
Narrative Imagination In “This Is How I Divided The Body” By The Storyteller Nabila Aboudi From Criticism Of The Other To Criticism Of The Self

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Abstract

In this research paper, we seek to approach the narrative narration of an Algerian writer and academic who was fascinated by writing novels and short stories. She is Nabila Aboudi. Through it we talk of its joy and its brokenness with a determination that supports the authority of writing with an artistic awareness that expresses a harmonious vision of the world.

In this article, we present a reading of cultural patterns ranging from the implicit to the explicit in her collection of short stories, represented by her memory and images, subjecting them to details, stylistic characteristics, and expressive values.

To achieve the goal of this approach, which is an attempt to reveal the ability of feminist storytelling to listen to the difference between multiple entities and interact with them in a soft language, we pose the following problem: What tools did the storyteller Aboudi use to achieve an imaginative narrative adventure? What cultural issues did the writer endow her texts in order to enrich the narrative identity?

Keywords: The short story; narrative identity; cultural patterns ; entities; writing.

I - Introduction

Narrative writing generally relies on conventions and elements related to narrative structure and meaning. Undoubtedly, the absence of "a philosophical and epistemological vision in the writer leads to stories that we continually encounter their counterparts" (Yaqtin, 2010). The writer’s connection to their work, in our estimation, does not emerge from a void, nor is it disconnected from reality. The writer’s texts are open to the world with all its contradictions, carrying its uniqueness. Novels, stories, and poetry collections that we read, regardless of their varied themes and the diverse times and places they depict, are tumultuous, chaotic, calm, conciliatory, provocative, turbulent, resistant, and domineering. They bear the weight of a world in constant unrest and instability. Thus, the text serves as a gateway to the world, and the world itself is a text that protests at times and resists at others.

In the context of this critical perspective, and based on our reading of Nabila Aboudi's short story collection *Thus the Body Swears*, we pose the following questions, which will serve as tools for research, analysis, guidance, and discussion simultaneously: What is the identity of narrative texts? Are these narrative texts a world reimagined in an aesthetic style? What is the relationship between narrative imagination in short stories and reality? How is the artistic and cultural world represented within the short story?

Whether a novel or a short story, narrative discourse is distinguished by artistic and cultural specificity. This conception leads us to examine the writer's position within the network of external data and cultural contexts from which they draw to shape their imaginations and their direct and indirect intellectual and artistic sources, as well as their varied references. Narrative discourse is in constant dialogue with the factors that shape its subject matter. In this sense, focusing on these references compels us to address the question of narrative imagination in relation to the knowledge the writer absorbs, which inevitably transforms into one of the subjects of narrative writing—not in the form of strict mimicry of the referential world, but rather through a creative imagination that overturns the world's order. Narrative gains authority in representing reality, reshaping things to meet the demands of imagination, and generating meanings, connotations, and intellectual-aesthetic proposals that enable writing to transcend the present and embark on a narrative adventure that blurs the boundaries between the rational and the irrational. This is achieved through a language that masterfully alternates between revealing and concealing.

Critic Abdallah Ibrahim, in his book *Writing Conventions*, highlights the formidable power of narrative in inventing new methods and techniques to express the world's themes most effectively. This power has been demonstrated by Arab narrative experiments and the achievements of renowned writers in aesthetic imaginative innovation, such as Naguib Mahfouz, Malek Haddad, Assia Djebar, Ahlam Mosteghanemi, and Zhor Wanissi. Literary criticism examines what the writer conveys in their stories, delving into their impulses, stillness, and symbols. It then seeks justifications for these choices and metaphors, which inevitably leave us ensnared by questions in search of solutions to the problem of what the writer writes and how they constructs their imagined worlds. Simultaneously, the writer faces choices in presenting their perspectives and forms of acceptance or rejection of the world. In other words, narrative dismantles the boundaries between truth and fiction, challenges the unspoken, and breaks barriers of fear. This aesthetic endeavor is achieved through language's acts of subversion and deconstruction of central structures, destabilizing their foundations, and reordering and organizing the writing system to suit a potential reader capable of uncovering the text's genius, symbols, and tricks.

The writer creates a narrative society that is a blend of characters, varying in number and function depending on the needs of the event, the limits of creative vision, and the ideas and issues it may address in time and space (Abdallah Ibrahim, 2019). Narrative is a linguistic form that unfolds within a spatiotemporal context, situating the event in a cohesive plot. Stories refer us to humanity as the subject of writing, "in its various conditions, turning into an imagined creature that lives life as its human counterpart does in the real world" (Abdallah Ibrahim, 2019, p. 15). From this intellectual perspective, rooted in understanding the relationship between what the creative writer writes and what exists in the world, the writer needs to create life details for characters that rejoice, suffer, travel, leave their homes, have their lands usurped, marry, have children, die, and confront all defeats. The writer draws for their characters homelands and cities with varied timelines of existence. What captures our attention amidst these details is an essential question: How do these details converge to fill the pages of stories?

The Short Story and the Question of Meaning Production: Toward the Adventure of Concise Narration

Creative writing encompasses various expressive forms that use narrative as a means of producing meaning. While poetry, often called the Arabs' "diwan," emerged from an extraordinary intellect that unconsciously bonded with poetic words in its movement and stillness, prose has garnered significant attention from writers. Consequently, narrative texts

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have become a literary genre and a creative chronicle that continuously narrates humanity's tales and adventures. They also contribute culturally by borrowing narrative skills from ancient folk arts shared across unlimited human cultures.

