
The Possibility of the Event in Algerian Folk Literature - A Semiotic Study-

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Abstract

Place holds great significance in folk and artistic literary creativity, as it uniquely evokes a sense of belonging and an awareness of time, making it an essential entity without which nothing occurs. It has played a crucial role in Palestinian poetry, where it became a poetic concern and anxiety stemming from the feeling of loss and the attempt to reclaim it. The sense of place intensifies when it is lost or displaced, and this feeling becomes even more pronounced when the displaced individual is a creative writer living in exile. Exile implies a rupture from physical existence in the homeland while simultaneously extending its presence internally. When the homeland becomes an internalized concept, the imagination is activated, revealing multiple levels of dreams and memory. Voluntary or forced withdrawal from a place does not signify the death of the idea of the homeland; rather, this idea continues to grow in exile. Poets in exile inhabit a linguistic homeland, which they construct through poetry and collections of verse.

Keywords: Place – Event – Semiotics – Folk Literature.

مكانية الحدث في الأدب الشعبي الجزائري - دراسة سيميائية -

Semiotic Concepts:

Semiotics is a relatively modern discipline, despite the scattered ideas found in both Arab and Western intellectual traditions. What distinguishes this field is its emergence in two different places within a closely related historical period. In

Europe, the linguist **Ferdinand de Saussure** (1857–1914) heralded the birth of this science, calling it *semiology*. He defined it as follows:

“We can conceive of a science that studies the life of signs within social life; we shall call it the science of signs, or semiology. Linguistics is only a part of this broader science.” (1)

Thus, semiology is concerned with:

“The study of sign systems—whether linguistic, iconic, or kinetic. While linguistics focuses on language systems, semiology examines non-linguistic signs that emerge within society.” (2)

Literary Creativity in Folk Heritage:

Folk literature encompasses all forms of spontaneous oral arts. These verbal expressions hold a prominent place among the branches of heritage, passed down orally from generation to generation in colloquial dialects. They serve as a reflection of human interaction with nature and with fellow humans, embodying collective experiences, knowledge, emotions, and sentiments. Folk literature includes **proverbs, folk songs, anecdotes, jokes, and street vendor calls**, among other forms (4).

No one can claim individual authorship of any piece of folk heritage. However, this does not contradict the idea that an original creator may have laid the foundation for a particular story or proverb at a certain time and place, based on a personal experience. This initial creation serves as the center of a ripple effect—like a stone thrown into a pond—where the expanding circles represent the collective contributions of various communities across different times, places, and psychological and social contexts.

Folk heritage is the product of human interaction with nature and with others, reflecting social, spiritual, and economic aspects of life. Verbal arts, a major component of folklore (5), are categorized by **Omar Al-Sareesi** (6) into the following types:

- **Incantations, spells, and charms:** The ritual use of words to bring blessings, ward off evil, or repel supernatural forces.
- **Folk proverbs:** Wise, eloquent, concise sayings that convey deep meanings and are widely used.
- **Folk songs:** Songs that originate from the people, depicting their lives in a spontaneous and emotional manner, passed down orally in the vernacular.
- **Jokes:** Short, satirical narratives that reflect the public's mood.
- **Street vendor calls:** To be considered part of folklore, these must be eloquent and have a musical tone.
- **Folk literature:** Defined by **Ahmad Roshdi Saleh** as *an ancient, spontaneous, and orally transmitted art, passed down from generation to generation and closely linked to traditions and customs*. Folk literature forms the backbone of folk heritage and is often referred to as "folk literature" in a broad sense (7).

Another branch of folklore includes **traditional handicrafts**, which have been debated in terms of their classification within heritage. These crafts include pottery, weaving, leatherwork, and wool-based textiles.

The final category comprises **folk dances, traditional music, and public performances** such as **dabke and other popular dance forms**.

The Importance of Studying Folk Heritage:

The study of folk heritage is significant for several reasons:

1. Balancing Material and Moral (Human) Values:

In an era dominated by materialism, scientific advancement, and technology, there is a noticeable decline in moral and spiritual values. A civilized society must progress along two parallel paths: one representing material values and the other representing ethical and human values. A simple comparison between these two aspects in the 20th century reveals a clear imbalance—while material progress has soared, moral values have remained stagnant, creating a fundamental flaw in the social structure.

2. Understanding the History of Human Thought:

Folk heritage offers valuable insights into the evolution of human thought across generations. It illustrates how humans have interacted with their environment over time, highlighting the processes of dissemination, circulation, and accumulation that characterize heritage.

3. Strengthening National Identity:

The shared cultural heritage among members of a nation reinforces national identity, solidifies social bonds, and strengthens historical roots (8).

Fundamentals of Folk Literature:

Folk literature possesses distinct characteristics in both form and content:

1. Language:

- **Mahmoud Dhahni** describes it as *simplified classical Arabic*, closely resembling the spoken dialect (9).
- **Ilya Al-Hawi** notes that folk literature often uses colloquial expressions infused with rural spirit, commonly used in daily life (10).
- Some scholars argue that adapting folk literature to classical Arabic limits its oral spontaneity and fluidity (11).

