

Excavation of the Unconscious Centre in the Black Margin Discourse- A Socio-Cultural Reading of the Novel "Al Zanjia" By "Aichabenour"

Haddour Rabiha ¹, Benhamioud Serine ², Messali Lynda³

¹ Language and Literature Laboratory .Mohamed El-Sadiq Ben Yahia University, Jijel, Algeria.

Email: Haddourrabiha@gmail.com

² Language and Literature Laboratory, Mohamed El-Sadiq Ben Yahia University, Jijel, Algeria

Email: benhamioudserine@gmail.com

³ laboratory for Interpretation and Discourse Analysis, Abderrahman Mira University of Bejaia, Algeria.

Email: Lynda.messali@univ-bejaia.dz

Received : 23/03/2026 ; Accepted : 27/07/2026 ; Published : 22/08/2026

Abstract:

This research paper to draw attention to a different Algerian text that poses the problem of representing the other negro narratively, and the extent to which the novelist is able to exclude her white centrality while trying to write in the voice of the margin. The article attempts to answer a problematic question: How much can a modern white writer with a black tongue in different identity, culture and ethnic coercions imposed on negroes? In order to answer this questioning, this research use a sociocultural approach that begs analysis of implicit patterns, and the study will focus on the presence of the White Centre's consciousness in a speech intended to defend negroes. This article serves to open the field of research further into the possible differences between black and white narratives of Negro issues despite their adoption of the idea of against-writing.

Keywords: Black, White, Resistance, Margin, Center.

Introduction: On the Allure of Titles / Racism Against Racism:

Aisha Banour's novel *The Black Woman* is a text rich in cultural significance, chronicling the journey undertaken by Black people who suffered the ravages of famine. It depicts their relationships with others within the constraints imposed upon them by race in a space dominated by others, an endeavour that requires the author to exercise a certain caution in borrowing Black narrative voices that differ from her own in terms of culture, identity, history and race. This forms the basis of the problem posed by this research paper: If the white author is capable of setting aside the 'centre's' consciousness in order to defend Black people, to what extent can the text represent the Black voice without the unconscious presence of the white 'centre'?

The Black Novel will not suffice as an isolated case study to answer this question, but it may serve as a foundational study for addressing it in future works of fiction that may tackle themes of Blackness. Before delving into the chapters of this research paper, it is worth beginning with a discussion of the cover and title, as these serve primarily as a promotional front, revealing both explicit and implicit discourses.

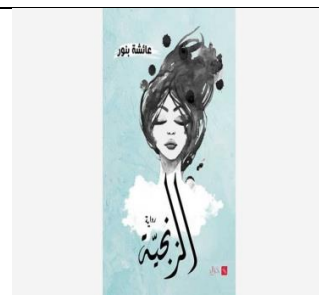
Both editions of the novel featured covers bearing the image of a Black woman; the second edition was more direct and explicit in its portrayal of race, as illustrated by the two accompanying images. Given that she chose the title *Al-Zanjiya* to accompany this image, we are faced with the need to

understand the aims behind the use of the image of a Black woman as both a title and a cover illustration within the broader publishing landscape.

Cover of the Saudi edition published by Riyada, 2021; cover of the first Algerian edition, 2020



Source: Dar Riyada's official website
For publication and distribution
Publishing and Translation



Source: The official Facebook page
Dar Khayal for

Although the choice of 'Al-Zanjiya' as the title suggests the presence of a counter-narrative and a discourse on Blackness, the novel's excessive emphasis on blackness renders this resistance, on the surface, 'racism against racism' (Amin Asber, 1985, p. 115). It is reasonable to assume, to some extent, that the use of the term 'Al-Zanjiya' was not an aesthetic choice, given that the novel – as we shall explain later – did not present a counter-narrative defending 'Al-Zanjiya', despite its attempt to speak on her behalf; moreover, a title that would have been more fitting for the work would have been 'Blanca' (the name of the novel's heroine), especially as this choice raises certain sensitivities relating to racism and the fundamental human moral principle against stigmatising people on the basis of their skin colour or ethnicity.

This deliberate choice, which provokes sensitivities regarding race and identity, reveals the author's influence by postcolonial cultural studies relating to Blackness; an influence that is evident even at the level of intertextual and textual references, where she draws upon the writings of 'Senghor' and 'Al-Fitori', which indicates that this title does not so much reflect a focus on the margins as it exposes an attempt to engage in the practice of exerting a promotional influence on the reader and reveals a premeditated writing strategy that conforms to the context of contemporary debates on race and identity.

