



Universidad Nacional de Catamarca - Facultad de Humanidades
Instituto de Investigación en Teorías del Arte y Estética
Revista Rigel – ISSN 2525-1945.

Narrative Memory and the Formation of the Self in Fadhila El Farouk's *Ta al-Khajal* (The T of Shame): From Recalling the Past to Resisting Erasure

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Abstract

This study examines narrative memory in Fadhila El Farouk's novel *Ta al-Khajal* (The T of Shame), focusing on the role memory plays in shaping the narrating self and in recovering women's experiences of violence and enforced silence during Algeria's "*Black Decade*."

The study proceeds from the premise that memory in the novel is not merely retrospective: it becomes an interpretive act through which the self is reconstructed, and a means of restoring women's voices threatened by forgetting and erasure.

The study draws on Maurice Halbwachs's concept of collective memory and Paul Ricoeur's notion of narrative identity, while also engaging narratological concepts related to analepsis, temporality, and space.

The reading shows how memory moves from the individual to the collective, extending beyond Khalida's private experience to those of her mother, grandmother, Yamina, Rawiya, and other women. Place—Constantine in particular—functions as a powerful trigger and repository of memory, while the female body becomes a bearer of the traces left by violence.

The study concludes that narration forms the crucial link between memory and resistance to erasure: recovering the past enables the reconstruction of the self; reconstruction leads to testimony; and testimony becomes writing capable of preserving experience against oblivion.

Keywords: narrative memory; narrative identity; collective memory; selfhood; body; place; testimony; erasure; Fadhila El Farouk...

Introduction

Memory has become a central concept in contemporary literary studies because it provides a productive way of understanding literature's relationship to the past, history, and identity. Memory does not recover the past as a neutral record of what happened; it reconstructs it from the standpoint of the present and is therefore inseparable from selection, interpretation, and the re-creation of experience.

Memory acquires particular importance in the contemporary Algerian novel, which has repeatedly confronted the social and political violence of the 1990s, commonly referred to as the Black Decade. That period left a deep wound in both individual and collective memory, and literature became one of the spaces in which experiences subjected to silence, suppression, or forgetting could be recovered.

Fadhila El Farouk's *Ta al-Khajal* belongs to this context. The novel revisits the experience of Algerian women through a narrative in which the body, memory, and testimony stand at the center of the storytelling process.

Previous studies have approached the novel from a range of perspectives, including memory and women's writing, history, narrative time, the unsaid, and female identity. The present study, however, does not treat memory as an isolated theme. It examines memory as a force in the formation of the self, traces its movement from individual to collective remembrance, and considers the way it ultimately becomes testimony and a form of resistance to erasure.

The central question is therefore: How does narrative memory in *Ta al-Khajal* move from being a means of recalling the past to becoming a mechanism for forming the self and resisting the erasure of women's experience?

1. Memory and the Reconstruction of the Self

Memory has attracted sustained attention from philosophers, thinkers, and literary critics because it is inseparable from both individual and collective practice. As Al-Bakkoush argues, acts of remembering permeate ordinary practices so thoroughly that memory has at times been understood as inseparable from life itself and as a source of the arts and letters (Al-Bakkoush, 2023, p.25).

Paul Ricoeur likewise insists that, when we refer to the past, "*we have no other resource than memory itself*" (Ricoeur, 2009, p.87). Memory is therefore not a marginal faculty but one of the principal means through which the past becomes accessible in the present.

Ta al-Khajal does not present the past as a completed and sealed period. Rather, it remains active in the consciousness of the narrating self. Analepsis is not used simply to fill gaps in the plot; it reveals how past experience has made the self what it is.

From the opening pages, the past is bound to women's experience:

"Since the family... since school... since tradition... since terrorism... since everything about me carried the *Ta al-Khajal* (T of shame), everything about them carried the T of shame; since our names that stumble at their final letter; since the frown that greets us at birth..." (El Farouk, 2015, p.9).

