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Semiotics of the Character's Signifier and Signified in the Novel *Equator (Khatt Al-Istiwa)* by Lazhar Attia

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Abstract

The relationship between character and the novel is fundamentally symbiotic; no narrative text can exist without characters who translate the author's ideational architecture into an operative fictional universe. The character constitutes the immutable structural axis around which other narrative constituents intersect and unfold. Drawing upon the theoretical frameworks of structural linguistics and narrative semiotics—particularly Ferdinand de Saussure's dyadic sign model and Philippe Hamon's semiological poetics of fictional personnel—this inquiry investigates the semiotics of the character's signifier (*signifiant*) and signified (*signifié*) in the Algerian novel *Equator (Khatt Al-Istiwa)* by Lazhar Attia. The study excavates the semantic intersections bridging character onomastics with textual behaviors, evaluates the congruence between actantial roles and psychological trajectories, and maps stratified descriptive paradigms. Deploying Hamon's dual criteria of quantitative distribution (textual frequency across the narrative) and qualitative differentiation (internal psychological versus external morphological traits; autodiegetic versus heterodiegetic modes), the findings demonstrate that Attia deliberately coordinates onomastic signifiers with evolving sociopolitical signifieds. Through this mechanism, characters evolve from initial "empty morphemes" into dense semiotic signs that embody postcolonial disillusionment, subaltern resilience, and communal consciousness.

Keywords: Character; Semiotics; Signifier and Signified; Philippe Hamon; Lazhar Attia; *Equator*; Narrative Discourse.



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Introduction

In modern narrative theory and semiotics, the fictional character has undergone profound conceptual re-evaluations. Early formalist and structuralist formulations—initiated by Vladimir Propp's morphology of folktales and extended by Étienne Souriau and Algirdas Julien Greimas—relegated the character to a functional actant subordinated to syntagmatic plot grammar. However, the subsequent analytical interventions of Philippe Hamon marked an essential theoretical shift. In his foundational work, *Le personnel du roman: Le système des personnages* (translated into Arabic as *Semiology of Fictional Characters*), Hamon established a rigorous semiological paradigm dedicated specifically to the characterological component, reconciling structural linguistic sign theory with the aesthetic dynamics of the novel.

This critical study interrogates the semiotics of the character's signifier and signified in the novel *Equator* (*Khatt Al-Istiwa*) by the Algerian writer Lazhar Attia (1989), deconstructing the textual mechanisms that generate fictional identity. Within contemporary textual analysis, the semiotics of the signifier represents a decisive epistemological departure: it redirects critical focus away from recovering a static, pre-existing, and obscured meaning (the signified) toward examining the sign's generative architecture and modes of textual production (the signifier).

Under this framework, the signifier is no longer conceived as a subservient vehicle delivering a static authorial message to the reader. Rather, it operates as an autonomous generative agent that produces meaning across a differential network of relations within the text. As Roland Barthes (1994) asserted, the ultimate objective of semiological analysis is not to retrieve an ultimate, theological meaning of the author, but to decipher the structure of meaning itself. The literary text is not a linear succession of words yielding a solitary truth; it constitutes a multidimensional fabric wherein diverse textualities intersect and collide. Meaning remains mobile, deferred, and dynamic, generated through the productive friction of signifiers, transforming the novel from a closed artifact into an open, pluralistic space of continuous reinterpretation.

I. The Semiotics of Character Signifiers in *Equator*

In literary onomastics, proper names function as concentrated textual markers loaded with etymological, cultural, and ideological associations. In *Equator*, Lazhar Attia deploys names that alternate between motivated symbolic roots and arbitrary sociopolitical indices.

1. Allal

In classical Arabic lexicography, the masculine proper noun *Allal* (علال) denotes one who waters camels a second time (*al-'alal* / العَلَل: the second drink), connoting perseverance, revival, and sustained argument supported by proof. Culturally, the name carries semantic markers of critical intellect, sharp analytical reasoning, and bold defiance. These qualities position Allal as the central vocal and philosophical protagonist of the narrative, bearing the collective anxieties of his marginalized urban milieu: *"Allal is not like you, people, because his preoccupations are immense and his griefs are vast; they are the griefs of this city and the concerns of its bare, destitute inhabitants."* The signified of this character embodies resilience and ideological leadership, harmonizing with his psychological state of perpetual searching. His existential crisis is condensed metonymically into voluntary solitude and the cigarette permanently resting between his lips: *"Burn your cigarettes one after another and do not worry; for time is past, present, and future: the past we remember, the present we live, and the future arrives while we know it not."* The narrator's recurring temporal framing highlights the collective historical trauma experienced by Allal and his society, caught between existential alienation in the present and apprehension regarding an uncertain future.

