

The Feminine Child Character in Algerian Novels: The Novel Tā' al-Khajal by Fadhila Al-Farouq as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT: *Childhood, in terms of content, is a narrative component rich in sociological and psychological implications, offering insights into the development of societies. As it pertains to Algerian reality, childhood proves to be a crucial indicator, as reconstructing events through literary works allows us to understand societal trajectories. This theme frequently appears in many Algerian narrative texts. The novel Taa' Al-Khajal by Fadhila Al-Farouq presents a depiction of feminine childhood, conveyed through the lens of the protagonist's own story. Despite the novel's sensitivity in tackling this subject, the study highlights the feminine childhood character and its reflection in Algerian literature using the mentioned novel as a model.*

KEYWORDS: Feminine Childhood Character, Identity, Differences, Shame and Rebellion, The Other, Patriarchal Authority

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Introduction:

The novel has emerged as a creative literary genre that has captured the interest of Algerian novelists, enabling them to articulate their vision of life and its various stages with an artistic approach that reflects the imagination sought by the novelist in the themes addressed in the narrative. Among these themes, the depiction of female childhood is one of the significant topics that Algerian novels have worked on, representing it as a narrative character within the storyline. This character carries diverse connotations that vary depending on the narrative perspective in the fictional imagination and the value of the topic itself within a specific context. The portrayal reflects differing views on femininity, where biological and psychological differences are seen as extensions of ideas deeply rooted in socio-cultural heritage.

Female childhood in Algerian novels is an essential phase and an integral part of a woman's life. Feminist narrative writing has excelled in addressing this theme, approaching it from principles that establish identity, liberation, and the self in relation to the other. Among these feminist writers is Fadhila El-Farouk, a bold voice whose novel "Taa' Al-Khajal" (The Shameful T) depicts female childhood in a male-dominated world that rejects diversity and relishes contradiction. Here, childhood continues its quest for liberation, striving and rebelling against norms to seek recognition and existence from the other. This reality has driven women to the extent of renouncing their own identity. Thus, feminist writing on such topics goes beyond aesthetics, making literature a reflection of the woman herself, using writing as a humanistic message to challenge patriarchal systems and defend women's rights in a male-dominated world. In this context, the novel "Taa' Al-Khajal" is taken as a literary model suitable for studying this research topic and adapting it to answer the following questions:

1. What are the semantic dimensions of employing female childhood as a narrative device in Algerian fiction?
2. In Fadhila El-Farouk's "Taa' Al-Khajal", does the depiction of female childhood serve as a semantic vessel carrying feminist and humanistic issues, or is it merely a literary display focused on aesthetic value alone?

Conceptual Overview of Female Childhood in Algerian Novels

Exploring the concept of childhood linguistically reveals its meaning through its use in Arabic lexicons. The term "طفولة" (childhood) follows the pattern fu'oola, which implies movement and change. Its definition begins with that of a child, as it represents a foundational stage in their life. According to Lisan al-Arab, under the entry Tifl (child): "Tifl, tifala; a girl is described as tafla if she is delicate; a tifl or tafla is a young boy or girl; tifl refers to the young of anything" (Abu al-Fadl Jamal al-Din Muhammad ibn Makram Ibn Manzur, 2003, p. 167.) This indicates that childhood represents the initial phase of a child's life, during which they are weak, dependent on others for activity, and require care.

In Mukhtar al-Sihah, the term tifl denotes "a newborn and also the young of any wild creature; the plural is atfal" (Mohammed ibn Abi Bakr ibn Abd al-Qadir al-Razi, 1986, entry "Child".)

From these definitions, it is evident that the term tifl does not consider the biological or psychological differences between the genders but rather encompasses both male and female equally.

The children found themselves in a complex emotional situation, which pushed their bodies into a state of stagnation and directed them towards a state of complete stillness and calm (Abdel Latif Al-Siddiqi, 1995, p. 75.)

This is considered a temporary phase, as the children gradually transition from a state of stagnation to a phase of growth until they reach the peak of their strength, overcoming obstacles that hinder their recovery and return to life. It is a phase during which calmness gradually takes hold, step by step, from stagnation to stability.

This phase encompasses the essence of safety and connection, where “calmness extends step by step to stability,” embodying a sense a girl, boy and he stance of plurality children (Ibrahim Mustafa et al, 2004, p. 560.)

