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The Female Character in the Novels *Memory in the Flesh* and *Chaos of the Senses*

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the issue of women's character and its role in building the significance of women's narrative text; Ahlam Mosteghanemi made the female character the focus of the text, through her study, we are able to make the text into a semantic explosion by answering the following questions: How will the narrator/man serve the woman, and how will the writer present an image of the woman from a male perspective? Will she succeed in creating a male character away from any projection of a woman's feelings on a man.

Keywords: female character, female writing, novel.

1- THE METHOD OF PRESENTING THE FEMALE CHARACTER:

The scholar *Bouchoucha Ben Jomaa* asserts that a woman's writing is primarily defined by her personal experience and the richness of emotions that shape her self-perception, her relationship with the world, and her stance towards it. Most of the narrative questions in Maghrebian women's novelistic creativity revolve around women, with the narration often being delivered in a female

voice. This makes the woman both the storyteller and the subject of the narrative simultaneously, and thus, the main character in most of their novels. This self-referential tendency reveals the relationship between the act of writing and female identity, explaining the phenomenon of the inflated ego in women's literature in general and the novelistic genre in particular.¹

Through this subjectivity, the Maghrebian female writer expresses a set of feminist themes that occupy a significant place in their narrative texts. These themes are intimate in the feminine personal and social world due to their revelation of the characteristics of female existence and the realities of its conditions in Maghrebian societies. This has made the issues raised by female writers represent the core of female suffering, as they expose the factors behind psychological tension and social existential crises.² However, does the nature of the themes in Maghrebian novels necessarily dictate that the main characters be predominantly women?

The nature of women's literary themes may lead us to accept this perspective, given that the author is a woman and the topics revolve around the female world. However, the Algerian writer *Ahlam Mosteghanemi* challenges this notion by deviating from the conventional approach in *Memory in the Flesh*, where she entrusts the narrative voice to a man, *Khaled*, instead of the expected female narrator that the reader might anticipate in a novel written by a woman.

One of the rare instances where the narrative voice is assigned to a gender different from the author's is found in *Memory in the Flesh*. Typically, authors tend to distance themselves from the act of narration, preferring to be closely aligned with one of the characters rather than the narrator. However, in *Memory in the Flesh*, the suspicion surrounding the author's involvement is removed, as she withdraws from the traditional role of the narrator. Instead, the main character, *Khaled*, narrates the events, conveys dialogues, and describes scenes, while the other central character, *Hayat*, whom *Khaled* loves, is closer to the author in terms of gender and the emotional characteristics associated with women. These emotions are conveyed in the novel from a perspective distinct from the way men typically write about women.³

In *Chaos of the Senses*, *Ahlam Mosteghanemi* assigns the narrative task to a female character, *Hayat*, as if she seeks to present a depiction of women from different perspectives—one from a feminine viewpoint, as seen in *Chaos of the Senses*, and another from a masculine viewpoint, as in *Memory in the Flesh*.

Memory in the Flesh features several female characters, including secondary ones such as *Catherine*, *Khaled's* French friend; *Atika*, the wife of *Hassan* and cousin of *Hayat*; and *Khaled's* mother, *Amma*, whose presence is established through recollections. However, the most prominent female character in the novel is *Hayat*. What makes this novel distinctive is that its author is a woman, yet she chose to present *Hayat* through the perspective of a male character, *Khaled*.

At a later stage in the novel, *Mosteghanemi* assigns another name to the character *Hayat*—*Ahlam*—suggesting that *Khaled's* unattainable dreams are centered around *Hayat*, the woman who embodies other dreams: those of the author herself. This creates the illusion that the author, a woman, distances herself from the masculine narrative voice she imposed on herself, thus exempting herself from this task and entrusting it instead to the male character born from her imagination, burdening him with an emotional weight beyond his capacity.⁴

But how does the narrator *Khaled* present *Hayat*? How does *Mosteghanemi* depict the image of a woman from a masculine perspective? And does she succeed in creating a male character without projecting feminine emotions onto him? The narrative effectively presents a clear image of *Hayat*—

one that does not reveal details about her daily life, making her less of a specific individual and more of an idealized woman: "We know nothing about her daily life; her image does not point to a specific woman but rather to the ideal woman." ⁵

The author's concern was not merely to expose the psychological distress and social struggles of women; she also symbolically links Hayat to the city of Constantine: "You were not a woman; you were a city."

