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The Cultural Imaginary and Experimentation in Modern Narrative

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Abstract

This study addresses the cultural imaginary and experimentation in modern narrative through an approach to the story "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey" by the Algerian writer Ahmed Reda Houhou, considering it a narrative model in which components of reality intersect with mechanisms of imagination and artistic experimentation. The study seeks to reveal the presence of the cultural imaginary in the construction of the narrative text, identify its manifestations and symbolic connotations, and examine its contribution to reshaping Algerian reality and representing its social and cultural issues. It also investigates the relationship between the imaginary and experimentation and the aesthetic and thematic dimensions resulting from their interaction, which enrich the short-story experience and broaden its expressive horizons. The study proceeds from the premise that creative work cannot be separated from the cultural systems that shape the consciousness of both the creator and the recipient, and that the narrative imaginary constitutes an artistic medium for transforming lived reality into images, symbols, and meanings that transcend the direct and the realistic. To achieve these objectives, the descriptive-analytical method is adopted, together with the mechanisms of cultural criticism to deconstruct narrative structures, reveal their cultural references, and clarify the effect of the culture of the Other on Ahmed Reda Houhou's creative experience. The study concludes that the imaginary and experimentation constitute active elements in constructing the short-story text, contributing to the production of profound symbolic and aesthetic meanings and presenting an artistic image of Algerian reality and its cultural and social values, thereby enhancing the literariness and artistic specificity of the text.

Keywords: cultural imaginary; narrative experimentation; modern narrative; short story; Ahmed Reda Houhou; An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey; cultural criticism; Algerian reality; cultural systems; narrative imagination.

Introduction



Narrative is one of the most prominent literary arts. It is a modern prose art that occupies an important position among other literary genres and has received considerable attention, to the point of becoming one of the most prominent literary forms in the contemporary period. It raises, through its distinctive artistic methods, issues that have occupied and continue to occupy human beings, and it embodies reality.

Because a short story transports the recipient to distant worlds—past, present, and future—through the element of imagination that supports the creative human self, transforming the abstract mental level into an evocative form known as the imaginary, which plays a major role in creating the atmosphere of the story, this study seeks to uncover the two characteristics of the imaginary and experimentation in “An Hour with the Wise Man’s Donkey” by the Algerian writer Ahmed Reda Houhou, through its narrative elements, and to identify the most important meanings and symbols of the imaginary in his story, which skillfully draws upon Algerian reality.

On this basis, a set of hypotheses emerged and led to the following questions:

- What is the extent of the influence of reality on artistic creativity? What are the characteristics of creative work shaped by cultural systems?
- What are the imaginary and experimentation? What is the relationship between them?
- What are the aesthetic and thematic dimensions of imaginative representations and experimentation in the short story? To what extent can the cultural imaginary embody reality?
- Is there an artistic work whose internal structures do not carry cultural values?
- To what extent does the culture of the Other influence Ahmed Reda Houhou’s art, and what is the significance of this space for him?

Accordingly, this study aims to trace the impact of the imaginary and experimentation on narrative artistic work and to understand the value of this cultural system, in order to comprehend and interpret the literary phenomenon through its components. It relies on the descriptive-analytical method, supplemented by cultural criticism, to reach the deep symbolic and semantic dimensions of the narrative imaginary in passages of the story related to the life of Algerian individuals in general and the values within which they were raised. This enables us to appreciate the beauty of its language and the diversity of its meanings, and consequently to reveal its literariness, aesthetics, and artistic value.

I. Conceptual Framework of the Study

1. The Nature of the Imaginary

Ibn Manzur’s *Lisan al-Arab*, under the root kh-y-l, states that the term means supposition, conjecture, resemblance, and ambiguity: “Khala al-shay’, yakhālu, khaylan, khayālan, and mukhālah: he thought it; takhayyalahu: he supposed and conjectured; khuyyila ‘alayhi: it was

made to resemble; khāla al-shay': it became ambiguous... and a mukhayyal thing is something problematic." (1)

This linguistic definition shows that the word khayyal carries several meanings: supposition, conjecture, resemblance, and ambiguity.

Terminologically, the word "imaginary" was borrowed from the Latin word *imaginarius*, which refers to mental data that do not correspond to the real world. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal used it to describe things that exist only in the human imagination. Since 1960, the term has been used in literature and the fine arts to discuss the imagining of a character or situation. (2)

The imaginary is therefore every mental product embodied in a literary work through characters, events, time, and space. It is the center of every creative act, moving the emotions and achieving various forms of pleasure represented by freedom, happiness, and beauty.