Writers of Arabic novels inherited the craft of storytelling from folk tales preserved in human memory, recounting adventures and innovatively passing them down through generations. These tales chronicled daily experiences, events, and the places visited, forming a narrative archive over time. This archive includes biographies, travelogues, letters, and maqamat (rhymed prose), all of which narrate events, shape characters' destinies, and describe their present and past.

The short story emerged as a distinct form from poetry and novels, characterized by unique artistic and structural features and its approach to presenting events. The history of modern literature credits the birth of the short story to the French writer Guy de Maupassant and the Russian Anton Chekhov. In Arabic literature, the first short story is attributed to Mahmoud Taymour in 1917, titled *On the Train*. Regardless of the different timelines of the short story's emergence and the names of its pioneers, short story experiments have consistently established this literary genre as one of significant value in language, themes, and event presentation.

The short story seeks to achieve a duality of reality and imagination, adopting an expressive style different from that of novels and poetry and inventing a unique identity for its narrative material to meet the needs of this literary form. As a cultural product rooted in both Arab and global human heritage, the short story makes humanity's tale a cornerstone of its narrative. It often resembles a brief history of an event, connecting its parts with density that makes it difficult to disassemble its units. The short story's uniqueness facilitates an internal dialogue among its elements—language, events, and characters—within the confines of the story itself.

The short story emphasizes the condensation of events, avoiding verbosity and excessive detail. Simultaneously, it allows for immersion and identification with characters, granting access to their world with fluidity and precision while maintaining the story's internal balance.

The short story writer presents details through an artistic vision that condenses the world into images that penetrate deeply into the event and explore its secrets, prompting a crucial question: How can numerous events be encapsulated in a short format? Essential elements with high aesthetic value converge to achieve the dual purpose of crafting a short story aimed at conveying a human meaning:

1. **Title:** The title of a short story must be compelling, guiding the reader to engage with the writer in imagining the story's meanings.
2. **Language:** Language is a fundamental requirement in the short story. The writer must carefully select language to align with the story's aspirations and support the event by relying on symbolism and brevity.
3. **Event:** The event operates within an aesthetic framework for writing a short story. To establish a relationship between two or more worlds within a limited narrative length, the writer must adhere to elements that ensure objectivity and artistic skill. These elements intertwine issues that shape ideas, concepts, and imaginations through mastery of representation to achieve the artistic purpose and the story's ultimate goal: to pose new questions and provide new knowledge for the reader. Art that disrupts the reader's expectations and challenges their anticipations offers professional possibilities for this literary genre.

Narrative Imagination and the Question of Self and Other in the Stories of Nabila Aboudi

Edward Said explored the theme of narrative within the framework of interpreting the novelistic discourse, linking it to its cultures and its historical, social, and political references. This perspective directs us to recognize that narrative discourses cannot be read in isolation from their past, the history of their peoples, or their identity. Nations are narratives, and the world is a collection of narratives fueled by a continuous dialogue with culture—whether through rejection or endorsement—that enriches narrative experiences and affirms their identity as creative cultural imaginings. What applies to the creative experience of novels also extends to short stories, where brief narratives are interconnected with historical events, challenges, and conflicts. To achieve this, creative imagination weaves relationships between the "narrative society and the real society" (Abdallah Ibrahim, 2019, p. 18). Reality and imagination coexist without complete alignment, creating a world that exists in the space between truth and fiction, dream and vision, with narrative serving as a tool for the short story writer to express their perspective on the world.

Embarking on the craft of short story writing reflects the inclination of its authors towards this literary genre, demonstrating its allure. Short narratives offer the pleasure of navigating dense, concise worlds that seek the shortest path to representing the world and addressing human issues within aesthetic conventions and formal norms. Short stories encapsulate meanings with precision and brevity, avoiding extended narration. The weaving, structuring, omission, and elision inherent in the genre align with the rapid pacing of events typical of short stories.

The language, rich in dense connotations, conveys a profound aesthetic experience in short stories that extends beyond summarizing an event into a few pages, as compared to novels. Each genre has its unique artistic and formal characteristics. To craft a narrative scene tied to a historical event, the short story writer selects an imaginative horizon that transforms history into positions and ideas conveyed through concise yet profound representations. The swift and calculated movement toward the objectives of the short story demonstrates the skill of generations of writers who have left behind a bright legacy of brief narrative texts, encapsulating the story of humanity, its existence, and its struggle to preserve its identity. These writers hail from diverse Arab countries.

This study examines the works of Algerian writer Nabila Aboudi, focusing on her collection *Thus the Body Swears* (2019), comprising seven stories spanning ninety pages. Aboudi excels in the realms of novelistic and short story creativity, expressing her stance on self, the other, and the world. Her narratives traverse the exile of a memory burdened by a desolate night, pushing beyond the confines of a self exhausted by silence. Her stories open an avenue for potential experiences, despite the conflicts and tensions brought about by excessive self-centeredness, which monopolizes the right to speak. In this context, narration in this collection becomes a form of resistance and protest on behalf of a body that swore to transcend death through loyalty, fear through confrontation, and silence through disclosure—destruction and reconstruction, deconstruction, and revelation.