She further extends this symbolism to represent the homeland: "O woman in the likeness of a homeland." ⁶

Since Khaled was deeply in love with Hayat, his narration focused on describing his relationship with her. While he did not reveal much about her daily life, he did provide details about her background—from her birth to her marriage. She is the daughter of the martyr Si Taher and first met Khaled in Paris, where their love story began and ultimately ended in failure when Hayat married an army officer, Si Mustapha, despite still loving Khaled. She even admitted this to him: "Khaled... do you know that I loved you? I once wanted you, desired you to the point of madness... Something in you once stripped me of my reason... But I decided to heal from you. Our love was a pathological one—you yourself said so." ⁷

Beyond Hayat's symbolic significance in *Memory in the Flesh*, we can analyze her portrayal as presented by the narrator. Despite Khaled's deep love for her and his depiction of her as an "enchanted, alluring, desirable princess, surrounded by admiration... confused, confusing, simple, proud," ⁸ he also accuses her of being a murderer: "Were you not made of paper? Loving and hating on paper, abandoning and returning on paper, killing and reviving with a mere stroke of a pen?" ⁹

He describes his writing to her as deadly, much like his love for her: "Writing to you is fatal... like your love." ¹⁰

Just as she metaphorically killed him with her love, she also killed him by marrying someone else: "Perhaps the final way you found to kill me again today—without leaving your fingerprints on my neck." ¹¹

Since writing to her is a form of death, so too is her book: "When did you write that book? Before your marriage or after? Before Ziad left... or after? Did you write it about me... or about him? Did you write it to kill me with it... or to bring him back to life? Or was it meant to end both of us, to kill us together with a single book, just as you left us for a single man?" ¹² That man was "Si Mustapha".

Khaled did not stop at accusing Hayat the woman of murder; he went further to accuse her of betrayal: "...And will my body truly forgive you, in a moment of passion, for all your past and future betrayals? That was madness within madness." ¹³

While her past betrayals are evident, accusing her of future betrayals that have not yet occurred is an unjust verdict. This could stem either from his deep resentment toward her for leaving him or from a masculine perspective that arbitrarily judges women not for any real reason, but simply because they are women.

The narrator reinforces the masculine viewpoint even further by diminishing the role of women and reducing their significance: "There is no space for women beyond the body, and memory is not the path that leads to them. In reality, there is only one path... I can say this with certainty today!" ¹⁴

This statement affirms a male-centric perspective that objectifies the female body as nothing more than a source of pleasure.

Khaled also attributes Hayat's decision to marry a military officer to the supposed weakness and allure that women feel toward military uniforms, even the most unremarkable ones: "Are women really like nations, always feeling some kind of allure... some kind of weakness toward military uniforms... even the dullest ones?!"¹⁵

To Khaled, the military uniform represents power and authority in the eyes of women.

The narrator describes the wedding night—traditionally considered the most joyful occasion for a couple—as a scene tainted with blood, not as a symbol of a woman's honor but as a metaphor for her death: "Something about this atmosphere, charged with ululations, decorations, and the music of the 'dukhla,' along with the cheers in front of a garment stained with blood, reminds me of the rituals of the corrida. That bull, prepared for a beautiful death to the rhythm of festive music, enters the arena and perishes to its melody slain by swords adorned for the kill, entranced by the color red, seduced by a lethal elegance!"¹⁶

This depiction transforms the wedding night into a macabre spectacle, equating it with a bullfight where Hayat is not merely losing her virginity but symbolically meeting her demise. The blood spilled is not just hers it represents the death of the homeland in the presence of high-ranking officials and figures of excess. But does the homeland truly die?

It is crucial to highlight Ahlam Mosteghanemi's ability to craft a male narrator who operates from a dominant masculine consciousness. This is evident in the subjective judgments he passes on Hayat—not because of any wrongdoing on her part, but simply because she did not belong to him despite loving him.

Just as the male narrator is exposed in his vulnerability, the author herself is laid bare through numerous textual moments where her presence is nearly revealed. Additionally, striking similarities emerge between the author and her protagonist, Hayat, particularly in their shared passion for writing. Both engage in storytelling and novel-writing, as reflected in these excerpts: "When we love a girl, we give her our name. When we love a woman, we give her a child. And when we love a writer... we give her a book. I will write a novel for you."¹⁷

And when we love a homeland, we write for it endlessly...

"I interrogated you in search of a suspicious memory. You said: Don't search too much... there is nothing beneath the words. A woman who writes is beyond all suspicion... for she is transparent by nature. Writing reveals only what clings to us from the moment of birth. Seek filth where literature does not exist."¹⁸

Here, the author critiques the way female writers are perceived and judged. Women's writings are often scrutinized not for their literary merit but for potential personal revelations, as if they are on trial within their own texts. Yet, the intersection of autobiography and fiction is not exclusive to women's writing it is a fundamental characteristic of the novel as a whole.