2. Le Sergent (The Sergeant)

As Ferdinand de Saussure (1916/1985) articulated, the link uniting the signifier and the signified is arbitrary and conventional. This arbitrary nature is manifested in the character designated by the military title *Le Sergent* (السارجان), designating a non-commissioned officer rank in the Algerian armed forces. Within the novel's diegesis, this functional title becomes an existential signifier for an individual burdened by acute sociopolitical disillusionment. The Sergeant seeks cognitive refuge in alcohol, singing with a haunting voice while voicing vitriolic opposition toward the emergent bourgeois class and opportunistic elements whose revolutionary loyalty was dubious: *"And the Sergeant passed by here singing... then he turned to you and laughed for a long time, and finally cursed you. Yes, he cursed you all, present and absent; he cursed the bourgeoisie, feudalism, and merchants, every single merchant, declaring to you: including my mother's husband—he is a merchant just like you."* This narrative sequence signifies an acute, uncompromised socio-political consciousness and bitter disenchantment with the post-independence social order.

3. Yamouna

Derived from the Arabic root *Maymouna*, Yamouna signifies grace, goodness, and spiritual blessing

(*al-barakah*). In narrative interactions, Yamouna establishes a profound dialectical pairing with the protagonist Allal. As Allal observes the city, her presence stands out: "*He headed toward the city to inspect it, as it devoured its dwellers to the rhythmic tunes of Yamouna's weaving loom, who refused to surrender as others did.*" Yamouna personifies the resilient, organic intellectual who shares the people's collective plight and preserves their cultural memory. Her existential kinship with Allal is underscored through spatial companionship: "*Depart, for the street is yours, Allal, and it is Yamouna's. Only the two of you can fill it, traversing it by day or night... while the people sleep; no one else could ever fill this street.*" The textual signifier of Yamouna consistently generates signifieds of unwavering fidelity, moral resilience, and existential resistance.

4. The Prophets (Al-Anbiya')

Linguistically, *al-Nabi* (the Prophet) stems from *al-naba'* (the announcement of momentous news) or *al-nabwah* (an elevated, prominent ground), signifying exceptional moral, ethical, and spiritual stature. Within the diegesis, prophetic signifiers are intertextually projected onto the central character, Allal: "*He passes by like the prophets, distributing his smiles to all the people; pass on, O ever-radiant face.*" This explicit metaphorical parallel links the protagonist's socio-moral trajectory with prophetic patience and martyrdom, anchoring the character's mundane struggle within a transcendent ethical lineage.

Table 1

Taxonomy and Semiotic Mapping of Character Signifiers in the Novel Equator

Typological Category	Character Name	Signifier (Linguistic / Cultural Etymology)	Narrative Function and Signified
Characters of Social Reference	Boumendjel	Alludes to the historical figure Ali Boumendjel, the Algerian nationalist militant and lawyer (UDMA).	Functions as the sage, the interpreter of dreams, and the social counselor for community affairs.

Typological Category	Character Name	Signifier (Linguistic / Cultural Etymology)	Narrative Function and Signified
	El-Amri	Derived from <i>Umar</i> (longevity/life); in classical lexicons (<i>Lisan al-Arab</i>), it designates a superior variety of dates.	The truck driver and intimate comrade of Allal; characterized by courage, humor, and physical vigor.
	Boukhemis	Arabic masculine onomastic indicating Thursday (<i>Yawm al-Khamis</i>).	The itinerant peddler with a modest pushcart; maintains continuous dialogic exchanges with Allal.
Characters of Historical Reference	Hamdan Qarmat	Prominent historical founder and figure of the socio-religious Qarmatian movement. Projected onto the town orator.	Symbolizes insurgent ideological preaching, public oratory, and moral admonition against corruption.
	The Martyrs (Al-Shuhada)	Sacred title denoting those who sacrifice their lives for the liberation and dignity of their	Embodied through invocations by Allal and the town orator, signifying ultimate altruism and

Typological Category	Character Name	Signifier (Linguistic / Cultural Etymology)	Narrative Function and Signified
		nation.	patriotic benchmark.
Mythological / Allegorical Reference	The Lame Donkey	Non-human domestic animal; "lame" (<i>a'raj</i>) signifies physical impediment and silent endurance.	Operates as a faithful vehicle for arduous desert journeys and a silent custodian of confidential truths.
Metaphorical Reference	Love	Signifies deep affective attachment, positive emotional devotion, and spiritual commitment.	Manifests as the profound, shared devotion uniting Allal and Yamouna toward their home city and its inhabitants.
	Hatred and Rejection	Aversive emotional states characterized by revulsion, refusal, and unyielding hostility.	Personified through the Sergeant's unyielding contempt toward bourgeois opportunists and faux revolutionaries.
Deictic / Indexical Characters	Hamdan Qarmat, the religious scholars (<i>Al-Ulama</i>), Boumendjel (acting as city archivist and living memory).		

Typological Category	Character Name	Signifier (Linguistic / Cultural Etymology)	Narrative Function and Signified
Memorial / Intertextual Figures	Historical and prophetic archetypes invoked within internal monologues: Prophet Joseph, Prophet Job, the Virgin Mary, and national liberation figures (Larbi Ben M'hidi, Didouche Mourad, Mohamed Salah Mihoubi).		