1. Female circumcision and the amputation of femininity: concerns regarding gender identity / the fragmentation of the relationship with the male other:

In this novel, the act of female circumcision reveals the heroine's shattered self-confidence and her inability to feel her femininity (which means the narrative is built upon a stream-of-consciousness style, resulting in a lack of extensive focus on plot structure), yet, in part, it also reveals the erasure of the self in the face of the authorities of the sacred and patriarchy, which derive their legitimacy from the individual's inability to rise up, for 'the sacred cannot manifest itself unless something is absent from the human being, and what is absent is the human being as nature's partner in the constitution of the self' (Judelle Morris, 1998, p. 2013). It is the human being who has forged their primary relationship with existence and society, and who realises that what has been sanctified can be removed.

‘Blanca’ feels herself breaking free from this patriarchy, which is embodied in the social structure of a tribal society that adheres to customs which the father is keen to enforce only through his death; thus, when her mother mentions that this is a year of mourning for her due to the loss of her husband and sister, Blanca replies: ‘I’m getting better!’ without realising why she said that or why she replied in that way on that particular day,” (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 77). Although her father was neither domineering nor unjust, the protagonist held him responsible for upholding the rituals that had harmed her body and deprived her of sexual pleasure.

Through the practice of female genital mutilation, the novelist explores the relationship between the female body and social traditions, the self, and the other—the man ‘Freeki’—as the body is not merely a mass of flesh but a culturally significant sign, ‘subject to the laws and norms of social interaction; it is the physical institution—if one may put it that way—that constitutes the subject of religion and the sacred, and which has been positioned such that it has become a common element shared by all people; it is their distinctive image and the foundation of their daily and functional actions’ (Farid al-Zahi, 1999, p. 32). Through this, we discover society’s strategies in exercising power over its members. The exclusion of ‘Blanca’s’ body continues out of fear of her femininity and her constant seductions, which reflects society’s adherence to drawing gender boundaries and masculinity’s fear of the female body.

Although female genital mutilation is not currently widespread—or its prevalence has declined due to international criminalisation—the novelist returns to speak on behalf of the minority in a country, ‘Nigeria’, where FGM is known to occur only in a few isolated rural areas, where the prevalence of FGM is less than 25 per cent, whilst it appears to be more common in Guinea and Mali, with rates exceeding 80 per cent (Audit Office Report, 2017). This focus on the marginalised can be seen as part of the novelist’s broader attempt to do justice to women from minority groups who have undergone FGM, even though this phenomenon is more prevalent in countries other than the one she has chosen; yet, on a narrative level, it remains a relative form of justice, because the character did not channel her awareness into resistance or calls for change; instead, she chose to emigrate so that what happened to her would not befall her sister ‘Viola’ and her daughter ‘Africa’. Her indignation and anger remained repressed, and her speeches were critical of the situation in which she found herself, without any celebration of African culture (except for the description of the dance rituals).

‘A society governed by instinct takes refuge in the collective’ is an important saying for understanding the relationship between society and the individual, and for grasping the relationship between the sacred and the collective; The circumcision that Blanca underwent is a ritual practised with the collusion of the community and reaffirmed in their language; ‘Freki’ speaks with the voice of the community when he consoles Blanca (‘What happened to you has happened to many before you’). The self becomes unable to shake off the sacred despite being aware of its consequences, and here the novel poses another question: Why does the Black community continue to perpetuate patriarchal rituals that destroy femininity?

‘That is how the human within us was a collective,’ as the narrator says; by this – we mean the author – she draws inspiration from Pierre Bourdieu’s idea that the regularity of the system of male domination stems from its operation on the structures of the unconscious, so that the individual becomes subject to the collective, functioning as systems of structures of perception, thought and action (Pierre Bourdieu, 2019, pp. 25–26), The self is deprived of the freedom to rebel and break free from its constraints.

The novelist places the heroine, 'Blanca', in direct confrontation with the traditions of a patriarchal society, enabling her to forge her own unique experience, shaped by the exceptional and harrowing ordeal she has endured; for pain 'always brings us back to ourselves' (Zakaria Ibrahim, D.S., p. 205), her thoughts crumble, and her discourse is characterised by the mechanisms of confessional speech, which lays bare her innermost thoughts and her view of the social situation and of the other characters, and reveals her fractured relationship with her body and its desires, for 'she willingly shuns her repressed desires and whims' (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 79). This exacerbates her relationship with her husband, as he invokes her body within their relationship to affirm his crucial role in heterosexual relationships, for 'the personal body is not isolated from the other. Its very existence is directed towards the other; its relationship with the other is an existential one, therefore, it is inevitable that we must move from the body in itself to the body for the sake of the other; indeed, it would be more accurate to say that there is no transition at all, since every personal body, in relation to the other, is a body that exists for the other's sake, or that the significance of the body is realised only through this intersubjective experience that permeates it' (Farid al-Zahi, 2003, p. 27)

2. Narrative Representation of the Black Figure / Stereotyping and Alienation:

Analysing the forms of narrative representation of the Black figure helps to reveal the extent to which a text is capable of doing so, and 'the intended significance of addressing the subject of Blackness (..) lies in elucidating a reading strategy focused on deconstructing intellectual frameworks; that reservoir of ideas and opinions held by white people about Black people' (Salim Hayoula, 2021, p. 162), which may be concealed in discourse spoken in the voice of a Black person; for however much the white writer may attempt to narrate through the voice of a Black person, white centrality is bound to be exposed by the discourses of the unconscious and, at other times, by the narrative strategies through which the writer believed they had done justice to Black people. The attempt to understand the portrayal of Black people in Aisha Banour's fictional narrative leads to an examination of the nature of the portrayal presented and the extent to which it is realistic and confers its value upon it.

