

## **Childhood in the Algerian Novel: Reclaiming the Self and Constructing Memory**

*Reading the Representations of Childhood as a Space for Reconstructing the Individual  
Self and Collective Memory in the Algerian Novelistic Corpus*

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### **Abstract**

This study seeks to examine the narrative function of childhood in the Algerian novel as a central signifying structure that transcends the boundaries of a passing theme, through a comparative critical reading organized into twelve sections combining theoretical framing (childhood in literary criticism, memory and identity, and autobiographical fiction) with an applied analysis of representative works from successive generations of Algerian novelists: from the founding generation (Mohammed Dib, Kateb Yacine, Malek Haddad, and Mouloud Feraoun), to women's writing (Assia Djebar), the post-independence generation (Rachid Boudjedra and Rachid Mimouni), and the contemporary generation (Waciny Laredj). The study concludes that the Algerian novel employs childhood as a dual-function device: reclaiming the fragmented individual self on the one hand, and reconstructing the nation's collective memory on the other, such that the child's narrative biography cannot be separated from the biography of the nation itself throughout its colonial and postcolonial stages.

**Keywords:** Childhood; Algerian novel; collective memory; identity; Mohammed Dib; Kateb Yacine.

## **Introduction**

Childhood occupies an exceptional position in the Algerian novelistic imagination, as hardly any Algerian novel is devoid of its evocation, whether as an age-related stage that the narrator recalls in a nostalgic tone or as a profound narrative structure that governs the formation of the character and shapes its vision of the world. This extensive presence of childhood cannot be understood independently of the historical condition in which the Algerian novel emerged. This art form, which was born under French colonialism and whose aesthetic and ideological consciousness was shaped in opposition to the project of erasing identity, found in childhood an inexhaustible source for understanding the mechanisms of both alienation and resistance.

The child in the Algerian novel is not merely an innocent age-based character; rather, he is often an observing eye focused on a troubled world and a consciousness in the process of formation that encounters the violence of the colonial reality or the violence of the post-independence period at an early stage. Thus, childhood narrative becomes both an emotional and a historical document. Hence emerges the central problem of this study: How did the Algerian novelist employ childhood as a tool for reclaiming the fragmented self and as a mechanism for constructing individual and collective memory within a postcolonial context marked by an unsettled identity?

This study proceeds from the hypothesis that writing about childhood in the Algerian novel cannot be separated from the project of reclaiming the wounded national self. When the novelist recalls his childhood or invents a childhood for his characters, he is, in fact, reconstructing the image of the homeland before and after the wound, attempting, through narrating the minor self (the child), to deconstruct and reconstruct the narrative of the greater self (the nation). Several subsidiary questions arise from this central hypothesis: What is the relationship between childhood and place in the Algerian novel? How did the founding generation of novelists (Mohammed Dib, Kateb Yacine, Malek Haddad, and Mouloud Feraoun) deal with a childhood marked by colonialism? How did the function of childhood change in the post-independence novel so as to engage in a critique of the shortcomings of the national state? And what are the particular characteristics of female childhood in Algerian women's writing?

### **1. Childhood in Literary Criticism: From Theme to Signifying Structure**

Childhood is no longer treated in modern critical studies as a marginal theme or a passing narrative embellishment. Rather, it has become a central signifying structure that governs the production of meaning within the novelistic text. Poststructuralist narrative criticism views childhood as a "perspective" that determines the angle from which events are perceived. When the world is narrated through the eyes of a child, reality is reshaped through a different sensibility that combines apparent naivety with depth of symbolic perception, thereby granting the writer considerable scope for irony and implicit criticism.

From a psychological perspective, childhood in literature constitutes a recovery of the "lost time" in the Proustian sense, whereby childhood memory becomes a repository of the first images that subsequently shape the writer's vision of the world. Childhood novels have generally been regarded as a form of the "bildungsroman," tracing the character's

development from innocence to consciousness, from integration within the family to confrontation with the outside world and its harshness. However, the Algerian novel has added a particular dimension to this Western model: confrontation with the world is not limited to an individual crisis of maturation but necessarily intersects with a collective colonial trauma. Thus, the “bildungsroman” among Algerian writers becomes a narrative of national formation as much as it is one of individual formation.