Hazim al-Qartajanni defines imagination as follows: "Imagination is for the listener to represent, from the imaginative expression, meanings, style, or structure of the poet, an image or images in his imagination, becoming emotionally affected by imagining and conceiving them, without deliberation, toward expansion or contraction." (3)

This definition reflects the interactive dimension of imagination: imagining something produces another conception and constitutes an indirect verbal act on the part of the creator. It also requires a preceding psychological state that functions as the center of interaction and response to the text, inviting imaginative cooperation with the reader (recipient).

Speaking of imagination in literature necessarily leads to speaking of the reality in which it was produced, "because the text, despite its individual and subjective particularities, is generally the product of a particular society and the offspring of a specific civilizational circumstance; it intersects with this environment in many places and interacts with it." (4)

In other words, regardless of the subjectivity of a literary work and regardless of how deeply a writer immerses himself in imagination, that product remains the offspring of social, political, and cultural circumstances. The literary work therefore presents a complete image of a social environment in its various dimensions.

The Egyptian writer Abd al-Hamid Yunis maintains in this regard that "the imaginary feeds on reality, which is its only source. However deeply an artist immerses himself in imagination, he derives its elements and units from reality or possibility. Its strangeness lies more in arrangement and composition than in creation from nothing. Thus, the relationship between reality and the imaginary is one of containment." (5)

This statement confirms the close relationship between the imaginary and reality, because the writer derives his primary material for artistic creation from reality; that is, he creates reality out of what appears to be non-reality.

Imagination plays an important role in the short story because it can fill many of the gaps that reality leaves. The narrating character knows much about the characters of reality, as though it denies its connection with the novelist, recording every detail of the characters from their social and psychological aspects and even their political orientations. The narrator thus acquires room to hypothesize, question, and alter the function originally assigned to him.

Algerian writers have experimented with several methods in this regard. Some began the journey of diagnosing the interior and uncovering the secret life of instincts and emotions; others focused on revealing everyday human life; while some attempted to question the role of myth and popular fairy tale. Through the novel, they all demonstrated that reality is obscure and complex, and that the more deeply we immerse ourselves in it, the more difficult it becomes to grasp the truth. (6)

Thus, every novelist sought the ideal model in narrative writing and discovered that there are different, sometimes contradictory and partial, truths. Consequently, the characters of the story appear closed within their own perspectives and beliefs: each has his or her own truth, just as every storyteller has his or her own truth.

2. The Concept of Experimentation

Lisan al-Arab states that experimentation derives from the root j-r-b: "to experiment, to try, to test something again and again; an experienced person is one who has experienced matters and knows them and what they contain." (7) Accordingly, Ibn Manzur's notion of experimentation derives from experience and is connected to knowledge and expertise.

Critics and scholars have offered numerous terminological definitions of experimentation because it is a broad term with scientific and literary meanings. Among these definitions is the following: "Experimentation is the reservoir of creativity; it consists in inventing new methods and means within different forms of artistic expression. It is the essence and reality of creativity when it goes beyond the familiar." (8)

Experimentation therefore means artistic creativity aimed at inventing different modes of expressing what is familiar.

Said Yaqtin defines it as going beyond the familiar in writing: "Excessive practice of transgression is what is usually called experimentation." (9) Its essential aim, therefore, is to make writing take a new form different from what preceded it.

II. Mechanisms of Experimentation in "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey"

The story "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey" is one of the most prominent short stories written by Ahmed Reda Houhou. It criticizes Algerian society during the colonial period by presenting a set of views on politics, women, education, and other issues. It is written in simple language in a satirical dialogic form with his donkey, intersecting here with Tawfiq al-Hakim's

idea of employing the donkey to express a particular position and create an atmosphere of allusion and attract the recipient's attention.

A. Components of the Short-Story Discourse

Among the experimental techniques used by the Algerian writer Ahmed Reda Houhou is his departure from the traditional form of narrative construction and his adoption of new mechanisms for narrating events, including characters, time, and space.

1. Characters

Every character has a nature and behavior that determine its mode of thinking and translate its inner secrets. The story contains a main character and a secondary character. The main character is the protagonist of the narrative text and is embodied in Ahmed Reda Houhou himself as the writer. At the opening of the story, the reader relies on two techniques to identify the main and realistic character in the introductory scene. The first is the first-person pronouns, including the first-person suffix and independent pronoun and possessive *yā'* in words such as "I finished," "I lay down," "I," "my life," "I immersed myself," "I read," "my eyes," "I saw," and "I knew him." The second is the third-person pronoun in "he cast." Which of the two pronouns reveals the narrator's identity?

