

Creative Horizons for Algerian Migrant Fiction: On the Pursuit of Global Reach

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Abstract

Algerian fiction is a literary form steeped in themes that not only capture the reader's attention but also engage them with national issues, while simultaneously mapping a path toward the exploration of the Other—a relationship often marked by an uneasy blend of affinity and contradiction.

How, then, does the Algerian writer compose in the language of the Other, yet still assert a distinct identity and reaffirm a selfhood that resists assimilation? How does “place” oscillate between a yearning for integration and a refusal to belong? And can national concerns and the migrant's struggle with dislocation and fractured belonging serve as creative engines for reaching a global readership?

This article cannot fully answer these questions. It merely pauses at select milestones in the work of prominent figures who have contributed to what is now identified as *migrant literature*. Yet in doing so, it opens a wider field of research; one in which interpretations frequently diverge, and critical positions remain contested.

Introduction

The study sets out by parsing “migrant literature” as a literary genus that forced recognition through sheer insistence. A concise theoretical sketch precedes a compact reading of three Algerian novelists—Mohammed Dib, Mouloud Feraoun, and Amara Lakhous—chosen for the weight their works carry in this field. First, the concept itself: migrant literature knots with multiple adjoining ideas, and untangling those threads remains necessary for clarity.

From there, the focus shifts to the novels that sounded Algeria's national question abroad while probing the migrant psyche that is sometimes wounded by geographic distance, sometimes scarred by a fractured, marginalized identity under a dominant adversary. Migrant writing, elastic in tone, keeps bleeding into the search for a fragmented self. Through selected texts by Dib, Feraoun, and Lakhous, the paper asks: in what ways did Algerian fiction step past its regional border, fashioning creative apertures that speak to the full crisis of migration?

Keywords : Algerian Fiction . Contradiction . Migrant Literature. Exile and Belonging

1 – On Migrant Literature and the Tangle of Definitions

If we track literature back to its older strata, we soon meet a band of poets who slipped the leash of place. Outside the tribal enclosure they shaped a distinctive voice—mostly oral, admittedly, yet unmistakably rebellious. The **ṣu‘lūk (outcast)** literature, born of poets expelled from their tribe, is a first hint: art can migrate the instant it steps past its geographic cordon. Exile, here, is not metaphor; it is a lived removal from the tribe’s central authority, a domain ruled by code and custom. That departure prefigures what is now called migrant or exile writing—stories written after crossing the map’s hard edge. Seen from the tribe’s center, such verse sat at the margin; from another angle, it announced a new center of its own¹.

Because the poets’ removal stems from a political act—banishment—“exile literature” and “migrant literature” often fold into one another. Yet the terms refuse to stay still. Abdullah Ibrahim for instance, argues that *kitābat al-manfā* (writing from exile) should replace *kitābat al-mahjar* (writing from the diaspora). His point is simple: diaspora criticism, locked in geography, cannot follow the writer into every moral or worldly debate, whereas exile writing, by definition, must. It speaks from a vantage that sees the globe without forfeiting the globe’s troubles². Although exile writing often appears to cast a wider net by addressing any global concern without being shackled to a single place; that breadth is, in truth, only one viewpoint among many. Tarek Bouhala pushes the discussion further. For him, “migrant” writing is an imagined discourse: authors tap it to voice creative responses to fresh tensions born of a particular encounter—Arab and broader ‘Third-World’ societies facing the cultural scripts of the West amid rapid political, economic, and cultural shifts. This encounter drags several heavy words into the open such as identity, alterity, memory, nation-state, homeland, migration, terms that frame both conflict and dialogue. Taken together, they generate a distinctive literary rhetoric probing the self/other dynamic³.

Bouhala therefore treats migrant literature as deliberately border-crossing; it grapples with human questions wherever they surface, moving through spaces where the writer lives side-by-side with an unfamiliar milieu, whether in place or in historical moment. Such proximity, however, spawns its own knots: the gaze of the other, the migrant’s need to assert difference, the struggle to be heard. The urge to claim legitimacy (to defend a right simply to exist) often sparks the very act of writing, an act nourished by imaginative openness and a craftsman’s grip on complex themes.

In short, Bouhala’s stance diverges sharply from narrower regional readings. He sees migrant fiction as a form that has earned its stripes precisely because its concepts overlap, collide, and reach outward, determined to win a global hearing beyond the tight circle of local concerns.