2.1. The stereotype of the Black person / the discourse of the centre:

The novel **Al-Zanjiya** presents a grotesque, superficial image of Black people, shaped by conditions of famine and poverty; this situation may be the reason they are depicted as emaciated and naked (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 87) or moving about in their filthy clothes, with no lust driving them and no instincts guiding their behaviour (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 83); however, it is the white narrator who speaks here, one who sees nothing but this image in Africans.

One might assume that the scarcity of water is the reason for the filthiness of their clothes, and this would have been logical were it not for the fact that the narrator constantly refers to the well from which the women draw water, and she could have established a counter-narrative that dispels the sense of defeatism regarding their identities, so as not to attribute their lack of concern for personal hygiene to a scarcity of water, given that the 'Zanouga' narrative is a reaction to white representations of Black people.

Through the words of 'Blanca's' mother, the novelist describes the character 'Freki' as being 'as patient as his mother, well-versed in the region's secrets, often shrewd and wise, (...) a rebel who encourages reflection and sparks debate on many issues', (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 84). However, this narrative portrayal does not correspond to the character's actual actions and thoughts; nowhere in the novel does 'Freki' attempt to engage in discussion with anyone, not even 'Blanca', nor was he rebellious, not even towards his employer who treated him unjustly.

Our rejection of this description is corroborated by what Blanca said about him: that Mr ‘Robert’ at the Arletinho mine would say, ‘Come on, hurry up, or you won’t get your daily allowance like the rest of the lads.’ Every time Freki would stand before him, angry or making excuses, Mr Robert would simply smile, feeling a sense of grandeur, then kick the cart, saying: ‘Come on, get back to work.’ Anger would show on Freki’s face; he would look at him with great hatred, but he would swallow his anger and walk away.” (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 44) She also adds: ‘He didn’t have enough courage to stand up to Robert.’

So he complied with his orders and yielded to his threats and warnings (..) for more than five years, during which living conditions in the region remained unchanged (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 44).

In doing so, he came to represent the oppressed Black person who preferred flight and emigration to revolution and uprising; this description was consistent with the Higuélian notion that ‘the Black character is characterised by a lack of self-control, and this condition precludes any development or culture, and for this reason, Black people have remained as we see them today; the only fundamental bond that has existed and endured between Black people and Europeans is the bond of slavery, and Black people see nothing honourable in this bond, nor do they consider it befitting of them’ (Hegel, 2007, p. 181)

This static image of Black people is derived not only from this narrative scene, but also from ‘Blanca’s’ descriptions of themselves, as she says: ‘I have neither sought nor aspired to break the chains that bind me; they were not the chains of those close to me, such as my mother, father or clan, but rather my tribe, to whose laws and rituals I submit; the shackles of the place that besiege me with a single mindset that does not believe in pluralism, for in truth it does not exist. The sole mindset that dominates minds is confined to securing a loaf of bread and safety” (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 68). She adds: ‘We remain as we are; nothing has changed in our land’ (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 21). ‘Everything is static and unchanging—the past, the present, and perhaps even the future looming on the horizon... My inner voice says: we possess natural and human resources that place us on a par with developed nations, but...?’ (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 22) This description corresponds to Heigl’s earlier idea, which points to their lack of development and their adherence to a particular culture. Is this truly a portrayal of the Black person, or is it a reflection of the white person’s beliefs about them?

The truth is that these distinctions and ‘the differences between them are conditioned by specific contexts and result from particular political, social and economic circumstances; they are not attributable to their biological characteristics, whilst colonial discourses lead us to believe that they are related to racial traits’ (Salim Hayoula, 2021, p. 163), thereby seeking to entrench the notion that Black people are prone to slavery and subjugation.

The author reiterates this same idea through Blanca’s words, stating: ‘Oppressed generations think in the same ways, speak and act in the same manner; there is nothing new in their thinking or their words’ (Aisha Banour, p. 69). Not content with this, she describes her society as ‘an instinct-driven society that takes refuge in the group; society exercises its power and cruelty so that there is no opportunity . to break free from it, or from its outdated ideas’ (Aisha Banour, p. 69).

