

**The Aesthetics of Titling and the Fantasy of Meaning – An Approach in
The Sea Fairy by Jamila Zeneir**

Asma, Benkerri

Mohamed Béchir El Ibrahimi University – Bordj Bou Arréridj

Laboratory Name: National Culture in Modern and Contemporary Algerian Literature.

Rank: Lecturer B

Email: asma.benkerri @univ-bba.dz

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Abstract:

The Algerian short story has surpassed the traditional stereotypical pattern, moving toward a new horizon of writing, adopting narrative experimentation as a way to engage with contemporary reality, expressing its content both in form and substance. This has made it popular and widely accepted among readers. One of the most prominent issues raised in the literary field is the aesthetics of titling; the title is the first threshold a reader encounters, arousing curiosity to engage with the theme of the text and understand its meanings. To shape the architecture of the contemporary short story and venture into experimentation and modernization, the Algerian writer created a fantastical (marvelous) tableau through the title, carrying an aesthetic dimension liberated from narrative monotony and loaded with meaningful dimensions reflecting its intention and eliciting the reader's wonder. The Algerian writer Jamila Zeneir is one of the authors who led the forefront of experimentation thanks to this new narrative form, as evidenced in her short story collection *The Sea Fairy*, using the marvelous element as a contrasting color that pierces the horizon of expectation and carries features of the extraordinary and illogical.

Accordingly, this research is based on several questions regarding the topic: the aesthetics of titling and the fantasy of meaning, namely:

- To what extent has the fantasy of the title contributed to adding aesthetic value to the new short story text, and how is this presence manifested?
- Did the writer employ the fantasy of the title purely for aesthetic purposes, aiming to evoke wonder and multiple meanings, or is it an experimental mechanism aimed at innovation and surpassing the familiar, to create a literary text that bets on inherent novelty?
- To what extent did Jamila Zeneir succeed in selecting marvelous (fantastic) titles for her collection that harmonize with the symbolism of the narrative events and reflect its intentions?

Keywords: Title, Marvelous (Fantasy), Narrative Experimentation, *The Sea Fairy*

Introduction:

Any text requires an initial gateway through which the reader can access its content, represented by the title, considered a window that opens diverse semantic horizons and deep dimensions

that encapsulate the spirit of the text, arousing the reader's curiosity and drawing them in. Therefore, modern critical studies have given it significant attention, moving beyond the textual body to what accompanies the text, including primary and secondary titles, which unlock its intricacies and prepare the reader for interpretation and reading pleasure. The title revolves around a duality: textual content / reader interaction, becoming the starting point for reading the text or abstaining from it. Accordingly, writers have devoted considerable care to the title, elevating it to dimensions charged with socio-cultural meanings, becoming a conceptual apparatus crafted with artistic and aesthetic skill, shifting from formal structure to a structure laden with dense imaginative constructs that suggest semantic multiplicity.

The title has become a semantic structure interacting with extratextual data to express the author's intentions, achieving aesthetic and artistic quality. Since the text itself contains prior elements, the title also enters the sphere of textual interaction, becoming parallel to the text. The writer draws on modern experimental data, surpassing the familiar and benefiting from fantastical, supernatural worlds that pierce expectations according to a mythical and aesthetic pattern, allowing the reader's imagination to soar through coded displacements and paradoxes intertwined with real-life atmospheres while hinting at semi-mythical extraordinary dimensions, all crafted with magical skill—either as an escape from reality or an expression of its repeated fractures affecting contemporary humans and their cries.

Thus, the Algerian short story has succeeded in venturing into experimentation as a modernist project calling for transcendence, reconstruction, and the search for techniques that attract and captivate the reader, contributing to making writing an artistic pleasure and a purposeful message rooted in culture and thought, rather than a commodity sold in markets. The literary and critical scene has recently witnessed a revival of the Algerian short story due to its ventures into marvelous worlds, whether in textual accompaniments such as titles or in narrative formation, open to new experiments that intrigue both reader and critic, creating a suggestive energy that liberates the audience's mind and leads it toward interpretation and analysis. Among the Algerian writers who excelled in the short story is Jamila Zeneir, whose collection *The Sea Fairy* surpasses feminine boundaries, combining narrative storytelling with marvelous and mythical elements, selecting her titles carefully and artistically to break the familiar and project it onto imaginative reality.

