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**Title: Self-alienation and oppressive reality in “Zawaya Essifr” novel Assia Boudekhana**

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**Abstract:**

This research aims to explore the most significant manifestations of alienation experienced by the characters in the novel *Zawaya Essifr* (Zero Angles), particularly the protagonist "Sarab." The oppressive and alienating reality she endures drives her to rebel against it and violate its sanctity. Through linguistic elements and narrative trajectories, the narrator marginalizes the center (patriarchal authority) and restores value to the fractured and marginalized female self. The protagonist navigates the realm of the imaginary to assert her identity and overcome feelings of frustration, anxiety, and loss in a male-dominated society that glorifies male virility and oppresses female femininity.

**Keywords:** Alienation, self, female, society, marginalization, loss.

**Introduction**

Alienation stands out as one of the most prominent themes in Arabic literature, particularly in the modern novel, as a reflection of the politically, socially, culturally, and morally troubled reality. It expresses a state of emotional and psychological detachment experienced by individuals toward themselves, their society, or the surrounding values and traditions. This feeling manifests in various forms, including self-alienation, social alienation, cultural alienation, as well as existential and philosophical alienation.

In the novel, alienation generally serves as a central and prominent theme through which writers depict the internal and external conflicts faced by their characters. This phenomenon is evident in the novel through diverse forms and manifestations, such as isolation, anxiety, identity struggles, and a sense of disconnection. These elements allow readers to engage with the narrative and delve into the inner worlds of the characters, enabling them to understand their suffering and struggles within a complex and ever-changing society. Through varied storytelling techniques, novelists have been able to offer

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profound insights into the phenomenon of alienation and its impact on various aspects of contemporary human life.

## I. The Concept of Alienation

The term "alienation" has been used in various contexts with multiple meanings, reflecting its study across different disciplines. Alienation is considered a human phenomenon that arises in diverse cultures and social systems. Its degrees range from feelings of detachment and disconnection to an individual's awareness of the tension between themselves and their surrounding environment. This manifests as a sense of estrangement, isolation, and anxiety. Alienation can be seen as a state that overwhelms an individual, making them feel disconnected from their reality and society<sup>2</sup>.

The Latin word "Alienatio" has been used to explain several concepts, including its legal meaning, which refers to the transfer of ownership of something to another party. When what once belonged to me and was part of my identity becomes the property of someone else, it becomes alien to me. In this context, a person is treated as a commodity that can be traded, leading to the loss of their human identity and dignity<sup>3</sup>.

In general, alienation is a psychological and emotional state experienced by an individual when there is a disconnect between the self and the internal or external world. This can result from various external factors related to society or internal factors tied to the individual's psyche and inner world.

## II. Manifestations of Alienation in the Novel

### 1. The Title

The title carries multiple connotations, as it gives the text its existence and identity. It becomes a unique mark that represents the creative identity of the work, granting it the dimensions it deserves. "On this basis, the title should be treated as a procedural key to engaging with the text in both its symbolic and semantic dimensions."<sup>4</sup>

The title of this novel consists of two words, both of which are laden with symbolic and semantic dimensions. The first word refers to all the life experiences of the protagonist, Sarab, on social, familial, and emotional levels. The second word symbolizes the absurdity and futility that envelop her life. Despite her attempts to escape the circle of alienation represented by this word, she repeatedly finds herself sinking deeper into it, ultimately leading her to perpetually stand at the threshold of zero, which cancels out all other aspects of her life—a life shrouded in disappointment, brokenness, and loneliness. As she reflects, *"I live in a strange integration between the two states, especially on those hollow nights, stripped of everything except for those angles that form the zero of my disappointments."*<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed Ali Al-Falahi, *Alienation in Arabic Poetry in the 7th Century AH: A Socio-Psychological Study*, Dar Ghida for Publishing and Distribution, Amman, 1st Edition, 2013, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Abdellatif Mohamed Khalifa, *Studies in the Psychology of Alienation*, Dar Gharib for Printing, Publishing, and Distribution, Cairo, n.d., p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Mohamed Saber Obeid, *The Density of the Threshold Title*, Al-Ussou' Al-Adabi Newspaper, Arab Writers Union, Damascus, 2007, Issue 1078, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> The Novel, p. 72.