"So, you were a virgin after all, and your sins were nothing but ink on paper."¹⁹

This statement underscores the idea that not everything a woman writes is necessarily true, and there is no need to spy on female authors through their texts.

A reflective reading of the previous examples reveals two key observations:

- a. Hayat who also represents the writer—attempted to deflect suspicion from herself and rejected any preconceived judgments. Everything she revealed was merely "ink on paper," emphasizing that fiction should not be mistaken for reality.
- b. Hayat as both character and writer—urged critics, readers, and men in general, as representatives of the dominant masculine perspective, to "seek filth where literature does not exist." Instead of obsessively scrutinizing female writers' personal lives, energy should be redirected toward forming objective judgments about women's literary contributions. This, in turn, would elevate the quality and recognition of women's writing.

It is evident that Khaled is deeply conflicted about his relationship with Hayat. After accusing her of various betrayals, he arrives at a different realization: "You were neither a liar with me... nor truly honest. Neither a lover... nor truly unfaithful. Neither my daughter... nor truly my mother." ²⁰

Thus, Hayat embodies multiple roles—she is the lover, the mother ("A woman disguised in my mother's clothes, in my mother's scent, in my mother's fear for me." ²¹), the daughter, the city, and the homeland.

Despite Hayat's limited presence in *Memory in the Flesh*, she remains the central figure around whom events revolve. She is the driving force of the narrative, deeply affecting Khaled, who is emotionally overwhelmed by her presence. Instead of confronting his feelings, he succumbs to silence, powerlessness, and pain: "He chose silence over confrontation, surrendered to helplessness and sorrow, never seeking happiness or venturing into the unknown. He remained shackled to the past and his memories, bound by the imaginary barriers his mind had constructed as obstacles and limitations." ²²

Thus, Mosteghanemi highlights a specific aspect of male character: one marked by weakness, resignation, and vulnerability. Meanwhile, she elevates the female figure to a central, dynamic role, presenting her as a source of liberation. Hayat finds a way out by marrying a distinguished man, whereas Khaled remains isolated, clinging to his writing and refusing to embrace life anew: "One does not get bitten twice by the same snake." ²³

He resigns himself to counting his defeats before Hayat: "I linger long upon your eyes, searching in them for the memory of my defeat (before you)." ²⁴

Even though Hayat finds her supposed salvation in marrying Si Mustapha, she is ultimately still escaping—from a past that has become uninhabitable: "I am not truly connected to him... I only flee to him from a memory no longer fit to be lived in, a memory I had furnished with impossible dreams and repeated disappointments." ²⁵

From this analysis, we conclude that Mosteghanemi, despite entrusting the narration to a male character and making him the protagonist, masterfully positioned the female character (Hayat) as the true focal point of the novel. She is the driving force behind events, their catalyst, and their essence.

If we shift our focus to *Chaos of the Senses*, we find that Hayat remains the most prominent female character. After Ahlam Mosteghanemi portrayed Hayat from a masculine perspective through Khaled in *Memory in the Flesh*, she now presents her through a feminine lens—this time as both the protagonist and narrator. The question arises: how does Hayat present herself? Or rather, how does the author/narrator construct the image of the female character in this novel?

Hayat narrates the entire story, yet the text offers little insight into her personal traits or details about her daily life. Instead, the novel focuses on her imagined love affair with a fictional man she has

created. Additionally, we learn about her marriage, but without substantial details regarding her personal existence.

She experiences repeated disappointments and suffers from failed love affairs, losing one beloved figure after another. First, she is deprived of seeing her father, the martyr Si Taher. Then she loses Ziad, Nasser, Khaled, and Abdel Haq the reader of *Memory in the Flesh*.

Thus, Hayat is a woman marked by loss and longing, living through the echoes of unfulfilled love and unattainable connections.

Hayat longed for romantic love, which perhaps led her to engage in an imagined relationship with the fictional hero of her own story. She admits: "...As much as my foolishness in that story annoyed me—how I behaved from the start with an idealistic stupidity, fabricating events, dialogues, and meetings—just so I could live in the illusion of romantic love."²⁶

This search for romance may stem from its absence in her marriage to Si Mustapha, whose rigid military demeanor left no room for such sentiments: "In the beginning, we know whom we are marrying. But as marriage progresses, we no longer recognize the person we are living with."²⁷

Here, Mosteghanemi suggests that romance gradually fades in marriage—if it ever existed at all.

