

**The Semantic and Aesthetic Dimensions of Heritage in the Algerian Novel:  
A Study in Cultural Consciousness and the Aesthetics of Narrative  
Formation**

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### **Introduction**

Heritage is considered one of the most important cultural components that have shaped Arab collective consciousness. In the Algerian context in particular, it carries meanings that go beyond the historical dimension to become a foundational element in both identity and writing. The Algerian novel found itself, since its emergence, facing a double challenge: building a modern narrative discourse capable of expressing reality, and at the same time restoring what had been confiscated from the collective memory during French colonialism. Thus, the return to heritage became both a cultural and aesthetic act through which the novel seeks to reconstruct the collective self and interrogate the past in order to illuminate the present.

The presence of heritage in the Algerian novel is not merely decorative or nostalgic; rather, it is—most often—a representation of a historical and aesthetic consciousness that reinterprets inherited traditions in light of modern questions about identity, belonging, modernity, and the Other. In this framework, the novels of Tahar Wattar, Waciny Laredj, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, Bashir Mufti, and others fall within a narrative project that seeks to restore memory through invoking religious, popular, Sufi, and historical heritage.

This article aims to reveal the semantic and aesthetic dimensions of heritage in the Algerian novel by analyzing the ways in which inherited traditions are employed in narrative discourse and clarifying their relationship with identity and modernity, relying on an approach that combines semiotic, cultural, and aesthetic analysis.

### **The Concept of Heritage and the Contexts of Its Use in Algerian Literature**

The term “heritage” in Arab thought refers to everything that society has inherited from symbols, systems, values, beliefs, texts, and cultural practices that express the continuity of collective history. This concept became a central focus in Arab critical studies since the 1970s, especially after the shock of modernity, when the Arab intellectual became preoccupied with the question of the relationship between the past and the future.

In the Algerian context, heritage acquired a doubled meaning because it became linked to the process of recovering the self after a long colonial erasure. The Algerian novel—especially after independence—did not write heritage from a position of nostalgia but from a position of

symbolic resistance. Thus heritage turned into a counter-discourse to cultural colonialism and a means to rebuild linguistic and historical identity.

Therefore invoking heritage was not merely a narrative “inclusion,” but a process of rewriting and deconstruction. The Algerian novel borrows its tools and images from heritage, but subjects them to the logic of narrative modernity. Among the most prominent manifestations of this interaction are the use of heritage or religious language within a modern framework that expresses multiplicity of voices and visions, and the employment of folk tales and myth as forms of collective memory. Historical figures such as Emir Abdelkader, or Sufi figures such as Abd al-Salam al-Asmar and Sheikh Bouamama, are also invoked.

### **The Semantic Dimension of Heritage in the Algerian Novel**

The semantic dimension of heritage appears in the Algerian novel through multiple functions ranging from redefining identity to producing new meaning. Heritage generally refers to the cultural elements transmitted from generation to generation; it expands to include everything such as customs, traditions, clothing, and various rituals in occasions such as marriage, birth, the seventh-day celebration, death, circumcision, planting, harvest, grazing, and others. It also extends to include the behaviors of individuals in their daily lives and their relations with others. Some anthropologists have pointed out that heritage carries information about events even if the core of truth is wrapped in myths, and it cannot be denied that folk tales contain within them the names of ancestors, times, places, means used in thinking, names of tribes, and general situations described in popular discourses and myths. Heritage in these novels is not a closed end but an open interpretive space that allows the writer to negotiate history from a contemporary position.

### **Heritage as Memory of Identity**

In the novels of Tahar Wattar, such as *Al-Laz* and *The Earthquake*, Islamic and Arab heritage forms a semantic base for rereading Algerian social and political reality. *Al-Laz* is not merely a resistance novel but a text that invokes the vocabulary of jihad and heroism in Islamic heritage to reinterpret them in light of the Algerian revolution. The hero here becomes a symbolic model that combines revolutionary action with a fatalistic tendency, reflecting the tension between the religious past and the revolutionary present.