Childhood is the early stage of human life and serves as the starting point and the foundational building block for shaping the personality of the future. At this stage, a child is vulnerable and requires care and attention to grow and mature. During childhood, a child possesses innate talents that need refinement to be fully developed. A child is born with abilities and talents that gradually become apparent and are discovered as the child grows and as new opportunities arise in their life. These talents may require someone to identify and nurture them, such as family, school, or other institutions dedicated to raising and educating the next generation (Ahmed Hassan Al-Khamisi, 2014, p. 127.)

Psychologists define childhood as an initial stage in a person’s life, consisting of the following phases:

Early Childhood Stage (2–6 years): During this phase, the child learns basic skills through sensory experiences.

Late Childhood Stage (6–12 years): In this phase, the child begins to perceive events through abstract reasoning.

Early Adolescence Stage (12–15 years): During this period, the child experiences instability, caught between being a “child” rooted in the present and adolescence, which transcends the present. The adolescent thinks differently than a child, focusing beyond the present and forming theories about everything, finding themselves in non-immediate considerations. In contrast, a child only thinks during immediate actions and does not form theories, even if an observer notices recurring patterns in their reactions (Jean Piaget, 1988, p. 149.)

Childhood has distinct characteristics that set it apart from other stages of human life, including:

Cognitive Characteristics: At this stage, a child is realistic, blending dreams with reality. Curiosity and continuous questioning are key traits, as the child seeks to satisfy their unrelenting curiosity.

Emotional Characteristics: Emotional aspects are among the most noticeable traits in a child, revealing instability and a lack of consistency in their emotions. The child’s mood swings frequently, fluctuating between intense and rapid emotional responses, fear, and quick reactions to stimuli. These are all indicators of weakness and limitations, driving the child to constantly seek emotional stability through various means. In their pursuit of reassurance and balance, children often project their emotions onto phenomena, interpreting them in ways that suit their desires. The child uniquely plays this imaginative game to maintain emotional stability. Animals, being the most spontaneous creatures, often serve as the child’s closest companion in this act of make-believe. From a chronological perspective, childhood represents an initial phase of human life. However, from a psychological perspective, it is a stage for recalling and retrieving fragmented and blurred memories of early life. Childhood memories are often incomplete, with many details missing, depending on the significance of each memory in a person’s subconscious (Abdelkader Amich, 2003, p. 69.)

The term “femininity” is marked by instability and inconsistency in meaning. It has been the subject of extensive intellectual and philosophical debate, extending into epistemological contexts rooted in critical discourse. The term evokes considerable controversy, with multiple interpretations shaped by diverse sociocultural frameworks. Linguistically, however, the term “femininity” enjoys some consensus, referring to the female as the opposite of the male. According to Lisan al-Arab under the entry for untha (female): “The female is the opposite of the male in everything; the plural is inath (females), and the term anathi appears in poetry. Femininity contrasts with masculinity, and unatha refers to the attribute of being female, as in ‘this woman is untha’ to describe a woman as embodying the qualities of a complete female” (Abu al-Fadl Jamal al-Din Muhammad ibn Makram Ibn Manzur, p. 169.)

The debate surrounding the term “femininity” carries an extended vision into the social custom rooted in a sociocultural background, differentiating between two terms:

Feminine : الأنثوية (Arab)

Feminism : النسائية (Arab)

Some argue that the term “femininity” is more appropriate for referring to the traits of the female gender, as it encapsulates what women do, are characterized by, and conform to. The word “female” immediately invokes sexual functions, due to its frequent use to describe weakness, gentleness, submissiveness, and passivity (Moufid Najm al-Din, 2005, p. 167.)

On the other hand, the term “feminism” faces rejection by many critics and researchers because of its connotations of prejudice tied to the derogatory and contemptuous view of women. The word “feminist” carries meanings laden with disdainful connotations, causing creative women to distance themselves from it in favor of alternative identities (Zohra Jalassi, 2000, p. 10.)

For instance, Dr. Zahra Jallasi, a critic defending the term “femininity,” supports using “feminine” as it has broader semantic applications compared to the restricted and limited connotation of “feminist.” Dr. Fatima Zahra Baizid presents a distinguished study to resolve the debate between femininity and feminism.