Critical studies addressing this phenomenon in the Maghreb context demonstrate that the evocation of childhood in the novel generally serves two complementary functions: a documentary-social function that records the details of everyday life, customs, and spaces threatened with disappearance, and a symbolic-psychological function that transforms the child into a metaphor for the nation in the process of formation or collapse. This is clearly manifested in the study devoted by the researcher Abd al-Rahman Ben Yatou to Mohammed Dib’s trilogy, which he described as “a childhood novel par excellence,” in which the writer relied on two elements that shared the role of protagonists: “childhood as a human theme on the one hand, and the genius of place on the other,” such that the child Omar in the trilogy became “a true prophecy of the Algeria to come” [i]. He further states: “Childhood as a human theme on the one hand, and the genius of place on the other... Thus, the child (Omar) became a true prophecy of the Algeria to come, while Dar Sbitar became a dynamic symbol of the Algerian reality capable of exploding” [ii].

This precise characterization encapsulates the essence of what this study seeks to elaborate: the child in the Algerian literary corpus is not merely a character but rather a “prophecy” and a “dynamic symbol,” that is, a narrative device onto which meanings extending beyond the individual toward the collective and the national are projected.

## **2. Memory, Identity, and Autobiographical Fiction**

### **2.1 Memory between the Individual and the Collective**

Memory constitutes the fundamental tool through which childhood is narratively reconstructed. The writer does not recount his childhood exactly as it occurred; rather, he recounts it as memory reconstructs it after a temporal and psychological distance that allows for interpretation, selection, and symbolic intensification. Critical studies distinguish between individual memory, which concerns the writer’s personal experience, and collective memory, which preserves the experiences and major events of the nation, such as colonialism, the revolution, and independence. What is particularly significant in the Algerian novel is that the two constantly overlap: the individual memory of the child becomes a gateway to the collective memory of the nation, so that the story of the child cannot be separated from the story of the homeland.

### **2.2 Autobiographical Fiction: The Boundaries between Imagination and Documentation**

A significant part of Algerian childhood novels falls within a hybrid genre known as “autobiographical fiction” or the “autobiographical novel,” a genre situated at the boundaries between the autobiographical pact (the correspondence between the author, narrator, and character) and the novelistic pact (freedom of imagination). An Algerian study addressed this issue under the title “Autobiography between the Autobiographical and the Novelistic in Contemporary Algerian Literature: A Reading of the Concepts and Intentions.” The study

examined “two literary genres, namely autobiography and the autobiographical novel, from a theoretical perspective,” and investigated “what the two genres share in terms of their literary elements,” ultimately seeking to examine “the intentions of autobiography, particularly the novelistic form thereof, through an applied perspective” on texts from contemporary Algerian literature [iii].

This overlap is clearly manifested in a comparative example from Maghreb literature more generally, namely Leila Abouzeid’s novel *Return to Childhood*, which has been described as an “excavation into memory” and a “depiction of the social and psychological condition of the family” within a colonial context. The author evoked “the period of colonialism and the political, social, and cultural transformations that characterized this period” and their reflection in the fabric of the autobiographical narrative [iv]. Although this approach lies outside the strictly Algerian literary corpus, it helps illuminate a mechanism shared by Maghreb literature more generally: transforming the photographic or mental image of childhood into a “historical document recording an important period” in the life of both the individual and the collective.

### 2.3 Fragmented Identity and the Question of Language

It is impossible to discuss the reclamation of the self in the Algerian novel without addressing the dilemma of language. The pioneering generation wrote in the language of the colonizer, French, a choice that itself carried a painful contradiction, expressed by Kateb Yacine in his famous statement that he regarded French as “a war booty,” declaring that he wrote in it “to tell the French language that I am not French” [v]. This linguistic rupture is directly reflected in the representation of childhood: the child who receives his education in the French school while living his emotional and family life in Arabic, Amazigh, or colloquial Arabic experiences an early fragmentation of identity that later becomes a central theme in the maturation of the novelist’s literary work.