Nabila Aboudi ventured into narrative art, surrendering to the temptations of short story and novel writing. This literary space allowed her to achieve aesthetic, artistic, and cultural goals, crossing a bridge toward humanity. Through her narratives, she traverses the deserts of time, recounting the fragility of existence, the journey of the soul, and expressions of joy, heartbreak, childhood, and desolate homelands. Her writing embodies an artistic consciousness reflecting a harmonious worldview in both language and subject matter. Aboudi does not seek to perfect the image in her stories and novels but instead enriches her writing with a unique intellectual

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and aesthetic perspective. Her work integrates the philosophy of existence and the relationship between humans and reality, aiming not to condemn or avenge reality but to infuse it with a cultural discourse that triumphs with the questions of the past and present, serving as a document linking writing with reality. Her stories guide readers toward both possible and impossible worlds, characterized by dissonance, harmony, and the interplay between self and other.

This article provides an analysis of cultural patterns, both implicit and explicit, in Nabila Aboudi's short story collection *Thus the Body Swears*. These stories reflect her memory and artistic vision, shaped by stylistic features and expressive values in which narrative takes center stage.

Everything in the world of this collection revolves around the story of a body worn down by its narrative. This understanding begins with the title, *Thus the Body Swears*, which establishes a decisive connection with the eager reader, curious to uncover the intricacies and mysteries of its seven narratives, prompting the inevitable question: Whose body? The cover image offers some interpretive distance, depicting a woman with pale features shrouded in deep sorrow. Her silence seems imposed as she gazes with eyes filled with anguish, as if bearing the misery and suffering of all women or perhaps the entire world.

Nabila Aboudi departs from the conventional portrayal of the protagonist as someone dictated by their role to experience failures and joys or adopt a specific perspective. Instead, she explores tools for writing derived from rich, open references that enable her to produce meanings and symbols about the world and its inhabitants. These elements form a broad space, allowing her to construct a narrative vision within the Arab cultural framework that weaves a fabric of interconnected narrative representations. These representations engage with questions of rejection, confrontation, suppression, and silencing—questions that can only be addressed through excavation and deconstruction.

Aboudi's narrative writing is deeply embedded in the social context in which it was produced, as well as the cultural specificity that drives her creative impulse. A philosophy professor, Aboudi draws on a wealth of knowledge and a profound philosophical vision to craft her narrative universe, select her characters, and portray the relationship between humans, existence, time, place, and death. Her work also reflects on how memory interacts with the past and contemplates the present. Through this multidirectional dialogue, Aboudi places humanity in a quest for salvation and resolution within a reality that defies easy understanding. Consequently, her stories become a space for debate between reality, thought, and art.

Aboudi presents a bleak yet complex picture of reality, marked by contradictions and uncertainty. She confronts this reality through the act of writing: "I wrote to you while the world slept, so no one would dare read my thoughts... Within my mind, you slept, wrapped in the dreams of my childhood that life's betrayals buried... All I have left is the past that I lived, live, and will continue to live tomorrow, despite the fragility of imagination for imagination is sometimes truer than reality." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019)

Aboudi divided her collection, *Thus the Body Swears*, into seven stories. In them, the body confronts its tragedies and sufferings within a shifting space of nostalgia, memory, withdrawal, and silence. This hybrid narrative blends the poetic and the narrative, writing and theorizing about writing. As part of this divided and pluralistic cultural space, the author reflects this complexity in her writing, posing questions in a narrative that becomes a subject for philosophical reflection. These stories are not merely artistic exercises; they turn writing itself into a subject of contemplation.

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The central theme in Aboudi's collection is humanity—both body and spirit—grappling with life and engaging in a struggle between internal desires and external conflicts. Her characters oscillate between their personal past and moments of present crisis, while also seeking liberation from an "Other" that poses an existential challenge. They expend emotions, aspirations, fears, and hesitation in their attempts to preserve their dignity and pride:

"Everything outwardly visible about me has changed... My physical details, facial features, even my spontaneous expressions they all changed. Now I choose my words with great care. But my inner self... that is another story." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 79)

The body in Aboudi's narratives is not merely ink on paper but a forceful presence oscillating between concealment and revelation, absence and presence, ebb and flow, ultimately retreating to the secluded corners of a troubled soul. The body becomes a metaphorical entity traversing the streets of love in secret, fearing self-reproach. Her characters, reconciled with their memories, accept life despite its contradictions and pains, transcending the ephemeral nature of physical existence, which they understand to be merely "an obscure beginning" (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 79).

The stories raise the fundamental question: to what extent can writing about the body liberate it from the constraints of reality and memory? Can narrative free it from its pain and bring an end to its suffering?

The collection depicts extraordinary moments where the body, with its symbolic, literary, psychological, and cultural dimensions, seeks emancipation from the classical body that awaits external salvation. Instead, the author grants it the freedom to express itself. As Zubeida remarks:

"I left him drowning in his silence... and walked away. Imad never understood that he was the first man I loved and the last man I wished for. He never understood that I chose another homeland and another sorrow." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 20)

Aboudi's characters face life's harsh trials, with writing as their sole companion. Each character possesses a distinct narrative and individuality. They confront their fates without fear, sometimes donning the cloak of silence to begin another chapter of forgetting. These characters take on various roles a lover, an estranged father, a betrayed woman, or a deceived friend. However, as readers master the art of interpretation, these characters transcend their literal truths, unveiling layers of meaning where boundaries dissolve, leaving behind only symbolism and allusion.

