
A FANONIAN CRITIQUE OF POST-INDEPENDENCE NATIONALISM IN AHLAM MOSTAGHANEMI'S *MEMORY IN THE FLESH*

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ABSTRACT

*The attainment of political independence in formerly colonized nations has frequently failed to translate into genuine social, cultural, and ethical liberation. This paradox is particularly pronounced in Algeria, where the War of Independence (1954–1962) promised revolutionary transformation yet culminated in widespread post-independence disillusionment. This article examines Ahlam Mostaghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* (*Dhākirat al-Jassad*) as a sustained literary critique of postcolonial failure through the theoretical lens of Frantz Fanon's concept of the "pitfalls of national consciousness." Drawing on close textual analysis and postcolonial theory, the study argues that the novel exposes the transformation of revolutionary sacrifice into symbolic and political capital monopolized by a postcolonial elite. Through the wounded body of Khaled, a one-armed war veteran living in exile, Mostaghanemi articulates the marginalization of those who bore the physical and psychological costs of liberation.*

KEYWORDS: *Postcolonial literature; Frantz Fanon; Algerian fiction; national consciousness.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The Algerian War of Independence occupies a central position in the political imagination of the postcolonial world. Fought between 1954 and 1962 against French colonial rule, the war was not only a struggle for political sovereignty but also a revolutionary project aimed at restoring dignity, cultural autonomy, and collective agency to a colonized population subjected to more than a century of violent dispossession. Independence was therefore invested with immense symbolic and ethical weight, envisioned as a radical rupture from

colonial domination and as the foundation for a just and egalitarian national future. Yet, as subsequent history reveals, this promise remained largely unfulfilled. The post-independence Algerian state, despite its anti-imperialist rhetoric, evolved into an authoritarian system characterized by elite domination, systemic corruption, and the marginalization of the very subjects who had sacrificed most for liberation.

This disjunction between revolutionary aspiration and postcolonial reality constitutes one of the most persistent paradoxes in postcolonial studies. Frantz Fanon's warning in *The Wretched of the Earth* that national liberation could degenerate into "a crude and empty nationalism" if not accompanied by social transformation has proven uncannily prescient (Fanon, 1961). Across the postcolonial world, the replacement of colonial rulers by a national elite has often resulted in the reproduction of colonial structures under new guises, producing what Fanon identified as the "pitfalls of national consciousness." Political independence, in this sense, becomes a symbolic achievement divorced from material justice, cultural emancipation, and ethical governance.

Ahlam Mostaghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* intervenes powerfully in this historical and ideological impasse. Rather than celebrating the triumph of independence, the novel interrogates its aftermath, exposing the moral exhaustion of postcolonial nationalism and the betrayal of revolutionary ideals. Narrated by Khaled, a one-armed veteran of the war living in exile in Paris, the text foregrounds the enduring wounds—physical, psychological, and ethical—left by a revolution that failed to deliver on its promises. Khaled's mutilated body, his artistic obsession with memory, and his estrangement from post-independence Algeria collectively dramatize the fate of the revolutionary subject rendered obsolete by the nation he helped to create.

This article argues that *Memory in the Flesh* constitutes a sustained literary articulation of Fanon's critique of post-independence nationalism. Through its depiction of elite corruption, the commodification of martyrdom, and the displacement of revolutionary subjects, the novel exposes how national consciousness collapses into symbolic performance when divorced from social responsibility. By placing Mostaghanemi's narrative in dialogue with Fanon's theoretical framework, this study demonstrates how Arabic Algerian fiction functions as a counter-national discourse that challenges official histories and reclaims memory as a form of resistance.

The originality of this article lies in its sustained Fanonian reading of *Memory in the Flesh*, moving beyond thematic discussions of love, nostalgia, or exile to foreground the novel's

structural critique of postcolonial power. While existing scholarship has acknowledged the text's political undertones, few studies have systematically examined how it embodies Fanon's diagnosis of post-independence failure. By doing so, this article contributes to postcolonial literary studies, Algerian cultural criticism, and Fanonian theory, highlighting the capacity of literature to diagnose the ethical and political contradictions of the postcolonial state.