She clarifies that the word “female” (femelle) refers exclusively to biological elements distinguishing women from men. The term “feminine” (féminine) is used to indicate behaviors imposed by patriarchal cultural and social norms. In contrast, “feminism” (féminisme) pertains to political issues regarding women’s liberation, which emerged in the late 1960s. These terms exhibit linguistic instability and ongoing evolution. For instance, in English, the term “feminist” corresponds to “النسوية” in Arabic, while “female” (femelle) is both an adjective and a noun without specific affiliation, encompassing all that belongs to the female gender. Meanwhile, “feminine” refers to attributes deemed characteristic of women, such as gentleness. Lastly, “feminism” is a movement advocating for women and equality with men (Fatima Al-Zahraa Bayzid, 2011-2012, p. 21.)

Feminine childhood forms the foundation of a woman’s life. Investigating feminine childhood is not merely exploring an empty stage of life; it is a critical starting point rich with psychological significance. It represents not just a phase but the woman’s existence and true identity. It cannot be separated as it is an integral part of a life system with epistemological manifestations in societal norms. However, this identity often reflects a sense of gloom and inferiority imposed by others, leading to psychological oppression. This may escalate to a point where women question their existential identity, a condition symbolically captured in the Qur’an:

“When news is brought to one of them of (the birth of) a female (child), his face darkens, and he is filled with inward grief.” (The Holy Quran, Surah An-Nahl, Verse 58.)

A woman’s existence in a patriarchal world is confined to a narrow space. Despite being a source of life, she bears injustice and contempt toward her gender. Her existence becomes instinctive, perpetually seeking satisfaction, confining her identity to her body. In artistic works, as Panik Rich explains, the body is situated in specific frameworks defined by relational structures expressed through colors and scents. These depictions confront the feminine character with objects, the world, and her male partner in an intimate relationship that condenses her desire for life. Her soul may merge with her body to become a desired entity for men.

Thus, her identity fluctuates between painful dependence on prevailing norms and a recognition of these realities as her own (Mohammed Nour Eddin Afaya, 1988, p. 19.)

The Algerian novel is an inseparable part of global literature. The first Algerian novel written in Arabic emerged in 1971. Critics view Algerian novels as a recent development; however, they have matured significantly, especially during the 1960s-1990s, thanks to a group of male authors like Mohammed Dib, Mohammed Rida Houhou, Tahar Wattar, and Rachid Boudjedra, alongside female authors like Zhor Ounissi, Assia Djebar, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, and Fadila Farouk. These writers portrayed Algerian life socially, culturally, politically, and intellectually. Novels, as Ahmed Dagmoumi states, are forms of culture before being literary creations (Ahmad Al-Dagmoumi, 1991, p. 17)

Given that novels are part of culture, they continuously interact with scientific developments, especially in psychology, which complements literary creativity, particularly in novels. For example, the division of child psychology from general psychology in 1879 significantly shifted literary topics, emphasizing the depiction of children. Child psychology officially separated in the 1930s but had been developing since the 17th century. This cultural focus on children urged writers to create literary works suitable for them (Iman Al-Baqqali, p. 38.)

Childhood has become a theme woven into novels, reflecting reality while granting it literary dimensions through the characters crafted by the authors (Qawli ben Saed, 2002, p. 17.)

These characters become reflections of the real world, showcasing childhood not as an abstract concept tied to reality but as an entity within the narrative. For authors, these characters encapsulate the broader reality in a microcosmic representation (Abdel Majid Mortad, 1988, p. 97.)

The image of childhood in the Algerian novel is present on two levels, according to two specific contexts:

1_ The image of childhood in the city (urban areas).	2_ The image of childhood in the countryside (village).
1_ The context of the colonial era.	2_ The context of independent Algeria, particularly during the "Black Decade" in the 1990s.

The novelist conveys the significance of childhood imagery in the novel through a contrast of levels within a specific context, revealing various differences that affect the meaning of the childhood character in the narrative. This significance generally aligns with the following:

A social significance.	Poverty, orphan hood, immigration, begging, student, housewife, educated person, ordinary person, teenager, brother, sister...
A psychological significance.	Oppression, misery, suffering, confusion, racism, love, rebellion, responsibility, astonishment, anger.
An idealistic significance (noble values).	Identity, patriotism, hero, role model, struggle, loyalty.