The passage immediately merges individual memory with a shared female memory. The narrator does not remain within "**me**"; she moves at once toward "**them**."

This movement becomes even clearer when Khalida recalls her mother and grandmother and the conditions in which they lived:

"Since my mother, suspended in a marriage that was never quite a marriage; since everything I watched die silently within her; since my grandmother, who remained paralyzed for half a century after the brutal beating she received from her husband's brother—a beating the tribe applauded and the law chose not to see. Since long ago..." (El Farouk, 2015, p.9).

Memory thus shows that the narrator's experience does not begin with her. Her self is already entangled with the lives of women who came before her. She carries part of her mother's and grandmother's memory, just as she will later become a bearer of the memories of other women.

From the perspective of Ricoeurian narrative identity, the self comes to recognize itself through the story it is able to talk about its life. Al-Ghanmi describes narrative identity as the identity a subject acquires through the mediation of narrative function (Al-Ghanmi, 1999, p.251). Khalida's return to her past is therefore simultaneously a process of composing and recomposing who she is.

The novel makes this relationship between memory and identity explicit when the narrator says:

"I was the possibility of a woman, but circumstances never let me become fully one. I was the possibility of a writer, and I became one only when I surrendered humanity to literature. I was the possibility of a life, and of that possibility I achieved barely a tenth" (El Farouk, 2015, p.13).

The self appears here not as a fixed essence but as an unfinished project shaped by experience. Writing is not external to that process; it becomes one of the ways through which the self is formed.

2. Writing as Resistance to Silence

If memory retrieves the past, writing makes that past speakable. The novel presents writing as an act that resists silence. The narrator explains:

"I wrote endlessly. Perhaps because, as Guy des Cars once said, I too am a woman, and 'a woman loves narration because through it she resists the silence of solitude.' The clamour of writing broke the bars inside me and made me walk in a vast demonstration calling for life" (El Farouk, 2015, p.12).

The passage offers a clear understanding of narration's function. The woman writes because she inhabits a social and psychological order structured by silence. Writing becomes an outlet for buried feelings, a means of escaping the prison of silence, and a language through which she can voice the oppression produced by rigid customs within family and society.

Under such psychological siege, writing becomes a force capable of loosening that enclosure. Narration is no longer merely an aesthetic activity; it becomes a means of reclaiming the self.

At the same time, the novel recognizes the difficulty of turning traumatic experience into language. When Khalida confronts the experience of rape, she asks:

"How does one write about a woman whose virginity was taken by force? I no longer know what writing is. I no longer know the colours of the pen or the colour of the page. Everything has come to resemble Rawiya's delirium and Yamina's bleeding. Everything has turned red—blood. Everything has become pain" (El Farouk, 2015, p.56).

This moment exposes the limits of language before suffering. Writing, previously imagined as a vehicle of liberation, enters a crisis when confronted with extreme violence.

Yet this crisis does not amount to the failure of writing. Rather, it reveals the novel's awareness of the ethical burden involved in representing pain: the victim is not raw material for fiction but a subject whose experience cannot be reduced without remainder to words.

3. Constantine as a Space of Memory

Memory in the novel is inseparable from place. Constantine is not merely the setting in which events occur; it becomes a space that summons the past and preserves its traces.

Recalling her relationship with the city, the narrator says:

"I would tell you about Constantine: the pine trees and the theatre, the radio and television house, the summer concerts, Ramadan nights, winter's weeping, the fog dancing on the bridges, and the streets rejoicing in malouf music. I had become entangled in loving it, without knowing that it was a city that neither embraces you nor lets you go" (El Farouk, 2015, p.11).

In the source text, malouf refers to the musical tradition for which Constantine is renowned, while the phrase "a city that neither embraces you nor lets you go" is attributed to the Algerian writer Mourad Boukerzaza.

Place is thus transformed into a constellation of memory-signs: trees, theatre, broadcasting, Ramadan, winter, bridges, and music. To recall Constantine is to retrieve an entire period of life, especially the cherished memories associated with childhood. The city becomes a site of longing and attachment to a lost past.