Describing society as instinct-driven implies an implicit denial of its rationality; this image aligns once again with the white man’s belief that the Black person ‘represents the natural human being in his completely untamed, savage state ’ (Heigl, 2007, p. 174)

Thus, the novel constructs a generalising, descriptive discourse that encompasses the entire Black community and does not stop at the description of a specific character; even in its attempt to

portray Freki as a kind-hearted character, this makes him the exception, as Blanca says: 'Freki was not as crude and hard-hearted as the rest of the young men in the area' (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 65), who listen only to their instincts and traditions. Once again, the presentation of this generalised image reflects the white author's belief that 'moral sentiments among Black people are extremely weak or, to be precise, non-existent' (Higuel, 2007, p. 178). They are villains, as Blanca sees them 'They never tire or grow weary of sitting and watching the young girls' bodies as they moan in pain, and they dance to the sound of their piercing screams' (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 67) during their circumcision; this is a negative stereotype that is not accurate.

The novelist linked the state of passivity and defeatism with which the Black character was characterised to the geographical landscape, the deteriorating economic situation, and the constraints imposed by the struggle to find a loaf of bread 'The people living in the neighbourhood are fortunate to have water and bread' (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 80), as Blanca notes; and because these are readily available, she argues, they are able to think about other matters.

The state of conflict with the Algerian 'other' creates a sense of alienation for these individuals, as they cling to their own customs and traditions and do not integrate into Algerian society. Blanca says: 'Geographically, the place exists; but in terms of self-concept and life, I consider it non-existent' (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 55), because it separates individuals from their original affiliations, rituals and beliefs, and compels them to follow the norms of another society. This causes psychological distress, as they attempt to preserve their identity within the host society whilst refusing to assimilate into it, believing themselves to be different from white people; Alienation, suffering, poverty and migration are factors that shape their life experience and personality in a way that differs from that of the white person (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 163)—who has never experienced the cold or suffered hunger as they have. Therefore, they cannot conceive of abandoning their identity, as this would mean abandoning their memory.

'We have come to search for a place in every city we live in' (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 147). This is how Blanca refers to the constant psychological search that drives them for a space that gives meaning and value to their existence; this is only realised in the African village of Oued al-Jum'a in the municipality of Al-Arba'a, in the province of Blida, where 'a human and familial bond is forged, uniting them through the unique connection within this isolated place' (Aïcha Benour, 2020, p. 166). They are content with the availability of water and trees, and a modest livelihood.

In the African village, we see the image of the Black person struggling to make a living, suffering terribly. Once again, the stereotypical image of poor, powerless Black people is repeated, with the author focusing here solely on race rather than class, which 'refers to the relationship between people within a single society in terms of financial privilege, well-being and racial purity; that is, pure lineage untainted by admixture, and this – of course – is within a single society and a single ethnicity, whilst race or ethnicity is the distinction drawn between a group of people on the basis of differences in colour and skin tone, to which are added differences rooted in human culture, and on the basis of which people have been differentiated; Racist ideologies have designated different segments of the population as inherently or biologically suited to specific roles' (Salim Hayoula, 2021, p. 164). This is what, in a sense, renders the novelist unable to conjure up an active and emotive portrayal of the Black person.

2.2. The alienation of Black people: the Black complex / fascination with whiteness:

The fascination with whiteness and the contempt for blackness are rooted in global stereotypes regarding concepts and standards of beauty promoted by the media and communication channels, which tend to establish whiteness as a fixed standard of beauty in the service of white male centrality, a standard that affects women in the first instance, as beauty constitutes for them a constant obsession they strive to satisfy.

The binary of white and black can be established through the stark contrast between the name of the Black heroine, 'Blanca'—which means 'white' in Spanish—and her physical appearance. This deliberate choice raises several issues: the choice of name in itself is indicative of cultural alienation and fascination with the European 'other', whilst the failure to adhere to African names is evidence of the beginnings of the erosion and fragmentation of national identity, even though the novelist portrays the Black community as insular.

Signs of cultural alienation and an inferiority complex amongst Black people are evident not only in Blanca's statements but also in the language of the unconscious, as we shall explain below:

The narrative discourse in **Al-Zanjiya** contains exaggerated assertions such as 'Because you are black, you are beautiful', through which the heroine attempts to convince herself that she is beautiful because of her skin colour, her uniqueness and her difference. These assertions recur in many narrative passages; the following narrative excerpts are given by way of example, though the list is by no means exhaustive:

- Excerpt 1: 'That was the only joy that remained within me, even if only partially, and the only thing that never left my thoughts; I tried to cling to it: "Because I am black, I am beautiful"' (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 49)
- Excerpt 2: 'I did not have a passport with which to traverse the long and rugged distances across the wilderness, but I was captivated by the beauty of my blackness, which the dark-skinned man Senghor sang of, and for which the black woman Fétori grieved, as did the Senegalese President Léopold Sédar Senghor' (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 52)
- Excerpt 3: 'For the person inside me speaks in the name of the self, repeating: "Because you are black, you are beautiful."' (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 52)
- Excerpt 4: 'Around her neck is a necklace of coloured beads, with a small white one in the middle; on her stomach is a small scar. Black people adore the second one; I was told it protects me from the most intense stares, and from the clusters of sparkling eyes that dart at my slender body in the streets. And because I am black, I take pride in my dark skin, my African features and my exotic rituals.' (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 53)

The novelist sought to have the protagonist take pride in her physical characteristics and her ethnicity as part of an attempt to construct a discourse attributed to Black women as a counter-discourse, which is 'in fact "an embodiment of the cultural value of the Black world", but which actually challenges the meaning and values associated with those connotations' (Anyia Lumba, 2007, p. 214), thereby deconstructing and exposing what perpetuates her inferiority.

This novelistic attempt, speaking through the voice of a Black character, fails to produce a discourse that challenges white centrality, because it does not truly celebrate Blackness; indeed, its constant repetition of the phrase 'I am Black, therefore I am beautiful' sounds like the repetition of someone trying to convince herself of this, rather than that of someone who is genuinely convinced. This idea can be illustrated by referring to other narrative passages spoken by Blanca, such as:

- Passage 1: ‘My features have been associated with harsher things, the saddest of all. There are things that cannot be forgotten or erased, and of these I remember only that I have dark skin; I am beautiful—a saying I repeat with much love and sorrow, and in my pain I say it with pride’ (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 11).
- Excerpt 2: ‘My sense of pity for myself was greater than that for him.’ (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 62).
- ‘I was a woman of ill fortune, or perhaps because I could not separate myself from my homeland, from my very self, and from my colour’ (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 159)
- ‘Nothing pleases me; nothing travels with me but my pain.’ (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 160)
- ‘Inside me, a faint voice whispers, “I will not change myself to suit others.”’ (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 156)

These narrative passages express the psychological distress of the protagonist ‘Blanca’, who feels an inferiority complex because of her skin colour. Although she does not attempt to articulate any discourse that perpetuates the superiority of the white race, this is reflected indirectly, which is nothing more than an expression of the author’s central white unconscious. This is evident in the following two passages:

1. ‘The snow was falling like fluffy cotton balls. I really loved that whiteness adorning the city, and I was beneath it as it coloured my blackness white.’ (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 162).
2. ‘In my eyes, the desert was no longer that enchanting beauty that dazzles the tourist at first sight, nor those golden sand dunes whose undulations resemble the long hair of a beauty cascading down her shoulders, captivating me as I roll about on their soft sand, my dark face coloured by their golden-yellow grains, (...) The wind did not play with my curly, jet-black locks; I did not wear high-heeled shoes or a dress adorned with flowers; nor did I paint my face with the colours of joy, as the fashion models do whose pictures I used to see in tattered magazines left by the local youths in the corners of the dilapidated huts.’ (Aisha Banour, 2020, pp. 13–14)

The first passage embodies the protagonist’s latent desire to acquire whiteness, as she is delighted that whiteness would cover the darkness of her skin; the second passage further illustrates the reality of this impossible desire, as she wishes her hair were straight and blonde so that the wind might play with it, and that she could wear high heels and a dress and apply make-up, these being the stereotypical images of feminine beauty and the body, which she sees embodied in the white body as a symbol of beauty. This belief extends even to the Black man who views Western women as beautiful and alluring, which is why Rambo, one of the novel’s characters, decides to travel to Spain to see the beauties. This perception is the author’s own and her primary belief, which sees in the white body—a perspective from which she was unable to break free.

The novel **The Black Woman** fails to speak through the voice of Black people in a way that delves deeply into their beliefs and ideas; instead, it presents what appears to be generalised and well-known stereotypes about Black people, such as their love of dancing, and describes their movements, appearances and rituals, but the depth one would expect from a narrative told from the Black woman’s perspective is lacking, because the author herself is ignorant of Black people’s beliefs about themselves and others.

3. The Dialectic of the Self and the Other: How Does the Black Person Perceive the Other?

A person’s relationship with the other is shaped by a set of contextual factors. Here, we are discussing marginalised characters who bear the burdens of class and race, placed within a narrative context that

compels them to interact with Algerians within the following dichotomies: dominant/dominated, in which the characters attempt to learn the Algerian dialect in order to scrape a living, a situation that leaves them in a state of human crisis, their spirit broken the moment they hold out their hand.