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1 – The Title Between Narrative Aesthetics and Reader Effectiveness:

The title constitutes a dense structure encompassing semantic symbols and aesthetic dimensions that attract the audience. Gérard Genette (G. Gennette) devoted extensive attention to this under the term *paratext* and dedicated a full chapter to it in his book *Thresholds*, starting from the idea that "the text/book rarely appears naked from verbal or iconic accompaniments that produce its meaning and significance, such as the book name, titles, dedication..." He highlighted all that surrounds the text and revolves around it, which he called "the peritext in general," i.e., the spatial and material zone surrounding the text, under the publisher's direct responsibility. Genette included the title within the *authorial peritext*, which includes the author's name, the title, subtitle, internal headings, preface, foreword, and introduction.

Thus, Genette did not neglect the textual thresholds in discourse analysis, considering them active elements in understanding the entrances to the text and guiding the reader toward its intentions. Jamil Hamdawi noted its importance in semiotics, stating: "It is an effective operational term in approaching the literary text, a key tool for the analyst to access the deep recesses of the text to interrogate and interpret it. The title can dismantle the text for reconstruction, by discerning its semantic and symbolic structures, illuminating at first what the text conceals—it is a technical key that captures the pulse, wrinkles, and structural residues of the text at both semantic and symbolic levels."

The title forms an aesthetic dimension due to its intentional purpose, contributing to constructing the text and achieving its uniqueness. It contains perceptions and concepts reflecting the writer's experience. Its aesthetic quality equips it to strengthen the text and shape its meaning. It creates paradoxes, displacements, and suggestive symbols through which the narrator projects past, present, and future, becoming an encoded equivalent of lived reality—a dense structure containing the text's contents and a façade summarizing its significance.

Throughout its historical stages, the Algerian short story has absorbed diverse issues and experiences, reflecting reality honestly—from Abdelhamid Benhedouga, Mouloud Feraoun, Malek Haddad, Kateb Yacine, to Assia Djebar, Zahour Nassy, and Ahlam Mosteghanemi—reflecting societal changes and challenges, until the short story evolved into openness toward experimentation, encompassing new issues addressing others and affirming identity and authenticity.

2 – The Algerian Short Story and Experimentation Strategies: Tradition or Modernization:

Due to recent changes in the Arab world affecting social and cultural movements, writers sought new means of expressing themselves and their communities, desiring liberation from imposed frameworks. They innovated tools across literary genres, breaking the usual patterns to attract more aware and open readers, overcoming reading apathy. "For the past four decades, the Arab novel has sought new narrative forms, interacting with political and social transformations in the Arab reality, linked to the emergence of a new creative consciousness focused on form as the nerve of narrative writing. The Arab novel's form emerges, as Ricardo (1967) notes, from the shift from adventure writing to the adventure of writing."

Stories no longer accept ready-made ideas recounting events as-is; they have become artistic activity seeking new forms of storytelling with marvel and strangeness. Émile Zola (1840–1902) was the first to link experimentation to the novel, in his well-known *Experimental Novel*. Said Yaktin affirms that experimentation is the excessive practice of transcending classical molds: "Excessive practice of transcendence is usually called 'experimentation,' a term discussed in the mid-1970s in discussions of stories by Tazi and Al-Madani and in art fair seminars." Mohamed Amsour elaborates, considering experimentation and its origins extending to objective horizons, such as the structural form of the artistic work, encompassing cultural, social, and historical issues. Experimentation is thus an aesthetic goal betting on inherent novelty, forming a new artistic structure that contributes to narrative events by creating displacements, paradoxes, and concentrated symbols, revealed to the reader.

Consequently, Arab writers adopted experimentation strategically to break expectations, incorporating modern techniques such as condensation, paradox, suggestion, and symbolism, in addition to creating illogical and surreal worlds that amaze the reader and impact the literary genre. A key question arises: Did Algerian short story experimentation merely interact with Western literature innovatively, or is it an extension of old narrative forms aiming at grounding within a conscious narrative structure?

The Algerian short story has made significant progress in experimentation, a requirement of modernity, despite late emergence due to political, social, and cultural circumstances. Post-independence Algerian writers focused on this literary genre, integrating societal changes, forming a more aware generation reflecting the spirit of the age, combining renewal through exposure to global literature and grounding through extending stories to revive traditional narrative roots (*One Thousand and One Nights*, *Kalila wa Dimna*, *Risalat al-Ghufran*, popular tales), opening to Sufi symbols, mythological and fantastic features, and employing them to break conventions. The renewing writer is attracted to unusual experiences that contrast with reality, explaining the marvels and oddities in the narrative, manifested in prose heritage.