When the author Ahlam Mosteghanemi merges with the narrator-protagonist Hayat (the writer-character), the text becomes a battleground of language, a linguistic duel where words wield power. Hayat, as a writer, enters into this battle determined not to be defeated within the realm of her own book: "And I, who entered this linguistic confrontation with him as a writer who masters words and refuses to be overpowered by a hero in her own domain, in a book that belongs to her, find myself losing round after round, getting entangled with him question after question."²⁸

In *Chaos of the Senses*, the relationship between the writer and language becomes an intimate one, where the female author asserts dominance over the text. In contrast, the other—the man—is relegated to a secondary position, far from his usual place of prominence:

"The writer (protagonist) transforms the man in *Chaos of the Senses* into a linguistic entity, turning her relationship with him into an act of imagination. She reverses roles, assuming positions of movement, initiative, and speech, while he is left in a state of stillness, silence, and waiting."²⁹

Through irony and metaphor, she subverts male authority just as she melts in love, she simultaneously pushes the man to the margins of the text. She reduces him to a linguistic construct and symbolically disarms him: "She severs his arm."³⁰

Thus, writing becomes a space for dismantling male power. Language, irony, and metaphor serve as tools through which the male figure is subdued and utterly defeated, leading to the complete dominance of the writer (the female narrator) over the text. This process also frees language from its historically masculine structure.

According to Zohra Kamoun, the characters in *Memory in the Flesh* and *Chaos of the Senses* lack realistic traits and are not clearly defined. Instead, they are intentionally ambiguous, which contributes to the poetic quality of the novels. The construction of characters in these works mirrors the way they are crafted in poetry: "The characters rarely engage in action or events, making them static and devoid of traditional meaning further resembling the character construction found in poetry."³¹

Beyond their indistinct features, Mosteghanemi's characters function as symbols: "Hayat symbolizes the homeland, Ziad represents the militant poet, Si Taher embodies the struggle..."³²

According to Zohra Kamoun, Ahlam Mosteghanemi's characters, in addition to lacking clearly defined traits and features, serve as symbols. Hayat represents the homeland, Ziad embodies the militant poet, and Si Taher symbolizes the struggle. This symbolic depth grants the characters a poetic dimension: "The symbolic nature of the characters in these two novels is what renders their features and traits indistinct."³³

Thus, the abstract and allegorical nature of the characters contributes to the novels' lyrical quality, making them more than mere fictional figures they become representations of broader historical and ideological narratives.

2- THE "WOUNDED" FEMALE CHARACTER AND THE PAIN OF AWAKENING TO THE DISILLUSIONMENT OF POST-INDEPENDENCE ALGERIA

Since the characters in Ahlam Mosteghanemi's novels *Memory in the Flesh* and *Chaos of the Senses* possess a high degree of symbolism, analyzing their semantic dimensions becomes essential for unlocking the deeper layers of meaning within the texts.

Ahlam Mosteghanemi is among the writers who exhibit a profound artistic awareness that prevents them from being confined to personal narratives. Instead, they transcend the self, or use it as a starting point to explore broader themes. This is why her writing pays significant attention to national issues and the essence of historical consciousness.

Poet Nizar Qabbani likened her to: "A poem written in all poetic meters... the sea of love, the sea of desire, the sea of ideology, and the sea of the Algerian revolution—with its freedom fighters and mercenaries, its heroes and murderers, its angels and demons, its prophets and thieves... This novel does not merely encapsulate *Memory in the Flesh*; it encapsulates the entire history of Algerian suffering, Algerian sorrow, and the Algerian ignorance that must finally come to an end."³⁴

If we seek to analyze the symbolic meaning of the female character in *Memory in the Flesh*, we find that the novel's metaphorical power is most evident in its final two chapters—chapters five and six. This is perhaps what led Sherif Habila to assert that these chapters are the novel itself, while everything preceding them serves merely as an introduction:

"I believe that these two chapters are the novel, and everything before them is just an opening."³⁵

In the final chapters of *Memory in the Flesh*, Ahlam Mosteghanemi employs the metaphor of a wedding to symbolize corruption and the violation of the homeland by those in power and driven by greed. Hayat's marriage to Si Mustapha is depicted as a transaction from which multiple parties stand to benefit—chief among them being Si Sherif: "Si Sherif must be getting something in return. We don't marry off our daughters to high-ranking officers without prior intentions."³⁶

This marriage, then, is nothing more than a deal a contractual union through which Mosteghanemi encapsulates the widespread corruption in Algeria. A nation whose dignity and sovereignty were built by an entire people is now being exploited by the powerful elite. Khaled, representing the Algerian people, deeply fears for his homeland: "I feared for the soil of (Amma), she whose entire life had been nothing but a succession of calamities."³⁷