Given the particular nature of this situation, the Black character's view of the 'other' is determined by his position; yet despite this negative position, the characters come to terms with their relationship with the Algerian, their faces betraying a sense of contentment and acceptance as dinars fall into their bowls – which leads us to wonder: is this truly the Black character's perspective? Or is it the author's perspective, shaped by collective consciousness and a condescending view of them? Was the migration of Freki, Blanca and their families truly for the sake of bread, as the novelist sought to portray? This appears to be a superficial reason sufficient to propel the characters towards other narrative destinations. The lack of an intimate connection with the Nigerian landscape, the characters' sense of their own identity, and the erasure of bitter memories—which robbed Blanca of her ability to relate to her own body and to others—is what made emigration a necessary solution for such troubled characters; and so, at a certain stage, the characters—albeit in their exile—will come to terms with themselves; the intensity of Blanca's self-focus will diminish, and the psychological conflicts that remind us at every turn of female genital mutilation will subside.

The novel explores the human relationship with place as defined by the 'other'; the characters feel a sense of belonging to a space that is culturally dissimilar to their own (Algeria) simply because the 'other' accepts them and shows them empathy (the mother's insistence that she remain in Tamanrasset, or Freki's interaction with Mrs Hajar). In this alien space, the novel raises the dialectic of the self and the other: what can rectify our view of the other?

Black people harbour an imagined image of the white Westerner as racist and as someone who exploits 'the Black man as a shield for protection amidst warring factions' (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 102). For this reason, Freki intends to live in an Arab country, avoiding the 'land of yellow hair', because deep down he is not inclined to do so, being black himself, for fear of hearing epithets that make him feel inferior and undermine his dignity and humanity, such as 'negro' or 'kahloush' (Aisha Benour, 2020, pp. 42–43). For a Black person, the white 'other' is not their equal, and his conviction on this matter stems from the nature of religious affiliation (Niger is a Muslim country), for the more factors of commonality and similarity there are, the less the feeling of alienation; this is why Blanca's mother hopes they will remain in Tamanrasset, as the people there resemble them in colour and appearance (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 102).

Black migrants believe that conditions are better in neighbouring countries (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 66). Blanca dreams of a future different from that of the Black men who mutilate women's genitals (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 67). She persuades her mother, Karina, to emigrate in order to earn a living and to spare her sister, Viola, the same fate (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 80). Despite Freki's fear that they might end up homeless and begging for alms (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 98), they would still prefer to remain in a society which Blanca describes as one that 'rejects our colour, our way of life and our "primitive" behaviours' (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 148) in order to avoid the rituals of female genital mutilation and circumcision.

What can cause a sense of alienation? Differences in culture, skin colour, identity and customs do not in themselves create a sense of alienation unless they are coupled with the exclusion and rejection of Black people by others, turning them into 'freaks', 'blancos' and 'ahlam' – 'outcasts in every country' (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 130). They are viewed 'as a threat to security, health, the

economy and even the environment, carriers of all the dangerous diseases afflicting the region, such as AIDS, foot-and-mouth disease, tuberculosis and others; and what hurts the soul most is their fear of being approached' (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 102) As Freiki notes, added to this is the factor of lived experience: they do not share Blanka's pain, which she hides deep within her, nor her dream of safety, with which she fled (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 101).

Black people are aware of how others view them, but the novelist did not portray these characters as seeking to change that perception, because it is the perspective of the centre; and given that the discourse of Black women 'requires a rewriting of one's personal history from the perspective of one's own reality, as it has come to be, thereby demonstrating one's strength and effectiveness' (Abdullah Ibrahim, 2010, p. 232) rather than their defeatism.

4. The unconscious presence of the 'white' in the discourse of the 'black':

Every fictional discourse is, in some way, a cultural discourse, in which culture, as al-Ghadhami points out, constitutes a kind of 'systemic author... In other words, the conventional author is a cultural product imbued first and foremost with the character of that culture; yet their discourse articulates, from within, things that are neither in the author's consciousness nor in that of the cultural audience, and these implicit elements convey meanings that contradict the intended message of the discourse' (Abdullah al-Ghadhami, 2005, pp. 75–76). The novelist wished to participate in the Al-Zanouja project as 'a project to eradicate the alienation of an entire race' (Hassan Al-Gharfi, 2012, p. 57), yet the inconsistencies in her discourse reveal a white-centred perspective, as illustrated by the elements of this axis.

. 1/- Verbal Affirmations / The Centre's Discourse:

Excessive affirmation of something amounts to a denial of it, or implies a state of psychological fragmentation towards the thing being affirmed. The novelist intended to have the heroine take pride in her dark skin on more than one occasion; however, the repetitions of the phrase 'because you are beautiful, you are beautiful' were not all narratively justified. Most of them seemed forced, as illustrated by the following examples: 'I have endured the hardships of rough roads for the sake of a better life. And at the same time, I repeat: 'Because I am black, I am beautiful'' (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 148) "All around me are many open mouths searching for a stale loaf of bread, and because I am black, I am beautiful" (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 50)

Whilst the repetition of this statement might be justified in each instance by the character's familiarity with and influence from Senghor's poetry, such a justification for its repetition in the case of Freiki (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 47) is not possible, as it is not narratively established that he is a lover of poetry.

