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Experimentation in the Short Story Collection "Harem of Saturn" by the Algerian Writer Zineb Lout

Dr. Samia Ghechir, Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef (Algeria)
s.ghechir@univ-chlef.dz ; <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-1413-4777>

Dr. Nadjat Hocine, Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef (Algeria)
nadjat.hocine@univ-chlef.dz

Dr. Salah Zaidour, Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef (Algeria)
s.zaidour@univ-chlef.dz; <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6693-985X>

Dr. Fatima Abderrahmane, Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef (Algeria)
f.abderrahmane@univ-chlef.dz

Dr. Amina Samet Bouhayek, Hassiba Benbouali University of Chlef (Algeria)
sametbouhaikamina@gmail.com

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Abstract:

Zineb Lout is among the writers who have embraced experimentation and pursued innovation in narrative writing. This is evident in her short stories and novels. She has produced highly distinctive and original texts by foregrounding poetic language and the existential construction of time and place. Her work also reflects a philosophical orientation and openness to diverse arts, media, and literary genres. These qualities are evident in her short story collection "Harem of Saturn," which serves as the case study for this article.

Keywords: experimentation; poetic language; time and place; philosophical orientation; arts and literary genres; Harem of Saturn.

1. Experimentation in Contemporary Arabic Short Fiction

The short story is among the most widespread prose forms today. It has often been neglected in both creative practice and criticism, while many writers have turned to the novel. Yet it has preserved its presence. This is evident in the short story collections published each year and displayed at international book fairs. The short story addresses important aspects of human life in a concise and powerful style. It also embraces openness and experimentation. As a result, it can leave a deep artistic impression and convey significant human meaning.

Writers recognized the importance of the short story and began experimenting with new forms and modern techniques. Experimentation became visible in both content and artistic structure. As one critic notes, "The short story is the most experimental of the arts. It allows the writer to use devices, techniques, and themes drawn from other genres, arts, and periods."¹

It is also one of the literary forms most capable of addressing major human concerns and prominent emotional states. This capacity stems from its human, psychological, and artistic richness. Despite its brevity and limited formal elements, it explores the depths of the human self and examines its many fractures. "A story expresses an attitude or a particular

¹ Sha'ban Abd al-Hakim Muhammad, *Experimentation in the Short Story (1960-2000)* (Egypt: Al-'Ilm wa al-Iman Publishing and Distribution, n.ed., 2011), p. 24.

moment in a person's life. Its aim is to represent a human experience by presenting it as something that could occur."¹ A short story is not written arbitrarily or randomly. It carries a serious purpose that its author seeks to communicate to readers. For this reason, writing it is especially demanding, despite the simplistic and dismissive view often taken of the genre.

Short fiction has attracted many creative writers who have produced distinguished texts. These texts also reveal the literary orientations to which their authors belong. Short fiction has kept pace with the social and political transformations of Arab society. It has become one of the genres most capable of recording living conditions and varied emotional states. Arabs became acquainted with this prose form only in the modern period. Its "early, non-artistic beginnings consisted of tales drawn from daily life and strange supernatural experiences. They focused mainly on the report or event itself, then on limited purposes such as entertainment and instruction. Examples include Arab proverb narratives, *Kalila wa Dimna*, and *One Thousand and One Nights*."²

These writers embraced experimentation in search of new creative possibilities that could give their texts distinction and originality. They recognized the importance of the short story and began testing new forms and modern techniques. Experimentation appeared in both content and artistic structure. "The short story is the most experimental of the arts. It allows the writer to use devices, techniques, and themes drawn from other genres, arts, and periods."³

Contemporary short fiction shows a clear tendency toward experimentation, adventure, difference, and the disruption of established conventions. Its writers seek new narrative forms in both structure and content. The factors that have encouraged this turn include "the expansion of knowledge and the diversity of its fields and directions. They also include changes in reality, new forms of innovation within social and human systems, and the need to keep pace with developments in poetic and narrative literature."⁴

The short-story writer is no longer a conventional author who merely reports events and facts, relies on classical constructions of time and place, and presents characters in ordinary ways. Instead, the writer embraces adventure and breaks with dominant patterns. The writer has "become a symbolic poet who seeks to create an imaginative image of a mind overflowing with thoughts, images, and impressions. In doing so, the writer draws on all the possibilities of language."⁵