This bond reaches its most intense form when the narrator says:

"At that moment Constantine wept, and silence closed around me. The past came down as sharply salted tears; your eyes swam across the sky, while I was a paper kite

exhausted by the rain. 'Let us hide from the rain,' Ahmed said. But I did not want to" (El Farouk, 2015, p.32).

Here the city becomes a sentient presence that shares the narrator's emotion. The past is no longer conveyed as information; it becomes tears and silence. The return of memory also retrieves Khalida's suffering under oppressive customs that condemned love, constrained women, and denied them the freedom they were born to possess. Constantine therefore functions as a form of spatial memory: it stores experience and releases it whenever the self returns to the city.

4. From Individual to Collective Memory

The novel moves beyond Khalida's personal memory to construct a polyphonic female memory. She recalls her mother and grandmother, and then turns toward other women, particularly victims of violence during the Black Decade.

Halbwachs's concept of collective memory is particularly useful here. Individual memory is formed within social groups, and the memories of others become part of the individual's own consciousness. As Halbwachs puts it, "every individual memory is a point of view on collective memory" (Halbwachs, 2016, pp.6-7).

This movement becomes visible when Khalida turns into a witness to women's experiences. She does not narrate only her own life; she carries stories that might never reach the reader without the act of narration.

The importance of this testimonial function becomes particularly clear in the novel's reference to what it calls the "law of silence":

"The figures contradicted one another in striking ways under the law of silence: 1,013 women were victims of terrorist rape between 1994 and 1997, in addition to two thousand women since 1997; some say the number exceeds five thousand cases" (El Farouk, 2015, pp.38-39).

Silence here is not merely an individual refusal or inability to speak. It becomes a mechanism governing whether victims remain visible in public memory. When a woman is silenced, her story disappears; when the story disappears, the experience itself is threatened with oblivion. Narration thus becomes a counterforce to erasure.

5. The Body as an Archive of Violence

Women's bodies have often occupied a central place in literary representation. Yet some writing, as Wattar observes, reduces women to eroticized bodies and frames them primarily through desire, sensuality, and physical appearance (Wattar, 1999, p.45). Such representations turn woman into an object of pleasure rather than a full human subject.

The violence inflicted upon women is also rooted in social structures that alternately idealize and diminish them. Muhammad discusses older Arabic conceptions of womanhood in relation to notions of human virtue and completeness, showing how language itself may register

contradictory valuations of femininity (Muhammad, 2006, p.21). Within such structures, contempt and perceived inferiority can help normalize violence.

In critical discussions of the Algerian novel, violence is understood as an act that threatens human integrity and causes material, bodily, psychological, intellectual, or symbolic harm; it may take verbal or physical form and operate through social, cultural, or discursive practices (Habila, 2010, p.11). It may likewise be understood as the deliberate infliction of physical, psychological, or moral injury through different means, producing varying degrees of pain and loss (Abd al-Rahmann, 2012, p.107). Across these formulations, violence converges on the violation and harming of the self or of others.

One of the novel's most significant uses of memory is therefore the transformation of the female body into a bearer of the past. Violent experience does not remain confined to consciousness; it leaves traces on the body.

This is evident in Yamina's experience of rape and bodily abuse at the hands of the terrorist group. Her story becomes part of Khalida's memory. The body is no longer only the object upon which violence is enacted; it becomes evidence that violence occurred. In this sense, the body performs an archival function, preserving what society may try to forget or conceal.

This dimension becomes still more important because the women in the novel confront two levels of violence: violence inflicted directly upon them and symbolic violence that turns the victim herself into the bearer of shame. The body is therefore bound simultaneously to memory and to shame.

The title *Tā' al-Khajal* does not refer only to an individual psychological feeling. It exposes a social mechanism through which women are made to carry the burden of silence for experiences for which they were never responsible.