White unconscious bias was implicit in these assertive statements; consequently, the heroine did not appear convinced by what she was saying, as we have previously explained. This bias becomes even more apparent through the emphasis on the fact that the characters are black in a way that seems strange: would a Black person always write, describing his family and children as having thick lips and black skin? This is something we do not observe in the white man's speech and descriptions, as he often mentions colour and appearance only when they are different, not when they are the same.

The above idea becomes clear when we consider the contexts in which the description appears in these examples: 'Death did not give him time to see the light of my little Africa shining upon our wretched hut, or to hold her in his slender arms and kiss her on her dark forehead' (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 71), 'And her thick, trembling lips still call out in a painful whisper: "My daughter...

Blanca... Blanca” (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 33), ‘She handed the remains of the ashes to my mother, Karina, to keep, saying to her: “These are traditions we simply must follow in this region,” and a fleeting smile played on her thick lips’ (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 34) ‘A round child’s face with coarse, dark features, its complexion cracked by the severity of the frost, foreshadows a violent fit of crying’ (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 152).

The reader senses an assertion that the characters are Black—an assertion that is not dictated by the necessities of description, but rather stems from a fear that the reader might forget that the characters are Black. The question remains: does the Black person believe that their own lips are thick and their features coarse, or will they perceive the white other as having thin lips and delicate features? These descriptions serve merely to reinforce the discourse of the centre and to speak on its behalf.

-2/ Slips of the unconscious:

The previous examples have illustrated how the discourse of the centre manifests itself through direct verbal assertions about blackness. In this section, we shall take as our starting point Michel Foucault’s idea that ‘the discourse of the unconscious speaks through the conscious’ (Michel Foucault, 1990, p. 304), by highlighting narrative passages that reveal the discourse of white supremacy.

The novelist, speaking through the character ‘Blanca’, says the following in her description of her upbringing and her community ‘Our upbringing was not subject to specific standards, as is the case with the “other” we imagine. It was a miserable childhood (...) because the harsh tyranny of the place forced us, as a primitive and superstitious society, to accept progress, to accept reality and the unbearable helplessness, lest our strength and all sources of resistance within us collapse; we did not belong to life’ (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 54) This passage presents a clear contrast between the normative upbringing of white people and the non-institutionalised, non-normative upbringing of black people, in which idealism and positivity are associated with whiteness. Blanca’s description of her black community as primitive and superstitious, and her attribution of characteristics such as intellectual stagnation and a lack of spirit of resistance and struggle, appear to be a discourse central to whiteness. Is ‘Aisha Banour’ writing from the perspective of the Black woman in the name of humanity and fairness towards others, or to criticise Black society?

We take our cue from Derrida’s idea: ‘The writing subject cannot exercise absolute control over the words it writes, because every act of writing bears the trace of a past or future meaning, which causes it to say more than its author intended to say’ (Jacques Derrida, 2008, p. ..). When Blanca speaks, describing the man who smuggled them out, she says: ‘There was the man whose head was beside him; his facial features had changed and taken on a different hue, despite their darkness, as he said: ‘I remember that well; they counted more than thirty-five bodies, most of them women and children, strewn along the road.’ (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 122) This passage contains a qualification (‘and his facial features had changed and taken on a different hue, despite their darkness’), and this qualification would not have been included had the author not been speaking with full awareness; for it is the white features that change colour, and the insistence on the black features changing colour despite their darkness—rather than simply using the word ‘changed’—means the statement conveys more than the author intended, as Jacques Derrida has explained.

The idea becomes clearer in this narrative passage in which Blanca says: ‘After long hours of terror and anticipation, the two lorries arrived and unloaded those weary bodies and dusty beings at the Algerian border, the city whose people we were told were kind, and which boasts one of the largest

museums open to the natural landscape.’ (Aisha Benour, 2020, p. 120) Blanca was not convinced by the idea of emigration and accepted it only to protect her daughter from female genital mutilation; in many narrative passages, there is no indication that she knew anything about the place she was heading to, as she was constantly wondering how they would treat her, In this passage, she mentions that she was told that Algerians are kind, in a context of commentary and interjection, rather than as a statement based on knowledge or spoken by a character who had actually visited Algeria. What is expressed here is an unconscious defence of the author’s Algerian identity, as she has not presented any negative portrayal of them in the narrative.