In the fictional world of Mohamed Dib (1920–2003), one of the giants of Algerian literature, he employs the image of Algerian childhood in the urban space of his famous trilogy: “La Grande Maison” (1952), “Le Feu” (1954), and “Le Noir” (Abu Yahya Mazyane Zainab, 2009, p. 12.) (1957). These works carry social and psychological connotations through a noble principle, reflecting the colonial era that aligns with the years of the Algerian War of Independence. Dib’s trilogy brilliantly portrays the reality of Algeria during the colonial period. He masterfully paints a picture of his homeland’s suffering under colonial control, embodied in the character of “Omar,” who serves as a connection between the three parts. “Omar, the hungry, orphaned hero, witnesses Algeria’s suffering through his family and draws strength from his mother, Lalla Aini, symbolizing resilience, and the will to survive, embodied in a sewing machine as a means to confront hunger” (Khalida Said, 1996, p. 42.)

Similarly, this image appears in the narrative imagination of the writer Mouloud Feraoun (1913–1962) in his novel “Le Fils du Pauvre” (1950), where the image of childhood in the rural context carries similar meanings.

The female childhood, as part of the broader concept of childhood, holds significant value in Algerian narrative imagination. This value gives it a distinctiveness reflected in the way female childhood is represented. It bears much contrast, starting from the inherent differences between women and men, influenced by various socio-cultural contexts. The differences are not limited to biological aspects, but also involve psychological dimensions, historical and cultural heritage, and long-standing experiences that deepen these contrasts. Furthermore, the political, social, religious, and economic systems all contribute to the creation of a relationship between the character, space, objects, the public and private spheres, and the self and the other (Sherine Abu Al-Naga, 1998, p. 43.)

In the narrative, female childhood plays diverse roles in times of instability and fluidity between two modes of writing: masculine and feminine writing. The significance of the female childhood character evolves in response to external contexts. This character can symbolize oppression, misery, and the struggle for self-liberation from the oppression of the other. It may also embody neglect, representing the rejection of the female presence in a society dominated by male authority, where women are subjected to a distorted and unjust social norm. The portrayal of female childhood in rural contexts differs from that in urban settings, according to the narrator's perspective. Both, however, resist oppression, alienation, and search for freedom. This does not mean the obliteration of differences between male and female writers, but rather highlights different responses to external influences in interpreting the world (Rachida Ben Masaud, 1994, p. 77.)

In Algerian literature, female writing, particularly in its treatment of female childhood characters, reflects personal experiences and emotions lived by the female author, making her writing a reflection of her own life. Thus, the literature created by women carries a unique flavor, often revealing personal experiences and feelings that differ from those expressed by male writers, especially during times when a wall of isolation rose between the genders (Mohammed Nour Eddin Afaya, p. 43.)

The female childhood character in Algerian novels cannot be entirely portrayed in a dark light. Despite her struggles and efforts to liberate herself and assert her identity, she often appears in a more positive light in many works. She is portrayed as an educated, cultured girl who is pursuing her studies, as exemplified by the renowned novelist Zohra Ouassi (1936–) in her novel "Du'a' al-Hamam" (2002). In such portrayals, the female character, often dominant in these novels, carries cultural connotations that distinguish her from other depictions of female childhood in Algerian literature, even when the novel is set in the context of the colonial era.

We find that the novelist portrays the female childhood character through:

The female childhood character in the novel "Du'a' al-Hamam".	Its significance in the narrative.
Maryam	An ordinary girl
Samara	A student

Nevertheless, female childhood, from a psychological perspective, continues to face much turmoil and repression within a patriarchal, dominant society. "The female narrative imagination places female childhood within a fragmented space, within a dominant patriarchal ideology, making her presence absent and her space charged with surveillance and repression. There is no possible space for women other than what is monitored and repressed" (Abu Yahya Mazyane Zainab, 2009, p. 9)

The manifestations of the female childhood character in the novel “Ta’ al-Khajal” by Fadila Fa’rouk:

The female childhood character in Algerian narrative is not portrayed without significance; rather, it carries a specific purpose aimed at reviving the value of women in life and asserting their existence, which the other continues to reject. Thus, female childhood in the novel reveals its secrets that it could not express in reality. Therefore, no one can articulate that experience except the female herself through her narrative writings. “Fadila Fa’rouk, an Algerian novelist, excelled in expressing the suffering of women in general, and particularly female childhood, in her novel Ta’ al-Khajal, set within a patriarchal society bound by social traditions that hold distorted, inherited views of women. The female childhood character she portrays is linked to the late childhood stage entering adolescence, specifically at 14 years old, within the rural environment during the 1990s, a period marked by Algeria’s ‘Black Decade’. Fadila Fa’rouk presents her protagonist in Ta’ al-Khajal a type of autobiographical literature as a bold and rebellious girl who continues her struggle against a society that holds a degrading and inferior view of her. This view is not rooted in biological or psychological differences but is a legacy of social customs passed down through generations. This pessimistic outlook permeates the entire existential space of life, reflecting on the character of the adolescent protagonist, who is acutely aware of the depth of the tragedy that stretches deep into history, not just tied to the present. As she says: ‘From the family, from school, from traditions, from terrorism, everything about me was a “T” for shame, everything about them was a “T” for shame from our names, which stumble on the last letter, to the frown that greets us at birth, from before this’” (Fadila Al-Farouk, 2006, p. 11.)

The novelist has chosen words that carry within them educational implications and relate to socialization. Through these, she conveys what society’s norms have distorted about the female, based on the decision-making mechanisms in society, which are rooted in the family as the foundational unit of society. The family plays a central role in socialization, as does the school, an essential educational institution in shaping an individual and preparing them to acquire behaviors suitable for adapting to society. Customs are inherited social practices that continue across generations, based on ideas and laws produced by the ancestors and adapted according to the social context in which they live. These customs become quasi-laws that individuals rely on as a reference for future generations. The novelist, in addressing the issue of the female’s existence, ties it to the fundamental components of society, revealing the extent to which she is shaped by three main hypotheses: (1) The first hypothesis suggests that socialization has distorted the female’s existence, limiting her to a subordinate role, leading to a degrading self-perception, which disrupts the natural balance of society. (2) The second hypothesis posits that the foundations on which society is built are flawed, thus producing behaviors that are distorted and unnatural toward women. This hypothesis calls for a reevaluation of society’s fundamental principles, especially since they have misrepresented women. Therefore, these principles need to be reviewed, corrected, and balanced with proper human existence. (3) The third hypothesis reveals a failure in human understanding of the foundations on which social mechanisms are based to shape a sound and healthy society. Consequently, the failure to accept the female’s existence stems from the fact that humans either lack an understanding of these principles, which they mistakenly consider absolute values, or these principles are inherently beyond human comprehension, making them difficult to adapt to human existence. This raises a question about the reliability of the principles that grant humans their core values, especially as social life itself embraces the acceptance of individual and essential differences.

The novelist portrays the protagonist, a “teenager,” living a state of love despite the bleakness of reality. At 14, the protagonist experiences a surge of hope and security, finding in love a refuge and an escape from the harshness of life and society’s views of women. This creates a sense of instability, leading the protagonist to question herself continuously without finding answers. She says, “And when I was on the threshold of fourteen, when my emotions were stirred by your purity, I experienced confusion for the first time. Am I one of the women, or one of the men? Why am I different from all the men? Is it because you

are the son of a woman, as the people of the neighborhood say? Or is it because you were different for a reason? I lived the most beautiful love story in that early time, and with you, I often forgot the harshness of men” (*Ibid*, p 12). The protagonist in the narrative is characterized by a strong memory, often recalling memories from the past, and is deeply attached to the old history. For her, the past does not appear as just a series of events; it is a refuge where she finds a chance to shape her character, which she developed through her experiences with several family members. She says, “Something of Lalla Aisha, many things from my mother Zahia, and things from others... I love that past, despite its dark colors” (*Ibid*, p 14)

The novelist portrays the protagonist, a “teenager,” as embodying the role of the rebellious adolescent who defies family customs. This rebellion is shaped by circumstances beyond her control, making her response inevitable. The societal view of women as inferior confines their roles to limited, temporary actions. This societal perspective forces the protagonist into a psychologically developed state where she begins to detach from her feminine identity. This rebellion is not merely a psychological decision but an outward behavior manifested in the family’s judgment that she is different from the other girls in her family and village. She says, “I was a project of womanhood, but I never fully became one because of circumstances. I was a writing project, but I only became one after losing the woman forever. I was a project of life, but all I achieved was a tenth of it... Aunt Kalthoum insisted: ‘She is different from our girls’” (*Ibid*, p 15.)

