

RESEARCH ARTICLE	Demonstration and representation of the city in "A City in Time of War" by Abdelkader Djemai	
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<b>Abstract</b> In this article, the author examines how the city is represented in literature, focusing on Une ville en temps de guerre by Abdelkader Djemai. The study highlights the city as more than just a setting—it becomes a character shaped by cultural intersections, identity struggles, and social change. Since the 19th century, the city has been viewed as both a place of alienation and a space of creativity and memory. In Maghrebi literature, especially Algerian, the city often contrasts with the village, symbolizing the shift from tradition to a sometimes-violent modernity. The article centers on Oran during the Algerian War, as seen through the memories of Lahouari, the novel's main character. Through his perspective, Djemai depicts the fear, chaos, and emotional toll of war-torn urban life. Ultimately, the article reflects on the city's role in literary creation—as a source of inspiration, memory, and expression of both suffering and dreams.		
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## Introduction

In international literature, the city has consistently been a privileged theme of inspiration for artists who have sought to portray its vitality, variety, splendor or decadence. The forces of modernity converge in the city, cultures intersect and personal and collective identities are forged. Thus, it is a complex and mysterious object that lies at the intersection of various disciplines: geography, sociology, urban sociolinguistics, anthropology, musicology, etc.

Since the 19th century, the city has become a central focus thanks to the emergence of large industrial centers. Authors have begun to explore its darker facets, emphasizing poverty, disease, violence, and alienation. In *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens depicted London as a devastating and miserable place where children suffer exploitation and abuse. In *Germinal*, Emile Zola illustrated the precarious condition of miners in an industrial city in northern France. Like other writers, they opted for an

image of the city as a place where economic and social forces oppress man.

The city is also a place conducive to hope and creation. In contemporary literature, authors have attempted to present it as a haven of freedom allowing for an autonomous and creative life. In *Ulysses*, James Joyce retraced a day spent in Dublin exploring its streets and neighborhoods. In his book "The foam of the days", Boris Vian invented a fictional city, where the protagonists live in absurd and poetic dwellings. For these authors, the city is filled with writings to explore, symbols to understand, faces to decipher and movements to interpret. It thus transforms into a book to read.

In literature, we observe the city from different perspectives: a place conducive to happiness for some characters and above all, a place conducive to unhappiness for others. Since independence, the modern city has also been the subject of criticism related the colonial past. The condemnation of the city is attributed to the fact that

it is the cultural center of the colonized. From this point, it generates and provokes cultural conflicts experienced by the characters. In this context, the image of the city in literary works is a captivating and indispensable subject as intercultural dialogue is clearly manifested. Not only does the intercultural approach give us a better understanding of the urban and village culture illustrated in literary texts, but it also makes us aware of the relative nature of their relationship to the values conveyed in and by the literary texts.

## Discussion

The city has been a favored literary motif among colonized writers. His representations are linked to the city-rural opposition, the main character often being a young schoolboy who aspires to change his destiny from that of a villager by joining the educational system of the other by confronting two very different cultural and urban environments.

In most recent texts, the city remains present but opens up to other perspectives. It is sometimes contemplated, fantasized, but often, reviled and presented as impure, unhealthy and menacing. From their countries of exile, some sing the nostalgia for their home land, the city of childhood; others blame the city for their sorrows and misfortunes, depicting it as prison city, a great cemetery where hopes and dreams end up buried. The city is the country, "the bled", people curse the city for the country and seek to escape it. Between two cities: hometown and host city, the long-awaited and hoped-for happiness remains suspended.

In the texts, fragments of an sorrowful and broken memory often emerge, between city, neighborhood, street, building or dwelling. In pieces, the often cruel fate of men and women is drawn. The daily life of city dwellers is recounted with the city. The city, because the city also has its language, its music and its songs.