The title encapsulates the central theme of the novel: the protagonist's struggle with her beautiful past and her bleak present, which prevents her from living comfortably in the moment, despite the prestigious social status she has achieved. Additionally, the title hints at other significant themes in the novel, such as injustice, cruelty, oppression, love, and loss.

The narrative structure of the title is itself provocative and suspicious. Can zero have angles? This unconventional title immediately immerses us in a space of contradictions, where the novel embodies the experience of a creative self deeply wounded, broken, lonely, and alienated. It is an intriguing and captivating title that plays a crucial role in drawing the reader's attention and compelling them to engage deeply with the text.

## 2. Alienation of the Female Self

Alienation from the self refers to a state in which an individual becomes unaware of their true feelings, desires, rejections, and even their actual identity. According to **Karen Horney**, a person alienated from their true self is someone who has become disconnected from their authentic identity. This occurs when an individual develops an idealized self-image that differs drastically from their reality, creating a deep chasm between their ideal self and their true self. Alienation from the true self, therefore, means alienation from the most vital core of our being—a separation or deprivation of access to this source<sup>6</sup>.

In general, self-alienation is a psychological and emotional state that expresses feelings of dissatisfaction, anger, and discontent with oneself and one's life due to the contradiction between one's actual situation and what one aspires to or dreams of. As it is said, *"The alienated individual is always suspended between a past that fades away, becoming more radiant and illusory, and a future whose endings are unknown to the point of terror. The present, between them, becomes an arena of constant psychological struggle and endless comparisons."*

In this novel, the sense of alienation pervades in all its meanings and dimensions, embodied through linguistic elements and narrative techniques. The alienation of women, in particular, is a central theme. The protagonist, Sarab, is a dreamy and ambitious woman who seeks to break free from societal constraints and norms, as these norms reduce her human essence to the mere image of a forbidden body. Her existence is confined within boundaries surrounded by an aura of sanctity and taboos. The mother, as the voice of society and the guardian of its norms, constantly reminds Sarab of this deeply ingrained concept in the collective memory. The narrator illustrates the nature of this relationship when Sarab reflects: *"My mother never missed an opportunity to compare me to other girls my age, most of whom had become exemplary housewives. To my mother, I was a disgrace to femininity because I knew nothing about cooking or cleaning, and because I disliked household chores altogether."* (p. 27).

This dynamic generates within Sarab a sense of rejection and loss, which she experiences in reality through the intense conflict between submitting to societal norms and the sanctity of the body, and rebelling against them to live freely. Away from these outdated laws and customs, Sarab seeks refuge in the realm of creativity and writing as an escape from the violence and tyranny of reality. This is what

<sup>6</sup> . Richard Schacht, *Alienation*, translated by Kamel Youssef Hussein, Arab Foundation for Printing and Publishing, Beirut, 1st Edition, 1980, p. 191.

<sup>7</sup> The Novel, p. 13.

she truly experiences in the embrace of the literary gathering that nurtures her poetic creativity, allowing her to embark on a new and different adventure with life and the longed-for freedom that her shackled self and broken spirit had never known—a different experience with love, disappointment, jealousy, and overwhelming femininity. As the novel states: *"The soft satin feels like it caresses my body, arousing waves of desire within me. I contemplate the room, myself, the shirt, my bare body—that nakedness which women have grown accustomed to wearing to ensure their femininity is fulfilled as they writhe on the bed of solitude."*<sup>8</sup>