Waciny Laredj, however, employs heritage as a multi-layered memory. In *Lady of the Maqam*, *The Prince's Book*, and *Memory of Water*, heritage appears in both its Sufi and historical forms. Invoking the figure of Emir Abdelkader in *The Prince's Book*, for example, does not aim to glorify the past but to question it: how can a symbol of resistance turn into a mythical being outside time? Thus Laredj opens heritage to the horizon of modernity by questioning its symbols and retelling them in a new language. Heritage can be said to be like a protective shield because it is the legacy of ancestors and grants its followers a measure of comfort and reassurance. Mohammed Al-Jawhari says: “It can be said—with some exaggeration—that heritage in traditional societies plays the role of political ideologies in advanced industrial societies, and heritage also represents an arena for the struggle between forces of change (in the name of modernity) and forces opposed to change (in the name of defending the inherited tradition).”

### **The Aesthetic Dimension of Heritage in the Algerian Novel**

The aesthetic dimension concerns how heritage is transformed into artistic material within the narrative text, which requires examining the methods through which heritage operates at the level of language, structure, narration, and characters.

#### **Heritage as a Discourse of Resistance**

In novels after the “Black Decade” (the 1990s), heritage acquired another dimension as it became a mechanism of symbolic resistance against violence and forgetting. In *Mixing of the Seasons* by Bashir Mufti, for example, popular and narrative heritage is invoked as an alternative language for survival, as if returning to the old tale grants the contemporary self the possibility of salvation from ruin.

This semantic employment of heritage reflects a tendency toward cultural continuity despite the violent transformations experienced by Algerian society. Hence it can be said that heritage in the Algerian novel performs a double function: it is, on the one hand, a reference for identity, and on the other hand, a critical tool for deconstructing the present.

#### **The Aesthetics of Intertextuality**

The technique of intertextuality is among the most prominent means that enabled Algerian writers to integrate heritage into their texts without falling into the trap of quotation or repetition. The modern novel calls upon heritage texts (the Qur’an; ancient poetry; modern poetry; tales; riddles; proverbs) and re-employs them within a new context that grants them contemporary meanings.

In *Memory of the Body* by Ahlam Mosteghanemi, this intertextuality appears on several levels. At the level of language, the writer employs Qur’anic rhythm and poetic rhetoric to give the text spiritual and aesthetic energy. At the level of imagery, she invokes symbols from Arab heritage (chaste love, heroism, chivalry) to express the wounds of the homeland and memory. At the level of narrative structure, heritage is used as a framework for generating meaning, where the relationship between the narrator and the heroine becomes a mirror of the relationship between the individual and the homeland, and the body becomes an alternative text for history.

#### **Myth and Folk Tale – The Aesthetics of Heritage Language**

The folk tale and myth are used in the Algerian novel as tools for constructing the marvelous and the symbolic. Myth is a deeply complex cultural reality about which viewpoints differ and even contradict one another. In *The Candle and the Corridors* by Tahar Wattar, popular myth is invoked to interpret reality, turning the text into an intermediate space that combines the real and the symbolic. In *Lady of the Maqam* by Waciny Laredj, the Sufi tale merges with political reality, so that the text transcends the realistic structure toward an open symbolic space where heritage becomes “material for dreaming” rather than “a document of history.”

Myth—the first adventure of the mind—as described by Firas Al-Sawwah embodies the existential anxiety of the human being. The researcher says: “Myth is a system of thought that absorbed the human being’s existential anxiety and his perpetual pause to uncover the mysteries posed by his environment and the riddles with which the orderly cosmic system that moves around him challenges him. It is the creation of order where there is no order, providing answers to pressing questions, and drawing a complete picture of existence so that we may find our place and role in the rhythms of nature. It is the tool that provides us with a guide in life and a

moral criterion in behavior. It is the gathering place of the intellectual and spiritual life of ancient man.”

Thus myths are answers to those urgent and primordial questions that appear to the primitive human being, a search for the origin of the order of the universe and existence. Therefore myths are summaries of the intellectual and spiritual life of ancient man.

For Claude Lévi-Strauss, myth always refers to events claimed to have happened long ago, but what gives myth its scientific value is that the particular pattern it describes is timeless. It explains the present, the past, and also the future. The essence of myth does not lie in its style, its music, or its structure, but in the story it tells. Myth cannot be confined to a specific time; it is a bridge through which the past, present, and future are explained.

Among the notable features of the modern Algerian novel is the employment of heritage language (religious, jurisprudential, poetic) in a modern style. The writer does not quote the language of the ancients in a traditional way but subjects it to semiotic generation. Thus heritage language becomes an aesthetic reservoir that enriches the text and breaks the monotony of everyday language.