2. Literature Review

Critical engagement with *Memory in the Flesh* has generally emphasized its lyrical style, its gendered metaphors of nationhood, and its exploration of memory and exile. Scholars writing in Arabic have often read the novel as a poetic elegy for a lost revolutionary past, foregrounding its emotive language and symbolic imagery (Benrabah, 2014; Hiddleston, 2017). In Anglophone criticism, the text has been discussed primarily within the context of postcolonial identity formation, language politics, and the representation of trauma in Algerian literature (Mortimer, 2009; Gana, 2015).

A recurring critical strand focuses on the novel's conflation of woman and nation, particularly in Khaled's idealization of Hayat as a symbolic embodiment of Algeria. Drawing on feminist and nationalist theory, scholars have argued that this metaphor both reproduces and critiques patriarchal narratives of national belonging (Cooke, 1996; Lazreg, 2014). While these readings offer valuable insights, they often treat the political critique of the novel as secondary to its romantic or symbolic dimensions.

Other studies have situated *Memory in the Flesh* within the broader trajectory of Algerian post-independence literature, emphasizing its departure from the militant revolutionary narratives of earlier decades. Unlike the literature of armed struggle that dominated the immediate post-independence period, Mostaghanemi's novel reflects a moment of retrospective disillusionment, marked by skepticism toward nationalist rhetoric and a deep sense of ethical loss (Mortimer, 2009). This shift aligns the novel with a wider corpus of postcolonial writing that interrogates the failures of liberation movements rather than their heroic origins.

Despite these contributions, there remains a notable gap in the scholarship regarding the novel's engagement with postcolonial theory, particularly Fanon's critique of national consciousness. Fanon is frequently cited as a contextual reference in discussions of Algerian history, yet his theoretical insights are rarely mobilized as an analytical framework for close

textual analysis. As a result, the structural parallels between Fanon's diagnosis of post-independence failure and Mostaghanemi's literary critique remain underexplored.

More broadly, postcolonial literary studies have increasingly emphasized the need to examine post-independence corruption, elite domination, and internal colonialism as central themes rather than peripheral concerns (Ashcroft et al., 2007; Lazarus, 2011). Within this context, Fanon's work has experienced renewed critical attention, particularly his warnings about the national bourgeoisie and the commodification of revolutionary history. Yet Arabic literature has often been marginal to these discussions, which tend to privilege Anglophone or Francophone texts.

This article addresses these gaps by offering a sustained Fanonian reading of *Memory in the Flesh*, situating the novel within debates on post-independence nationalism, memory politics, and elite betrayal. By doing so, it foregrounds Arabic Algerian fiction as a critical site for theorizing the unfinished project of decolonization.

3. Theoretical Framework: Fanon and the Pitfalls of National Consciousness

Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* remains one of the most incisive theoretical interventions into the dynamics of decolonization and its aftermath. Writing from his experience as a psychiatrist in colonial Algeria and as an active participant in the anti-colonial struggle, Fanon conceptualizes decolonization as a total rupture—political, economic, and psychological. However, he simultaneously warns that the moment of independence is fraught with danger, particularly when revolutionary leadership fails to transform nationalist consciousness into a genuinely social and egalitarian project.

Central to Fanon's critique is the figure of the national bourgeoisie, a class that emerges after independence to inherit the privileges of the colonizer without dismantling colonial structures. Rather than fostering productive economies or redistributing wealth, this elite relies on symbolic nationalism, bureaucratic control, and alliances with foreign capital. Fanon describes this class as "incapable of great ideas" and obsessed with consumption, prestige, and imitation of Europe (Fanon, 1961). In such conditions, nationalism becomes an empty performance, sustained through rituals, monuments, and rhetorical invocations of the revolutionary past.

Fanon's concept of the "pitfalls of national consciousness" refers precisely to this degeneration of liberation into spectacle. When national consciousness fails to evolve into social consciousness, it produces authoritarianism, corruption, and popular disillusionment. The masses, who bore the brunt of colonial violence, find themselves excluded from the

benefits of independence, while their sacrifices are appropriated as symbolic capital by the ruling elite.

This framework is particularly relevant to the Algerian context, where revolutionary legitimacy has been central to state authority. As scholars have noted, the post-independence Algerian regime has repeatedly invoked the memory of the war to justify political exclusion and suppress dissent (Martinez, 2000). Fanon's critique thus provides a powerful lens for understanding the ethical contradictions of postcolonial Algeria and the literary responses they generate.