The curse of sudden change weighs heavily on Sarab, transforming her from a peaceful woman trying to accept the bitterness and ugliness of reality into a rebellious woman who refuses to submit to its lowly traditions and values. These traditions force her to live as a prisoner of ideas and beliefs that contradict her desires and dreams, shattering the self that yearns for freedom and life. *"We are ignorant of our own personalities and surrender ourselves to customary beliefs and virtues that we convince ourselves of, only to practice self-oppression, concealment, and living according to acquired standards. There, we fall into the trap of confusion between what the true self lives in our unconscious and what it must live in compliance with imposed norms, producing our own misery."*<sup>9</sup>

Her life changed drastically after her father's illness. His absence affected the entire family, and Sarab suffered from feelings of deprivation and loss, leading her to spend the rest of her life searching for love and tenderness. The father's absence in the novel can be seen as a symbol of the loss of security and stability, as well as the collapse of the patriarchal system and moral values in society.

"Najla" is another rebellious and dreamy female character striving to achieve her identity, far from the constraints of society and the family that rejected her. An orphan, she lives with her brother and his wife, who made every effort to turn her life into an unbearable hell. Her only refuge became escaping far from this torment. It was by chance that she met Sarab in a room at the teacher's house, where they shared unforgettable memories. Each embraced the other, finding solace and comfort for lost tenderness and fleeting love. *"Najla was always a guardian angel to me."*<sup>10</sup>

The novel portrays various characters suffering from the pain of loss, fear, and brokenness due to the lives they ended up with after failed love experiences and turbulent emotional relationships. These experiences charted a different course for them, turning their dreams to ashes. Similarly, Najla tried to find refuge in her marriage to her German friend, who converted to Islam, as a way to compensate for the disappointment of love and the pain of betrayal she endured at the hands of her professor. She then moved forward with the marriage project, clinging to this relationship despite its strangeness, defying societal values and traditions, and attempting to heal her wounds, rebuild her identity, and protect herself from getting lost and collapsing again in the whirlwind of a new life.

Meanwhile, Sarab returned to her small village, dragging the tails of regret and disappointment after her dream of building a successful love relationship with *Karim* faded. He ended up marrying someone else after numerous failed attempts to get closer to Sarab and confess his deep love for her.

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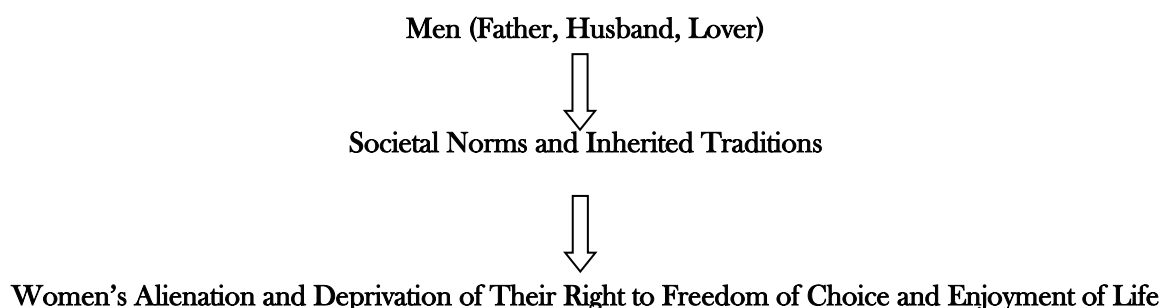
<sup>8</sup>. The Novel, p. 13.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 102.

<sup>10</sup> The Novel, p. 71.

The female characters in the novel suffer from self-alienation, which is clearly reflected in their behaviors and attitudes toward society and the lives they lead. Sarab, the protagonist, rebels against her rural reality, which expects her to be a wife and mother who raises children and serves her husband. However, her dreams go beyond this reality, and she rejects it with all its classificatory standards. Therefore, she defied the norms of her village and continued her education, unlike the girls in her village who are forced to leave school and marry at an early age. She then joined the university and became a mathematics teacher after graduation, despite her passion for poetry, writing, and creativity. Here, her first dreams shattered on the ground of a reality that forced her to work in a field she did not desire, solely to earn the money needed to support her family, especially after her father's illness and their declining social status.