In Aboudi's stories, the real and the imagined merge, forming narratives that provoke philosophical reflection on existence. Her storytelling becomes a laboratory for exploring the relationships of attraction, repulsion, wonder, loyalty, and loss that govern her characters. This hybrid narrative process breaks free from monotony, guiding the reader along paths of discovery to uncover new knowledge and unfamiliar images. Through this, the stories reexamine themes of love, pain, loyalty, and memory, as though Aboudi is testing her readers with texts destined to emerge anew after they finish contemplating the intricacies of the body.

The stories center on characters teetering between memory and forgetfulness, with departure as their shared experience—the death of a father, the estrangement of a lover, and the absence of hope and joy. Sadness permeates the body, offered up as a sacrificial altar. Women in these stories transcend the confines of emotional narratives or psychological complexes. They assert their autonomy within their relationships, choosing to leave, forget, or withdraw entirely of their own accord.

Through her writing, Aboudi explores the relationship between self and Other as a foundation for diverse narrative structures across the seven stories, opening possibilities for experiences that are worth living on a narrative level. Her characters initially seem like people we've met before, perhaps encountered in other stories or novels. However, this resemblance fades quickly, as Aboudi does not present heroes so much as she breathes life into ideas, provoking her readers with questions. In the titular story, *Thus the Body Swears*, she writes: "When your love became an illusion, I wrote its details on the mirage of the desert. And when meeting you became impossible, possibility ended its existence, leaving behind only a separating hyphen." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 59)

This separating hyphen is a narrative thread spun from fantasy, defeating language and the metaphors of a self enamored with weaving monotonous meanings over ninety pages. Her writing expands the artistic vision by incorporating epic, dramatic, and poetic elements, broadening the horizons of creativity.

We propose analyzing Aboudi's collection through four key themes: gazing, dreaming, the body, and death.

Pain... and Another Pain: The Gaze as a Discourse of the Viewer Toward the Viewed

The author's texts present the details of the possible life through imagination whose threads intersect with reality, drawing energy from a psychological reservoir seeking to resolve its dilemma, thus establishing a new space for the self, distinct from that designed by the other on one hand, and on the other hand, inventing a style of adventure in search of more withdrawal within its world, fearing for its being from exposure before the mirror of the self, thereby revealing its truth. Events revolve around the character Zubeida, who enters a love relationship with the husband of her friend Saada, named Imad. Zubeida says: "You put him in front of me... and put me in front of him... you opened the door." Saada replies: "But the friendship was between us, and love was our guardian... but love betrayed us. Yes... love betrayed you, betrayed Imad, and betrayed me. So, I betrayed you, betrayed myself, my principles, and all women, while I had dedicated my life as an ambassador for women's rights. And what about my right... do I not have the right to live?" Saada, Imad's wife, responds: "But your life means my death... and the orphaning of Yumna and Yusra." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 19).

Nabila Aboudi's narrative experience indicates a profound concern for human and spiritual issues, enriched with a refined mystical philosophy that travels to the depths of philosophy. Parallel to this course dictated by the author's writing conventions, the woman emerges as a central and ever-present text, carrying the narrative reins. She has been burdened with heavy loads faced through forgetting, fleeing, silence, and despair: "I had no choice but to flee, though I love confrontation." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 19). Based on this, the stories offer a cultural perspective that reshapes the features of self-awareness and reclaims the power of knowledge about the self and the world in a context fraught with conflict, where women excel in the game of appearance and concealment. She is the symbolic woman, not the living woman—the woman in writing, referring to the metaphors of absence, silence, and forgetfulness (Mohamed Bouazza, 2014).

The author opens the doors of confrontation between the characters Zubeida and Saada and sets the narrative in a closed temporal framework that leaves no room for hope. It resides in the space between friendship and betrayal, between speech and silence, between fleeing and confronting, and between the past and the present, resulting in "complex images of identity and being, of history and existence." (Mohamed Bouazza, 2014, p. 69). To achieve this, the author employs the technique of "gazing."

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Gazing belongs to a conceptual system of the mirror stage, ego formation, epistemological deviation, the other, and formal visual domination. Although the importance of the eye and gaze has accompanied human thought since the dawn of history, the concept of gazing is associated with the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, who renewed Freud's psychological concepts, and the French thinker Michel Foucault. The concept has recently prevailed in cinematic studies, gaining prominence in the 1970s to address gaze exchange in cinema and film, especially from the perspective of feminist criticism, as well as in cultural and postcolonial studies. In Sartre's existential philosophy, it is essential for defining existential selfhood, as our alienated existence depends on how the other views us, and without this gaze, we cannot acquire our existential identity. This means that gazing stems from the other, signifying a purposeful act of looking (Mejan Al-Ruwaili and Saad Al-Bazei, 2002). In this context, we pose the following question: How was the concept of gazing formulated in "Pain... and Another Pain" at the discourse level? And what are its symbolic implications?