6. Shame and Erasure

"*Shame*" in the novel can be read as one of the mechanisms of erasure. Shame imposes silence; silence obstructs testimony; and the absence of testimony places memory at risk.

shame → silence → forgetting → erasure

narration → testimony → memory → resistance to erasure

Writing acquires its decisive function within this opposition. The narrator cannot change the past, but she can prevent its traces from disappearing. Memory thus becomes an act performed in the present rather than a passive return to what has already happened.

7. The Paradox of Remembering and Forgetting

Forgetting accompanies every act of remembering and every reactivation of memory. Ricoeur captures this paradox in the proposition that "*to remember is not to forget*" (Ricoeur, 2010, p.154): memory carries within itself the continuing possibility and presence of forgetting.

Squire and Kandel describe memory as the binding material that holds mental life together; when memory is lost, we also lose the capacity to reanimate our past and risk losing our connection to ourselves and to others (Squire & Kandel, n.d., p.10).

Ricoeur similarly describes forgetting as a persistent and troubling threat in the background of both the phenomenology of memory and the epistemology of history (Ricoeur, 2009, p.602). Remembering and forgetting therefore do not simply cancel one another; they remain locked in a continuing tension.

The attentive reader of the novel can see that forgetting becomes a major theme in its own right. Its presence occupies a significant part of the characters' inner lives. Tzvetan Todorov crystallizes the dilemma in a provocative question: *"If the recovery of the past leads to death, why should we not prefer forgetting?"* (Todorov, 2006, p.242).

Ta al-Khajal adopts a complex position toward the past. It returns to the past repeatedly, yet it also stages the desire to be freed from its effects. Khalida expresses this tension when speaking of Yamina:

"I wanted her to fall in love with life again, to forget what happened to her in the mountains, to sever her bond with the past, to endure for hundreds of years as these bridges have endured. I wanted her to be hard—hard as all these rocks" (El Farouk, 2015, p.93).

The statement reveals an essential paradox. Khalida wants Yamina to forget so that she can continue living, yet Khalida herself cannot stop writing about the past. The relationship between memory and healing is therefore deeply ambivalent. Forgetting may appear necessary for individual survival, but erasing the past from collective memory would also erase the victim's experience.

For this reason, the novel's narrative structure refuses to present forgetting as a final solution. It retrieves precisely what its characters sometimes wish to leave behind, turning remembrance into a form of resistance.

8. From "I" to "We"

The novel gradually moves from the individual self toward collective memory. Khalida's "I" is never isolated from "them." She carries the memory of her mother and grandmother, then of the women she encounters, and eventually of the women who became victims of violence. Narration becomes a meeting place for female selves.

Through this movement, individual experience becomes collective experience. One of the novel's most important achievements lies here: it returns woman from the position of "the object of the story" to the position of "the one who owns and tells the story." Woman appears not only as victim but also as witness, speaker, and narrator.

Conclusion

Ta al-Khajal (T of shame) reveals that memory is not merely a narrative technique used to retrieve the past. It is a mechanism through which the self is formed and experience is reconstructed.

The study has shown that memory in the novel follows a cumulative movement:

recalling the past → reinterpreting it → constructing the self → testimony → resistance to erasure

The narrating self returns to the past in order to understand itself, but it does not remain enclosed within private experience. It moves toward the memories of other women. Place—Constantine above all—becomes a carrier of this memory, while the female body becomes an archive of the traces left by violence.

Writing performs the decisive function in this process: it transforms silent experience into testimony and testimony into memory that can circulate. The title of the novel itself acquires a layered significance. "*Shame*" is one of the forces that drives women toward silence, whereas narration becomes a means of confronting that silence, escaping its confinement, and giving voice to what has been held within.

Resistance to erasure therefore does not mean an absolute rejection of individual forgetting. Rather, it means refusing to allow experience to disappear from collective memory. The novel cannot change what happened, but it can prevent what happened from being turned into something that, in public memory, never happened at all.

Ta al-Khajal may thus be read as a text that mobilizes memory as an act of recovering the self, as testimony to women's experience, and as a symbolic resistance to erasure.

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