The writing self cannot control its words, as Derrida pointed out, and this inability stems from the fact that it may employ utterances that are intended to mean something else; thus, the writer always says through Blanca: “Many pieces of advice run through my mind, echoed by my inner voice—as someone once said: ‘Watch your words, for they will become actions; watch your actions, for they will become habits; watch your habits, for they will become character; watch your character, for it will determine your destiny.’” (Aisha Banour, 2020, p. 152). She follows this quote with a footnote indicating that the speaker is Ibrahim al-Faki, an expert in human development and neuro-linguistic programming, and this is nothing more than words

Conclusion:

Novelist Aisha Banour wrote the novel **Al-Zanjiya** as a humanitarian effort to give voice to marginalized Black others; however, her text is rife with white-centric discourse in several respects:

- Conformity to the contemporary critical and intellectual discourse that addresses crises of identity, ethnicity, and Blackness by capitalizing on the critical reception’s sensitivity to the issue of slavery and the promotional image of the Black woman, which perpetuates racism in the name of anti-racism.
- Perpetuating stereotypes of Black people as incapable of thinking, creating, or developing, and imposing the same stereotypes produced by white centralism (brutality, violence, susceptibility to enslavement, defeatism, following instincts, etc.) and undermining the characters’ agency in the face of reality, as the novel describes and portrays what the media and social media platforms present about Central and Southern Africa rather than attempting to delve intellectually and culturally into the true mindsets of Black people.
- The inability to overcome unconscious white centrality when discussing Black others stems from two factors: The first factor relates to the nature of the writing, which is based on the free association of ideas, resulting in unintended statements (such as describing the Black self with unusual physical attributes—a reference to the author’s own discourse rather than that of the character); the second factor relates to what the author had previously read or witnessed, leading her to reinforce the negative stereotype of Black people.

On this basis, this text moves beyond anti-Black discourses into the realm of fictional narratives that speak on behalf of the “other” in a generally humanistic manner, as dictated by the principle of human empathy; Consequently, the text by the Black woman was unable to represent the Other in a conscious manner that would make it impossible to distinguish it from a text by a Black man writing and speaking about himself. Therefore, the classification of counter-discourses must be reconsidered in light of the writer’s ability to avoid discourses of unconscious centrality.

References and Sources:

- **Source:**
- Aisha Banour (2020). **The Zanjia Novel**, 1st ed., Khayal Publishing and Translation House, Bouarraj Tower, Algiers.
- **References:**
- 1. Idris Bukhari, (2008). *The Colors of Black Literature*, D.T., Algiers, Al-Bayt Association for Culture and the Arts.
- 2. Amin Isber, (1985). *Africa: Political, Economic, and Social Dimensions*, Dar Damascus, 1st ed., Syria.
- 3. Anya Lumba, (2007). *On the Theory of Colonialism and Postcolonialism in Literature*, 1st ed., trans. Muhammad Abdul-Ghani Ghanoum, Syria, Dar al-Hewar for Publishing and Distribution.
- 4. Pierre Bourdieu, (2009). *Masculine Hegemony*, Translated by Salman Qa'frani, 1st ed., Arab Organization for Translation, 1st ed., Beirut, Lebanon.
- Jacques Derrida, (2008). **Of Writing**, trans. Anwar Maghith and Mona Talba, National Center for Translation, 2nd ed., Cairo, Egypt.
- 6. Judelle Morris, (1998). *The Enigma of the Gift*, translated by Radwan Zaza, Al-Mada House for Culture and Publishing, 1st ed., Iraq.
- 7. Hassan Al-Gharfi, (2012). *On African Poetry: The Pioneering Generation as a Model*, Al-Sada House for Journalism, Publishing, and Distribution, 1st ed., Dubai.
- 8. Zakaria Ibrahim, *The Existential Problem*
- Zakaria Ibrahim, *The Problem of Creation*, Dar Misr for Printing, n.p., Egypt, n.d.
- 9. Salim Hayoula, (2021). *Strategies of Cultural Criticism in Contemporary Discourse: From Aesthetic Reading to Cultural Reading—A Study of Epistemological Foundations*, Dar Mim for Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., Algeria.
- 10. Abdullah Ibrahim (1997), *Western Centralism: The Problem of Formation and Self-Centeredness*, Arab House for Science Publishers, 1st ed., Beirut.
- 11. Abdullah Al-Ghadhami, (2005), *Cultural Criticism: A Reading of Arab Cultural Patterns*, Arab Cultural Center, 3rd ed., Casablanca, Morocco.
- 12. Farid al-Zahi (1999). *The Body, the Image, and the Sacred in Islam*, Dar Africa al-Sharq, n.d., Beirut, Lebanon.
- 13. Farid al-Zahi (2003). *Text, Body, and Interpretation*, Africa al-Sharq, 1st ed., Casablanca, Morocco, 2003.
- 14. Michel Foucault, (1990). **The Order of Things**, translated by George Abu Salah et al., National Development Center, n.d., Beirut, Lebanon.
- 15. Friedrich Hegel, (2007). **Reason in History**, translated by Imam Abd al-Fattah Imam, Dar al-Tanweer for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, 3rd ed., Beirut, Lebanon.