Algerian storytellers blend old narrative traditions with contemporary texts, adding the unreal and supernatural. This winged imagination enters unnatural realms, benefiting from visions of blindness, madness, and aging. The marvelous does not oppose reality but adds symbolic and semantic value: the marvelous and extraordinary invent a reality, under magical and imaginative shades. This includes exemplary stories, containing marvelous tales, e.g., those of Ubayd ibn Shuriya, Al-Wahidi, Al-Isfahani, and others.

Thus, the Algerian writer seeks to combine modernization and grounding, creating new experiences in his narrative works according to a serious vision, employing imaginative narrative discourse containing realistic semantics expressed through illogical spaces, in a language reflecting a rebellious self aspiring to foresee a better reality.

3 – The Marvelous in the Algerian Short Story: Limits of Reality and Transformations of Imagination:

A – Definition of the Marvelous:

Linguistic: In *Lisan al-Arab* by Ibn Manzur, the word 'ajeeb is derived from the verb 'ajiba, meaning to be astonished. Al-'ajab signifies disbelief due to rarity. The plural is a'jaab. It describes something so unusual that a person says, "I am amazed by this."

Technical/Terminological: Tzvetan Todorov was the first to formalize the term *marvelous*, defining it as: "the hesitation felt by a being who knows only natural laws when confronted with an apparently supernatural event." Todorov's definition refers to the confusion experienced by a reader accustomed to ordinary reality when placed between the familiar natural world and a supernatural, extraordinary world. This state of hesitation is the marvelous: "When a reader encounters a story involving ghosts disrupting people's lives, causing suffering, they feel fear; fear is the principle of supernatural stories. Some scholars judge a supernatural story not by the author's purpose or plot, but by the intensity of emotion it evokes in the reader... A story is supernatural if it generates a deep sense of fear."

Saïd Yaktine agrees with Todorov, considering that the state of hesitation, fear, and astonishment experienced by the reader or the character is what creates the fantastic, as he believes that the fantastic "occurs on the basis of uncertainty or hesitation, shared between the agent (the character) and the reader regarding what they encounter, as they must decide whether it is connected to reality or not, as in the common consciousness."

The term *fantastic* (fantastique) refers to everything supernatural or unusual, "that is, unreal, shaded, and it denotes (image, manifestation, vision)." The term is synonymous with the fantastic, and due to differences in translation, it has multiple names in Arabic criticism, including: (fantastique, al-gharib, al-ghara'ibiya, supernatural, al-khawariqi, fantasia...).

The fantastic encompasses the earliest creation tales found in sacred texts, such as the story of Adam and Eve, in addition to miracles, marvels, illustrative stories, and tales narrated by animals, such as the story of the dove and the crow with Prophet Noah, peace be upon him, as well as fairy tales and ghost stories, along with stories of ghouls, demons, and devils, and other religious stories like those of the prophets, their miracles, and the pious and their extraordinary acts in healing people, among others.

Thus, the fantastic includes everything related to narrative, the art of folktales, and anything depicting extraordinary legendary scenes that provoke astonishment, hesitation, and fear, deviating from familiar frameworks and rules, as well as everything mentioned in Greek mythology. Of course, the reader is central to the communicative process, especially since "the fantastic is a feature of the narrative utterance, a rhetorical discourse employed by the narrator for aesthetic purposes."

Consequently, the writer employs it within the text or in titles for two purposes:

- **First, experimental and modernizing:** through which the writer rebels against familiar patterns by drawing on new experiences and horizons with global and human dimensions while preserving the authentic and starting from it.
- **Second, artistic and aesthetic:** weaving the narrative structure with artistic skill that blends reality and imagination to present visual literary tableaux for a reader seeking both pleasure and knowledge, activating their sense of wonder, fear, and hesitation, cultivating reflection and thought, breaking their expectations, and linking these extraordinary events to reality while decoding their hidden meanings.

Based on this, the Algerian storyteller has creatively employed the fantastic element, exploiting the poetry of narrative to craft magical mirrors through which we perceive his skill in achieving artistic pleasure and manifesting strangeness that astonishes the reader. He applies fantasy to reality as an experimental tool to express a world permeated with negation and alienation, finding in the imagination of reality combined with magical and illogical worlds a key to reading and interpretation, indeed a semantic indicator for understanding the surrounding world through a journey of inquiry and contemplation. In other words, it is a rebellion against the laws of nature and perception, allowing the reader to immerse their imagination in the depth of collective memory and unconscious inspiration, reformulating reality in an artistic and aesthetic mold.