2. **Themes:**

- Folk literature addresses **universal themes** that resonate with every individual while also dealing with **personal concerns**, making each person feel connected to its content (12).
- It covers a vast range of topics relevant to the daily lives and struggles of the people.

3. **Form:**

- Folk literature does not adhere to a strict form; it adapts its structure to serve its objectives. A story may evolve into a proverb, a folk song, a play, or a blend of these forms (13).

4. **Means of Expression:**

- It employs various forms such as myths, epics, sagas, and drama to convey its message.

5. **Spontaneity and Oral Tradition:**

- Unlike formal literature, folk literature is instinctive and dynamic, evolving across different environments and eras.
- Its storytelling often defies logical sequencing, focusing instead on emotional and cultural resonance (14).

Key Features of Folk Literature:

- **Widespread Popularity:** It is accessible to all social classes, unlike formal literature, which is often confined to an elite group.
- **Timelessness:** Folk literature transcends time, remaining relevant and engaging across generations (15).
- This dual nature—*widespread circulation and enduring appeal*—defines the essence of folk literature (16).

The Hero in Folk Literature:

The hero is the **central figure** in folk narratives, as **Ghassan Al-Hassan** states in his study on folk tales (17). The plot revolves around the hero's journey, and the development of events depends on their fate rather than a predetermined storyline.

- The folk hero can be **anyone** from society, representing the common people.
- Folk narratives often incorporate **mythical and supernatural** elements, which gradually evolve to reflect **real human struggles** (18).
- **Tawfiq Zayyad** links the hero to the people's struggle, portraying all folk heroes as representations of the collective national spirit (19).

The hero's role is to **pave the way for success**, often facing hardships that require extraordinary actions or supernatural feats. Whether through their words, deeds, life, or even death, the hero overcomes adversaries, sometimes even achieving victory posthumously.

Time and Space in Folk Literature:

Time:

- Many folk tales begin with "*Once upon a time*", indicating an **undefined era**.
- Some stories provide clues about their historical context. For example, the story of *Ihdeedoun* suggests an origin in the Iron Age, as the protagonist's name is derived from "blacksmith," and the antagonist, a ghoul, fears iron weapons.
- Folk narratives reflect the values and social norms of their respective eras. Stories featuring **harems and concubines** likely originate from the

medieval period, while those centered on **land, animals, and exploitation** align with **feudal times**.

A precise method for dating folk tales involves analyzing their **motifs**—specific recurring elements—since each motif belongs to a particular historical period.

Place:

- The setting in folk literature can be **vague** or **generalized** at the beginning of a story.
- Sometimes, locations are **briefly mentioned** (“He traveled to the King of China...”), while other places play a **crucial role in shaping the narrative** (e.g., a hero’s interactions within a specific kingdom or cave).
- Folk storytelling often adapts locations based on the **narrator’s and audience’s familiar surroundings**, making the setting more relatable.

Event Structure in Folk Literature:

Events in folk literature follow a **positive-negative pattern** (22):

- **Positive events** benefit the hero (e.g., a talking stone warns the hero of a lurking serpent).
- **Negative events** pose challenges for the hero (e.g., the hero gets bitten by the serpent).

The **human-place relationship** is central to folk narratives. Forced displacement disrupts one’s “**sense of place**”, affecting identity and perception. This phenomenon is reflected in folk tales, where characters struggle between **remaining in a hostile environment or fleeing to survive** (23).

When individuals are forcibly removed from their homeland, they experience a **distorted connection to their new surroundings**. This creates a **psychological**

and cultural dissonance, making them feel alienated despite any material comforts offered in exile (24).

Structural Features of Folk Narratives:

1. Minimal Detail:

- Folk literature favors brevity, avoiding unnecessary descriptions.
- Characters are identified by **name** (e.g., "**Al-Shater Mohammed**"), **trait** ("**Nus Ansees**"), or **profession** ("**The Fisherman**"), rather than detailed physical descriptions (25).

2. Positive-Negative System:

- Events alternate between favorable and unfavorable outcomes, influencing the hero's journey (26).

3. Purposeful Coincidence:

- Coincidence plays a crucial role in **suspense and resolution**. When the hero faces a crisis, an unexpected event often intervenes to **rescue them** and **propel the story forward**.

4. Final Attempt Triumphs:

- The successful character is often **the last one to try**.
- Multiple contenders may attempt a task (e.g., rescuing a princess), but only the **final** contender—the hero—succeeds (27).

Folk literature is a **living, evolving entity**, shaped by the collective contributions of successive generations. Its **spontaneous nature**, **cultural adaptability**, and **timeless themes** make it an enduring pillar of cultural identity.