## **3. Historical Context: The Emergence of the Algerian Novel and the Presence of Childhood**

### 3.1 The Founding Generation and Literature of the Colonial Period

The modern Algerian novel emerged essentially during the 1940s and 1950s, amid an exceptionally harsh colonial period. From its inception, it carried the concern of expressing the suffering of the Algerian people and their symbolic and actual resistance to occupation. It can be observed that many novelists of this founding generation chose childhood as an entry point into their early novels, considering it the age closest to the popular everyday life that the writers sought to document and preserve literarily in the face of colonialism’s erasure of the features of national identity.

Mohammed Dib is a prominent example of this tendency. Throughout his novelistic career, he repeatedly returned to addressing “an aspect of his childhood and the harsh events that confronted him,” while presenting “a comprehensive picture of what the Algerian people were suffering” under colonial oppression. This led him to demonstrate a “readiness to engage in the liberation revolution” at the level of literary consciousness even before the revolution actually erupted [vi]. This pattern was likewise repeated among Algerian writers who wrote in French, such as Mouloud Feraoun and Malek Haddad, who “succeeded in

writing the Algerian novel in French” and in “asserting themselves in a highly distinctive field such as literature,” while nevertheless preserving “a specifically Arab character in their anti-colonial and resistant content” [vii].

### 3.2 Childhood as Testimony to Colonial Alienation

Childhood acquires, in this foundational context, a dual documentary-protest value: on the one hand, it records the details of the daily life of the colonized Algerian family (poverty, confined space, paternal authority, the Qur’anic teacher and Qur’anic school versus the French school); on the other hand, it exposes the mechanisms of symbolic and material violence exercised by the colonial regime upon the child’s body and nascent consciousness, beginning with discrimination at school and culminating in scenes of repression and displacement observed by the child narrator with an eye that does not yet possess the full tools of interpretation, thus leaving the reader to complete the meaning. In this way, the apparent innocence of the child becomes a tool of defamiliarization (in the Brechtian sense), deepening the effect of exposure and condemnation.

#### **4. Mohammed Dib: *La Grande Maison* and the Poetics of Childhood Space**

Mohammed Dib’s novel *La Grande Maison* (1952) has received direct and extensive academic critical attention as the most representative model of the theme of childhood in the early Algerian novel. This is confirmed, at least, by two Algerian master’s theses devoted entirely to this issue. The first, entitled “The Image of the Child in the Contemporary Algerian Novel: Mohammed Dib’s *La Grande Maison* as a Model,” demonstrates in its abstract that the novel “addresses in its content several problems arising from the depths of Algerian society, embodied in the story of (Omar), this poor and miserable child who suffers in order to obtain a piece of bread” [1], whether through protecting his classmates at school or through helping his neighbor “Yamina” in “Dar Sbitar” in exchange for obtaining food. The second thesis, entitled “The Image of the Child in Mohammed Dib’s Novel *La Grande Maison*” (Mohamed Boudiaf University, M’Sila), elaborates on this representation through two complementary chapters. The first addresses the issue of “Omar and the Great House between Identity and the Presence of Belonging” [2], while the second examines “The Great House and the Symbolism of Place” [3]. In its analysis of the chapter “Omar and the Erasure of Identity through French-Language Education,” the study concludes that the French school during the colonial period “sought to erase the national personality with all its constituent elements.” It did not introduce the child Omar to his people and his history; rather, it “taught him that France was his motherland,” something that “Omar found astonishing and knew to be a lie.” Thus, the colonial school became a coercive instrument for erasing Algerian identity in the child rather than an instrument for educating him [4].

As for the dimension of “the symbolism of place,” the same thesis highlights how Mohammed Dib employs the novel’s three spaces—the house, the school, and the street—as “closed” and “open” spaces that govern the formation of the character of the child Omar. The Great House (“Dar Sbitar”) is a narrow, enclosed space bringing together densely packed poor families struggling with the conflicts of everyday poverty. The school is another enclosed space in which symbolic and epistemic violence is exercised, whereas the street becomes the child’s only refuge when “he found no comfort at home and nothing pleasing

at school, so he spent his day in the street,” causing his actual upbringing to become an upbringing of the street par excellence [5]. The study concludes in its final section that Mohammed Dib “succeeded in making childhood one of the fundamental themes of his novel” and succeeded in “conveying the suffering of children with honesty and realism because he lived in that environment and tasted the bitterness of misery.” His choice of childhood in particular was not “an arbitrary choice, but rather because this group represents the future, and it is the group that had recently grown up among the fangs of occupation at the height of the colonial era to bear the tragedy” [6].