The two pronouns alternate in revealing the narrator. The first-person pronoun appears at the beginning of the introductory scene: "I had finished an enjoyable reading of Tawfiq al-Hakim's book *My Donkey Told Me*, and I reclined in a comfortable chair, comfortable for me, I who had spent thirty years of my life between study chairs and work chairs, none of which had any close or distant connection with comfort or softness. Then I immersed myself in deep thought, trying to digest what I had read. Only a few minutes passed before my eyes grew heavy..." (10)

The third-person pronoun appears in "he cast upon slumber a light black cloak," giving the reader the impression that there is a speaker and another absent person, separate from the reader.

However, by considering the first-person pronoun, which reappears in "I saw, in what the half-awake sleeper sees, a small, gentle donkey showing signs of intelligence and excellence, peering at me from behind my chair. I recognized him without difficulty or trouble, for it was Tawfiq al-Hakim's donkey, head and foot" (11), we infer that the narrator is the author himself. He narrates what happened to him while reading the book; the first-person pronoun announces Ahmed Reda Houhou's presence at the first narrative level and his expression of himself in order to enter his depths. He is therefore the one who narrates the events after encountering the donkey in his dream.

The secondary character represents the supporting character and is embodied in the *Wise Man's Donkey*, an animal character described as a hardworking creature that knows no hypocrisy and works without complaint even though no one appreciates its effort.

2. Time

Time refers to the temporal boundaries of the narrative work—past, present, and future. (12) In narrative texts, time is organized through techniques including analepsis, prolepsis, and ellipsis. In the story, time is represented as follows:

2.1. Analepsis (Flashback)

Analepsis means recalling and evoking events that occurred in the past and bringing them into the present through different stages of life. In our study of "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey," analepsis appears in the writer's words through the narrator: "I had finished an enjoyable reading of a book, *My Donkey Told Me* by Tawfiq al-Hakim, and I reclined in a comfortable chair, comfortable for me, I who had spent thirty years of my life between study chairs and work chairs, none of which had any close or distant connection with comfort or softness. Then I immersed myself in deep thought, trying to digest what I had read." (13)

Through the narrator, the writer recalls his past in education and work and the difficulties and fatigue he experienced. The purpose is to portray the lived reality in Algeria.

Analepsis appears again through the narrator and the donkey: "He said: And education? I said: There is official education, which is based on a deep and mysterious philosophical principle at the same time: learn in order to become ignorant." (14) The verb indicating completion points to the temporal trajectory of Algerian education from the past to the moment when the judgment is issued in the narrative text. The purpose is to show that there is no value attached to the seeker of knowledge in Algeria as long as matters are not entrusted to their proper people and the principle of competence is not observed in selecting officials.

2.2. Prolepsis (Foreshadowing)

Prolepsis is a state of anticipation and expectation experienced by the reader during reading, with the vision becoming complete only after the reading has ended. (15) In the story, prolepsis appears in the narrator's dialogue with the Wise Man's Donkey: "How did you leave your companion? He said: Whom do you mean? Tawfiq al-Hakim. I have had enough of this man; whenever I devise a reform program, he comes and ruins it for me. I said: Despite the soundness of your opinions, you will find no one else who can digest them." (16)

The narrator anticipates that Tawfiq al-Hakim will welcome the opinions of his philosophical donkey. This reflects the degree of intellectual development in Egypt, to the point that a donkey possesses modes of thought acceptable to the most famous thinkers.

3. Space

Space represents the geographical setting in which the events of the story take place. Here it is represented by the house, which for its owner is a place of rest and dreaming despite being a closed space. In it, the writer rests from his false reality and gives free rein to his daring ideas and difficult, seemingly unattainable dreams in the external world. This appears in: "I had

finished an enjoyable reading of a book, *My Donkey Told Me* by Tawfiq al-Hakim, and I reclined in a comfortable chair, comfortable for me, I who had spent thirty years of my life between study chairs and work chairs, none of which had any close or distant connection with comfort or softness. Then I immersed myself in deep thought, trying to digest what I had read." (17)

B. Linguistic Formation and Narrative Construction

1. The Opening

Experimentation appears through what is known as the opening and the frame narrative. The opening has received considerable attention from creative writers, especially openings containing linguistic forms with stylistic prominence and an effect on the reader. The opening is the key signal through which the reader enters the text, and it is the second signal after the title that the addresser sends to the recipient. (18) The opening therefore represents the beginning of the moment of communication between the two poles of sender and receiver.

