 68):

Metaphorical Space: The space found in the narration of sequential events, serving as an arena for and complement to the events. It is not a crucial element in the novelistic work; it is a passive, submissive space subjected to the actions of the characters.

Geometric Space: The space presented accurately and neutrally by the novel through its external dimensions.

Space as a Lived Experience within the Novelistic Work: A space capable of evoking the receiver's own spatial memories.

Hostile Space: Such as prisons, exile, desolate nature, and places of alienation. It falls under patriarchal authority, in contrast to the previous three, which he views as maternal spaces.

However, some scholars objected to these divisions. Some argued that all space in a novel is metaphorical, while others maintained that one cannot separate "geometric" from "lived" space, as all places have geometric dimensions, and even hostile space remains a spatial environment. Therefore, these classifications are deemed unnecessary as they evaluate our perception of space's importance by isolating it from time.

We deduce from these categorizations that space is distinguished by metaphorical traits carrying aesthetic and creative significations. These traits imbue the text with an artistic character that enriches the receiver's experience and leaves a psychological impact. This effect is highlighted in the interaction between the creator and the receiver, where the former shares their places and encourages the latter to partake in them, thereby stimulating the evocation of associated memories. Accordingly, space forms an essential backdrop for the novelist's imagination, defining their existence and carrying their unforgettable experiences and memories. Thus, human existence becomes complementary to space; they influence each other and harmonize with the needs of the individual and society. Consequently, the novelistic experience is intrinsically tied to space, whether through harmony or collision with it. Therefore, it can be said that space is the starting point for any idea, initiative, or creation, and the interpretation of human behavior is expressed through the environment with which they interact.

01-02 -Local Specificity and Creative Geography in the Contemporary Novel

Local places in the novel constitute a series of eloquent images that guide the reader through the pathways of the narrative text. Spatiality intertwines with the novel's events and the depth of its linguistic formation. At times, we dispense with physical action in the narrative text to gaze deeply, through the descriptive system,

into the local environment. This environment is not merely a coloring limited to descriptive accuracy; it transcends the superficial layer of being a mere geometric container for characters and events. Instead, it stands as a testament to the author's identity and the locality of their artistic vision, which stems from an attention to geographical details that penetrates to the core theme of locality defining the novel. In this context, Faisal Al-Johani describes the representation of urban space in the novel as a "panoramic formulation of the local scene" (Al-Johani, 2014, p. 17). Space is enveloped by local and artistic dimensions, whether through presence or absence; explicitly centering a specific place inevitably pushes another absent place to the margins. Addressing this, Mujib Al-Adwani states: "In the other dimension of space, namely the hidden or dialectical dimension, we find a new value for its efficacy, for the declared text necessarily deletes another text" (Al-Adwani, 1998, p. 349). This highlights the value of utilizing local space as a theme expressing the novel's locality.

The term "locality," in its broad sense, refers to the distinctive qualities or elements of a specific place, encompassing the objects, events, people, and activities within its surrounding environment. Deriving from the Latin root *localis*, it relates to place and the local milieu. This environment might be regional or local in character, distinguishing the local level from the general or national level. In this sense, the local is tied to everything a place contains -whether a village or a city- encompassing people, activities, cultural manifestations, customs, and traditions. Nevertheless, the concept of "locality" remains difficult to define precisely due to its varying scope of application; it can encompass diverse groupings of places, from small villages and neighborhoods to broader regions or states. However, the presence of homogeneous elements spanning geography, population, culture, and customs is essential to identifying a specific environment as local, as this contributes to forging a distinct local identity reflecting the unique characteristics of that place (Djawadi, 2021, pp. 313-314).

If literature in general is the product and reflection of its environment, novelistic narrative, in particular, "is the most intimately connected of all literary genres and languages to its environment, originating from it, taking root in its soil and space, and engaging in the struggles of its living beings. This is due to its

diagnostic and mimetic nature, which monitors the fluidity of the daily and the lived, penetrating the tissues and hidden depths of the social body. Hence, the novelistic narrative forms a crystalline and metaphorical mirror that roams the streets just as it roams the inner depths, to echo Stendhal's expression. The narrator's imagination, no matter how high it soars or how far it strays, cannot help but summon the streets it knows and distill the inner depths it is accustomed to; for a person is but a fragment of their place and time" (Al-Aufi, 1993, p. 126). It is precisely from here that the "specificity" and "locality" of novelistic narrative emerge. Upon this local specificity and its foundation, the contemporary Algerian novel defines itself, moves, and acquires its artistic distinctiveness and secret code.