The narratives capture moments and "fragments of the urban atmosphere" images then unfold like postcards crystallizing a simile or a gaze: the landscape of the city and memory. In the texts, the past weighs heavily on the conscience, resurrecting memories in these spaces where life was once, good to live. Has the city really changed between then and now?

The city is there, present, invasive, we are wary of the excess of the city; the characters suffocate, it dominates and crushes them. The authors make him a character with a voice and a face, a memory and a story. She is a woman, sometimes beautiful, sometimes ugly, she tells her epics, her tales and her legends. She is a mother, we worship her, we always end up coming back to her. The city, it seems, perverts men; it turns them into monsters or ghosts.

In times of war and disaster, the dead are mourned; the city in ruins is mourned. Haggard eyes, we flee death, the city is no more, but there remain these ties that unite the men that literature tends to re-weave. The writings of the

extreme event, whether of human or natural cause, proliferate; they respond to the need to testify and to put into fiction the disaster in an urban environment. The city is also the street, a place of life and movement. It describes the urban atmosphere, the noise, the tension and the discord. It is a place of paradoxes and social effervescence. We find there "the collective soul" (Gustave le Bon 2002 :12), the people and the public solicited during conflicts and clashes for power. But the street is pernicious because it is there that the "soul of the crowd" is formed (Gustave le Bon 2002 :12). The crowd, a phenomenon of the urban environment, has been intriguing especially since the Arab Spring. We take the crowd or it is she who takes us, it is the "monster with millions of heads" (Hippolyte Taine, 1986 : 295): "The crowd calls the crowd, hatred, curiosity, fear, idleness, conviction, error, expectation, revenge." The city displays its signs and its signs, its texts and its images. It also suffers the anger and revolt of these "walkers" who degrade and violate it, they write on its walls their emotion and disarray, we read and decipher a thousand illusions and disillusion. According to de Certeau, "walkers" are those who practice the city, transform it, "fragment it and divert from its order" (De Certeau, 2011: p.139-142), they write the city but cannot read or grasp it in its entirety; as opposed to "voyeurs" who, from a high point (the top of a building), escape the grip of the city "and manage to read it, but from whom they feel excluded. (De Certeau, 2011: p.139-142).

The painting of the city in Maghreb or Algerian literature of French expression is linked both to the context of colonization and independence of these countries. Maghrebian writers have always chosen the city as a place of narration where, on the one hand, the cultural values of the village die and where, on the other hand, a civilized or modern life is acquired. Thus the city/village opposition forms the narrative structure of Maghreb novels.

Added to this are the conflicts of generations. The education received in school is often opposed to that of parents. The village is characterized by submission to parents and customs, a prison that deprives young people of their freedom. The causes of the rural exodus in the novels are not only limited to material poverty, monotony, or disappointing climatic conditions, but also and above all to the very attractiveness of the city. It is irresistibly attractive by its splendid buildings, its asphalt streets, its paid jobs, its many cars, its motorcycles, the Western language (French), its places of entertainment such as cinema, dance bars, in short, what characterizes the Western world, the modern world.

This article seeks to address the following questions: **How does the author see, present, and describe his hometown? What can the city offer to the creator in their creative work? And in what ways can the author draw inspiration from the city in the process of literary creation?**

The answer to these questions claims the following assumptions: DJEMAI is a talented storyteller who guided us through a crucial era in Algerian history, focusing on the personal journey of his main character in his hometown, Oran. He strove to share with us memories, stories and tragic as well as joyful moments. He strives to portray this city to us through the pains, torments, misfortunes and pleasures of its residents during an extremely trying time in its history, "the time of war".

DJEMAI found in Oran a multitude of details to design his work of art. These elements, which the author was able to observe thanks to his magical writing talent, include aspects such as the scents that permeate the city, the paths filled with the tumult of the demonstrators, the noise of the celebrations, the places where the cinemas, the train station and the campsite are located, etc.

