

The Human Values in Algerian Novels

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Abstract:

The novel is often understood as a form of writing that explores the self, society, and the relationships linking peoples and cultures across the world. In doing so, it foregrounds the notion of humanity and its values, seeking to embody them in social consciousness through narrative discourse that writes about the human being and searches for meaning in the dark labyrinths of existence. Because the Algerian novel is part of world literature in its aims and functions, its narrative discourse is rarely devoid of such values. This paper examines the human values carried by Algerian fiction and argues that they are frequently articulated through the author's ideological positioning, cultural horizon, and worldview; therefore, values appear in the text as both ethical aspirations and narrative choices. Methodologically, the paper combines a conceptual discussion of values with a thematic-narratological reading that follows how values are 'performed' through character construction, plot conflict, and the distribution of voice.

Keywords: Algerian novel; human values; values; intellectual; narrative discourse; freedom; dignity; solidarity; identity; secularism.

Introduction

Like other novels worldwide, the Algerian novel writes the self and society. Within its narrative fabric, it stages the human being's

continuous struggle with life and the persistent search for meaning amid social, cultural, political, and economic difficulties. In this sense, the novel becomes a space for questioning identity and existence within a world marked by ambiguity, and for seeking an interpretive vision capable of making reality intelligible. It also becomes a field for revealing the fractures of everyday life, as the narrative voice often moves between the personal and the collective, between the intimate wound and the public crisis.

Because the novel has succeeded in accessing the depths of subjectivity—especially as it has developed alongside major social, intellectual, and scientific transformations in the contemporary world—it has become a carrier of diverse visions that seek to influence readers’ consciousness and to occupy a central place within it. Among the most prominent of these visions are the human values that contemporary fiction strives to disseminate as shared horizons among peoples. Accordingly, the Algerian novel frequently appears as a discourse that educates without preaching, persuades without direct sermon, and invites reflection through the pleasures of storytelling.

From this perspective, this paper asks: What do “human values” mean? How do Algerian novels represent them—explicitly or implicitly—through characters, events, and narrative techniques? And, to what extent is value-discourse in the Algerian novel inseparable from ideology, especially when the narrative foregrounds the intellectual as an agent of critique and resistance?

Methodological Note (Close to the Original Orientation)

This study proceeds in two complementary steps. First, it clarifies the concept of values and the concept of humanity by drawing on sociological and ethical discussions in order to establish an operational definition of ‘human values’ suitable for narrative analysis. Second, it offers a thematic reading of selected motifs and character types in Algerian fiction—especially the intellectual figure—because such motifs provide a clear entry into how values are dramatized. The paper does not claim to exhaust the Algerian novel;

rather, it proposes an interpretive map of recurrent human values and illustrates how each value tends to appear in narrative situations (conflict, choice, humiliation, solidarity, hope, and the struggle for justice).

1. The Concept of Human Values

1.1. Values

“Values” are among the most debated concepts because they are closely tied to culture, belief systems, and the social life of individuals and communities. Accordingly, values may differ from one person to another and from one society to another, since they are learned through upbringing, education, and collective experience. A common definition describes values as social standards with strong affective force that individuals acquire from their environment and use to evaluate behavior and guide choices (Al-Zyoud, 2006). This definition highlights two crucial dimensions: the emotional power of values (their capacity to motivate) and their regulatory function (their capacity to judge and direct conduct).

Some writers connect values directly to ethics. Ethics concern individual conduct and activity and one’s relationships—with God, with oneself, with other people, and with the surrounding world. Ethics are commonly divided into good morals (e.g., honesty, courage, generosity) and bad morals (e.g., lying, miserliness, cowardice). From this angle, values can be seen as the broader framework that gives ethical behavior its meaning and legitimacy, while ethics are the concrete behavioral manifestations of those values.

From a sociological perspective, Durkheim argues that value is not an intrinsic property of the object, nor is it granted by the individual subject; rather, the collective mind is what crystallizes values and judges objects, individuals, and issues positively or negatively according to their benefit or harm to society. Since values form systems, there is necessarily a shared collective origin for value-systems (Qansuwa, 1980). In other words, values are not isolated rules but interconnected hierarchies that produce social consensus, shape

expectations, and determine what a community praises or condemns. Thus, although definitions vary across disciplines, most converge on the idea that values are social regulators that guide individuals and enable them to function ethically within their communities.