Based on the above, locality can be considered a literary feature not confined to superficial manifestations but rather a profound characteristic consistently embodied in human creativity, regardless of its diverse forms and evolving patterns. This is because literature -even if it plunges into realms of abstraction or tackles surrealist dimensions- cannot be devoid of deeply rooted aspects of locality. However, "what is prevalent in the history of world literature is the association of locality with the realist or naturalist school, as manifested by Russian, French, and Spanish writers, and some Arab writers" (Ajjouj, 2018). Mustafa Yala views the phenomenon of locality as: "The artistic treatment of a specific material and moral environment, reflecting various natural phenomena, human relationships, and human emotions, with a prominent influence of diverse traditions, customs, and norms in a concrete manner, far from any abstraction or vagueness. While the scope of locality is particularly defined in a small local society, it may expand to encompass a large city, a province, or the nation as an appropriate field. There is no contradiction between locality on the one hand, and nationalism and universality on the other. Local literature is the tributary that flows into the sea of national literature. It is also the sound starting point towards achieving the ambition of universality" (Yala, 2011, p. 38). From this, we understand that it is natural for the novel to be considered one of the most suitable mediums for accommodating representations of locality, given the infinite possibilities it offers as an artistic

expression of personal life experiences, social problems, and national and global issues.

Thus, it becomes clear that local literature is inextricably linked to its surrounding environment, a connection essential to shaping its identity and its intellectual and aesthetic distinctiveness. Despite this connection, it does not preclude being influenced by national and world literature, as prominent literary experiences continuously aspire to evolution and renewal. Therefore, local literature is not limited merely to heritage customs and traditions; rather, it represents a specific historical project with its own distinguishing features. These features do not render it closed off but leave it open to absorbing objective elements that lend it a universal character.

On another note, the representation of local spatiality -as an external given- within the angles of the narrative text, along with its aesthetic and thematic dimensions, transforms it into a dimension "not bounded by length or width, but rather by the characteristic of inclusivity" (Mouanessi, 2001, p. 18). Confining the creative experience within the local spatial environment implies that it "encompasses numerous intellectual, psychological, and emotional reflections" (Ben Amar, 2016, p. 18). This signifies an unbreakable relationship between humans and space, as space contains the human experiences expressed through various forms, methods, and styles. The novel -as an expressive field that attracts the creative self to reveal its inner depths- creates a fictional artistic dimension through its intersection with local space, to the point where spatiality has become "a fundamental unit in the literary work within literary theory" (Abu Heif, 2005, p. 123). We understand from all this that local/urban spatiality in a novel is a foundational pillar of the local novel; lacking this pillar, the novel loses a significant portion of the theme of locality and its specificities, thereby rendering the work pale or lackluster in this regard.

Looking at Algerian novelistic texts, especially contemporary ones, we find that local space has received an abundant share of attention. The employment/representation of local spatiality and the embedding of its elements within the artistic structure of the narrative text have become a means of achieving

belonging and expanding the circle of identity and nationalism. This is done by selecting spatial environments from either the internal or external environment. In several novels, such as *What Doesn't Happen* by MerzakBagtache, *The Rebel* by Malika Mokeddem, *The Flies and the Sea* by WahibaDjamoui, *The Prince* by WacinyLaredj, and AhlamMosteghanemi's trilogy, we observe the representation of local spatiality. This is expressed either in celebration or in comparison with other spatial environments based on the dichotomy between the center and the margin. The contemporary Algerian novel has adopted this equation to highlight the aesthetics of local space through comparison and differentiation, summoning architectural and historical landmarks and coupling them with human phenomena, social problems, and the cultural-intellectual determinants of the local space. It highlights space as an "authority that has its past, present, and future, exercising its positive action at the level of presence, interaction, and renewal, possessing the capacity to be a founding memory for cognitive production" (Al-Rahawi, 2011, p. 265). This means that local space has acquired the authority to transport the reader/receiver to what was geographically or culturally hidden from them.

Souhila Ben Amar has identified two methods for employing spatial/geographical/architectural environments": External employment: which informs the reader and exposes them to what is unknown to them. And organic employment: by making it a psychological equivalent to complex phenomena" (Ben Amar, 2016, p. 20). Thus, the representation of this local space oscillates between the processes of historiography and documentation, and the adopted intellectual visions evoked as a living memory and a present consciousness.