In *Lady of the Maqam*, for example, Laredj mixes the language of Sufism with the language of politics, creating a linguistic layer charged with meanings. Myth seeps quietly into the narrative fabric, not separate from events but formed from within them, as if reality itself gives birth to it under the pressure of pain and fear in a time dominated by violence and cities suffocated by fear. The “maqam” becomes more than a place; it turns into a living being, a guarding memory, a spiritual refuge standing against darkness.

The Lady of the Maqam does not appear as an ordinary character but as a sacred shadow accompanying the narrator, as if she were the spirit of the city or its secret mother. She becomes a symbol of protection amid ruin. With the escalation of violence, her mythical presence increases, appearing as a hidden force attempting to preserve balance in a collapsing world. She is not a specific woman but an imagined image of the wounded homeland and of femininity that resists the culture of death with the culture of life. The real and the mythical merge without clear boundaries: the sounds of bullets stand beside whispers of remembrance, and blood stands beside incense. This overlap gives the narrative a Sufi dimension in which resorting to myth becomes a kind of symbolic resistance.

Thus myth forms in the novel as a narrative parallel to reality: the greater the violence, the greater the need for symbol; the narrower the horizon, the wider the imagination. In the end the Lady of the Maqam becomes a living memory that cannot be assassinated and an inner voice whispering that life, no matter how surrounded by death, is capable of being reborn. In Mosteghanemi’s writing, heritage language acquires a poetic character reminiscent of Al-Mutanabbi and the tone of Andalusian nostalgia, which gives the narrative a musical and contemplative dimension.

### **The Cultural and Social Dimension of the Presence of Heritage**

Culture or civilization in the broad ethnographic sense is the whole complex that includes knowledge, beliefs, art, law, morals, customs, and all other abilities and habits acquired by a human being as a member of a particular society.

Culture has two aspects: a material aspect and a non-material aspect. Material culture includes tangible and visible things produced by human beings such as housing, furniture, tools,

clothing, and other aspects of life, and everything related to production, technology, and inventions that produce such things. Marxists believe that the material manifestations of culture have the decisive word in the entire social system.

Culture also includes ideas, patterns of behavior, and attitudes circulating within a social group and transmitted from one individual to another and from one generation to another. Kroeber and Kluckhohn consider culture to consist of explicit and implicit patterns of behavior acquired and transmitted through symbols that constitute the distinctive achievements of human groups and appear in the form of artifacts and products. The core of culture consists of traditional ideas (historically formed and selected), especially those connected with values. Cultural systems can be considered products of action on the one hand and conditioning factors that determine future action on the other.

Heritage appears in the novels of the Algerian writer Tahar Wattar as a living fabric intertwined with the daily, political, and social. It is not a rigid material of the past but a collective memory breathing within the present. His characters do not live outside history but move within a space saturated with proverbs, inherited tales, Sufi symbols, and heroic biographies that shaped Algerian consciousness through the centuries.

In the novel *Al-Laz*, revolutionary and popular heritage intertwines with the experience of resistance. Collective memory becomes a driving force for action. The heroes are not isolated individuals but an extension of a long chain of popular struggle, as if the past supports the present and grants it the legitimacy of continuity. Here the cultural dimension of heritage appears as a reservoir of identity that preserves the features of the national character in the face of colonialism and alienation.

Customs and traditions play an important role in the lives of societies, and the customs of nations vary according to their cultures. Adeb Abi Daher says: "Every people in the world has its traditions and customs that distinguish it from other peoples, and many of these customs are the product of folk tales or myths transmitted by descendants from their ancestors, to which they cling for fear of losing them in the labyrinths of progress and civilization." The culture of peoples differs from one country to another, and every people is distinguished by its traditions. The employment of heritage in the Algerian novel cannot be separated from its cultural context, as invoking heritage is essentially a position toward modernity and toward the Western Other.

## Conclusion

After this enjoyable journey within heritage in the Algerian novel and the limits of its employment, it can be said that heritage in the Algerian novel is not merely a theme or cultural background but a semantic and aesthetic structure formed within the text to express the struggle of memory, identity, and modernity. From Tahar Wattar to Waciny Laredj and Ahlam Mosteghanemi, heritage appears as a mirror of history, a voice of identity, a language of beauty, and a horizon for dialogue with the self and the other. Re-reading heritage within the modern Algerian novel essentially represents a project for rebuilding collective consciousness in a time of fragmentation and an aesthetic practice that seeks to transform memory into a living and renewed art.

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