The Status of Algerian Popular Poetry in the Cultural Process

Some believe that the existence of **Malahun poetry** in Algeria is primarily due to the spread of the poetry of **Banu Hilal** and **Banu Sulaym**, who advanced from Kairouan to Algeria in the **10th century**. This is why determining the emergence of literary texts in general, and poetic texts in particular, remains a subject of debate among researchers until material evidence can confirm this origin.

The poetic text holds the status of an **official document**, free from ambiguity, and should therefore be given great attention in studying the history and literature of the people. It serves as an **important historical and intellectual archive**, preserving a significant part of the national heritage. The historical development of **popular poetry** cannot be separated from the mentality of the **popular poet**, who acted as an **ambassador** or a **journalist** in every sense of the word. He accompanied various social developments and events, conveying them through his poetry, reflecting the suffering of society. This is evident in the words of the poet **Abdel Salam Al-Fa'al**:

*The poor man's rights are lost among the kidnappers and false witnesses,
The oppressed woman stands, narrating her suffering,
The judge's gaze is terrifying,
The oppressed have no protector, their tears are endless.*

This was not the only time poets played the role of **media figures**, as they spoke about all aspects of life that **Algerians** experienced. Poetess **Fatima Al-Sharif** described the pain of **departure**:

*Where is our joy? Where is our comfort?
Where are our celebrations and weddings?
We were prosperous in this land,
Now our souls burn with longing.*

Despite the hardships Algeria has faced throughout history, **popular poets** have always been present, documenting events through **magnificent poetic imagery**, passed down orally from generation to generation. While **formal literary culture** was suppressed by colonial policies, **popular culture remained intact**, beyond the reach of official decrees and coercive measures. The colonial authorities, despite their vast surveillance network, could not suppress the **continuity of popular poetry**, as is the case in all nations experiencing similar circumstances.

Among the poets who immortalized the **national struggle** is **Abdelkader Al-Wahrani**, who lamented the **French occupation of Algiers**, leaving behind powerful verses that resonate deeply:

*This is the time of revelation,
Martyrdom is better than living in shame,
The virgins of paradise rejoice with their voices,
The gates of bliss are open for the nation.*

Algerian poets excelled in **Malahun poetry**, covering themes of **elegy, pride, love, and social issues**. One of the greatest examples of **romantic poetry** is "**Hayziya**" by **Bin Qitun**, a masterpiece of passionate poetry:

*Mourn with me, O noble ones, for the leader of the maidens,
She rests beneath the earth, my heart is burning,
I am lost in my sorrow, my heart departed with Hayziya.*

During the **Algerian War of Independence**, **popular poets** played a pivotal role in documenting events, motivating the people and **freedom fighters**. A poem from **Souk Ahras** reflects this:

*I arrived at Wadi Al-Aar,
The battlefield was ablaze,
The flames consumed the land,
And our breath turned bitter.*

One of the most famous poets from **Souk Ahras** was **Sheikh Bouragaa**, a poet and singer known for his linguistic creativity. He recited spontaneously, saying:

*The Day of Judgment is the day of suffering,
There will be no escape,
It is not like this world of wealth and trade,
On that day, all will cross the bridge.*

The presence of **popular poetry** was more comprehensive due to its **diverse themes, rich poetic imagery, and realism**. It not only expressed the **emotions of marginalized classes** but also preserved the **language and culture** of those deprived of formal education. **Oral tradition** played a crucial role in safeguarding **Islamic thought**, especially when **printing and publishing** were absent.

Algerian Popular Poetry: Contemporary Challenges

Popular culture in Algeria is facing **new challenges** due to rapid social changes and historical transformations. Since the **colonial era**, efforts have been made to collect and study this cultural heritage. French colonial authorities began researching Algerian folklore in the **19th century** as part of their **anthropological and strategic studies**. One of the most notable works in this field is "*L'Algérie des Anthropologues*" by **Philippe Lucas and Jean-Claude Vatan**, which analyzed Algerian society through its **popular cultural expressions** and provided colonial authorities with insights for political and military strategies.

While these studies hold **scientific value**, it is essential to **critically analyze them** to uncover useful insights into **Algerian history and folklore**.

The Future of Algerian Popular Poetry

The **academic study** of Algerian popular poetry remains limited. Many **theses and dissertations** remain confined to university archives, without being widely published or benefiting the field itself. There is a **gap between academic institutions and official cultural organizations**, making it difficult to collect and document this **rich oral tradition** due to a lack of financial and logistical resources.

Algerian popular poetry has yet to **evolve beyond** the contributions of great poets like **Bin Qitun, Bin Karyu, and Sheikh Al-Samati**. It remains largely confined to **traditional forms and rural vocabulary**, lacking significant innovation in **themes and stylistic approaches**. Additionally, many contemporary poets have become mere **praise singers**, performing at cultural festivals that offer little artistic development.

The **future of Algerian popular poetry** depends on its ability to **adapt to modern realities**, incorporating **new artistic tools** while drawing inspiration from **other Arab poetic traditions**. Without such renewal, its future remains uncertain.

Footnotes:

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