### 1. Demonstrations and representations of the city in "A City in Time of War" by Abdelkader DJEMAI

Abdelkader DJEMAI is one of the Oranese writers of this generation (1945-1950) who all agree at least on one point: their slice of life is linked to the dark period of the War of Independence. In 1961-1962, they entered their teenage years at the same time as the advent of the OAS. In times of armed conflict, adolescents develop a remarkable and memorable ability for personal or collective events, which is extraordinary. Jacques Fieschi, Hadj Cheikh Bouchan, Lucien-Guy Touati and their eldest Michèle Villanueva are involved. Life stories have been given to us by these authors about the tormented period of daily life in Oran.

Oran, 1961-1962. The city, called "la Radieuse- the Radiant ", is ravaged by barbed wire, violence and hatred, and is the scene of bloody fighting between the French army, the OAS and the FLN. At a terrifying pace, neighborhoods are cordoned off, attacks, assassinations, kidnappings, bombings and arrests follow one another. Lahouari Belguendouz, a young boy, witnesses this tragedy that also affects his family and that of his comrades. We navigate the reality of a daily life where war, fortunately, does not consume everything, through his fears and his memories. The streets, games and cinemas of childhood, familiar places, ancient images and the faces of loved ones thus come back to him in memory between life and death.

When the Algerian war ended, DJEMAI was a teenager and his city was ravaged by bloody attacks by the OAS, a panicked departure of the Pieds-Noirs and a French army confronted with the new masters of the FLN and the unfortunates of the OAS. DJEMAI offers the perspective of a child facing this unbridled violence with his usual style and hypersensitivity.

Collective memory defined the chronicles of this Franco-French civil war during the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of Algeria's independence. The Oranese memorial library has just been enriched with a literary work by Abdelkader DJEMAI, "A City in Time of War".

This account brings to light the years of great turmoil. Led by the political commissioners of the official memory who showed themselves, for five decades, unconcerned with regard to this deep and painful wound left still gaping by the OAS at the end of the war, with nearly two thousand Algerian and European victims. (Benkada, S. 2012)

As a result, it can be said that DJEMAI had a great spirit of responsibility towards his hometown and towards a large part of the population, having lived with great intensity these difficult and tragic moments while preserving and evoking snippets of memories. In the aftermath of independence, the memory of the people who sacrificed themselves to prove to the OAS is relatively indifferent, even if they died, they will continue to testify to the extreme horror that plunged the city into a bath of blood and tears for more than a year (April 1961-June 1962) A massive lobotomization helped this.

Although all the characters in this story, with the exception of some of them, designated by their name or by their initials, are fictitious, it should be noted that the author strives to tell here the real events and the events he experienced in Oran, in 1961 and 1962. The book entitled *Un adolescent en temps de guerre* would have been better inspired because it deals only with the daily life of Lahouari Belguendouz, personifying the author who tells the war to what he experienced. The author does not give this book the title of a war time city ; so many painful events have passed in silence. DJEMAI was a teenager when the Algerian war rocked his city and set it on fire. There were violent attacks by the OAS, violent fighting against the Blackfoot, a French army struggling with the new masters of the FLN and the desperados of the OAS. DJEMAI shows through his story that he is a child who feels bad and sad because of the violence.

DJEMAI in his novel "A city in time of war" states that: "Any city, especially if you were born there and where you have lived for a long time, can, in a recurrent, fragmentary or implicit way, accompany a creative work. It is a place, both familiar and still alive in you, that could contribute, through the means of writing, to the birth of stories". In the almost unchanged decor of Oran, the material is at hand. It is made of images, memories, smells, noises, anecdotes, dramatic or happy events. It is for DJEMAI to nourish, through facts, atmospheres, situations and the lives of people, such as his grandparents, neighbors or childhood friends, novels that are as close as possible to the reality and the experience of each one. This is why many of his texts are largely autobiographical. In *A City in Time of War* (Benkada, 2014, pp. 302-307) DJEMAI tried, through the eyes of a teenager, Nouredine, to evoke the bloody period of 1961- 1962 when the city suffered from the atrocities of the OAS. Algerian neighborhoods such as Mdina-Jdida where he was born, and European ones, such as the Plateau Saint-Michel, were separated by barbed wire, all this against the backdrop of attacks, shootings and explosions such as that, one day in Ramadan, of the car bomb on the-

Tahtaha (Car bomb attack by the O.A.S., February 28, 1962, killing several dozen people).