¹Fikra Cultural Magazine. “Migrant Literature and Its Influence on World Literatures.” Thursday, September 22, 2022. Available at:

http://www.fikramg.com/topic_det

²Abdullah Ibrahim. *Encyclopedia of Arabic Narrative*, Vol. 2, 1st ed., Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum Foundation, Dubai, UAE, 2016, p. 17 (adapted).

³Tarek Bouhala. “Representations of the Migrant in Contemporary Algerian Fiction: The Case of Amara Lakhous.” *Al-Thaqafa Magazine*, January 12, 2017. Accessed February 12, 2023, at 14:00 via: <http://thakafamag.com>

Other scholars shift the vocabulary again. Rami Abou chihab prefers **diaspora literature**, claiming the term records a deeper, more collective wound than exile can capture⁴. Whatever the label, the migrant's identity often fractures under the stress, searching for a center lost to conflict and flight.

Strip the adjective away and ask: *who is the migrant?* Farleyz Lewis defines the migrant as anyone who leaves home to live abroad, permanently or for a long span, in pursuit of perceived necessities⁵. Two subtypes follow. The internal migrant crosses an internal administrative line yet stays inside the state

. The external migrant steps over a national border⁶.

Where borders measure capability and distinction, art—the novel included—naturally tests them. That testing is our next concern: Algerian fiction that edges beyond its home ground while still sounding the national note. The path leads, inevitably, to Mouloud Feraoun, Mohammed Dib, and Amara Lakhous, each of whom turns the migrant's predicament into a channel for wider recognition.

2 – Algerian migrant novels: creative departures, global echoes

The Algerian novel entered the modern arena late—scarcely by choice. French rule, an intricate mesh of surveillance and constraint, strangled prose production for decades. The first text that leans decisively toward novelistic form is *Hikayat al-Ushshaq fi al-Hubb wa-l-Ishtiyah* (*Tale of Lovers in Love and Yearning*) by Mohammed Ben Ibrahim, a writer whose property the colonial administration had already confiscated. That debut mirrors a larger fallout: 1830's invasion of Algeria⁷.

Other experiments followed, exploratory, only half-aware of novelistic protocols. Among them: *Ghada Umm al-Qura* (*The Maiden of the Mother of Villages*, 1947) by Ahmed Reda Houhou; *Al-Talib al-Mankub* (*The Afflicted Student*, 1951) by Abdelmajid Chafai; *Al-Hariq* (*The Fire*, 1957) by Nour Eddine Boudjeda; and *Sawt al-Gharam* (*Voice of Passion*, 1967) by Mohamed Meniâ. Still, most literary historians mark 1971—and Abdelhamid Ben Hadouga's *Rih al-Janub* (*South Wind*)—as the genre's firm establishment⁸.

Shift focus now to novels that thread national trauma, migrant disquiet, and the slow search for a usable identity. The thread often runs through French, the occupier's tongue, and is frequently spun from outside Algeria's borders. That angle narrows the present study: a handful of narratives, published abroad yet rooted in Algerian questions, begins to appear in the immediate aftermath of World War II. Around 1945 three names surface almost together—Mohammed Dib, Mouloud Feraoun, and, soon after, a cluster of others—each carrying the weight of a wounded country. French-language Algerian fiction therefore lives at a junction: the author stands, pen in hand, to defend a homeland, while the medium remains the colonizer's idiom⁹. Critical opinion, confronted with that

⁴Rami Abu Chihab. In the Last Passage: The Palestinian Diaspora Narrative from a Postcolonial Perspective, 1st ed., Arab Institute for Research and Publishing, Beirut, Lebanon, 2017, p. 121.

⁵Mohamed Akli Kezou. The Legal Status of Algerian Migrants in France, Master's thesis, Faculty of Law, University of Tizi Ouzou, Algeria, 1998, pp. 21–22.

⁶Tarek Ben Beyya. Demographic Transitions and Migration in the Algerian Sahara, Doctoral dissertation in Demographic Sciences, Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Oran 2, 2016, p. 21.

⁷Saleh Mafkouda. "The Genesis of the Arabic Novel in Algeria: Foundations and Formation." *Al-Makhlab Journal: Research in Algerian Language and Literature*, Algeria, n.d., p. 16.