For narrative analysis, this implies that values are best approached not as abstract words (freedom, dignity, justice) but as practices and evaluations that the novel assigns to characters and institutions. A value becomes visible when it is violated (humiliation exposes dignity), when it is desired (privation exposes justice), or when it is defended (resistance exposes freedom).

1.2. The Importance of Values

It is difficult to fully enumerate the importance of values in individual and social life, given their foundational role in building both the person and society. It is nearly impossible to imagine any human society living without values, because values provide the criteria by which people judge actions and define the meaning of 'good life'. Values shape not only behavior but also expectations, aspirations, and the very language with which individuals interpret their experiences. In this sense, they are both a moral compass and a cultural memory.

- help produce individuals characterized by positive traits such as perseverance, excellence, and success, rather than negative traits.
- prepare individuals to make certain choices that shape their behavior and responses, and thus play an important role in personality formation.
- arouse admiration and affection in others, encouraging constructive imitation and healthy competition toward lofty morals.
- enable the individual to fulfill what is required, to adapt positively, and to feel self-satisfaction through harmonious integration with the community's principles and beliefs.

- strengthen the life of nations and peoples by providing shared criteria for words, actions, stances, and decisions.
- help societies face change by clarifying sound options that make life easier for people and reduce confusion in moments of transition.
- preserve continuity, cohesion, and identity by defining stable goals, ideals, and principles; they also integrate scattered cultural elements into a coherent whole.
- contribute to building cohesive, strong societies able to confront external threats through shared moral bonds.
- provide social systems with a faith- and reason-based foundation that is difficult to uproot, because it is anchored in collective legitimacy.
- protect society from excessive selfishness, conflicts, and reckless desires that strike at the heart of unity.

When Algerian fiction foregrounds values, it is therefore engaging in a double operation: it registers society's moral capital (what it claims to honor) and it exposes society's moral failures (what it actually practices). This dialectic is often intensified in periods of crisis—colonial domination, post-independence tensions, and the 1990s conflict—when the gap between proclaimed values and lived reality becomes narratively dramatic.

1.3. Humanity

Humanity is closely associated with the values and principles that govern relationships among people, often expressing unity, shared belonging to the human family, and a sense of common feeling regardless of differences in race, color, religion, or creed. It aims to embody compassion and empathy toward others, and to treat the other as a full moral subject rather than an object of exclusion.

In contemporary discourse, “humanity” is often presented as a desire to serve others and pursue the common good under various banners and for various purposes. While the term can appear noble and uplifting, it is also frequently mobilized within broader ideological frameworks—such as secularism and globalization—depending on intellectual and political contexts. In some definitions, it is described as a philosophical and literary, materialist, non-religious doctrine that emphasizes human individuality against religion and privileges a worldly viewpoint (World Assembly of Muslim Youth, 1999).

Taken together, human values can be defined as the noble principles and elevated morals that unite human beings and allow them to cooperate and coexist despite ethnic, religious, sectarian, or political differences. From the perspective of narrative analysis, these values become visible when the novel dramatizes recognition, empathy, justice, and respect for dignity in concrete scenes and relationships.

2. The Intellectual in the Algerian Novel and the Consolidation of Human Values

The Algerian novel is part of a rich Arabic literary heritage that reflects the joys and sorrows of Arab societies while searching, within its narrative fabric, for what might transform collective consciousness and open horizons toward a better future. In doing so, it often embodies the author’s ideas and ideology by selecting themes that express a particular vision of society and the world. Many Algerian narratives thus carry an implicit ‘human project’ that seeks to plant human values in their broad sense—values that can be read as a response to historical suffering and social instability.

Frequently, the protagonist in the Algerian novel belongs to the educated class and attempts to diagnose and critique Algerian reality—a reality often marked by bloodshed, violence, misery, and hardship, all of which stand in tension with human values that promote tolerance, love, peace, and social tranquility. The intellectual character therefore becomes a narrative device through which the text

articulates criticism, rethinks history, and proposes alternative moral horizons.