The city is also for DJEMAI the place of a real quest for oneself especially when it comes to a city that one carries within oneself, this quest is implicit, underground, constant and sometimes also open to elsewhere. It is a natural and legitimate concern that has, regardless of the languages or forms used, always accompanied the Algerian creators of yesterday or today.

The city is not always painted as an attractive place that empties the countryside, but also as a place of destruction of traditional values.

**It is the place where traditional values die**

DJEMAI sees that the city is a body and a soul, a being made of wounds, suffering, joys and sorrows. The smells that pass through the city are garbage caused by garbage collectors, and an important kitchen for this traveler. The streets are invaded by the clamor of demonstrators or the sounds of some festivities. The short, very violent and bloody threat is tied in the hand or in the pocket. The city can be very busy, frightened by fear and resigned to the worst. Places where there are movie theatres, a train station and a campsite. The memories of the past and the gloom of those left behind make people suffer. The pulse of the city beats, to the regular rhythm of everyday life, or panics, brought by the jolts of history. Abdelkader DJEMAI lives in the city and she lives there too.

He knows that cities are like gloves. Whatever the material in which they have been carved, the important thing is the traces and the warmth that they leave, after being removed, on the flesh of the hands, which also speak. From these cities, bowing under violence or boredom, he takes what they deign to give him: a piece of decor, a piece of history, the imprint of an odor, the weight of a gesture, the colors of a sky or those of laundry drying at a window or on a balcony. He strives to transform them into words, to translate them, to reinvent them:

Il sait que les villes sont comme les gants. Qu'importe la matière dans laquelle ils ont été taillés, l'important ce sont les traces et la tiédeur qu'ils laissent, après avoir été ôtées, sur la chair des mains, qui parlent elles aussi. De ces cités, ployant sous la violence ou l'ennui, il prend ce qu'elles daignent lui donner : un bout de décor, un morceau d'histoire, l'empreinte d'une odeur, le poids d'un geste, les couleurs d'un ciel ou celles du linge qui sèche à une fenêtre ou sur un balcon. Il s'applique à les transformer en mots, à les traduire, à les réinventer. » (Djemai, A. 2013)

DJEMAI invites his reader to follow the path of his childhood in Oran. In 1961-1962, the Algerian War ended. But before that, Oran, a Catholic and anti-anti-Semitic city in the country, will be dead due to the fratricidal war that lasted several times. Lahouari sees the streets, the neighborhoods, some portraits, the haouch, this "big house", which of course recalls the novel by

Mohamed Dib, where several Muslim families live, the daily life of Algerians and the memories of a kid who is not yet ten years old. Finally, history, and his procession of assassinations, missing persons and attacks. These urban and memorial wanderings show how people spent their lives at this time in our history.

With the help of solid historical documentation and experience in the field of journalism, DJEMAI uses its method to be mindful of facts. He looks at the details of everyday life, putting notes on time and in another place: the blues of Shanghai, the football clubs, the Kid, the Regent, the Empire or the Colosseum, these cinemas where movies were growling.