The portrayal of men in the novel—whether as fathers, husbands, or lovers—reflects a painful social reality for women and serves as a primary reason for deepening their sadness and alienation. This is illustrated in the following diagram:



The characters of the novel *"Zero Angles"* are among the most important elements of its success. They embody and play roles, emotions, and powerful ideas that actively confront the various challenges of life. These events also contribute to shedding light on many significant social and psychological issues, offering a profound perspective on the struggles of the Arab individual in the face of contemporary life challenges and their earnest attempts to seek peace and psychological stability.

### 3. Spatial Alienation

Place plays a crucial role in shaping human identity, building personality, and defining thoughts. In *"Zero Angles"*, the setting plays a significant role in deepening the characters' feelings of alienation and loss. The place is a living element and an integral part of the central characters, serving as the ultimate protagonist. The city of Skikda represents the narrative space, connected to other secondary locations that embody a love story between the narrator, the protagonist *Sarab*, and the poet *Suleiman*, which ends in failure and separation. The narrative, with its structure and descriptions, immerses us in a sad and tragic atmosphere filled with pain and suffering. The place is laden with connotations of confusion and loss, primarily through two key spaces:

#### ➤ The Village (The Home):

The home reflects the state of exclusion and marginalization experienced by the protagonist, *Sarab*. It is a space suited for roles of servitude and humiliation—a desolate space devoid of the tranquility and love that fill life. This is due to the psychological and physical separation among its members. *"The mutual influence between the character and the place they inhabit, as well as the surrounding*

*environment, reveals the emotional state the character lives in. It may even contribute to the internal transformations they undergo.*"<sup>11</sup>

In this novel, the author *Asia Boudhanah* relies on the element of folk heritage to illustrate the psychological struggle of the self and its suffering from internal fractures and breakdowns. This suffering intensifies in the landmarks depicted in *"Zero Angles"* through the character of *Sarab*, an educated and dreamy girl whose life is turned upside down, her joy transformed into tragedy. This shift occurs due to an incident that befell her father one evening as he was returning from the city to his village on a bus that was attacked by terrorists. As a result, he suffered a severe head injury, leaving him disabled and confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life, mentally absent and living in his own world, detached from reality and life. This tragic incident marked a decisive turning point in the life of *Sarab*, the once-spoiled girl, who was forced by harsh life circumstances to abandon her dreams after losing her pillar of support and security—her father. *"Terrorist groups attacked a bus and slaughtered most of its passengers... My father returned to us disabled, unable to stand due to physiological damage and unconscious due to traumatic injury. My father became a mere body, devoid of vitality, with no sound or movement, living in a world unknown to us, understood only by him. I entered the school of orphanhood early, while he was still alive."*<sup>12</sup>

In *"Zero Angles"*, the setting breathes life, and its distinctive character emerges from within. The house that once cradled *Sarab*'s childhood, filled with love and tranquility in the embrace of her father and his lavish affection, is the same place that now closes in on her with its walls and sorrows, suffocating her vibrant heart and soul. It transforms her into a body without a spirit after losing its joy and light due to her father's sudden illness, plunging it into the darkness of loss and the loneliness of alienation. The narrator expresses this bitterness in the novel, saying: *"Nothing but ruins and disappointment remain behind your illness, Father. I can no longer distinguish anything from anything else. A whirlwind has thrown me into zero, searching for its angles with a microscope of scattered things after all these years. How I need you, Father, to feel joy, but after you, I have been tossed by the beasts of loss."*<sup>13</sup>

The home in this novel also reflects the state of exclusion and marginalization experienced by the wife, as it becomes a space suited for the role of servitude. It is a desolate space devoid of life due to the psychological and physical separation between the spouses. *"Her gaze, fixed on the floor of the house, told of a deep wound within her."*<sup>14</sup>

#### ➤ The City (Skikda):

This setting in the novel is laden with the pain of love and a false hope for freedom, wrapped in bitterness and heartbreak, especially after the characters fail to live their lives and embrace their dreams naturally. It is Skikda, *"the city of lovers, quiet noise, shy noise, the city of strawberries, Prince Ammar, and peaceful devils—as its visitors fondly call it. As for me, my loud silence has labeled it as ruin, for I have nothing on the margins of this city but it."*<sup>15</sup>

<sup>11</sup> Saleh Wella, Place and Its Significance in Abdel Rahman Munif's Cities of Salt, Modern Books World, Jordan, 2010, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> The Novel, p. 44.