The childhood character depicted by the novelist in Ta’ al-Khajal is a young girl living through a transitional phase between late childhood and the beginning of adolescence. During this period, the female is in a state of instability and uncertainty, constantly searching for a role model to emulate. She is a weak female in a patriarchal society, and although she is living a story that allows her to somewhat forget her psychological distress, she remains in a state of reflection, seeking someone who will guide her, granting her confidence and strength in her identity and existence. A role model is crucial at this stage in life to help mature behavior and stabilize life. The protagonist finds this role model in Aunt Lalla Aisha, especially since she has established her own place in a male-dominated environment and earned its respect. The protagonist says, “As for me, Lalla Aisha was a strong woman. She would sit with men and engage in their political discussions. She once told me she was the first woman to join the party during the revolution, and that she paid four duros as her membership fee” (*Ibid*, p 22.)

The protagonist develops an emotional character within the confines of the family, a result of being affected by the instability in her family environment. Her family is large and complex in structure. The family system is based on class distinctions that separate men and women, positioning the women of the house as second-class individuals, with men occupying the first class. This family is marked by differences and distinctions, rooted in biological factors and distorted social customs

The protagonist’s emotional state is a reflection of this system. She becomes rejecting, oppositional, and rebellious against this situation, which is most evident during the Friday lunch period. She says, “But my mother’s silent crying and the disagreements among the young women in the family make me anxious at times. What really makes me lose my temper, however, is the Friday lunch. We, the women, have to wait for the men to return from the mosque. After they finish eating, it’s our turn. We would all gather at Aunt Tunis’s, and I hated that tradition that made us a second-class herd” (*Ibid*, p 24.)

This diversity in the family structure, as discussed in the context of the 1990s, reveals that the Algerian family, particularly in rural areas, is shaped by a numerical abundance of family members. This is the result of a coexistence of various generations within the same family unit, extending beyond the nuclear family of father and mother to include grandparents, uncles, and aunts. This diversity and complexity deeply impact the socialization of the individual, particularly in the external family space. The individual is born into a system of moral uprightness, dictated by surveillance mechanisms within the family. The large family structure creates a system of oversight, especially over children, forcing them to conform to imposed behaviors without the freedom to ignore them, as they are constantly under surveillance. This constant surveillance, combined with the psychological pressure on the individual, often leads to repression, which

the individual tries to counter by finding a behavioral space for self-expression, as a release from this oversight. The novelist portrays this dynamic through the family structure the protagonist lives in, illustrating how women are considered second-class members within the family, especially on Fridays. This day, which should symbolize family unity and closeness, quickly transforms into a day that divides the family into two categories. This contradiction stems from distorted customs embraced by the social structure, which perpetuates their continuity despite their imbalance in the social order. The custom of segregating women on Fridays reflects a social imbalance that has not been critically examined, nor has its value been re-evaluated in relation to the future of the family and its members' behavior in accepting the diversity of its composition (female/male).

The protagonist's character in the narrative demonstrates consistency in her principles. Although she is different from the other girls in her family, she remains firm in her rebellion against the customs of the village, family, or society. This is particularly evident in her discontent and rejection of the tradition of marriage. Despite the fact that marriage is a social context marked by joy and celebration, she sees it as embodying sorrow and tragedy, reducing the female to a mere object for men's desires, where her feminine identity dissolves. She says, "How ugly it is for one of us to be a bride. My cousin's daughter, Sihem, came close to me and whispered, 'Did you see the bride? She was covered.' I didn't reply. I had grown to hate myself and the sight of women, so I went back to our house and tried to forget that wedding. Those rituals were foreign to our family" (Ibid, p 26.)