II. The Semiotics of Character Signifieds in *Equator*

As Philippe Hamon (1977/2013) demonstrates, the signified of a character is not an *a priori* essence, but a semantic bundle constructed gradually across the syntagmatic axis of the narrative. A character enters the fictional discourse as an empty morpheme (*morphème vide*), progressively accumulating qualitative descriptors, functional actions, and socio-ideological traits until crystallizing into a semiotic sign (Yaqtin, 1997). To deconstruct this accumulation, Hamon proposes two central analytical criteria: quantitative distribution and qualitative differentiation.

1. Quantitative Evaluation

The quantitative criterion gauges the explicit textual frequency and distribution of character references across the novel's pages, establishing the relative narrative density of each figure. In *Equator*, textual tracking reveals sharp functional demarcations:

- **Allal:** Formatted across two intersecting descriptive planes—an intellectual/psychological axis (devotion to the city, existential perplexity, contemplation of sociopolitical decay) and a tangible physical axis (the constant cigarette, languid posture in confined quarters).
- **The Sergeant:** Introduced through detailed behavioral descriptors (alcohol dependency, vocal artistry) alongside a catalog of precarious manual trades (bootblack, cigarette vendor, car washer, dockworker).
- **Yamouna:** Elevated through poetic imagery centered on her nocturnal loom, symbolizing nocturnal vigilance and metaphysical resistance against communal despair.

Table 2

Textual Occurrence and Frequency Distribution of Major Characters

Character Name	Page Numbers of Explicit Occurrences	Total Page Frequency	Relative Share (%)
Allal	8, 10, 12, 16, 19, 23, 27, 30, 33, 35, 39, 42, 45, 49, 52, 59, 61, 62, 66, 69, 71, 74, 76, 80, 85, 87, 93, 97, 102, 109, 115, 118, 121, 125, 129, 130, 132	37	47.4%
Yamouna	11, 17, 19, 22, 27, 33, 35, 39, 45, 49, 55, 56, 59, 60, 63, 66, 71, 75, 80, 86, 88, 91, 96, 107, 117, 120, 126, 130, 131	29	37.2%
The Sergeant	15, 23, 36, 42, 56, 68, 74, 77, 93, 111, 119, 129	12	15.4%

As illustrated in Table 2, Attia concentrates narrative weight upon the central dyad of Allal (37 occurrences) and Yamouna (29 occurrences), who collectively account for 84.6% of the primary character citations. This textual concentration reflects their roles as structural anchors through which the city's existential drama unfolds, while peripheral figures provide complementary ideological perspectives.

2. Qualitative Evaluation

Quantitative metrics require qualitative elaboration to articulate internal psychological features and external morphological traits:

Allal (Direct vs. Indirect Presentation): The narrator alternates between direct autodiegetic reflection and heterodiegetic framing:

- *Direct Self-Presentation (First-Person 'I')*: "As for me, glued to the ground, stretched out in total languor in this room, I burn away with every second, continuously perturbing the air."
- *Indirect Narration (Omniscient Narrator / Interlocutor)*: "Burn your cigarettes one after another and do not worry; for time is past, present, and future: the past we remember, the present we live, and the future arrives while we know it not."

The Sergeant (Indirect Omniscient Characterization): Characterized through behavioral description:

- "Whenever the Sergeant passes through this street—as often happens during his luminous sober nights—he approaches this window and shouts at the top of his lungs."
- "And the Sergeant passed by here, singing; his voice was intensely captivating, finer than all the melodies I used to hear in those days."

Yamouna (External Trajectory and Inward Depth): Presented via an omniscient voice highlighting her interior significance: "*You have become something entirely different for us in this city, Yamouna... You alone comprehend our deepest secrets, and you alone can shake our depths to awaken us to our reality.*" Externally, the text summarizes her biographical trajectory through urban space: from her birth on the city's main street, through family bereavement, marriage, and divorce, to her ultimate return to the maternal house where her loom remains an enduring acoustic presence.

Conclusion

This semiotic inquiry yields the following findings:

1. **Plurality of Narrative Modes:** Attia alternates between direct autodiegetic discourse and external omniscient narration, creating depth between character consciousness and social environment.
2. **Socio-Ideological Alignment:** The physical and existential features of the protagonist Allal root him in the subaltern social strata, embodying the anxieties of post-independence Algerian society.

3. **Onomastic Intentionality:** Character signifiers are closely aligned with thematic signifieds (Allal's endurance, Yamouna's grace, the Sergeant's disenchantment), demonstrating deliberate onomastic craftsmanship.
4. **Dynamic Semiotic Filling:** In accordance with Philippe Hamon's framework, characters develop from initial empty morphemes into complex signs through cumulative narrative interactions.
5. **Prevalence of Omniscient Perspective:** While interiority is granted to major figures, an omniscient perspective coordinates the overarching semiotic system, inviting the reader to participate in deciphering socio-political meaning.

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