The OAS and the FLN signed an agreement in Algiers on 17 June. In Oran, the OAS wants to do its scorched earth policy. DJEMAI said that the Micheletti, like most OAS chefs, fled and left alone and helpless those who were going missing on July 5 at the party that had caused a waking nightmare. The FLN is organizing demonstrations on 5 July to celebrate independence. DJEMAI recounts the first shots that are not yet known, the panic and the disarray. The demonstration will be called "nightmare", a nightmare caused by the massacres of Algerians and Europeans, like this man murdered with an axe in the trunk of a black 403 or the mass grave of the Petit Lac. DJEMAI recounts that Algerians walked with their families, with their wives and children on Thursday, which was supposed to be a day of joy. They showed their joy along the elegant facades in front of which they sometimes raised their heads. They had been very dependent on their future and destiny. They had been despised and humiliated.

DJEMAI is not an expert in science. It shows a complicated situation and tragic events in its different dimensions. He evokes the responsibilities of each other, those of the "marsiens", these 25th hour fighters, the criminal excesses of pseudo independence activists, the power struggles within the FLN, the hatred and thirst for revenge of the local OAS, when he hides nothing of the horrors inflicted on Europeans but recalls that the victims were also "Arabs".

On 12 July 1962, Ahmed Ben Bella, who had been conned by Colonel Boumediene, entered the city. Three years later, the president who ran Olympique de Marseille was injured by his defense minister. Abdelkader DJEMAI writes a different story. One particularly The two lions continue to guard the town hall of Oran today. These lions stayed outside because the donkeys reigned inside.

He has always loved the places he has inhabited that one day end up inhabiting him. Lahouari Belguendouz is the narrator of this story, who remembers the city of his childhood, Oran, which continues to inhabit it. "La Radieuse", as it was called before the Algerian war, was killed. The story begins on colorful and happy notes, which show that childhood misery is a fairy tale. War became a place under military occupation. The arenas



became a center for sorting French troops, the grand hotel became a headquarters of the local ceasefire commission. The fort of Santa Cruz is an army transmission center.

The author describes his city; he describes the Algerian war without taking a position, because a child does not understand why we kill each other. There is a family, friends disappearing quickly, streets that vibrate and feel independent, cinemas and small shops, football matches and poisoned fountains. Violence destroys the golden age, but the city remains alive, heals its wounds, and Oran, the main character of this simple story, recalls all the villages where we spent, laughing or screaming, our childhood, all the perfumes, all the tastes, all the strong sensations that are the heart of a human identity. The city is identical; the sun continues to bathe the land and the sea. There was a large amount of water in the anisette, things unfolded quickly. Now, we only kill time, boredom and mosquitoes. The light had become stronger in the country and changed the color of the ash. We no longer look at the colors of the sky and the sea, but beauty is forgotten. The author talks about fear and pain in her childhood. He evokes the "Maid of Algiers", the statue of Joan of Arc, adorned with a Haik after independence. The country is still here. He knows that cities are like gloves. They have been cut, but they have the importance of leaving them on the flesh of hands that also speak. It is this memory that makes us think fifty years later because it has left its memory in the memory of the author and that it touches us. This little boy who

has the child hood of a little boy who does not understand things. The expression of sensations and emotions in a specific period of time. Abdelkader Djemai's writing is simple and modest, it always upsets us.

## Conclusion

In short, the description of the city as an imaginary place of perdition is confirmed by Denise Coussy (2005 : 25) who encapsulates all these critiques with the following: "Most of the texts, however, align with the great current that carries the protagonists towards the cities [...]. But this frantic urbanization does not fail to turn very quickly against those who solicit it without being able to dominate it. Whether by stuffing their stories with personal comments or by directly reporting the reactions of their protagonists, the perpetrators turn into prosecutors who violently indict the city.

The urban area is also depicted in Francophone Maghreb literature as the prime site for acquiring a new culture, or even a change in behavior at the expense of traditional habits. Thus the city is the crossroads of cultures, the hub of linguistic and cultural diversity and the center of uprooting. This is why it is a favorite theme of intercultural in the context of the explanation of literary text in French as a foreign language class.

For DJEMAI, the city is alive, composed of a body and a soul, a being made of wounds, suffering, joys and sorrows.

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