In reading *Memory in the Flesh* through this Fanonian framework, this article approaches the novel not merely as a narrative of personal trauma but as a structural critique of post-independence nationalism. Khaled's marginalization, the rise of corrupt elites, and the commodification of martyrdom are read as literary articulations of Fanon's theoretical insights, demonstrating the continued relevance of his work for contemporary postcolonial analysis.

4. The Veteran's Body as National Allegory

One of the most striking features of *Memory in the Flesh* is its insistent focus on the wounded body of its narrator. Khaled's amputated arm, lost during the War of Independence, functions as a powerful allegory of national sacrifice and postcolonial betrayal. His body bears the visible marks of revolutionary violence, yet it is rendered politically and socially irrelevant in post-independence Algeria.

In Fanonian terms, Khaled represents the revolutionary subject abandoned by the nation-state once independence has been secured. While the postcolonial elite celebrates the revolution through monuments, ceremonies, and official discourse, the living bodies of veterans like Khaled remain inconvenient reminders of the ethical obligations independence has failed to honor. His physical mutilation contrasts sharply with the symbolic glorification of martyrdom, exposing the gap between lived sacrifice and nationalist spectacle.

Khaled's body also functions as an archive of memory, preserving a history that the postcolonial state seeks to sanitize. His persistent recollections of the war resist the official narrative of triumphant liberation, insisting instead on the enduring costs of violence and loss. In this sense, the wounded body becomes a site of counter-memory, challenging the erasure of revolutionary suffering from public consciousness.

Moreover, Khaled's marginalization underscores Fanon's warning that post-independence regimes often exclude the masses from meaningful participation. Despite his revolutionary

credentials, Khaled occupies a position of exile—geographical, political, and psychological. His body, once instrumental to liberation, is now excess, embodying what Fanon identifies as the tragic fate of those whose labor creates the nation but who are denied its benefits.

Through Khaled's corporeal vulnerability, *Memory in the Flesh* exposes the ethical bankruptcy of symbolic nationalism. The novel insists that independence cannot be measured by flags or slogans but must be accountable to the bodies and lives it has irreversibly transformed.

5. Corruption, Spectacle, and the Postcolonial Elite

One of the most incisive critiques articulated in *Memory in the Flesh* concerns the transformation of revolutionary legitimacy into political capital monopolized by a postcolonial elite. Characters such as Si Sharif and the elusive Mr. X embody what Fanon describes as the national bourgeoisie: figures who appropriate the symbolic authority of the revolution while abandoning its emancipatory objectives. These characters do not merely betray revolutionary ideals; they institutionalize betrayal as a mode of governance.

Fanon's critique of post-independence leadership centers on the replacement of colonial domination with internal forms of exploitation. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, he argues that the national bourgeoisie "steps into the shoes of the former European settlement" without transforming the structures of inequality that sustained colonial rule (Fanon, 1961). In Mostaghanemi's novel, this dynamic is vividly dramatized through the elite's control over political institutions, economic resources, and cultural memory. Revolutionary credentials become a currency that grants access to privilege rather than a mandate for ethical responsibility.

Public spectacles—national holidays, commemorations, and monuments—play a central role in sustaining this system. These rituals function as performances of unity and continuity, masking the widening gap between nationalist rhetoric and lived reality. Khaled's narrative repeatedly exposes the emptiness of these displays, emphasizing how they displace attention from material injustice and political exclusion. The revolution is celebrated as a finished event, frozen in time, rather than as an ongoing ethical project.

This spectacle-driven nationalism aligns closely with Fanon's warning that national consciousness, when detached from social transformation, degenerates into "a crude and fragile travesty" (Fanon, 1961). By converting history into ritual, the postcolonial elite neutralizes its radical potential. Memory becomes ornamental rather than transformative, serving to legitimize authority rather than to challenge it.

Mostaghanemi's critique is particularly sharp in her portrayal of corruption as normalized and routinized. Unlike overt colonial violence, postcolonial corruption operates through bureaucratic opacity, patronage networks, and moral indifference. The novel suggests that this form of domination is more insidious precisely because it cloaks itself in nationalist legitimacy. In exposing this contradiction, *Memory in the Flesh* dismantles the myth that independence alone guarantees justice, revealing instead how sovereignty can coexist with systemic exploitation.