Ahmed Reda Houhou begins his story with an opening passage in narrative form: "I had finished an enjoyable reading of Tawfiq al-Hakim's *My Donkey Told Me*, and I reclined in a comfortable chair, comfortable for me, I who had spent thirty years of my life between study chairs and work chairs, none of which had any close or distant connection with comfort or softness. Then I immersed myself in deep thought, trying to digest what I had read. Only a few minutes passed before my eyes grew heavy, and sleep cast a light black cloak over me. I saw, as the half-awake sleeper sees, a small, gentle donkey showing signs of intelligence and excellence, peering at me from behind my chair. I recognized him without difficulty or trouble, for it was Tawfiq al-Hakim's donkey, head and foot." (19)

The reader of this passage, in which description drives narration, recognizes an introductory scene through which the writer presents the narrator's state of exhaustion by means of the changing elements of the scene. Yet it is devoid of events and movement because description has transformed the character into an almost independent scene upon which change occurs.

This opening has an impact operating on several levels. First, literary narration may be regarded as a message sent by an addresser (narrator) toward a future addressee (narratee), which constitutes the elements of the literary message. From a communicative perspective, the literariness or poetic quality of narration is considered through the elements of the message. (22) Thus, sender and receiver share a context from which the message is at a distance, and this distance is occupied by transformational mechanisms that convert context into message with regard to the sender as creation, and message into text through context with regard to the receiver as interpretation.

Second, it has a psychological and polarizing function through its role in attracting and influencing the recipient, consciousness, perception, and taste. Ahmed Reda Houhou uses this opening to present his narrative material and as the first level of entry into the great dream. The author does not provide conclusions for the opening scene that reveal the ultimate purpose of

reading; rather, he uses it to lure the reader and surprise him with an unseen journey that Houhou makes arise from the enjoyable reading of Tawfiq al-Hakim's book.

This opening scene also constitutes the frame narrative before the dream, making the reader anticipate knowing its narrator. Does the author reveal himself in the first sentence of his opening? Thus, the textual opening in "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey" becomes a bridge over which actual reading crosses, beginning from the space prepared by the text and reaching the implicit textual core.

2. Acceleration of Narration

Acceleration of narration is one of the most important elements through which events proceed rapidly, relying only on extracting the essential elements without mentioning minor details and particulars. (20) This feature appears in: "...Then I immersed myself in deep thought, trying to digest what I had read. Only minutes passed before my eyes grew heavy... I saw, as the half-awake sleeper sees, a small, gentle donkey showing signs of intelligence and excellence, peering at me from behind my chair. I recognized him immediately without difficulty or trouble, for it was Tawfiq al-Hakim's donkey, head and foot." (21)

Here, the acceleration of the event is evident in revealing the donkey's identity without prolongation, so that attention can remain focused on the main events while secondary events that do not serve the narrative purpose are bypassed.

Acceleration may also occur through deleting some expressions or passages and replacing them with ellipses, as in the following passage spoken by the donkey: "He said: How strange... Do you have six religions? I said: Only two... an official religion supervised by the government and implemented by al-Asimi, and a free religion believed in by the people and led by al-Ibrahimi." (22) The ellipsis at the end of the speech indicates omitted passages that apparently do not affect the course of the narrative; the writer therefore wisely avoids mentioning them because they have no major significance.

3. The Mythic Feature

Among the imaginative representations and mythical features in this story is treating something lowly as though it were great, a technique known in Arabic literature as treating the inferior through praise. This appears in Ahmed Reda Houhou's words through the narrator: "I saw, as the half-awake sleeper sees, a small, gentle donkey showing signs of intelligence and excellence, peering at me from behind my chair. I recognized him without difficulty or trouble, for it was Tawfiq al-Hakim's donkey, head and foot." I said to him: "You are the Wise Man's Donkey; I recognized you." His lips opened into a broad smile and he said: "You recognized me so easily and without difficulty?" I said: "Yes, your features were unmistakable." He said: "Then I am famous in your country?" I said: "Without doubt... Who does not know a philosopher donkey like you?" (23)

The donkey is presented here as gentle, intelligent, and distinguished, and beyond that as a famous philosopher. We know that philosophy seeks to elevate thinking and viewing matters from multiple perspectives by activating reason and reflecting on what surrounds us—qualities that do not apply at all to an animal not endowed with reason. Yet this semantic paradox carries very deep cultural connotations. It can be interpreted as revealing the level of intellectual development in Egypt, since the donkey belongs to Tawfiq al-Hakim, to the extent that the donkey becomes, by exaggeration, a famous and accomplished philosopher.