In her novel *Ta' al-Khajal*, the writer Fadila Farouk reveals the patriarchal perspective that confines the existence of women, particularly female childhood, to the realm of the body. This is an unjust view of the female gender, which the writer exposes through her portrayal of female childhood suffering during the Black Decade. The protagonist, in her search for her identity, finds in writing a means of liberation from this oppressive perspective against women. In the novel, the writer portrays how the protagonist rejects and confronts this male gaze, laden with contempt and desire, facing it with courage and determination. She is unaffected by temptations or harassment. The protagonist in the narrative is portrayed as an upright, loyal, and virtuous young woman, faithful to her neighborhood. She says, "Don't touch me again," as a dog howled nearby. Yassine smiled and said, 'You whore, is Nasr al-Din more deserving of you than I am?' I slapped him and ran away... The next day, I met him on the stairs. He stopped me quietly and said, 'Be obedient, or I'll expose you.' I had a stubborn head. I looked at him and said, 'Go to hell'" (Ibid, p 28)

In her novel *Ta' al-Khajal*, Fadila Farouk imbues the protagonist with profound psychological and personal traits, such as loyalty, love, and a strong character. The protagonist is a deeply reflective and curious figure who engages with the changes in her environment, responding to various influences that render her existence unstable and in constant flux. She is relentlessly seeking to assert her identity. Described as a cultured and conscious woman, the protagonist embraces a rebellious and oppositional stance, rejecting anything that does not align with her feminine identity, which is shaped by her experiences as a woman living through transformations. In the world of academia, she finds an escape from her struggles and a chance to embrace her childhood dream of becoming a writer. Farouk's brilliance lies in her portrayal of the protagonist, breaking away from the traditional depiction that confines rural women to the domestic sphere and reduces them to mere objects of desire. The protagonist says, "I had one strength that could not be defeated the love of my father for knowledge"

The theme that the novelist Fadhila Al-Farouk addresses through her novel "Taa Al-Khajal" is the issue of female rape in the nineties by armed groups outside the law. Through this, she shows the extent of female suffering from various psychological, social and existential dimensions, so that the prevailing custom makes her a debtor in everything, without having the right to defend herself. The situation is no different from the behavior of ancient myths and stories of sacrifices. In the context of the nineties, the female was a sacrifice for that critical situation. The female was born to die, which is linked in human heritage to the female sacrificial sacrifice known to ancient religions. It is a situation that did not even spare female childhood. The novelist depicts the inhumane practices against the female and how the bad situation that

the female suffered from extended even to female childhood, crystallizing in immoral behavior represented in suicide, where suicide became an outlet for salvation from the brutality and cruelty of that era that the female lived. The novelist depicts the story of the girl (Reema Al-Najjar) when she was eight years old when she committed suicide by throwing herself from On the Sidi M'cid Bridge, which later turned out to be the girl's father who threw her off the bridge, thinking he had gotten rid of the shame because she had been raped. She says: "But the worst thing in those days was the story of Rima Najjar, an eight-year-old girl who threw herself off the Sidi M'cid Bridge" (Ibid, p 35) I did not believe that children commit suicide, so I investigated the matter. After the details threw me into a maze, I discovered that the father was the one who threw his daughter off the bridge. People forgot about the gang rapes and started thinking about Rima. He said he had gotten rid of the shame because she had been raped (Ibid, p 44)

Through her exploration of the issue of rape that unjustly targets the female self, the novelist Fadila Farouk highlights the violation of all values and ethics that society is supposed to uphold, transcending all laws. She portrays the contradiction in the societal structure, where the values upheld by society are in stark contrast to the behaviors it practices. Farouk's aim is not only to expose these contradictions but also to evoke empathy for the female existence and to advocate for women as a just cause. She emphasizes that this issue deserves attention and calls for better mechanisms to ensure the dignity and respect of women, seeking a more humane approach to coexistence with women in society. Through her work, Farouk calls for a deeper understanding of the suffering and struggles women face, urging society to take responsibility and adopt measures that protect women's rights and well-being.

Conclusion

_The exploration of the female childhood character in Algerian literature reveals the significance of this character in the narrative, reflecting the socio-cultural contexts that shape it. The representation of female childhood in the narrative serves as a true mirror of reality, capturing the struggles and dynamics that exist in society.

_The term "femininity" has sparked wide debate and a sense of instability in its use. However, most critics prefer "femininity" over "feminism" because the former encompasses traits that align with the female gender, such as kindness and love, while the latter refers to advocating for women's rights.

_The use of female childhood characters in Algerian literature highlights the societal views of difference and distinction between the sexes. This perspective fluctuates between the female and male, based on biological and psychological differences. Moreover, this distinction is shaped by societal norms that develop biased ideas about the female gender, often reducing it to mere physicality and instinct, thus limiting the female's existence and potential.