⁸Ben Jomaa Bouchoucha. Narrative Experimentation and Narrative Modernity in the Algerian Arabic Novel, Maghreb Printing and Publishing House, 1st ed., Tunis, 2005, p. 7.

⁹Najwa Mansour. "The Identity of the Algerian Child in Mohammed Dib's *La Grande Maison*." *Ishkalat Journal*, University of Tamanrasset, Issue 9, May 2016, p. 117.

tension, has mostly anchored belonging in geography: write on soil called “Algeria,” and the writer is Algerian—language or lineage notwithstanding.

Aïda Adib states flatly: “Algerian literature is any literary work, in Arabic **or** in French, authored by one of the country’s native inhabitants.”¹⁰ Language, in her view, never bars entry; the decisive marker remains national experience.

Concepts, however, multiply. “Migrant literature” (adab al-muhâjir) flourished first inside the novel, its thematic reach straddling both local and global issues. Opinions split, yet presence is no longer denied. Ahcen Telilani underlines the maze: adab al-muhâjir, adab al-mahjar, adab al-hijra—the list itself betrays disagreement. Telilani leans on one practical signpost: when a text appears in a non-national language—French above all—it is migrant by language, even if composed at home. English would count the same. Conversely, Arabic novels penned abroad also migrate, because migration may be spatial or temporal. He invokes Ahlam Mosteghanemi, writing from exile, as a ready example. Telilani adds a sharper claim. Migrant writing often outpaces domestic output; he points to Assia Djebar’s four Nobel nominations as proof, calling her doubly migrant—by location and by tongue. In short, Algerian migrant literature is abundant, multilingual, national yet human, and, beyond that, unambiguously global¹¹.

From this angle the Algerian novel; whether it speaks in the colonizer’s idiom or crosses borders in person; earns its place inside migrant literature. The creative force lies precisely in that crossing. A brief reading of selected pioneers follows.

Mohammed Dib earned early recognition through a three-part cycle—*La Grande Maison*, *L’Incendie*, *Le Métier à tisser*—written before Algeria’s uprising yet already tracing its fault lines. Each novel sprang from lived social textures; the set, taken together, explains why a people finally lifted the lid. Poverty, hunger, illiteracy, forced displacement, torture—all surface in stark relief. Dib’s aim, barely veiled, was to show an international readership how colonial rule had stripped Algerians bare and why resistance became the sole remaining logic. The fiction thus tilts from mere art into near-documentary¹²: ink doubles as evidence, pages call readers to moral witness, and aesthetic success folds back into a broader human plea for liberation.

La Grande Maison opens the sequence. Life inside *Dar es-Sbitar* which is a ramshackle lodging that binds residents through shared deprivation. Central figure ‘Aynī and her family scramble daily for bread; Dib stresses dilapidated classrooms where hollow-eyed pupils sit learning French. One teacher, nevertheless, whispers a seditious line— “Do not believe anyone who tells you France is your homeland.”¹³

L’Incendie shifts to Beni Boublane, a rural hamlet. Social gatherings of farmers thrum with talk that “something new” must soon arrive. The year is 1953; the actual revolt breaks out in 1954. Dib seems to sense the spark before it jumps.

¹⁰Aïda Adib Bamia. *The Evolution of Algerian Narrative Literature*, University Publications Office, Algiers, 1982, pp. 50–51.

¹¹Ahcen Telilani. “Creativity Returning from Exile,” El Massa, Cultural Forum, January 17, 2020. Available at: <http://www.elmassa.com>

¹²Amna Aachab. “The Image of the Algerian Revolution in the Algerian Novel: Mohammed Dib’s Trilogy (*La Grande Maison*, *L’Incendie*, *Le Métier à tisser*) as a Case Study.” *Afanin al-Khitab*, Vol. 1, Issue 1, December 2021, p. 34.

¹³Mohammed Dib. *La Grande Maison*, trans. Ahmed Ben Mohamed Bakli, Sidi Yahia, Algeria, unpublished edition, August 2002, p. 81.

The cycle closes with *Le Métier à tisser*. Inside a textile mill owned by Mahy Bouanane, exhausted weavers talk back and forth, their dialogue revealing rising class consciousness and simmering rage at untenable conditions. The loom's ceaseless clatter measures both exploitation and the workers' slow awakening.