Among the most prominent Algerian writers who mastered the fantastic technique is Jamila Zeneir in her short story collection *Sea Fairy*. She is considered the first female writer to use the supernatural to explain phenomena, designing her collection's titles with fantastic horizons that attract the reader, demonstrating her skill in weaving the collection through openings that correspond to the narrative content, embodying imaginative tragedies coated with the fractures that threaten contemporary humans.

We have chosen examples of titles in which Jamila Zeneir employed the fantastic element to highlight the storyteller's success in selecting thresholds that first attract the reader and second experiment with narrative form. A story without a title is like a body without a head; one cannot enter the text without crossing this threshold. "When a title entices the reader to engage with the text, it acts as a stimulating elixir for reading; when the reader is repelled, it becomes a poison, leading to the text's death, i.e., not reading it. Therefore, the title must be chosen precisely, with sweet words (boniment) that whet the audience's appetite, stir their inner emotions, and encourage them to engage with and purchase the book."

4. Fantasy of Meaning in the Titles of Jamila Zeneir's Short Story Collection *Sea Fairy*

1/ *Sea Fairy*: The main title of the collection, *Sea Fairy*, is followed by a series of carefully chosen titles through which Jamila Zeneir draws on mythical and legendary worlds blended with and expressive of reality. Linguistically, *Sea Fairy* is a nominal sentence consisting of an implied subject "she," with *fairy* as the predicate, and *sea* as the genitive complement.

- *Fairy*: Semantically, it refers to multiple meanings. Jinn are classified among unseen beings not visible to the naked eye, carrying the meaning of concealment in Arabic lexicons. They are mentioned in the Qur'an, such as in Surah Al-Jinn: "Say, [O Muhammad], it was revealed to me that a group of jinn said, 'Indeed, we have heard an amazing Qur'an.'" (Qur'an 72:1). Jinn have various names in popular tales, such as shaytan, ifrit, ghou, appearing in different forms and supernatural traits that evoke fear, against which one protects oneself by invoking God's name.
- *Sea*: A natural cosmic phenomenon characterized by constant change—waves, tides, storms, and calm—also symbolizing serenity and psychological calm. Its mystery and unpredictability often astonish humans and break their expectations.

By combining the fairy with the sea, inspired by legends of mermaids or sea brides, the title carries a fantastic dimension that attracts the reader and prompts the question: what does the storyteller mean by *Sea Fairy*, and how does it manifest in the story and express her intent?

Jamila Zeneir allows the reader to soar in the seas with all their secrets, blending reality and imagination by connecting the supernatural *Sea Fairy* with the human sailor, stating: "Since the Sea Fairy inhabited him, he devoted years of his life to her, a woman from legends who fed him forgetfulness and anchored loyalty on his arm and the mark of devotion." Here, the storyteller depicts the sailor captivated by love for the fairy, reflecting a faint image of the sailor's suffering or the marginalization of humanity devoid of emotion and love. In this blending, the departure from the usual is a rebellion against systems and laws that oppress the contemporary human, leading to a tragic ending: the sailor's death symbolizing the death of human conscience and entry into a nightmarish maze that destabilizes him.

2/ Man from Another World: This title evokes a duality between reality and the imaginary or metaphysical world, where the familiar intersects with the unseen, known only through myths, legends, and tales. It does not follow the traditional pattern but appears as an imaginative image that misleads the reader toward otherworldly realms. The man belongs to reality, but his circumstances suggest the illogical, prompting astonishment and preparing the reader to explore the symbolic and paradoxical aspects he embodies.

The storyteller refers to the dark spaces the man inhabits, specifically the orphaned boy fleeing himself toward the jinn (mythical mermaid, bride of the shore) to find refuge from his domineering stepmother: "He embraced her phantom with his longing gaze, revealing a woman from legends, and all the myths clinging to his mind danced in his imagination... quickly deciding to die to escape his stepmother." His closing of eyes reflects escape and surrender to fate, absence of light and joy, using his dreamlike visions to find solace from oppression, ultimately marrying the fairy who rescues him from human constraints.