Through this mythical representation, Ahmed Reda Houhou ridicules the deteriorating cultural reality in Algeria resulting from the population's distance from intellectual development.

The fascination with the mythical Other also appears through proleptic narration, a "state of anticipation and expectation experienced by the reader during reading, with the vision becoming complete only after reading has ended" (26). In the story, prolepsis appears in the narrator's dialogue with the Wise Man's Donkey: "How did you leave your companion? He said: Whom do you mean? Tawfiq al-Hakim. I have had enough of this man; whenever I devise a reform program, he comes and ruins it for me. I said: Despite the soundness of your opinions, you will find no one else who can digest them." (24)

The donkey completely rejects comparison between himself and his companion Tawfiq al-Hakim, confirming that there are differences between them. The donkey always seeks reform and development, unlike intellectuals who constantly seek favor with those in authority. This is a quality the donkey refuses to possess: he does not belittle himself in pursuit of ambition. This explains why Tawfiq al-Hakim does not welcome the opinions of his philosophical donkey and reflects the intellectual development in Egypt to the extent that a donkey possesses modes of thought acceptable to the most prominent thinkers.

In the donkey's rejection of all forms of subservience to authority, the relationship between the Wise Man's Donkey and the writer (the I) appears to be one of agreement rather than disagreement.

The critique of the I of the Other in this binary appears in many matters, such as the Wise Man's Donkey's search for fame. The donkey considers fame an ordinary matter because it is a donkey and therefore does not submit to human laws and complexities. He proceeds to expose certain problems with complete transparency, without flattery or favoritism. The narrator objects to this, as appears in the following:

"I said: In any case, you have brightened our gathering. What is the reason for this visit, I wonder? He said: I was summoned to sing at the radio station. I said: You sing on the radio? How strange! He said: What is strange about that? My voice is beautiful; would you like to hear it without charge? I said: No... no... no, but is this not the voice mentioned by God in the Qur'an?" (25)

The writer eventually states his position and becomes convinced by the donkey's opinion, acknowledging that the voice of donkeys may be better than the voices the writer is accustomed to hearing. This appears in the donkey's words: "You will find that my voice is better than the voices you are accustomed to hearing every day." (26)

After this criticism, the donkey counters the writer's satire by affirming that he considers himself a citizen of these Arab countries, which he approaches out of love. In his view, they are small parts of the larger whole represented by the civilizational existence of the Arab nation. At this point, the binary of I and Other shifts from writer/Wise Man's Donkey to Arabs/West.

4. The Imaginative Space and the Intellectual's Conflict with Authority

The opening scene in "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey" represents a bridge over which actual reading crosses and the focal point leading to Ahmed Reda Houhou's viewpoint on himself in this text. Through recalling and invoking events that occurred to the narrator—the writer himself—in the past and bringing them into the present, "I had finished an enjoyable reading of a book, *My Donkey Told Me* by Tawfiq al-Hakim, and I reclined in a comfortable chair, comfortable for me, I who had spent thirty years of my life between study chairs and work chairs, none of which had any close or distant connection with comfort or softness. Then I immersed myself in deep thought, trying to digest what I had read." (27)

It is evident that Ahmed Reda Houhou, as the implicit character in the narrative, appears tired and uncomfortable as a result of the difficulties he experienced in study and work during the French occupation and the unjust laws imposed upon his country. The relationship is thus characterized by separation and contradiction, making the intellectual live in a continuous conflict with the conditions of his country. He remains constantly opposed to them for various reasons concerning vision and methodology, the nature of managing the affairs of the people and the homeland, and ideological positions toward national and international issues.

Despite the harsh circumstances through which the writer passed and continues to pass, he retains some optimism that one day he may achieve comfort in his work and life as a whole. This feeling appears through expressions such as "enjoyable reading" and "comfortable chair." Nevertheless, he will inevitably encounter many difficulties and obstacles, some of which are expected to multiply year after year in an attempt to undermine his determination and optimism.

Because Algeria was a source of inspiration for novelists, it represented fertile ground for creating the imaginary in "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey." The space of the narrative is Algeria, and its representation was enriched by a cluster of signs such as history (the past) and stories that summarize the formation of the geographical site and the conflicts that existed among its races and religions.

The reader of "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey" inevitably encounters a number of events occurring in Algeria. The Algerian space, with its cultural elements and suggestive breadth,

allowed for a diversity of events and ideas in the story and imposed a rhythm on the narrative action that emphasized the realism of place, as shown in the mention of well-known figures such as Sheikh al-Abbasi and Sheikh al-Ghassiri and others. It also drew secondary boundaries of signs known to the reader as a result of conventions that give memory its specificity.