<sup>13</sup> The Novel, p. 101

<sup>14</sup> The Novel, p69

<sup>15</sup> The Novel, p35

This open space in the novel is associated with freedom, symbolizing unrestricted movement without external barriers that limit or restrict the protagonist's freedom as she moves through different spaces in this large city. Skikda embraced both her hopes and pains simultaneously. Sarab, the liberated woman rebelling against her reality and her fate dictated by strict social traditions in her rural society, lives her life in Skikda and exercises her longed-for freedom. She writes poetry and attends literary festivals, staying at a hotel for three consecutive days, enjoying the festival's atmosphere and its delightful evenings with her poet friends. She lives a lavish love story with one of them, *Suleiman*, whose details unfold rapidly, igniting the fire of love and jealousy in her young heart. However, this passionate romantic relationship leaves a deep wound within her, intensifying her alienation and deepening her sadness and loneliness after failing to achieve happiness due to the lack of compatibility and harmony between the two. This fleeting relationship marked another painful turning point in Sarab's life, causing her to lose her friend *Karim*, whom she had always considered just a brother and friend, nothing more. Yet, he loved her madly, and his hopes were dashed after Sarab rejected his love, as she was infatuated with another man, *Suleiman*. In the end, she discovers that Suleiman was merely a passing whim in her life, nothing more, and that her true love was *Karim*, who had always been by her side, sharing her sad and beautiful moments. Thus, Sarab returns to Karim, confessing her love for him, only to face the bitter truth that Karim had become engaged to another woman and loved her because he could not bear the pain of Sarab's rejection and distance.

What is notable about this novel is that it begins with a state of confusion, sadness, and alienation after Sarab loses the tenderness and support of her father, and it ends similarly after she loses the love of her life, her friend, and her pillar of support—*Karim*.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, we can summarize the key findings of this study as follows:

1. **Alienation as a Universal Phenomenon:** Alienation is a human phenomenon that has encompassed various social and psychological patterns, touching diverse cultures created and experienced by humanity.
2. **Multiple Meanings of Alienation:** Alienation revolves around feelings of disconnection, lack of belonging, and dissonance, as well as a failure to reconcile with oneself and reality. This can stem from external societal factors or internal psychological and personal struggles.
3. **Expression of Alienation in *Zero Angles*:** The novel "*Zero Angles*" portrays the alienation and fragmentation experienced by its characters, particularly the protagonist, *Sarab Al-Amiri*, who lives with deep internal alienation torn between a painful past and a rejected present.
4. **Alienation in Character Portrayal:** The characters in the novel embody various states of alienation, such as feelings of loneliness, loss, and fear of life and death. These are reflected in their reactions and behaviors, highlighting their alienated traits.
5. **Themes of Alienation:** The phenomenon of alienation is evident in the novel through a range of themes that reveal the depth of the conflict between the self and reality within the troubled characters, who are searching for stability and meaning in their existence.

6. **Language of Alienation:** The novel is dominated by the language of alienation and its derivatives—loss, sadness, death, darkness, blackness, and the unknown. These alienating terms express the profound internal and external struggles in the characters' lives.

7. **Diverse Settings:** The novel *"The Darkness of Memory"* features a variety of settings, both closed and open spaces, which reflect the psychological states of the characters and their trajectories in the story. These settings are colored by their emotions, embodying their sadness, brokenness, and alienation.

8. **Reflection of Arab Societies:** The novel mirrors the reality of Arab societies, depicting alienation and domestic violence in its various forms and meanings. It portrays the troubled lives of its characters and their uncertain destinies, submerged in the darkness of reality and the shadows of bleak memories.

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