One of the most prominent features of experimentation in the short story is the use of stream of consciousness. It is a modern experimental device because of "its artistic value in probing the depths of the psyche. Psychological life and the inner world dominate our lives, while outward behavior reflects what lies within. This technique reveals the character's psychological behavior in relation to the self. It discloses memories and disturbances and appears in the character's inner dialogue."⁶ Stream of consciousness is therefore an important artistic technique in contemporary experimental short fiction. It explores the depths of the psyche and conveys atmospheres charged with desire and despair, as well as hope and optimism. It also portrays the tormented and divided self. "The stream-of-consciousness technique moves away from direct narration and turns toward the depths of the psyche. Some implications appear in delicate images, while many others are conveyed through images of greater complexity and depth."⁷

2. Features of Experimentation in Zineb Lout's Short Story Collection "Harem of Saturn"

¹ Abd Allah al-Rukaybi, *The Algerian Short Story* (Algiers, Algeria: Dar al-Kitab al-Arabi, n.ed., 2009), p. 133.

² Al-Sa'id al-Waraq, *Trends in the Short Story in Arabic Literature in Egypt* (Egypt: Dar al-Ma'rifa al-Jami'iyya, n.ed., 2003), p. 13.

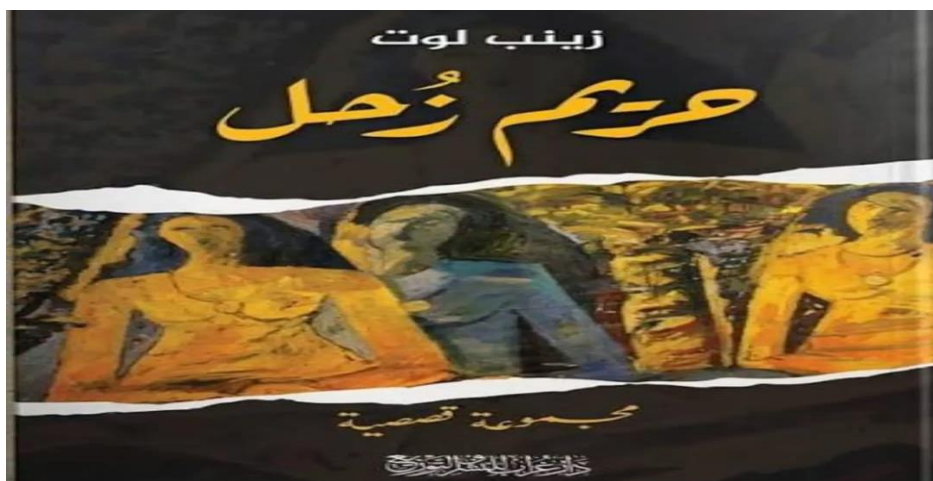
³ Sha'ban Abd al-Hakim Muhammad, *Experimentation in the Short Story*, p. 24.

⁴ Abd Allah al-Rukaybi, *The Algerian Short Story*, p. 133.

⁵ Leon Edel, *The Psychological Novel*, trans. Mahmoud al-Samra (Beirut, Lebanon: Al-Ahliyya Library, 1st ed., 1959), pp. 275-276.

⁶ Sha'ban Abd al-Hakim Muhammad, *Experimentation in the Short Story*, p. 38.

⁷ Sha'ban Abd al-Hakim Muhammad, *Experimentation in the Short Story*, p. 84.



One of the leading features of experimentation in "Harem of Saturn" is its treatment of new and unfamiliar subjects. Most are philosophical and portray the human relationship with the self, life, and existence. The writer also displays considerable skill in exploring the psychology of her characters. She seeks to understand their complexes and repressed desires and to examine their inner worlds. Thematic experimentation usually appears through the storyteller's distinctive treatment of the subject. It also emerges through paradox in expression, imagery, description, and narration. These devices allow her to penetrate the human self and reveal its varied emotional states. The resulting scenes and images express the writer's awareness, insight, and the identity of the text and writing self. This is because "the self in the text represents thought and feeling, whereas the subject refers to lived reality. As Kant argued, the interaction of the self with sensory experience produces the object. In this sense, the object does not initially exist. Rather, it is brought into being within the self through its dialogue with the universe..."¹