What is useful and influential in the narrative, however, is that Ahmed Reda Houhou broke the stereotypical image of Algeria as an empty space. He succeeded in reformulating this emptiness and giving it an existential and contemplative vision of human being, so that the story appears to the reader as a symbol of deep Algeria. This appears in the donkey's statement to Ahmed Reda Houhou: "The donkey moved his long ears and then said: You are not mistaken; I have noticed that many donkeys enjoy great fame in this country." (28)

This satirical expression alludes to some famous people in Algeria who are likened in this construction to donkeys. Through this satirical representation, the reader gains information about individuals who attain positions without deserving fame, and the author mocks the naivety of the Algerian people who trust such figures without carefully examining their honesty or distinguishing who deserves fame from who does not. He thus calls upon the people to seek the characteristics of the appropriate person for each task and to consider their experience so that the individual responsible for a place, position, or group of people possesses the capacity to bear that responsibility.

The writer also introduces French colonialism as a second party in his short story through insinuation, charging particular words with multiple connotations that make them near-signs of the intended meaning. He says: "He said: I am exhausted from searching. Suggest a fascinating topic for us to discuss at length. I said: Choose two topics: poverty and ignorance." (29)

Ahmed Reda Houhou alludes in this passage to French colonial policy in the country. The expression "poverty and ignorance," together with similar expressions, functions as a euphemistic indication of the extent to which France fought education and the economy in Algeria. The writer uses it to strengthen his thesis rejecting French colonial policy. Through this indirect expression, he attempts to convince the recipient that the French government deliberately sought to erase the Algerians' Arab-Islamic identity generation after generation until the desired human community was formed, one that could be manipulated at will.

The writer sought to reveal Algerian identity through the interpretation existing between the lines of the narrative, by means of signs and symbols grounded in reality as much as in imagination. Although Ahmed Reda Houhou considers himself a stranger to Algerian society in terms of its culture, hopes, and aspirations, he is fully aware that the philosophy of the Algerian intellectual concerns not merely the elite but all Algerians, both intellectuals and ordinary people. Perhaps this is why he asks the donkey not to discuss the conditions of Algeria with him, because he realizes that judgments concerning its cultural, economic, and political circumstances are derived from the experience of the Algerian man and the difficulty of living there. This appears in the following:

"He said: Let us speak, then, about religion. I said: Whose religion? He said: The Islamic religion. I said: I know that. The government's religion or the people's religion? The official religion or the free religion? The religion of al-Asimi or the religion of al-Ibrahimi? He said: How strange... Do you have six religions? I said: Only two... an official religion supervised by the government and implemented by al-Asimi, and a free religion believed in by the people and led by al-Ibrahimi." (30)

This passage confirms the writer's awareness of religious conditions in Algeria. Religion appears multiple and divided into types according to its bearers, which demonstrates the multiplicity of viewpoints and the nation's division over a matter that should not be subject to classification. The definitions of "official religion" and "free religion" serve to distinguish between them and then persuade the recipient to favor one over the other. The free religion adopted by the Algerian people through conviction and will, and defended by the Association of Muslim Ulama in its effort to protect its principles and dignity, is presented as more beneficial and higher in status than the official religion that government authorities manipulate according to their interests. Hence, the Algerian people are urged to demand a complete separation of Islam from the colonial state and to beware of what the colonial government and its allied forces propagate.

The writer says: "I said: You are an Egyptian donkey, and your ideas are bold Egyptian ideas. The situation here is not like the situation there, and I fear that our exhausted stomach cannot digest them." (31)

Returning to this passage, we find that the writer artistically expresses the intellectual and lived reality in Algeria from a negative point of view because of the conditions experienced by him and his compatriots as a result of French crimes. "Through reliance on the reference/relationship between the I and the Other, the specificity of the self appears between two fields: history, which seeks abstract truth, and art, which places itself at the service of truth in its general framework, thereby building a strong bridge between past and present and making them interpenetrate until it becomes difficult afterward to distinguish between them." (32)

The writer is also adept at criticizing authority when he moves from using description as an isolated element to using description through a sequence of sentences. He says: "He said: But we must address some topic; let us talk about the economy. I said: As for the men of finance and trade, they do not waste their precious material time reading our skills, while readers do not possess what they wish to read, and they have no need of your economic expertise." (33)

In this passage, the writer relies on a series of descriptive sentences: "they do not waste their precious material time reading our skills"; "readers do not possess what they wish to read"; and "they have no need of your economic expertise." These descriptive sentences are formulated as a form of social satire intended to provide the recipient with a developed assessment of the miserable condition of culture and the economy in Algeria.