6. Exile, Language, and Failed Belonging

In *Memory in the Flesh*, exile serves as both a physical condition and a structural metaphor for postcolonial alienation. Khaled's life in Paris underscores the paradox of post-independence belonging: although Algeria is politically sovereign, it no longer offers symbolic or ethical shelter to those who sacrificed for its liberation. Exile thus becomes a consequence not of colonial displacement alone but of postcolonial exclusion.

Paris occupies an ambivalent position in Khaled's narrative. As the former imperial center, it embodies the history of colonial domination; yet it also provides a space of relative freedom absent in post-independence Algeria. This contradiction reflects Fanon's observation that postcolonial subjects often find themselves alienated from both the former colonizer and the newly independent nation. Khaled belongs fully to neither space, inhabiting what may be described as a postcolonial limbo.

Language plays a crucial role in articulating this condition of failed belonging. Mostaghanemi's decision to write in Arabic constitutes a deliberate act of cultural resistance, reclaiming a linguistic medium historically marginalized by colonial and postcolonial elites alike. At the same time, the persistent presence of French within the narrative signals the incomplete nature of decolonization. Language becomes a site of tension rather than resolution, reflecting the fractured identity of the postcolonial subject.

Fanon emphasizes that cultural decolonization must accompany political independence if liberation is to be meaningful. In *Memory in the Flesh*, the persistence of linguistic and cultural hierarchies suggests that this process remains unfinished. Khaled's estrangement is not merely personal but structural, rooted in a national project that has failed to integrate cultural authenticity with social justice.

Exile, then, is not presented as an individual choice but as an imposed condition resulting from the collapse of ethical nationalism. The novel thus reframes exile as a symptom of postcolonial failure, rather than as a relic of colonial displacement.

7. DISCUSSION: Literature as Counter-National Discourse

Taken together, the motifs of bodily sacrifice, elite corruption, and exile frame *Memory in the Flesh* as a counter-national narrative. In doing so, the novel resists official historiographies of liberation. Rather than reaffirming nationalist mythologies, the novel subjects them to sustained ethical scrutiny, revealing the structural contradictions and moral vacuity that underpin the post-independence Algerian state.

Fanon's theoretical framework illuminates this intervention by highlighting the structural nature of postcolonial failure. The novel does not attribute disillusionment to individual moral weakness but to systemic processes that convert revolutionary history into political spectacle. In doing so, it aligns with Fanon's insistence that the true measure of independence lies not in symbolic sovereignty but in the redistribution of power, dignity, and resources.

Literature emerges here as a privileged site of resistance. Unlike official discourse, which seeks to stabilize meaning, literary narrative preserves ambiguity, contradiction, and memory. Khaled's fragmented narration resists closure, mirroring the unfinished project of decolonization itself. Memory becomes an act of refusal—a refusal to allow revolutionary sacrifice to be aestheticized or forgotten.

This reading challenges reductive interpretations of *Memory in the Flesh* as merely a romantic or nostalgic text. Instead, the novel is positioned as a diagnostic work that exposes the ethical bankruptcy of symbolic nationalism and reclaims literature as a space of political accountability.

8. CONCLUSION

This article has argued that Ahlam Mostaghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh* constitutes a sustained literary articulation of Frantz Fanon's critique of the "pitfalls of national consciousness." Through its depiction of wounded bodies, corrupt elites, and post-independence exile, the novel exposes the failure of Algerian nationalism to translate revolutionary sacrifice into ethical governance.

By reading the novel through a Fanonian framework, this study has demonstrated how postcolonial literature can function as a critical site for diagnosing systemic failure rather than merely reflecting personal trauma. Khaled's marginalized body, the commodification of revolutionary memory, and the persistence of cultural alienation collectively reveal independence as an unfinished and ethically compromised project.

The contribution of this article lies in foregrounding Arabic Algerian fiction within debates on postcolonial theory and nationalism, an area often dominated by Anglophone and

Francophone texts. In doing so, it affirms the continued relevance of Fanon's work for understanding contemporary postcolonial conditions and highlights literature's capacity to resist the erasure of revolutionary ethics.

Future research may extend this analysis by examining comparative post-independence narratives across the Global South, further exploring how literature articulates resistance to internal forms of domination in the aftermath of colonial rule.

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