By foregrounding social reality, the novel seeks to disturb complacent consciousness and to guide the reader through engaging fictional discourse that contains signals, lessons, and warnings. The Algerian intellectual—both in reality and in fiction—often maintains a conflictual relationship with the past and with a memory scarred by blood, repression, and marginalization, with reconciliation possible only through interrogation and critique. The novel provides a fertile space for voicing these concerns under the protective cover of imagination, making confession and frank speech possible without direct confrontation.

In this sense, intellectuals play a vital role in producing and sustaining ideologies and in building consent and acceptance; social cohesion is not only a function of institutions but also of cultural mediators who interpret reality and legitimize meanings. Thus, the intellectual character often embodies what may be called ‘possible consciousness,’ seeking to reshape social views of life and the universe through whatever expressive means are available. This resonates with the idea that the intellectual’s vocation includes confronting power and resisting conformity (Said, 1994).

2.1. Zaydan in al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār’s al-Lāz

A clear example appears in the writings of al-Ṭāhir Waṭṭār, a major figure of the Algerian Arabic-language novel, who portrayed both the liberation struggle and post-independence contradictions. Waṭṭār’s narrative corpus is rich in characters entrusted with central roles because the author carries a social concern and a human civilizational vision that he seeks to embody through fiction.

The character ‘Zaydan’ is a pivotal figure in al-Lāz. Although fictional, Waṭṭār constructed him using major elements from the biography of the communist activist al-‘Īd al-‘Umrānī, a member of the Central Committee of the Algerian Communist Party who joined the liberation revolution and was ultimately slaughtered (Dīk, 2013).

This interweaving of history and fiction enables the novel to explore a value-problem: how ideological plurality is treated in moments that claim national unity.

Zaydan carries an explicitly humanistic vision: despite his significant role in the Communist Party, he joins the revolution without hesitation. He declares that he did not consult anyone when he joined, and that he would not renounce his party even under pressure; he would continue to struggle for national independence (Wattār, 2013). Here, the novel translates ‘human values’ into a narrative ethic of consistency: the refusal to betray one’s convictions for safety or convenience.

At the same time, Zaydan’s assassination dramatizes the fragility of human values under violence and internal exclusion. The plot therefore becomes an ethical diagnosis: liberation can be compromised when difference is not tolerated. Such a diagnosis is supported by scholarship that reads *al-Lāz* as a text deeply concerned with everyday hardship and the moral stakes of struggle (Al-Sa’āfīn, 1997).

3. Forms of Human Values in Algerian Novels

The Algerian novel addresses human values in depth, shaped by the injustice and oppression experienced under French colonialism and later by the violence of the 1990s conflict. In this context, the novel is not merely an account of events but a means of exploring major human questions lived by individuals and communities. Values in the Algerian novel are often presented through lived contradictions: the value appears as an aspiration, while the narrative reveals the forces that threaten it. The following values frequently emerge in Algerian fiction:

3.1. Freedom

Freedom is a central value in Algerian fiction, appearing as a major axis of struggle. Algerian novels depict the people’s fight to break free

from colonial rule and represent characters who pursue both individual and collective freedom. Early Algerian fiction often revolved around the theme of the revolution until the early 1990s, after which it gradually moved beyond the revolution as the sole thematic center. Freedom then became associated with questions of speech, conscience, and everyday life under pressure.

Narratively, freedom is staged in several registers: (a) freedom as national liberation, (b) freedom as the right to speak and narrate, and (c) freedom as bodily safety and the absence of fear. In women's narratives, freedom frequently intersects with identity and gendered constraints, as studies of women's Algerian writing show (Nouarī, 2024).

3.2. Dignity

Algerian novels highlight the importance of human dignity in both social and political contexts. Characters often struggle to preserve dignity in the face of oppression and coercion. Dignity is threatened not only by direct violence, but also by poverty, humiliation, and symbolic exclusion. In narrative terms, dignity becomes visible when a character refuses humiliation, resists being reduced to a number, or insists on recognition as a full subject.