The fantastic narrative constructs an artistic form carrying social suffering, highlighting extreme marginalization, negation, and alienation experienced by the boy. Zeneir successfully links the extraordinary with reality to create a photographic image laden with darkness and oppression, crafting her collection through textual thresholds that reveal the hidden and challenge convention, leaving the reader in a state of puzzlement, searching for the realities concealed within the story.

3/ Secret of the Seventh Room: This title forms a symbolic threshold open to multiple interpretations. The number seven recalls popular belief in magical and legendary worlds, linked with folk medicine, magic, incantations, charms, and spells. The storyteller's emphasis on the number seven reflects an awareness of creating a modern horizon surpassing the conventional to generate new meanings: "the event floats between the real and the fantastic; while we are anchored in narrative realism, we find ourselves wandering in semi-mythical atmospheres."

Through this title, the storyteller reveals hidden secrets within the protagonist and a profound sense of psychological alienation. The character *Aziza* embodies sorrow and solitude, stimulating the reader's imagination to explore a marginalized feminine world within a fantastic framework. The room, as an enclosed space, carries mystery and suspense; the number seven

adds a sacred and strange aura, inducing hesitation and fear as the reader questions whether the secret is real, magical, or mythical.

Decoding this fantastic threshold within the textual structure reveals a feminine self trapped in this room, symbolizing fragile psychology, excessive thinking, and obsessive thoughts leading to panic and hysteria, soaring in magical and legendary horizons. The fairy or *night mermaid* visiting Aziza as a phantom becomes one of the room's fantastic secrets: "She saw the phantom's face sway across the woman's visage, staring into her eyes wherever she turned, fleeing the haunted room, leaving it to the legendary night fairy who traversed it like a spark every Wednesday night." This title protests against a present dominated by negation and psychological confinement, concluding with Aziza's hidden suffering, symbolizing a woman challenging imposed realities and rebelling against everything, even herself, trapped by armies of pain.

Through this fantastic opening, the storyteller achieves liberation from the imposed laws of reality, reaching the highest levels of the fantastic discourse, rich in secrets revealing imaginative skill, narrative beauty, and clarity of vision.

4/ The Driver and the Phantom: This title forms a duality centered on reality and dream. The driver is a human, while the phantom is an imagination soaring in unfamiliar realms, prompting questions about their relationship. The story blends reality and fantasy, reflecting intrusion of contemporary anxieties and nightmares into dreams. This title draws the reader to explore the driver and his connection to the phantom.

The story's opening establishes a symbolic dimension reflecting contemporary concerns. The writer portrays the driver's routine days under the desert sun, traveling long distances for livelihood, contrasted with the phantom or fairy creating a deviant narrative structure that grants calm and relief: "Her face radiated sweetness, shimmering like water, and to avoid his gaze, he looked away to the road, staring into the mirror, contemplating the sand as dawn of softness and warmth arose in his chest... evening carried her to mysterious appointments." The interplay of the illogical with reality creates a symbolic structure transitioning from alienation and loneliness to the search for a ray of light, revitalizing the driver and illuminating his dark path. Fantastic narrative, with its semantic and aesthetic dimensions, effectively reveals characters' suppressed depths and transgresses social boundaries. The storyteller conveys her message through a symbolic mixture of fantasy, reality, strangeness, and logic, fostering awareness of the present and transforming narrative writing into a cultural, social, and psychological statement documenting contemporary concerns and anticipating a better tomorrow through an artistic and aesthetic consciousness, constructed in a novel form.

Conclusion: In summary, we conclude that

- The title is an aesthetic and semantic structure that serves the short story text and expresses its purposes, while also contributing to strengthening the relationship between the triad of text, reader, and author.
- Algerian short stories have made significant progress in breaking the monotony of traditional writing, becoming a literary genre that requires constant renewal through the

creation of a fantastic pattern full of astonishment and hesitation, which infiltrates the characters' memory and reflects their inner depths.

- Narrative experimentation constitutes a modernist project based on deconstruction and reconstruction within an artistic framework that gives the text both an aesthetic dimension and a modern one, relying on artistic creation and elevating the literary genre to horizons that transcend local boundaries toward the global.
- The writer Jamila Zeneir succeeded in choosing fantastic titles for her short story collection, demonstrating her creative ability to perceive the deep structure of humanity's fate and its threatened existence, through skillful blending of imagination and reality, of the natural and the supernatural, to create visions and symbolic meanings that critique the present and anticipate a better future.

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