Meanwhile, Si Mustapha and his circle fight amongst themselves for a share of the country's riches—resources that generations had struggled to build. Mosteghanemi paints a scathing portrait of this corrupt class: "Those with bloated bellies... with Cuban cigars... and suits tailored to fit any era. The men of every regime and every time... the bearers of diplomatic briefcases... the executors of shady missions... the men of power and the men of misery... the men with unknown pasts. Here they are—former ministers... and future ministers. Former thieves... and future thieves. Directors and opportunists... and opportunists searching for a directorship. Former informants... and military men disguised in ministerial suits." ³⁸

Faced with this reality, the author poses a painful question: "Is it the destiny of nations to be built by entire generations, only for one man to reap its benefits?" ³⁹

Through this powerful critique, Mosteghanemi transforms her novel into a lens through which to examine the post-independence betrayal of Algeria. The ideals for which so many had fought were now being traded away in backroom deals, and the dream of a free homeland had been replaced by a system driven by personal gain.

The text employs the wedding symbolically, functioning at the semantic level, intensifying the drama of corruption. Its two sides are:

- The military groom, the rapist.
- The bride, Hayat, the violated homeland. ⁴⁰

Her uncle is complicit with the military officer, selling the sacrifices of the martyr Si Taher. Those who helped prepare the bride symbolize the people.

The narrator says: "My sorrow for that dress... my sorrow for it. How many hands embroidered it? How many women took turns working on it, only for a single man to lift it today? A man who will carelessly toss it onto a chair, as if it were not our memory, as if it were not the homeland." ⁴¹

The disappointments of this wounded homeland are even more evident in *Chaos of the Senses*, where the author places the female character at the center of the text. She symbolizes the homeland once again, but this time she experiences a strange and ambiguous love affair with the man in the coat, who represents the other side of the duality (Hayat/homeland, man in the coat/memory/son of the nation).

Hayat desired the man in the coat, for he matched her silence and temperament, just as Algeria once longed for one of its sons—Mohamed Boudiaf, who had contributed to its glory, only to be assassinated as soon as he arrived in Algeria "without having completely removed his coat." ⁴² With his assassination, the revolutionary memory was also killed, and Algeria, after believing it had moved past the era of tragedies, continued to suffer disappointment and grief. Mosteghanemi captures this critical period in Algeria's history, mourning the loss of its sons one after another.

Thus, Ahlam Mosteghanemi constructs the female character as the focal point of the text. Through her, the entire narrative is semantically deconstructed, ultimately expressing the pain of awakening to the disillusionment of post-independence Algeria.

ENDNOTES

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- ³ Tahar Al-Jaziri, *Infi'āl al-Takhayyul fī al-Mutawāliya al-Mūnūlūjiyya fī Riwayat "Dhākirat al-Jasad"*, Riḥāb al-Ma'rifa Publications, Issue 67, Tunisia, 2009, p. 47.
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- ¹⁰ Ibid., p. 10.
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- ¹² Ibid., p. 272.
- ¹³ Ibid., p. 232.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., p. 385.
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- ¹⁶ Ibid., p. 264.
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- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 335.
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- ²⁰ Ibid., p. 379.
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- ²² Tahar Al-Jaziri, *Infi'āl al-Takhayyul fī al-Mutawāliya al-Mūnūlūjiyya fī Riwayat "Dhākirat al-Jasad"*, Riḥāb al-Ma'rifa, p. 48.
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- ³¹ Zohra Kamoun, *Al-Shi'rī fī Riwayāt Ahlām Mustaghānamī*, p. 220.
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³³ Ibid., p. 222.

³⁴ Ahlam Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh*, back cover.

³⁵ Sherif Habila, *Al-Riwāya wa al-‘Unf: Dirāsa Sūsiyūnaṣiyya fī al-Riwāya al-Jazā’iriyya al-Mu‘āṣira*, Alam Al-Kutub Al-Hadith, 1st ed., Jordan, 2010, p. 175.

³⁶ Ahlam Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh*, p. 367.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 330.

³⁸ Ibid., pp. 354–355.

³⁹ Ibid., p. 362.

⁴⁰ Sherif Habila, *Al-Riwāya wa al-‘Unf*, p. 175.

⁴¹ Ahlam Mosteghanemi, *Memory in the Flesh*, p. 362.

⁴² Ahlam Mosteghanemi, *Chaos of the Senses*, p. 23.