"Her gaze lost among the withered roses of friendship and the spring of love that resigned from seasons... She continues to gaze at me with her honey-colored eyes while my inner fear intensifies... As for torment, it grew weary of tormenting me and left me to die before her gaze." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 17).

This narrative passage provides insight into the end of the relationship between Saada and Zubeida after the revelation of Zubeida's relationship with Saada's husband. Saada, shocked, searches for further evidence in Zubeida's eyes, gazing at her through a sensory trajectory that forms comprehensive units and eventually covers a pre-existing world—the world of language. This ties it directly to hearing and speech, stripping the sanctity of the relationship between her and Zubeida, leading to total estrangement.

Similarly, Zubeida's self takes a stance toward itself based on the visual signals sent by Saada's eyes through the act of gazing, intensifying her internal fear of the truth: "But the price was steep. At the moment I found Imad, I lost Saada. That's life... It gives you something and takes away many others. It gave me love and took away my friendship, my self-respect, my reputation, leaving me with the question of choice requiring an obligatory answer: What will you choose love or friendship?" (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 15).

The narrator derives her answers and justifications for her love for Imad while contemplating her present and delving into moments of the past: "He was my beginning, making me a new woman from whom life pulsed, awakening the dormant spring to flood her with its colors." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 12).

The representation of the self as the other, and the other as the self, holds a unique allure in cultural narratives, transforming stories into "spaces of attraction like a game of mirrors, where the self reveals itself as the other and contests alterity as a value that defines the literary process itself." (A collection of academics, edited by Hayat Om El-Saad and introduced by Waheed Ben Bouaziz, 2018).

What matters in these narrative representations are the cultural backgrounds that serve as bridges from textual signs to the world from which Zubeida's self-derives. In general, the narrative draws its effects, emotions, systems, and what they lead to in terms of images, meanings, and symbols that cannot replace reality itself.

Nabila Aboudi's representations contain cultural implications and symbols that occupy the middle ground between imaginary horizons and reality, "as expressive and discursive practices" (Idris Al-Khudrawi, 2012) intertwined with the systems and discourses produced by society.

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Self, Other, and the Labyrinth of Narrative Representation: Who Writes Whom?

In Nabila Aboudi's writing, an epistemological issue arises regarding who takes control of the narrative within the framework of narrative writing as a form of imagination. This imagination is built upon symbols, systems, and discourses produced by broad cultural contexts through which the aesthetic horizon is defined, shaping the writer's relationship with reality.

The writer draws creative energy from continuous dialogue with reality and the knowledge of the external world, which at first glance seems disconnected and independent while expressing their ideas. Thus, we pose the following questions: How do fragments of the world become subjects for writing? What approach has the author taken to explore the self's relationship with the other in her collection of stories?

The story *Pain... and Another Pain* captures our attention with a narrative that is an internal world of the self recounting its experiences in a journey of connection with a partner in love. However, the self fails in its endeavor because an important party—Imad's wife stands in the way. A confrontation occurs between the two women, and betrayal is revealed. The narrator states:

"I refused to choose, knowing I was playing with fire. And I went on deceitfully embodying every role. I was the friend and the rival. I was the victim and the perpetrator. I was the loyal one and the traitor. But I was not me. I was never like this." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 18).

The author focuses on representing the troubling relationship between two friends deeply wounded by love, highlighting the self's crisis that intensifies as it approaches the truth. This crisis silences the self, leaving it defeated and wounded, buried under despair and loss. Each time, the self-experiences a deeper kind of loss, leading it to withdraw and return to the place of pain, with love before it and friendship behind it.

The author transitions from speech to silence and disappointment, liberating the language from the burden of betrayal by confronting self-awareness. This self-awareness plays the role of the victim, unleashing a reservoir of pain. Zubeida says: "My hopes are a minefield, and my goal is a timed bomb waiting to explode. The dreams I built with Imad scatter before me, fears scatter in the face of a storm of cruelty. My fear runs like a small gazelle lost on its way to its mother. At that moment, I realized the truth." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 16).

The self-gains deeper knowledge of itself, resisting both dreams and reality with literary courage.

Nabila Aboudi embarks on an experimental journey fortified by artistic construction and a narrative plot that departs from the familiar. She aims to depict the harsh crisis faced by the self while simultaneously seeking a way out. In my opinion, the author is deeply aware of the philosophy of imagination and moves in the direction that life holds no meaning outside the boundaries of confrontation and beyond the realm of reason. Thus, her characters are not driven by whims; they possess a creed in their journey to search for the other another that remains elusive despite its presence. Perhaps we will find traces of it in one of Nabila Aboudi's upcoming texts, or perhaps we will not.

Thus the Body Swears: The Death of the Body, the Journey of Ascension

In this story, the narrator encapsulates the journey of a body worn down by illness on a hard bed:

"Its hardness increases... its nails gnaw into the frail body until they penetrate the marrow; its

soft velvet has turned into thorns... even hungry fangs tearing the limp body and crushing its ribs mercilessly." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 63).

The vast night looms over the exhausted body, which tries to alleviate its pain through sleep, but sleep does not comply, despite the body's force and grandeur. The body has chosen insomnia as its companion since the departure of its beloved.