From a stylistic perspective, Dib employs an intense poetic language in describing the domestic space as an extension of both the mother’s body and the homeland. The details of the courtyard, the narrow rooms, and the densely packed neighbors thus become a visual lexicon that transports the reader into the heart of the sensory experience of impoverished childhood. At the same time, the omniscient narrator’s voice occasionally intervenes, granting the scenes involving the child Omar a contemplative dimension that exceeds his immediate perception. This narrative technique enables the writer to combine the authenticity of the child’s perspective with the depth of socio-political analysis.

Appendix: Parallel Models from Criticism of the Image of the Child in the Algerian Novel  
This reading intersects with another peer-reviewed study that examined a different novelistic model in terms of both period and subject matter, namely the study “The Image of the Child in the Algerian Novelistic Imagination during the Liberation Revolution: Maamar Hadjij’s *Nights Pregnant with Moons* as a Model.” The study observed how “the child appeared in it as a revolutionary, a preserver of the Book of God, and a defender of his national values in terms of language, identity, and culture” [7]. This confirms that the function of the child character changes with the historical period: from a victim-child who exposes the misery of colonial alienation in Dib, to a positive and resistant child who embodies the values of the revolution in Hadjij, without either case being detached from the common essence: employing childhood as a tool for reading the relationship between the small individual and the greater homeland.

### **5. Kateb Yacine: *Nedjma* and Fragmented Identity**

Kateb Yacine’s novel *Nedjma* (1956), written when its author was twenty-eight years old [8], represents a fundamental turning point in the Algerian novel’s treatment of the questions of identity and memory. Although it is not a childhood novel in the literal and direct sense, as is the case with Dib, its deep structure is based on recovering the memory of origins and roots through four young men—Mourad, Lakhdar, Rachid, and Mustapha—who “are united by kinship ties on the one hand and by the dream of rebellion and revolution on the other.” All of them search for “Nedjma,” the symbolic woman who encapsulates “the lost and scattered homeland” and “the identity lost among different origins” [9].

Critical studies have observed that Nedjma’s identity itself was “deliberately confused,” making it “based on her own interpretation of memory and history,” such that “memory is no longer individual but becomes a shared social memory through narrative plotting” [10]. This is precisely the essence of what we seek to demonstrate in this study: the search for the lost childhood origin (*Nedjma* as mother-homeland-myth) transforms from an individual

quest undertaken by the four protagonists into a collective project for reconstructing the narrative of the “ancestors of the nation,” since “national identity cannot be separated from the narrative of the ancestors of the nation” and their documents and original historical facts. “National identity cannot be separated from the narrative of the ancestors of the nation, as well as its original documents and facts; the existence of identity has remained inseparably connected to its narration” [11].

The radical nature of Kateb Yacine lies in the fact that he did not write a linear and reassuring childhood biography. Instead, he exploded the novelistic form itself—the interweaving of temporalities, the multiplicity of voices, and the fragmentation of the plot—to make the form itself an objective correlative of the fragmentation of Algerian identity and memory at the moment of late colonialism and the beginnings of the revolution. Thus, *Nedjma* becomes closer to a deferred and scattered collective childhood memory, whose fragments are reassembled through narrative rather than being recounted in a calm, sequential manner as in Dib’s trilogy.

#### **6. Malek Haddad and Mouloud Feraoun: Childhood, Migration, and Fragmentation**

Whereas Dib and Kateb Yacine wrote childhood from within occupied Algeria, Malek Haddad adds another dimension: the childhood of migration and the fragmentation of the self between the two shores of the Mediterranean. He “succeeded in writing the Algerian novel in French” and in “asserting himself in a highly distinctive field,” while preserving “a specifically Arab character in its anti-colonial and resistant content” [12]. However, he distinguished himself through a refined sensitivity to the loss of the mother tongue and its impact on the formation of the self from childhood, until his famous statement that “French is my exile” became a defining expression for understanding the linguistic wound that has pursued the Francophone Algerian writer from early childhood.