In this regard, Amna Belala states that the subject of the novel's locality should not be viewed as the antithesis of universality, but rather locality should be considered "a promotion of local values in order for us to be more universal and at least assert ourselves" (Belala, 2022). In the same context, AzzedineDjelaoudji posits that the universality of the novel cannot be achieved except by starting from locality and subjectivity, stating: "There is no sense in writing literary texts according to what Western centrism dictates; rather, they must spring from our own selves so that we

can tell the world we are capable of adding a new brick to human civilization as a whole" (Djelaoudji, 2022).

We can arrive at the conclusion that the representation of local spatiality is one of the most prominent components of the theme of locality within the topography of the novelistic work. It is the theme that supplies the narrative text with all the characteristics and elements associated with local space, culture, social and economic problems, and issues falling within the context of locality.

02 :The Local Character of the Novel; BachirMefti and the Narrativization of Space

Novelistic events cannot develop except within a spatial environment that lends the narrative corpus a realistic dimension and social features. Space emerges from those spatial polarities to intertwine with the artistic work, depicted according to a specific vision that monitors and defines spatial coordinates -especially those real places- to achieve geographical fidelity and prove their existence. The novelist leans on these coordinates to draw the space as they see it, or as they wish to see it, until it transforms into a profound and significant geographical dimension that qualifies the city to be the capital of that novel (Mortad, 1998, pp. 131-132).

Hence, the study of spatial formation relies on extracting descriptive passages of both natural and material objects, examining the semantic, psychological, and intellectual shades they add to the novel's elements, which are directly related to the character's psychological state and their vision of the place they inhabit, whether that residence is voluntary or forced. In this study, we find BachirMefti in his novel *Ghosts of the Murdered City* celebrating the city of Algiers immensely. He granted it immense centrality in the narrative progression, linking events to the neighborhoods, municipalities, and landmarks of the capital. He represented and depicted it from various architectural, psychological, political, historical, social, and religious angles, granting the city semantic momentum and the novel profound local dimensions. This is based on the premise of the city being a spatial, cultural, economic, and social environment imbued with psychological, religious, and historical dimensions.

02-01 -The Urban Image of Algiers and its Historical and Political Dimensions

The urban images of Algiers in the novel manifest through the description of architecture, streets, municipalities, neighborhoods, beaches, and more, in addition to referencing numerous archaeological and historical landmarks left by ancient civilizations, rendering them witnesses to the city's antiquity. The novelist points to this when describing the city as "the city of the French, and before that, the city of pirates and Turks" (Mefti, 2017, p. 22), highlighting its architectural and engineering diversity. This is particularly evident in the historic Casbah neighborhood, which the novelist describes through the character El Hadi Ben Mansour as having "narrow and small Casbah houses" (Mefti, 2017, p. 177), and through Said, noting its "interlocking architecture, narrow streets, and tightly packed neighborhoods" (Mefti, 2017, p. 22). The Casbah is the neighborhood that attracts the most tourists both from within and outside Algeria. This is juxtaposed with a modern architectural landmark, the Great Mosque (Djamaa El Djazaïr), which is linked in the novel to Martyrs' Square in the words of Zaouch (a character): "I headed to the Great Mosque at Martyrs' Square." Here, the novelist emphasizes both the local and urban character alongside the historical and civilizational dimensions these landmarks acquire. The Great Mosque is a contemporary engineering and architectural structure yet deeply rooted in history, especially as it is the third-largest mosque globally and serves as a monument to Islam and the martyrs. With its minaret towering over the Mohammedia district and the corridors of the colonial past, its location -formerly used during the occupation as a headquarters for French Crusader missionaries, and situated at the end of a road where the French colonizer built a wine factory- stands as a powerful symbol. Celebrating these landmarks is a celebration of locality and the symbols of modern identity.

The author mentions several other landmarks, such as the Hamma Garden. Zaouch says, "We run, as we are accustomed to doing every day, along the roads of Marché 12 Street until we reach the Botanical Garden in Hamma" (Mefti, 2017, p. 114). Said describes its vastness and beauty: "The large and beautiful Hamma Garden was our refuge when we were children and the narrow alleys of the

neighborhood suffocated us" (Mefti, 2017, p. 19). These portrayals of a local landmark acquiring architectural, historical, and even touristic value in the heart of the capital represent its breathing space, its lungs, joy, and purity. This is expressed by Zahra El Fatmi (a character in the novel): "The most beautiful thing about the building I was born in is that it is adjacent to the Botanical Garden, and my window overlooked the towering eucalyptus trees and the chirping birds; I felt as if I were living between two different and distant banks" (Mefti, 2017, pp. 322-323). Not far from this, we find the novelist celebrating locality and the historical dimensions of spatiality by relaying descriptions and mentioning several streets bearing historically significant names. For example, El Hadi Ben Mansour says, "We asked the driver to take us to First of May Square" (Mefti, 2017, p. 189), "I was on Hassiba Ben Bouali Street" (Mefti, 2017, p. 242), and "On the long Larbi Ben M'hidi Street" (Mefti, 2017, p. 251). Zaouch notes, "We walked with her until we reached Amirouche Street" (Mefti, 2017, p. 150).