The narrative concerns a woman who has dedicated her body to beautiful memories of a man she loved—a man who has departed to the world of the dead. Since his departure, her body has lain on the nails of loneliness: "It was frail, and today it is even more so. Its boundaries... its contours have lost their features, erased from the map of the faithful body a body in which desire has committed suicide and yearning has been strangled. This loyal body that knew no man before you and will allow no other to decipher its mysteries." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 60).

The narrator summarizes the life of this body in two phases, each symbolically significant within the framework of the imagined narrative and descriptive language of presence and absence. The first phase is the loss of the first and only man in this character's life due to death. She remains faithful to him, living for loyalty—a love that began and ended with him. The second phase is her preparation to leave this world as her body, ravaged by illness, nears its end. Between these two phases, overshadowed by death and departure, the self confronts the harshness of solitude, recalling the beautiful past and his sweet words that once comforted her in moments of despair:

"And so, the mute memory chose silence as well, leaving only remnants of recollections." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 62).

The author employs psychological metaphorical narration, recounting the character's inner psychological activities in the first person. This deviates from Dorrit Cohn's conventions of psychological narration, where the third person typically assumes the narrative role.

The narrator retrieves internal visual images from the character's life, reviving fleeting past moments, which Dorrit Cohn refers to as "moments of vision" (Dorrit Cohn, 1981). The narrator merges psychological storytelling with metaphorical imagery, slowing the narrative pace. The body's journeys are postponed, its dreams weary, and neither the present brings her joy nor the past restores her happiness. To end the torment of her soul, she chooses this time to travel without a ticket, freeing herself from the past, fleeing toward a known future where the transparent spirit of her beloved touches her trembling, fearful soul. It embraces her, erasing her buried pain and carrying her far away to another death and another life. There, her sorrows and pains die, and her joys and hopes are born anew (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 62).

It is death, the eternal truth, where the cry of life is silenced, and the soul journeys to its homeland, leaving behind the frail body and a promise of loyalty.

The narrator turns to writing to draw strength against the pain of loss and illness. Do these two phases in the character's life not parallel the stations of ascension in a Sufi's spiritual journey? A body not seeking desire is a body that knows its worth, indifferent to life's adornments. It is an epic body, always searching for a ray of light that opens the door to acceptance, awaiting its death certificate, which becomes a new birth certificate.

Narrating Silence: The Imaginary Dimension of What Was and What Was Not

Pain represents one of the central themes in the discourse between the self and the other, as evidenced by the feelings and emotions of characters driven by failed love, death, loss, or betrayal. In Nabila Aboudi's stories, no single narrative can be prioritized over another to

illustrate the intense presence of pain as a core motif, owing to the meticulous strategy adopted by the author to represent the victims of pain. Each story carries its own symphony of sorrow and its unique depiction. The narrator says: "He searches daily for prey to devour, but his hunger neither calms nor rests. At night, he casts his victims into a cell inhabited only by empty corners." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 23).

Every page lives the tale of its pain and lamentation, presenting us with narratives brimming with anguish, fear, and turmoil. In *The Cold Heart*, viewed from the perspective of a child who kills his mother because she left him and married another man in place of his father, sorrow is not introduced to us; it is born with us, embedded in a fractured soul. It has mastered survival, reigned supreme, and become an undisputed king. Pain is exposed—no matter how it hides in hearts and souls, it reveals its secrets.

This story operates on the principle of contrast and establishes its unique context, requiring an interpretation that accounts for its specific construction. By returning to the details of the story, a roadmap of pain and its causes is drawn: "The sorrows that roamed the desert of my soul read and studied my details; they became the owners of the place. I try with all my might to uproot them, but I cannot. They always excelled at hiding." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 38).

The narrator's depiction of sorrow, now exposed, relies on a series of narrative and descriptive images. She juxtaposes the self's past, resembling a resilient city that defied conquerors, with its present state, where sorrow has compelled it into helplessness, robbing it of its secret password as it faces profound pain—the theft of her mother's heart by another man. The narrator meticulously traces the path of sorrow hidden behind vivid expressions, metaphors, and deep imagery of grief.

The self recalls and reconstructs its childhood with precision, leaning on a child's perspective and its layers: "Alone since my childhood... I searched for myself and found me in a sea-night, veiled by a dream within a dream. No one remembers or wants to remember, but I always remembered her. Every place I pass reminds me of her... her scent... It is impossible to remove her from me; she has become a part of my sorrows... She is my mother." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 40).

This is a metaphorical depiction of human pain, portrayed as an indelible memory. Pain in this narrative achieves an aesthetic value tied to the eloquence of storytelling, inviting us to share the self's sorrow. Her pain splinters into countless others, making it unforgettable. The self is in a dual struggle—one with itself and another with the other, "the mother," whom the son yearns for but cannot find. He resorts to envisioning absence through memories shaped into contemplations and confessions, embodying the self/son's struggle with the other/mother.

To understand this struggle, one must examine the transformation within the author's narrative imagination, where she crafts a tense relationship between the son and his mother, diverting it from the natural path of human connection. Readers are drawn into an aesthetic labyrinth, where the narrative's eloquence and high linguistic and character-building skill prevail (Sharafuddin Majdolin, 2012).