Taken as a whole, Dib's trilogy pioneered migrant literature in the Algerian context. It travelled far beyond national borders while keeping the liberation struggle front-and-center; for that reason, it remains a touchstone whenever scholars discuss how the Algerian novel stepped onto the world stage.

Among the novelists who placed the national cause at the center of their fiction and managed to move beyond Algeria's frontiers, Mouloud Feraoun occupies a steady corner. He wrote three French-language books—*Le Fils du pauvre* (1950), *La Terre et le sang* (1953), and *Les Chemins qui montent* (1957). Each return to Kabylie, a mountain enclave layered with customs that still governed daily life in mid-century. Feraoun records those rites in close detail yet refuses nostalgia; he singles out practices he considers harmful and calls, without sermon, for repair. The trilogy's resonance has carried it far: translations are now available in English, German, Russian, Spanish, Polish, Bulgarian, and Arabic.

Le Fils du pauvre, finished in 1939 yet released only in 1950, lingers over Kabyle life with almost ethnographic patience. Feraoun lists the family chores, the layout of terraced fields, the trades that keep the valleys alive, then narrows in on his young hero's stubborn push through school.

La Terre et le sang (1953) shifts the lens to land itself. Amer returns from years in France, a French wife beside him; the village he left now stares at both as partial strangers. He tries to re-inhabit that soil, she tries to decipher codes she never learned, and the plot tightens around the silence between host custom and foreign instinct. The novel becomes a ledger of what re-entry asks of a migrant.

Les Chemins qui montent—drafted 1953-56, issued 1957—extends the same thread. Again Amer, child of an Algerian father and a French mother, walks the steep tracks of IghilNzman, a hamlet ruled by unwritten statutes. He rebels, scoffs at proprieties; Dahbia, raised by White Fathers and schooled in Christian rites, meets him in a brief, raw love that village logic cannot shelter. The book ends with Amer murdered, a grim footnote to the risks of mixed lineage under rigid tradition.

Together these three volumes form a discreet trilogy that critics still treat as foundational. Their multiple translations carry Algerian questions across borders: how a migrant returns, how custom resists, how identities splinter when two moral worlds collide.

Amara Lakhous belongs to the most recent wave of Algerian fiction writers who have pushed the migrant-literature label in unexpected directions. His second novel—*Come fartisucchiare il latte dallalupa senza chetimorda* (*How to Suckle from the She-Wolf Without Being Bitten*)—shows just how far that push can go. Lakhous wrote the book after years of living in Italy; by then he spoke the language with the ease of a long-term resident and had absorbed the small habits that shape everyday Italian life. Those years mattered. They allowed him to probe migrant hardship from the inside.

The book shows how Lakhous—by staging the clash between *self* and *other* in an Italian setting—moves beyond the Algerian default that keeps plots at home. He threads police-noir tension, hints of terror, sharp critique, even moments of grace, while probing both the flaws and the virtues of the

foreign environment. At the same time the narrative keeps its own pulse: a distinct Algerian awareness of self and world¹⁴.

Thus, Lakhous' work, counted within migrant literature, sketches a contemporary path toward fresh invention: national questions, the migrant's identity struggle, the hard task of belonging—all carried abroad, rendered with linguistic agility, and offered to a global readership hungry for human stories told without borders.

Conclusion

Ultimately, then, the quick spotlight on Dib, Feraoun, and Lakhous marks only one way-station on a far longer track. Indeed, the label *migrant literature*—for all its blurred edges—endures precisely because it springs straight from lives bent by departure. Whether the lines move in Arabic or in a borrowed idiom hardly shifts the centre; rather, what matters is the muted signal that braids national hurts with broader human knots. Consequently, the writer's craft—sharp lexical pivots, restless plots, feints designed to snag the eye—opens a corridor toward readers beyond the homeland. Meanwhile, writer and reader now walk almost abreast; each book becomes a crossing point where home-grown grievance, migrant fatigue, and the splintering self haggle for space.

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¹⁴Chawki Badr Youssef. "Narrative Modernity in Contemporary Algerian Fiction." *The Novel: Issues and Horizons*, Egyptian General Book Organization, Cairo, Egypt, n.d., p. 41.

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