Ahmed Reda Houhou also makes extensive use of adjectives and coordinated elements. The predicate describes the subject, and the adjectives are arranged as follows: Islamic, government, people, official, free, al-Asimi, al-Ibrahimi. They are formulated to show the fragmentation of groups within the nation over the issue of religion and its purpose. The writer thus exposes the different forms through which the management of Islam in Algeria was represented.

The relationship between the educated Algerian and his homeland is intimate, and at minimum it may be described as spiritual. Consequently, harming the identity of one's homeland is like harming one's own person. Pride in the self is a behavior that develops from childhood in the way we look at ourselves, the degree to which we value ourselves, and the feeling of satisfaction toward our identity.

From this standpoint, the text emphasizes that the individual should take pride in himself, affirm his existence, and establish his identity. This is reflected in the narrator's words:

"The donkey scratched the back of his head with his foot and said: Do you want us to discuss the subject of women? I said: Be at ease in this respect; there are no women in our country. He said: How strange! Do you live without women? And how do you reproduce? I said: We have reproductive machines that we keep in our homes." (34)

Women are compared here to reproductive machines because their role in Algeria at that time was confined to bearing and raising children, without significant participation in the deteriorating reality surrounding them. This indicates the backwardness and decline of the cultural and social level in Algeria, to the point that women were distanced from developing and changing society. It is also an allusion to the prevailing ignorance in the nation at the time, unlike developed countries where women were given opportunities to participate in building their world and the world around them.

Leaving women's condition static did not contribute in any way to developing society. Through the satirical expression "reproductive machines," the author implicitly attempts to convince the recipient of the value of developing women's thinking through education so that they can participate in building a homeland living under colonial rule.

In the field of literature and the arts, Ahmed Reda Houhou puts the following words into the donkey's mouth:

"He said: Do you enjoy discussing literature? I said: We have no literature, no arts, no press, and nothing to worry about. He laughed heartily and said: You are a very pessimistic man. I said: I mean Sheikh al-Ghassiri; he is a very optimistic man." (35)

In this passage, the writer presents the intellectual and cultural decline of Algeria during French occupation. Cultural life was characterized by weakness and stagnation as a result of France's attempt to erase Algerian identity.

Ahmed Reda Houhou expands the circle of critical judgments directed at state institutions. He criticizes the governmental systems of the time and confirms that some people boast of democratic words without actually understanding what they say. This appears in:

"He said slyly: You are very cautious. I said: Leave me alone about politics, political donkey. It has not yet benefited our country and still depends more on personal interests and individual grudges than on principles and the public interest. I do not want to stain myself with its mud, whatever the cost." (36)

The writer emphasizes that his policy is not to practice politics in its direct sense, since he considers that to be the work of the masses who use it as a means to achieve goals they could not achieve through knowledge and literature. In this sense, politicians belong to a category of failures in life, and political activity is therefore incapable of producing genuine change in the history of peoples.

The writer also wishes that politics in Algeria would be based on the public interest of its people and homeland rather than personal interests. This is because Algeria is a part of his heart, and because he is committed to Algerian existence and to building a developed state. Such a project can only begin from strong foundations that remain distant from selfish ambitions.

Conclusion

Our study of the cultural imaginary and experimentation in the Algerian short story through "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey" has led to the following conclusions:

- Artistic experimentation is a complex process woven into an intricate fabric, and its aesthetic value in short-story texts is realized within the limits of their narrative structures, revealing the suggestive energies and transformative values they contain and thereby showing the effect of the text on the reader and its aesthetic dimension.
- The writer presents the story in simple language within a satirical mythical framework, intersecting with Tawfiq al-Hakim's idea of employing the donkey to express a position and create an atmosphere of allusion and attract the recipient's attention.
- Imagination plays an important role in the short story because it fills many of the gaps left by reality. The narrating character (the I) records all the details of reality from its social and psychological aspects and even its political orientation, allowing the narrator to hypothesize, question, and alter the assigned function.
- Every writer seeks the ideal model in short-story writing, attempting to reveal the existence of different, sometimes contradictory and partial truths. Thus, the characters appear enclosed within their own perspectives and beliefs, each possessing a truth, just as every storyteller has a truth.
- The I feeds on reality, which is its only source. However deeply the writer immerses himself in imagination, he derives its elements and units from reality or possibility. Its strangeness lies more

in arrangement and composition than in creating what does not exist. The relationship between reality and the imaginary is therefore one of containment, confirming the close relationship between them because the writer derives his primary material for artistic creation from reality and creates reality from non-reality.