This story shatters our expectations about the sacred bond between the self and the other (the mother), reconfiguring it in cultural terms and revealing paradoxes. These paradoxes expose the nature of love, which can morph into hatred laced with fear and pain. The narrative also reveals contradictions that challenge societal and cultural norms of respect and affection for mothers. Here, the mask falls, replaced by the shroud of sin as the son strikes his mother and ends her life:

"She is my mother, the secret of my existence, the secret of my sorrow. My mother, whom I killed just as she killed me when she chose another man over my father, who died of heartbreak. On that day, she ripped my cold heart from its place, and I killed her... I killed her out of love because I wanted her to be mine alone. I feared the cold for her, so I killed her before it could." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 41).

The author confronts us with a tragic ending in which the mother dies at her son's hands. Yet, this opens the door to cultural readings of the self—grieving, rejecting the idea of another man replacing the father, and resorting to narrative murder with cold resolve. From a critical perspective, this unveils the centrality of the self/masculinity, which perceives itself as the guardian of women's actions. This is evidenced by the son's claim: "She killed me when she chose another man over my father. I killed her out of love for her."

This conflicted existence rejecting the other's desires and clashing with them—creates a fertile ground for imagination. The self envisions the other as an ideal being who must not disrupt stability, even at the expense of the other/woman. The narrative does not clarify why the mother chose another man over her first husband, depicted as a pitiable figure: "My father, who died of heartbreak."

In another narrative layer, the author consistently seeks to release the body from its suffering sometimes through silence, sometimes withdrawal. In this story, the mother's death at her son's hands becomes one form of releasing the body from its sin, protecting it from the cold under the shadow of another man. This generates expressions with aesthetic functions, reshaping the cultural position of the self in the world. The author strives to explore the potential of storytelling, breaking readers' expectations by masterfully working within the triad of self, other, and pain as the driving force behind the narrative's aesthetic and cultural dimensions.

The story *The Mute Poem* aligns with the theme of pain and silence, suggesting silence as an inevitable choice despite the possibility of speech and confession. This reflects the narrative's reliance on omission, leveraging self-suppression instead of expression when necessary. The narrator states: "Words remain trapped in my vocal cords... deeply buried in my profound well, where only silence emerges." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 67).

A sub-narrative forms within the primary narrative, creating a free space where the suppressed voice fulfills its goals, leading to "the internal theater of the self in its relationship with the other, expressing external worlds in their intertwinings, attractions, and contradictions" (Hassan El-Mouden, *The Novel and Textual Analysis*, 2009).

The primary narrative represents the self's internal monologue, confined within its limits. Here, silence becomes the first choice in the face of a harsh and unyielding present. The secondary narrative incorporates silence within the imaginary discourse, placing it at the heart of the narrative imagination. This silence, guiding the narrative, parallels reality and situates the self between destiny and the present.

This story combines fragments of a painful reality, expressed by the narrator with eloquence and artistic refinement. The suffering self ascends levels of mastery over forgetting. Love and pain dominate the collection's pages, chronicling betrayal and exposing falsehoods before the mirror of the soul. The collection's experimental potential and aesthetic elements shape the narrative, engaging readers with profound psychological, social, and cultural worlds.

In *The Mute Poem*, the narrative opens scenes of psychological pain for a body that chooses silence over speech in the face of marital betrayal: "Mute... it is the destiny inscribed on the silvery brow... Mute is the only choice I found, and silence overtook my words." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 67).

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This narrative seeks to reclaim what the self has lost through imaginative storytelling, abbreviating the path for both the character and the reader, ensuring they are captivated by the events, drawn into reflection, and left questioning.

Conclusion:

In her collection *Thus the Body Swears*, Nabila Aboudi demonstrates mastery over the tools of writing and narrative craftsmanship, enabling her to weave stories within the larger narrative—a world from which she draws inspiration to construct her narrative universe. Through her stories, she searches for meaning beyond the gaze of the censor or a whisper to resist the winds of distance and abandonment. Her narratives skillfully employ the imaginative and creative potential to express and penetrate the world, reaffirming the vitality of the short story a genre that has seen a decline in reception compared to the novel.

Aboudi takes us back to the era of pioneers of Algerian short stories, such as Zlikha Saoudi, Zhor Wanisi, Tahar Wattar, and Mustafa Fassi. These writers produced remarkable pages that expressed the concerns of the nation, humanity, and colonialism with profound artistic awareness.

In Aboudi's stories, writing serves multiple functions. It is not merely about creating stories whose appeal fades once read and relegated to the shelf of forgetfulness. Instead, it fulfills psychological roles, evident in the voices of characters grappling with the pain of loneliness, betrayal, death, and absence. Here, the body plays the lead role, actively engaging readers in the interpretive game: Whose body does Nabila Aboudi mean? Can narrative free the body from the historical burdens of writing that confined it to fulfilling material desires?

Aboudi's self-aware narrative voice enriches the blank spaces, allowing her pen to recover the body's losses. The body transforms from a physical entity stripped of its spiritual role into a symbolic narrative event brimming with meanings and connotations. Through this, the self recovers its lost image, gazing into mirrors that reveal an unembellished truth. Aboudi's short stories become a project to critique the self before both itself and the other. From a critical perspective, the self needs to reclaim its cultural identity, lost to submissive writings that positioned it within the confines of the other's dominance. These writings perpetuated a static identity, devoid of cultural dynamism or introspection.