The title of the collection reveals the writer's use of paradox, difference, and departure from convention. It is designed to surprise and unsettle the reader. Lout combines two elements: the "harem," meaning women, and Saturn, a planet far from the sun. The collection thus seems to create spaces for women who search for their existence amid rigid customs, marginalization, and alienation. The title also suggests that the women of Saturn are distant and difficult to reach. It further evokes a search for freedom, isolation, silence, and escape into dream worlds. The writer develops an intellectual project that affirms the right of lost, faltering, and confused women to exist within their social environments. This project is visible on the cover through meaningful visual signs, including the artwork and colors. It also appears in the author's introduction and in story titles such as "A Harem Discourse," "Harem," "Harem and Prohibition," "Femininity," "A Matter of Honor," "Marguerite Duras," and "Faust." Lout supports a harem or feminine discourse centered on the girl, mother, beloved, and artist. She gives the feminine system semiotic meanings linked to fertility, growth, motherhood, the gift of life, and resistance to social oppression and exclusion. This approach departs from familiar images of fragility, defeat, and submission in earlier books, novels, and tales. Those works often portrayed women as submissive, passive, and vulnerable. Lout also criticizes ideologies and customs that fail to understand women's subjectivity, thought, and vision. This appears in her story "A Harem Discourse": "On Women's Day, she mounted the platform. She spoke against the oppression of women whose history society had marginalized. She demanded the restoration of rights and an end to injustice..."²

The passage activates a cultural pattern that exposes the falsehood of societies that fought women for many years. It focuses especially on patriarchal authority, represented by the father, man, and brother. Women later regained recognition through the work of associations and organizations and through events that celebrate them, such as Women's Day.

Another feature of experimentation in the collection is the fragmentation of narration, time, and place. The short story no longer depends on a sequence of reported events. Nor does it focus on the conventional spatiotemporal setting. Greater attention is given to its psychological and philosophical construction. Place becomes a means of understanding the character and the flow of memory. Time is similarly released from chronological sequence. It becomes psychological time that explores the conscious and unconscious aspects of the character. In the story "N," Lout writes: "The feminine Nun can unfurl like a lotus flower and sits down for tales every evening. Yet she scatters laundry soap through her heart. She borrows a body for love and powder for cosmetics. Meetings take place beneath a roof of words, and words are braided by the trembling of the seasons. Each morning, Nun rises in defiance as though she were pulling the kingdom of Zenobia behind her. Every day, she finds nothing but the fragrant foam of oblivion. She soon dismounts and begins again. She sips poison before evening puts on its shirt of darkness."³

¹ Mahmoud al-Dab', *The Allure of Experimentation: The Arabic Poetic Movement at the Beginning of the Third Millennium* (Cairo, Egypt: Egyptian General Book Authority, 1st ed., 2014), p. 54.

² Zineb Lout, *Harem of Saturn* (Cairo, Egypt: Ghurab Publishing and Distribution, 1st ed., 2020), p. 15.

³ Lout, *Harem of Saturn*, p. 37.

The stories humanize place, which functions as a central artistic element. Places become focal points of narration and give the text depth and meaning. Place thus turns into an important character within the narrative fabric. It produces several meanings tied to attitudes, emotions, and an existential vision. In "Kham al-Narjis," the narrator says: "Scent has a strange history. Civilizations fell as time coiled around itself like an infant that had lost its place. You returned stinking after stealing my father's money. You left while the waves of the sea battered you. All the whistles at the border failed to stop you from returning, and so did my father's voice... You possess nothing now. You died from your sorrow, my brother..."

And I die every moment I remember you...

Yet I made my heart migrate with the birds I once followed... I lost everything in my exile."¹ The short story therefore also presents places as symbols. Here, place becomes a repository of sadness, exile, nostalgia, longing, and isolation.

Another feature of experimentation is the philosophical construction of character. It moves beyond the traditional perspective, which presents characters in stereotypical and colorless terms. Contemporary short fiction encompasses the character's psychological, intellectual, and ideological worlds. It also conveys the character's cultural background and reveals a deep view of existence, life, and society. "For a fictional character to be convincing, the character must develop and possess defining dimensions. These dimensions include the motives and obstacles that lead the character to act. They also emerge through gestures, movements, and psychological traits. Together, these elements add a new dimension: depth."² The protagonists' ideological frameworks carry literary and artistic meanings. References to Faust, Mikhail Zoshchenko, and Marguerite Duras evoke literary and artistic figures whose works addressed existence, the meaning of life, irony, humor, and laughter.