The intersection of urban architecture and historical dimensions in the novelistic work, along with the invocation of these nomenclatures holding immense identity value, strongly signifies the novelist's commitment to emphasizing locality. Despite these streets holding different names during the Ottoman era, the French colonial period, or even post-independence, he celebrated them by invoking their modern, localized names.

Furthermore, celebrating the local spatiality of the capital is intrinsically tied to highlighting the natural amalgamation of the city embracing the Mediterranean Sea. Bachir Mefti deliberately discusses the strategic locations of the capital—a coastal city blending with the sea and the greenery of nature. This emerges in a dialogue between Zaouch and Warda: "She was telling me about the places I wanted to see but she hadn't visited, like the Bab El Oued neighborhood, its cornice overlooking the sea, and the beaches that offered a view of the entirety of Algiers." From the novelist's clarification, we deduce that this entanglement between architecture and nature in all its manifestations is inherently a touristic practice, aiming to extol the city, its local civilizational components, their historical dimensions, and their value in Algerian society.

The novelist does not stop there; he intimately links the architecture and spatial environments of the capital with cultural and aesthetic dimensions. He describes the neighborhoods of "Belcourt" through the protagonist, Said: "The wonderful area of Belcourt, and it is wonderful for several reasons" (Mefti, 2017, p. 12). The repetition of the word "wonderful" in the same sentence implies an adulation of this neighborhood that embraced the protagonist and where he grew up, stemming from the novelist's own attachment to this space. We also find him linking the Sidi M'hamed cemetery with urban aesthetics on one hand, and the historical and cultural dimensions of the space on the other. Said notes: "The fascinating Sidi M'hamed cemetery, which was a meeting place for women and seekers of the miracles of righteous saints" (Mefti, 2017, p. 19). This cemetery was a destination for women and all those seeking the blessings of saints a widespread custom among many residents who believe in the idea of the righteous saint as a conduit drawing the servant closer to their Lord.

Through the novel, BachirMefti brilliantly captures the urban image of the spatial environments of the capital, making it the veritable capital of the novel and a declaration of its locality. This functions as a form of affiliation with the city and the nation, and an exaltation of local nationalism. Celebrating the city and rendering the novel almost like a tourist guide that leads the reader through the alleys, streets, and neighborhoods of the capital provides a vivid picture where urbanism blends with culture and history, opening up to nature and embracing historical monuments that attest to the deep-rootedness of this local entity.

02-02 -Local Systems Between the Social Image and Cultural Dominants

Relaying images related to social, cultural, and religious aspects, and shedding light on issues and problems intertwined with societal components, are factors through which a novel is classified as inherently local. In referencing this, we find BachirMefti declaring the dominance of the local trait in his novel by touching upon all of these elements—conveying and embodying both positive and negative details: violence, poverty, ignorance, murder, unemployment, destruction, taboos, love, happiness, and coexistence among individuals. This is presented in an

exposition of various contradictions and opposing dichotomies. We observe the pronounced class stratification of Algiers' society; the writer notes: "The cable car (téléphérique) that connected the residents of below with the residents of above" (Mefti, 2017, p. 41). This disparity, a legacy of French colonialism among the children of a single homeland, is further detailed when discussing Mr. Khaled (a character): "He worked with the rank of 'Caid' under the French administration, and owned a plot of land in the western area of Algiers" (Mefti, 2017, p. 19). The author swiftly transitions to portraying the ethnic diversity in the capital when discussing the Belcourt neighborhood: "The neighborhood where I lived was undoubtedly teeming with residents from the north and the south, often the blond from the Kabylie region and the dark-skinned from the vast central region, but we felt that we belonged to this great city and were part of its unification colored by a shared spirit" (Mefti, 2017, p. 21). Demonstrating the demographic diversity in Algiers is entirely natural in a novel with a local character, as the area was densely populated and served as a major hub -especially (Marché 12)- attracting different races and ethnicities from various regions in search of work and trade opportunities.