The 1990s conflict literature often intensifies this theme: trauma narratives show how violence injures both body and social meaning, and how the struggle to retain dignity becomes a form of survival (Daoudi, 2011).

3.3. Solidarity

Solidarity and mutual support appear clearly in Algerian novels, especially in times of crisis. Fiction represents the importance of family and community in supporting individuals through adversity, and it often turns everyday acts of care into moral scenes: sharing food, sheltering the threatened, or sustaining the memory of the dead.

In narratives related to the 'Black Decade,' solidarity is tested under fear and suspicion; yet many texts insist that community bonds remain

an ethical resource against fragmentation. Research on women's narratives of the 1990s underscores how storytelling itself can function as solidarity—bearing witness and refusing silence (Boutheina, 2021).

3.4. Identity

Algerian fiction examines identity in depth, as individuals seek to explore cultural and social identity under difficult circumstances. Algerian identity is frequently represented as a negotiation between tradition and modernity, and between inherited memory and lived contradictions. In *Memory in the Flesh*, identity is closely linked to the body and to national belonging, which makes the question of identity inseparable from pain and desire (Nuha, 2016).

In such narratives, identity can appear as a value (belonging, loyalty, continuity), but also as a site of conflict when identity is weaponized into exclusion. Therefore, the human value at stake is often inclusive belonging—the capacity to recognize difference without denying common humanity.

3.5. Hope

Despite suffering and harsh conditions, Algerian novels carry messages of hope. Characters strive to overcome adversity and build a better future, creating a light of optimism even in the darkest circumstances. Hope in these narratives is not a mere emotional state; it often appears as an ethical choice to continue, to educate, to love, and to rebuild.

Hope also appears as a narrative rhythm: even when the plot is tragic, moments of tenderness, humor, or moral steadfastness resist total despair. In this sense, hope is a practice that keeps open the horizon of meaning and prevents violence from monopolizing the story.

3.6. Resistance and Steadfastness

Resistance and steadfastness are deeply associated with national identity in Algerian fiction. Narratives depict the ability of characters

to confront risks and challenges, reflecting a strong collective will to defend rights. Resistance is represented both as a historical necessity and as an internal struggle requiring courage and perseverance. Steadfastness (*ṣumūd*) becomes the ethical side of resistance: the capacity to bear pain without surrendering to humiliation or becoming an agent of injustice.

Many novels thus distinguish between legitimate resistance and destructive violence. This distinction becomes crucial in narratives of the 1990s, where the moral question is how to resist terror without reproducing terror. Scholarly work on trauma representations in Algerian literature points to these ethical tensions and to the role of literature in negotiating them (Daoudi, 2011).

3.7. Social Justice

Algerian novels also address social justice by reflecting economic and social gaps and their effects on people's lives. Characters depict how social injustice harms their conditions and pushes them to seek fairness. In narratives of poverty and deprivation, the question of justice appears as a daily reality: access to work, education, health, and recognition.

Social justice is often intertwined with dignity: poverty becomes a moral injury when it humiliates the person and restricts life possibilities. In this context, fiction does not only expose inequality; it also asks who benefits from it and how it is legitimized. The value of justice therefore appears as both an ethical demand and a political critique embedded in narrative form.

Conclusion

Human values are among the noble values extensively represented in Algerian fiction, largely because of the Algerian people's suffering under colonialism and, later, the violence of the 1990s conflict. Algerian novels have been creative in portraying a wide range of

human values such as freedom, dignity, family and social solidarity, cultural identity, hope, resistance and steadfastness, and social justice.

At the same time, although these writings appear to advocate noble values, they may also be framed by non-neutral intellectual visions—such as secular, communist, or Marxist perspectives—depending on the author’s ideology. Because the novel has a strong capacity to penetrate social consciousness, it can disseminate such values through narrative discourse; yet in many cases this remains inseparable from the author’s ideological project. Accordingly, Algerian novels—especially those that foreground the intellectual figure—often convey implicit messages under the banner of civilization, culture, and social progress, while leaving the reader to evaluate the ethical stakes of those messages.

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