Stream of consciousness is another leading feature of experimentation in the short story. It is a modern experimental device because of "its artistic value in probing the depths of the psyche. Psychological life and the inner world dominate our lives, while outward behavior reflects what lies within. This technique reveals the character's psychological behavior in relation to the self. It discloses memories and disturbances and appears in the character's inner dialogue."³ This technique appears in several passages. In "The Author," Lout writes: "The papers are scattered everywhere... Utter chaos. Her characters flee to rest... Only one remains, breathing into the captivity from which she had sighed."⁴

Experimental short fiction does not present its text in a direct, report-like manner. It adopts a symbolic and suggestive form. It benefits from modern techniques, dialogue among genres and arts, and a stronger focus on poetic language. Such language penetrates the essence of things and produces profound meanings. Poetic language borrows suggestive images from poetry and enters the depths of the psyche. It powerfully embodies human emotional states and clarifies the character's relation to other elements of the story. In "Faust," Lout writes: "The devout and pious man turns into the fist of a devil whom he summons. He travels through the cellars of place. He walks with the devil's summit under his arm, yet love forms his ribs. The years of struggle pass and his appointed time ends. He surrenders the soul, and the thin, sadistic body disappears."⁵

A nihilistic philosophical vision dominates many stories and gives voice to damaged, defeated, and oppressed selves. The writer depicts the divide between body and soul during the search for human existence and the attempt to escape absurdity, alienation, and anxiety. This is especially clear in "Human," where she writes: "The soul wrenches out its words: How I have been toyed with by a body that never rests.

The body lets its words fall: You have clung to me, soul. I am not human, nor are you without me. You push me forward, then weigh down my steps..."⁶

The writer also employs a philosophical vision through concepts such as nothingness, anxiety, alienation, negation, existence, absurdity, and isolation. In "Femininity," she writes: "She breathes deeply, releases her final breath, and leaves. Her femininity has been packaged. No one has the right to violate her legitimate claim to freedom within a homeland that inhabits her as widely as her breaths, her ribs, and her solitary world."⁷

The writer also borrows techniques from cinema and the visual arts. Her stories become visual canvases filled with scenes, images, colors, and shifting shadows. She further enriches them with artworks that express their contexts, meanings, and dramatic qualities.

Experimentation also appears in artistic style. Lout cultivates poetic language and uses a rich vocabulary marked by dense symbolism and suggestion. She tends toward imagination and ambiguity to strengthen meaning and deepen the stories' dramatic dimension. This is evident in "Air," a story of only five lines that is nevertheless condensed, profound, and open to several meanings: "Acquiring air has become important.

Yet he spends his whole life possessing emptiness. All the women around him wear the stories that he furnishes according to the needs of his mind and the conjectures of his desolate illusion. They bear the fractured reflection cast upon the ribs

¹ Lout, *Harem of Saturn*, p. 29.

² Abd Allah al-Rukaybi, *The Algerian Short Story*, p. 132.

³ Sha'ban Abd al-Hakim Muhammad, *The Short Story*, p. 38.

⁴ Lout, *Harem of Saturn*, p. 169.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 149.

⁶ Lout, *Harem of Saturn*, p. 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

of truth. What descends from dreams cannot establish complex minds."¹ An ordinary reader may not grasp the writer's meaning or intention. The story addresses a critical reader with a strong intellectual background who can decode the text's signs and implicit meanings.

3. Conclusion

Zineb Lout has created a new experimental text that differs in content as well as in its artistic and aesthetic structures. She engages with several arts and literary genres, including cinema, theater, and the visual arts. She also employs literary intertextuality by invoking major figures from literature and thought. This practice reveals her broad knowledge of world literature and of literary and artistic schools. Her philosophical orientation leads her to examine human subjectivity. She also defends women's freedom and their intellectual and existential projects. In doing so, she rejects the intimidation, exclusion, and subjugation that women have endured for decades.

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