The author then points to a local problem within Algerian and specifically Algiers' society: violence against women. Speaking of Warda Sinan, who suffered from domestic violence at the hands of her stepfather, the author writes: "The day I saw her stepfather hitting her intensely for a reason unknown to me; he beat her as if she were a piece of wood feeling nothing" (Mefti, 2017, p. 74), and later, "Until I saw her stepfather grab her and beat her violently, which provoked my anger" (Mefti, 2017, p. 123). All this happened to a young girl in plain sight, yet no one could intervene due to the private nature of the matter and its ties to the family. Zaouch, who attempted to intervene to save the girl, was himself beaten by his father, who told him: "What is your business with them?" (Mefti, 2017, p. 124). All of this clearly signals the phenomenon of violence against children and women in Algerian society, rooted in the prevailing mentalities of the time, which viewed traditional upbringing as naturally leaning towards violence and the law of the jungle. This could also be attributed to what the author indicated regarding the residents of the Marché 12 neighborhood living below the poverty line, which generated severe

social and life pressures, thus breeding this violence against vulnerable groups. Asmahan (another character) speaks of the same issue: "I was raised on violence; my father would hit me as well just for suspecting that someone was interested in me" (Mefti, 2017, p. 206). These are among the prevailing social images and cultures in Algiers' society. Asmahan continued to suffer this violence even in her marital home, stating: "Then I moved to a psychologically complex husband, full of every psychological illness imaginable. Jealous as well, suspecting even an ant if he saw me looking at it, and he quickly began hitting me too... I had a husband who only entered the house to humiliate me or make me feel that I was less than a crawling worm whose neck he could crush and tear apart in the blink of an eye" (Mefti, 2017, pp. 205-206). It is as if this young woman was created for torture and abuse, expected to submit totally to patriarchal authority without the right to defend herself. This patriarchal authority dominated Algiers' society, even among siblings. Zaouch says: "The house is a closed, narrow space full of bickering among everyone. My sisters suffered from the oppression of my brothers, and even from my mother, who acted like an officer in a military barracks, showing them the evils of harsh treatment" (Mefti, 2017, p. 99). The cramped housing and difficult social conditions led to these conflicts where females were always the losing party.

We also find the writer hinting at another problem that spawned these deplorable manifestations: the housing crisis and overcrowded living conditions. Zaouch notes: "I lived on the fourth floor of a five-story building, inside a small apartment consisting of two rooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom, with a family of six" (Mefti, 2017, p. 98). Ali El Harrachi (a character in the novel) expresses this by saying: "My father possessed neither knowledge nor money, nor the strength that would qualify him to survive, nor did any of my ten brothers and sisters; we were a multitude suffocated by the small space of the house" (Mefti, 2017, pp. 263-264). This extreme poverty experienced by Ali El Harrachi's father forced him to give up one of his sons to the mosque's imam -who had no children and was financially well-off- so his son could live a decent life far from the poverty line, learn the Quran, the Sunnah, and Islamic sciences, and escape the suffering under which his father groaned. Ali says of his father: "He worked as a cobbler in the popular market.

Despite people's view of a cobbler as extremely shabby, helpless and powerless -a condescending view the cause of which I do not know- they usually confused it with shoe-shining, the profession that Algerians divorced after independence so it wouldn't remind them of their humiliating years of poverty" (Mefti, 2017, p. 157). Poverty was not limited to the illiterate or poorly educated classes; it even afflicted the educated class, who struggled to find work and realize their dreams. This class disparity in the capital's neighborhoods caused intellectuals to collide with a miserable reality that did not serve the scholar who dedicated their life to study to uplift and serve their country. This is the case with El Hadi Ben Mansour, who studied in Algeria and traveled to Bulgaria on a scholarship to study cinema. After seven years, he returned to the capital, full of hope to realize his dream and work in his country. However, nepotism (wasata), heavily alluded to by the novelist as another phenomenon plaguing society, stood as an obstacle. He wanted to produce a film about the popular life of the people and the reality of Algiers' neighborhoods, but notes: "Some warned me against it, saying: 'If you don't have connections, there is no need to tire yourself'" (Mefti, 2017, p. 264). Dreams in this city are destined to die, and what happened to El Hadi Ben Mansour is profound proof of that.