Similarly, Mouloud Feraoun presents in his works an image of Kabyle mountain childhood, characterized by poverty, early labor, and the gradual separation from the land as a result of migration toward the cities or toward France. He offers a calm and realistic representation that moves away from explicit political directness without being any less condemnatory of the colonial system of impoverishment. The experiences of Haddad and Feraoun converge in their portrayal of childhood as the last moment of harmony before colonialism, migration, and war impose an irreversible fragmentation between the self and its original roots.

#### **7. Assia Djebar: Female Childhood between the Veil and Writing**

Assia Djebar represents a landmark in Algerian women’s writing, as the issue of childhood intersects in her work with questions of gender and the space divided between the female interior (the house, the hammam, the harem) and the male exterior (the street, the mixed school, and public space). The girl’s childhood in her works is not merely an age-related stage; it is also an initial moment of negotiation with the boundaries of the body and freedom. The girl’s entry into the French school thus carries a dual significance: symbolic liberation from the isolation of the traditional female space, while simultaneously entering a colonial system that imposes a language and a frame of reference alien to the family.

This vision intersects with what studies of Maghrebien women’s autobiographical writing have demonstrated more generally: writing about female childhood is often associated with

a revealing moment (such as the removal of the veil or the first confrontation with a harsh social gaze) that becomes a turning point in the narrator's awareness of her female self within a patriarchal social system. Thus, women's writing adds a qualitative dimension to the theme of childhood in the Algerian novel. It does not merely question colonialism and national identity; it also subjects the internal patriarchal structures of Algerian society itself to critical scrutiny through the eyes of the girl who discovers, at an early age, the limits of her dual freedom.

#### **8. Rachid Boudjedra and Rachid Mimouni: Post-Independence Childhood and Criticism of the National State**

With the generation of novelists that emerged after independence (1962), the function of childhood in the Algerian novel underwent a fundamental transformation. After having served as a tool for exposing colonial alienation, it became, in the works of writers such as Rachid Boudjedra and Rachid Mimouni, a tool for criticizing the shortcomings and disappointments of the emerging national state, including bureaucratic authoritarianism, corruption, and the frustration of the dreams of independence. The child in this wave of fiction is often recalled as a witness to the gap separating the promises of the revolution from the disappointing reality of the post-independence period.

Boudjedra's style, particularly in his early works written in French, is characterized by a technical disruption of the narrative sentence—the long, flowing sentence and stream of consciousness—which embodies the disturbance of childhood memory when it encounters dual violence: remembered colonial violence and experienced post-independence violence. Rachid Mimouni, meanwhile, sometimes employs childhood through a tone of bitter irony, exposing the falsity of official discourses by contrasting them with the simple childhood dream of justice and dignity, in a critical endeavor that reformulates the relationship between the individual memory of the child-writer and the disappointed collective memory of the nation after independence.

#### **9. Waciny Laredj and the New Generation: Childhood and the Recovery of National Memory**

Waciny Laredj, alongside writers of his generation, represents a continuation of the project of recovering memory through childhood, but with more complex narrative tools that combine historical documentation with modernist and sometimes postmodernist fiction (multiple voices, overlapping temporalities, and metanarrative). The novels of this generation tend largely to evoke a childhood divided between two periods: the memory of the liberation revolution, which the writer did not experience directly but inherited orally, and the memory of the "Black Decade" and the period that followed, characterized by internal violence that reopened the wounds of identity and belonging.

This writing intersects with what recent Algerian studies have observed concerning the employment of "local memory, popular mythology, and the Maghrebian space" in contemporary Algerian fiction and storytelling, within a "changing civilizational context seeking to overcome the crisis of writing and identity in a troubled world," thereby granting the text "its new language and its different aesthetic horizon" [13]. Thus, childhood in this new generation becomes a space for reconstructing a fragmented national memory situated

between the oral memory of the ancestors, archival documentation, and the writer's own fictional imagination.

#### **10. Childhood and Linguistic Identity: Between Francophonie and Arabic**

The theme of childhood cannot be separated from the question of language that has continued to trouble the Algerian novel since its emergence. The pioneering generation (Dib, Kateb Yacine, Haddad, and Feraoun) wrote in French, whereas a later generation of Arabophone novelists emerged, such as Tahar Ouetar and Abdelhamid Benhadouga, who recovered childhood through literary Arabic infused with Algerian colloquial Arabic. Kateb Yacine described this painful linguistic choice in his famous statement that he wrote in French "to tell the French language that I am not French," considering it "a war booty" [14]. This statement encapsulates the paradox of an entire generation whose childhood was divided between the language of the home and the language of the colonial school.