_The representation of female childhood in Algerian literature reflects the reality of these societal constraints, exploring two main settings: (1) urban childhood and (2) rural childhood, within two historical contexts: (1) the colonial era and (2) post-independence Algeria, particularly during the 1990s. This dual representation reflects diverse perspectives shaped by male and female writers alike.

_In her novel Taa al-Khajal, Fadila Farouk masterfully portrays the female childhood character, capturing the suffering and challenges of women in a patriarchal society. Her writing becomes a platform where the female voice resists and continues its struggle for freedom from the degrading patriarchal gaze. Farouk's portrayal of the protagonist is deeply personal, as it reflects emotions and experiences that she herself has lived through. Only women, as direct witnesses of the pain of female childhood, can truly express this anguish.

_The construction of Fadila al-Farouk's novel "Taa' al-Khajal" (The Letter of Shame) using the autobiographical style, through the mechanism of recalling memories in building the narrative, does not mean that the researcher categorizes the novel as part of autobiographical literature. This is because the researcher must go beyond the ready-made meaning when studying the novel. The autobiographical style in the novel creates a closer distance for communication between the novelist and the reader. Thus, through

her novel, Fadila al-Farouk seeks to involve the reader in the narrative and make them a part of it, enabling them to embody and live the story alongside the author, in a state of influence and being influenced. The novel, as a literary art form, aims to affect and be affected by the reader. Therefore, through the autobiographical style of narration within the narrative, the reader sees themselves as participating and interacting with the novel at all stages. In contrast to objective narration, where the reader forms perceptions and tries to create imaginary dimensions to approach the novel, this is primarily due to the distance of communication between the objective narrative and the reader's horizon of expectations. Thus, the autobiographical style in the narrative is closer to involving the reader as a medium of communication, anticipating interaction based on the principle of influence and being influenced, because autobiography is quicker in affecting the reader.

_The use of the female childhood character in Algerian literature, and specifically in Fadila al-Farouk's novel "Taa' al-Khajal" (The Letter of Shame), is based on a human dimension. The novel addresses life issues related to childhood in general, and female childhood in particular. Fadila al-Farouk did not neglect this human dimension in her novel, portraying the suffering of female childhood during the 1990s. Through this, she aims to influence the reader to accept the female self as an existing entity and coexist with it, based on the logic that existence itself is rooted in diversity, difference, and the respect for her self as a human being with freedom and dignity.

_The significance of employing the female childhood character in the novel "Taa' al-Khajal" lies in the portrayal of a rebellious, bold, and steadfast character. This serves as an exploration of building a future female model that embodies the traits of liberation from distorted traditions, filled with moral principles that enable her to live freely and independently, respecting diversity and difference. This aligns with the essence of feminist narration. The issues Fadila al-Farouk addresses in her novel touch on human concerns that affect the reality of female childhood, surpassing the tabooed behavior of infringing on the dignity and freedom of women. She presents these issues in a frank and bold literary style, breaking taboos that were once considered forbidden subjects. Therefore, this literary approach within the novel gives the concept of the novel an existential dimension, going beyond the aesthetic qualities of literature and the poetic nature of narration, to become a medium for offering existential interpretations of the human condition.

_Fadila al-Farouk's writing in her novel "Taa' al-Khajal" expresses the suffering of female childhood as a marginalized character who experiences deprivation and pain, stemming from a patriarchal society with distorted views of women. Through her narrative, she exposes and uncovers its concealed actions and intentions, rebelliously challenging its authoritarian laws with boldness. This carries within it a challenge rooted in deep feminist awareness, which drives her to defend herself as a woman and demand her right to equality and difference rights that the patriarchal system has long attempted to suppress and shackle with its tyranny.

_The feminist orientation in the novel "Taa' al-Khajal" carries an imbalanced significance between what the author attempts to condemn namely, the authority of a patriarchal society saturated with patriarchal and clerical ideas that marginalize women and limit their existence to the realm of instinct. These ideas have killed the angelic spirit of female childhood, plunging it into submission to obligatory traditions and norms that confine its ambitions, preventing them from surpassing the boundaries of marriage as the imposed outcome of societal norms. However, there is another dimension that contradicts the feminist stance, which is the shift from condemning the patriarchal society to a more forgiving approach regarding the character of her lover. This character manifests as a presence that is absent yet present, a ghost of memories. Before this character, the court of condemnation falls away, dissolving into the features of love and longing, making her forget, if only for a moment, her pain.

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