- The story opens onto multiple symbolic dimensions whose meanings depend on our own re-conception of it. The writer therefore combines spontaneity with the use of imagination in many of its passages and details.
- Finally, scholars should approach Algerian short-story art through study and methodological reflection in a manner appropriate to the era in which its methods emerged and new sciences developed. This creative art is a fertile field for diverse linguistic studies, and analyzing it through modern approaches provides greater possibilities for revealing its interactive and interpretive dimension.

Research Notes

1. Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, Vol. 6, Dar Sadir for Publishing and Distribution, Lebanon, 1st ed., root kh-y-l, p. 121.
2. Amna Balali, *Al-Mutakhayyal fi al-Riwaya al-Jazairiyya min al-Tamathul ila al-Mukhtalif*, Dar al-Amal, Algeria, n.d. (2007), p. 8.
3. Mustafa al-Nahhal, *Min al-Khayal ila al-Mutakhayyal*, Fikr wa Naqd, Morocco, No. 33, 2000, p. 53.
4. Hassan al-Moudan, *Al-Riwaya wa al-Tahlil al-Nassi: Qira'at min Manzur al-Tahlil al-Nassi*, Dar al-Ulum for Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., 2009, p. 38.
5. Amna Balali, *Al-Mutakhayyal fi al-Riwaya al-Jazairiyya min al-Tamathul ila al-Mukhtalif*, previous reference, p. 8.
6. Mahajeri Linda and Serrar Souria, *Al-Bunya al-Sardiyya (al-Zaman-al-Makan-al-Shakhsiyyat) fi Riwayat al-A'zam li-Ibrahim Saadi*, Master's thesis in Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts and Languages, University of Bejaia, 2013–2014, p. 25.
7. Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, Vol. 6, Dar Sadir for Publishing and Distribution, Lebanon, 1st ed., root kh-y-l, p. 121.
8. Omar Ezzat, *Tawajuh al-Khitab al-Sardi fi al-Riwaya al-Imaratiyya wa al-Arabiyya al-Mu'asira: Qira'at Tahliliyya*, Department of Culture and Information, Government of Sharjah, 3rd ed., 2001.
9. Ahmed Reda Houhou, "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey," *Al-Basa'ir*, mouthpiece of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, second year of the new series, 1948–1949, issues 46–90, Vol. 2, p. 151.
10. Same source, p. 151.

11. Same source, p. 151.
12. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, translated by Said al-Ghanimi, Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, 1991, p. 69.
13. Same source, p. 151.
14. Same source, p. 151.
15. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, translated by Said al-Ghanimi, Arab Cultural Center, Beirut, 1991, p. 69.
16. Same source, p. 151.
17. Same source, p. 151.
18. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, translated by Said al-Ghanimi, p. 97.
19. Same source, p. 151.
20. Mahajeri Linda and Serrar Souria, *Al-Bunya al-Sardiyya...*, p. 65.
21. Same source, p. 151.
22. Same source, p. 151.
23. Same source, p. 151.
24. Same source, p. 151.
25. Same source, p. 151.
26. Same source, p. 151.
27. Same source, p. 151.
28. Same source, p. 151.
29. Same source, p. 151.
30. Same source, p. 151.
31. Hassan al-Moudan, *Al-Riwaya wa al-Tahlil al-Nassi...*, previous reference, p. 91.
32. Ahmed Reda Houhou, "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey," previous source, p. 151.
33. Same source, p. 151.
34. Same source, p. 151.

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1. Ahmed Reda Houhou, "An Hour with the Wise Man's Donkey," *Al-Basa'ir*, mouthpiece of the Association of Algerian Muslim Ulama, second year of the new series, 1948–1949, issues 46–90, Vol. 2, p. 151.

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1. Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, Vol. 6, Dar Sadir for Publishing and Distribution, Lebanon, 1st ed., root kh-y-l, p. 121.
2. Ibn Manzur, *Lisan al-Arab*, Vol. 6, Dar Sadir for Publishing and Distribution, Lebanon, 1st ed., root kh-y-l.
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III. Scientific Theses

1. Mahajeri Linda and Serrar Souria, *Al-Bunya al-Sardiyya (al-Zaman–al-Makan–al-Shakhsiyyat) fi Riwayat al-A'zam li-Ibrahim Saadi*, Master's thesis in Arabic Language and Literature, Faculty of Arts and Languages, University of Bejaia, 2013–2014.