Nabila Aboudi entered the literary world driven by a desire to explore the human depths. She constructs her narratives on a solid foundation that disrupts certain universal truths from philosophical, intellectual, and socio-cultural perspectives. For her, literature specifically the short story becomes a stage for rebellion against cultural discourses that perpetuate the body's subordination. Aboudi's stories liberate the self from its fragility, pulling it out of old territories and placing it in constant dialogue with stereotypical images that it refuses to inhabit. Instead, her stories seek to change these images, affirming the legitimacy of a human existence free from discrimination, dependence, or erasure.

Aboudi's short stories evoke a myriad of contexts, broadening her engagement with contemporary cultural and existential issues. Her works raise questions about the self in its relationship with a multifaceted other, as it seeks its destiny amidst a tumultuous crowd of failures, stumbles, and indistinguishable names. Aboudi creates spaces within her narratives for these paper beings to express themselves and reclaim forgotten details.

Nabila Aboudi's stories are not just titles that captivate with their metaphors and imagery. Instead, they are stances on the world, unhesitatingly embracing its distortions and exposing its secrets. Her narratives breach narrow fields with a comprehensive artistic vision, addressing human concerns through a sensitivity that relies on the beauty of language. Aboudi does not

wait for others to liberate her burdened self; she knows the path to her redemption: "Sometimes, imagination is more truthful than reality... I wrote to you while the world slept, so no one would spy on my thoughts or dare read my reflections." (Nabila Aboudi, 2019, p. 54).

When examining the world through Aboudi's short stories, one inevitably seeks her ability to express fragments of reality in all its diversity. The struggles of her characters reflect battles encountered on streets or in public parks. Her narratives extend beyond the covers of her stories, offering a portrayal of sadness and disappointments that resonate with the real world. For Aboudi, the writer's role is not merely to document reality but to elevate it through artistry. This echoes Abdallah Ibrahim's assertion that if writing merely replicated reality, creativity would lose its necessity.

Narrative, in Aboudi's perspective, becomes a space for reclaiming the self's lost possessions. Writing fills voids and becomes the mute poem that finds its voice through the act of surrendering what it loves. This transforms it into a subject of love, forgetfulness, and death. Her narratives connect the particular to the universal, the individual to the collective, and the imagined to reality. Through this, the narrator creates a middle ground between truth and dream, convincing readers that stories seek the lost parts of ourselves, altering our perceptions of time, life, and existence.

The collection fulfills the desire to celebrate a body inseparable from the soul, pursuing this narrative goal through the metaphors of language, revealing values, emotions, and visions. Aboudi's characters understand that reclaiming lost dreams and reviving forgotten lives is achieved by sheltering in imagination, transcending sensory limitations to explore existence in the realm of the mind.

Aboudi does not celebrate the material body as it embarks on journeys to fulfill repressed desires, which might trample human, ethical, and religious values. Instead, she liberates the body from the shackles of materialism, enabling it to escape the abyss and isolation that lead to fragmentation. From my perspective, this reflects an existential aesthetic strategy that showcases Aboudi's genius in narrative writing. Her treatment of the body achieves a harmonious coexistence with the soul, resisting a corrupt underworld and writing its history of emancipation with all its senses.

Through her narratives, Aboudi allows the body to become a subject of creativity—a self-producing discourse carving its path to self-realization. Despite the challenges of love and the surrounding frustrations, her characters maintain balance, ascending through their choices, embodied in the act of writing. On this aesthetic and cultural foundation, one wonders: Will Aboudi's future narratives continue to escape the traps of oblivion and silence? Will her narrative voice retain its elegance, fully aware that writing is a journey through the eternal exiles of the soul?

Aboudi constructs a vision for a cultural aesthetic project, engaging with a temporally infinite conception of the world. Her narratives reorder human roles, undermining the temptations of the present and the assumptions of the past. By doing so, she creates a narrative experience that avoids the pitfalls of replication while retaining the clarity of traditional storytelling. Her stories reflect an unconscious connection to the foundational texts of Arabic literature, drawing inspiration from classics such as *One Thousand and One Nights*. This connection invites readers into a world of wonder as they witness the transformations of her characters' destinies. Her focus on narrative representation aligns with her characters' will, aspirations, and positions, set within a coherent plan tied to specific times and places. Through this, she reveals the unspoken, the possible, the impossible, and the rational and irrational in a symbolic manner. Aboudi's narratives are steeped in social, psychological, and intellectual dimensions, never

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abandoning their aesthetic core. Through rich metaphors and the eloquence of her language, she captures the fluctuations of the body and its demands within the narrative framework.

The duality of self and other in Aboudi's stories reflects a series of cultural references that shape her characters' unique personalities. Her narrative strategy intricately weaves deep connections within the text, intensifying meanings through a network of stories that reflect a symbiotic relationship. Aboudi's narratives are informed by a cultural heritage that resists severance from the traditional foundations of Arabic storytelling. Her work redefines the relationship between the body, soul, and pain, using reality not as a means of repetition but as a repository of cultural systems. This allows her to shed light on these elements and reconstruct an artistic perspective imbued with imagination.

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