This linguistic division means that the recovery of childhood itself takes on a different character depending on the language that carries it. Writing in French about Arab-Amazigh childhood involves a structural paradox between the language of narration and the language of the lived experience being recovered, whereas later writing in Arabic seeks to bridge this rupture by recovering a childhood vocabulary closer to the original pronunciation of sounds, names, and places, although it too operates within literary Arabic, which may itself be distant from the colloquial language that constitutes the actual language of lived childhood.

#### **11. Childhood and Gender in Algerian Women's Writing**

Alongside Assia Djebar, other Algerian female voices have contributed to developing a distinctive treatment of the theme of childhood, such that female childhood is no longer narrated from the outside—as in male narratives that turn women into symbols such as Nedjma in Kateb Yacine—but is narrated from within, through the voice of the girl-narrator herself. This writing intersects with growing critical interest in "autobiographical writing" in contemporary Algerian literature, which seeks to "reveal how" the Algerian writer—and specifically here, the female writer—"wrote her biography... as an affirmation of herself and a confirmation of her identity" [15].

This feminist perspective enables childhood to be reread as an initial moment in the formation of awareness of both the body and social constraint, revealing that the recovery of the self in the Algerian novel does not take place only in opposition to external colonialism or the national state, but also in opposition to internal structures (the extended family, the authority of the father and brother, and the division of space) that restrict the freedom of the female self from childhood. This makes women's childhood narratives a dual project of liberation: from colonial-national alienation and from internal patriarchal alienation simultaneously.

#### **12. Childhood as the Construction of Collective Memory and the Nation**

As a synthesis of the foregoing, it can be argued that the Algerian novel has made childhood an indispensable passage toward reconstructing the collective memory of the nation. When the novelist recalls the space of the Great House in Dib, the myth of Nedjma in Kateb Yacine, the exile of language in Haddad, the veil of female childhood in Djebar, the disappointment of the post-independence period in Boudjedra and Mimouni, or the multiplicity of historical

voices in Laredj, he is, each time, rewriting the biography of the homeland through the biography of the child. Thus, childhood becomes a meeting point between the individual autobiographical pact and the collective historical pact, where the writer recounts his childhood only in order to recount, in parallel, the childhood of an entire nation—Algeria before and after independence, with its wounds and deferred dreams.

This explains the Algerian novel's persistent return, across successive generations, to the scene of childhood. It is not merely a passing nostalgic recollection, but rather a narrative strategy for resisting the forgetting threatened by both colonialism—which sought to erase national memory—and the national state—which may itself seek to impose a single official narrative of history. Through the eyes of the child, the Algerian novel reclaims the right to an individual memory that is multiple and sometimes contradictory, in opposition to all forms of dominant, monolithic narrative.

### **Conclusion**

This study has concluded that childhood in the Algerian novel is not a marginal theme or a narrative embellishment, but rather a central signifying structure consciously employed through artistic and symbolic means to achieve two interconnected projects: reclaiming the fragmented individual self and constructing the collective memory of the nation. From the founding generation (Mohammed Dib, Kateb Yacine, Malek Haddad, and Mouloud Feraoun), which transformed childhood into a testimony to colonial alienation, through women's writing, which added a critical gender dimension (Assia Djebar), to the post-independence generation, which employed childhood to criticize the shortcomings of the national state (Rachid Boudjedra and Rachid Mimouni), and finally to the contemporary generation, which reconstructs a memory fragmented between the revolution and the Black Decade (Waciny Laredj), childhood has remained the thread connecting these temporally and stylistically distant stages.

This reading confirms that the relationship between childhood and memory in the Algerian novel is dialectical rather than simply cumulative: memory is not recovered as it was, but is reformulated and interpreted through the mirror of the child, allowing the writer to question both the colonial past and the national present without falling into the trap of simple nostalgia or abstract condemnation. Despite its breadth, this approach remains open to further development in subsequent studies that examine specific texts in greater detail.

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