Imbuing the novel with the trait of locality and setting a specific spatial environment as the capital of the events necessitates addressing the customs and traditions prevailing in that society. The author mentions manifestations of modesty, propriety, and women not leaving the house except out of necessity, accompanied by a male guardian (mahram), and wearing modest clothing (the Haik). Zaouch says: "As for my sisters, they didn't leave the house except for shopping or the public bath once a week, and usually only after their friends, because it was forbidden for them to move without a male guardian watching over them" (Mefti, 2017, p. 105). This was a defining characteristic of Algerian families in the capital.

Marriage, as a tradition, proceeded according to laws inherited across generations, forged by social custom. A girl could not choose her life partner, nor could she even steal a glance at whoever knocked on the door. The author writes: "Traditions dictated that a girl's marriage is the most beautiful thing she dreams of,

or so I heard several times from my mother as she trained my sisters for their future in the happy marital home" (Mefti, 2017, p. 106). Marriage was viewed as the ultimate goal for which women were created, and mothers had to train their daughters to become housewives, regardless of the girls' own opinions, which could not be expressed in any way. If the family deemed the suitor suitable, the matter was closed. Zaouch, speaking of his sister Rachida, says: "Everyone continued to treat her as if she were marching toward realizing her dream of marriage, and that this person who proposed to her was from a noble family and had a job" (Mefti, 2017, p. 107). Despite Rachida's sadness and rejection of this marriage, she couldn't confess her feelings even to her mother, because the girl represented the family's honor, and it was her duty to marry whomever the family chose and deemed suitable. This ultimately drove her to end her own life. Her brother Zaouch, who had assumed his family lacked feelings and emotions, discovered the opposite after his sister's suicide, noting: "Suddenly, it became clear that they too possess feelings, emotions dripping from their hearts, after they had appeared indifferent and living without a soul" (Mefti, 2017, p. 116). The novelist focuses on these manifestations and the prevailing culture in his narrative text to unveil before the receiver the sensitive topics and distinguishing features of Algiers' society as a representative sample of local societies, thereby cementing the local character of the novel as a whole.

The novelist in this work portrays social life in all its negative and positive aspects. Despite the poverty, oppression, injustice, corruption, unemployment, and other widespread social problems in a popular neighborhood like Marché 12 and others, manifestations of love, cohesion, and coexistence among its individuals were palpable. The author and the protagonist of the novel (Said), before narrating his story, confesses his love for Algiers and his deep attachment to it. Thus, in the first chapter of the novel, he affirms his belonging to this city and his adoration for it: "And I loved this city that leaves no one neutral before its greatness and its degradation... To win her is as if you have won the most beautiful woman in the world, and for her to win you is as if you have fallen between the jaws of the worst executioner in history" (Mefti, 2017, pp. 21-22).

The author's confession of love for the spatial environment is clearly embodied through these words and others, such as: "It is a cursed city, as has been said of it, and whoever it strikes with its arrow loses insight before sight, and whoever loves it will die of infatuation like madmen, and whoever blesses its reign will remain an exile on earth throughout his life, and in the sky throughout his death" (Mefti, 2017, p. 22). He who truly loves is enamored with the details, and this is exactly what BachirMefti has conveyed to us in his novel, which he stamped with the most defining characteristics of locality.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, we present the findings and recommendations we have reached in the following points:

- BachirMefti uniquely depicted local spatiality through multifaceted images to reflect the tragic reality, effectively projecting local problems onto the spatial environment that harbors them.
- The cross-pollination of spatiality -as a material entity from which the novelist draws their creative material- with the characters, events, and problems interacting within it, unveils intellectual visions and psychological crises to the reader.
- The representation of Algiers' spatiality in the novel transcended the traditional concept of space as a mere container for events and narrative progression, transforming it into a productive structure generating semantic dimensions within the narrative corpus.
- The focus on local issues reflected in the novelistic text elevates the novel from a purely entertaining creative work to a practice encompassing historiography, reporting, critique, and more.
- By celebrating local spatiality, BachirMefti sought to propel his novel toward universality; engaging with and promoting local reality and its embedded values establishes a foundation for self-assertion and reflects a pride in local realities.
- BachirMefti attempted to shatter Western transcendental paradigms in novel writing, launching instead from a dissection of local reality, making it a narrative material to celebrate and highlighting his pride and belonging to the local spatial environment.

- BachirMefti successfully captured the vast majority of elements that compel the reader to classify the novel as distinctly local.
- BachirMefti excelled in making his novel a reflection of reality by diagnosing numerous local issues and problematics, intricately tying them to a specific local spatial environment.

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