

RESEARCH ARTICLE	Manifestations of Racism and the Narration of Suffering in the Quest for a Lost Self in African Novels: A Reading in the Novels of Haji Jaber	
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Abstract Identity is considered one of the most crucial issues in African narrative, which emerged from the depths of suffering to reveal the tense self through its relationship with existence. Here, we find ourselves confronted with themes of migration, homeland, war, and racism. African novels can be considered a space for revealing the tension between the African individual and their lost identity. In discussing African novels, the narrative of the novelist Haji Jaber is presented. Jaber is an African novelist who has gained considerable recognition recently due to his creative works that depict the image of the African individual, expressing their hopes, pains, and aspirations that have been scattered in a violated homeland that refuses to acknowledge them amidst the fragmentation of identity and a lost self. How could the novelist narrate all this suffering with a deceptive innocence that makes us believe that the subject is merely a novel?		
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Introduction

The novel, according to most critics, is concerned with observing and expressing reality. It showcases the creator's ability to convey societal realities stemming from the collective consciousness to which they belong and sometimes transcending it to express human issues that concern society in a specific time and place. Thus, the novel becomes a historical narrative tangibly justified by the real histories of real nations and used by colonized peoples as a tool for the struggle to prove their unique identity and affirm the existence of their established history¹.

Just as the novel was the preferred medium of the Western colonizer to sweep across the geographical

space of the "Other" world, colonize it, absorb it, and exploit it², it was also how the colonized people regained their voice and reclaimed their ability to reformulate their existence and identity. Writers of the Third World were able to write their narratives, which naturally represent a counter-movement, invading the imperial space itself, conquering it, and reversing roles in a new language, with avenging heroes and a transformed and modified narrative structure, to serve the very goals of the Third World writers, and to shake off the central, metropolitan origin³. In this context, the African novel emerged as a counter-movement that attempted to refute the false image that European writers had been drawing of the African reality. The African novel is the fruit of great effort made by Africans to develop it, adding to it their spirit, the nature of the continent, and the tools of expression inherited through

generations of oral narrative, storytelling, and special linguistic elements.

African literature has long been an unknown realm for the inhabitants of North Africa despite their common belonging to the African continent. Although the Sahara Desert was not a barrier to communication between the north and south of the continent throughout history, colonialism, with its colonial strategy, was able to create that rift between north and south. Despite the lack of Arab interest in sub-Saharan African literature, this literature is achieving strong accomplishments at the global level, as evidenced by the international awards it has received, which allow it to gain a foothold on the world literary map.

The concept of "African literature" has preoccupied African writers and scholars. Mazisi Kunene asked, "What is African literature? Is it literature of a region defined emotionally on a continental basis?" Through his statement, he declares his rejection of the regional meaning and proposes a concept of African literature by saying: "African literature is the literature that depicts an African reality in all its dimensions, and these dimensions do not only include the colors of conflict with the forces that had previous control over the continent but also include the conflicts within the African continent".

Through this definition, it becomes clear to us that African literature, in Mazisi Kunene's view, is that which imitates the reality of Africa in all respects, not only from the historical aspect that sheds light on the suffering and exploitation by the controlling other but also imitates everything related to the Negro race and Negro cultures as well, without any regard or consideration for other races and cultures.

The Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe also emphasizes that African literature cannot be confined to a strict definition... "I do not see African literature as a single unit, but rather as a set of interconnected units that mean the totality of national and ethnic literatures in Africa".

African literature, in its entirety, is the literature of the regions located south of the Sahara Desert, and this is what specialists in this field have agreed upon. If we want to confine it to a definition, we can say that it is an artistic expression of man, the universe, and life, produced by an African individual regardless of their nationality and in whatever language they wrote. It is the literature that flowed from the minds of the children of the African continent, expressing their feelings and influencing the reader in a refined style regardless of time and place.

In light of the continuous growth of the African novel, which has become a bright spot and a distinctive mark in the narrative scene, it is like a new weapon in the hands of Africans, through which they express their strength and rebellion and their identity, and reveal the forgotten and marginalized aspect of the realistic issues that the African continent suffers from. They have achieved an accomplishment that deserves scrutiny, and this is what makes delving into writing about this type a correct choice because of the distinct issues it enjoys.

The African novelist, especially the one who left their homeland for the embrace of the West, returned to his homeland after a long absence in the diaspora with a new awareness, realizing that the history of Africa must be rewritten narratively. He also realized the Western paradox between what is happening in terms of democratic rationality in Europe and the outside world, which is teeming with denigration of the other and his culture. The African novelist returned to history, and from it, he drew stories from the heart of reality.

Most African novels focus in their narration on place, history, and characters, and the exposure of African reality and the unveiling of ideology. This is to create a special aesthetic, and this is what George Lukács confirms when he says that any description that does not include the characters' view of the world cannot be complete. The view of the world is the highest form of consciousness, and the writer obscures the most important element of the person standing in his mind when he neglects the view of the world. The view of the world is a deep personal experience that the individual lives and it is the biggest change that distinguishes his inner essence, and it reflects at the same time the issues of his era⁶. This represents the ambition of the African novelist to express fundamental issues, as he wanted to convey an important message to the world about Africa in terms of cultural specificity and identity.

The African novel has successfully narrated the continent's history, achieving a prominent position among global narrative trends, particularly with the rise of translation. African novels recount the history of colonialism and resistance alongside daily life patterns marked by marginalization and oppression. Moreover, these novels are rich in fantastical elements, local folklore, and ancient heritage.

The continuation of the African narrative signifies a discourse on African identity and its contemporary cultural product. Various novels penned by Africans have sought to depict the continent in its primordial form and the problems brought about by colonialism. It is challenging to speak of a single African novel due

to the abundance of African writings; each new novel carves its own space.

1. Issues of the African Novel:

The African novel responds to the inner turmoil of the self within the realm of issues that Africa continues to grapple with, such as identity, the self and the other, the subordinate, alienation, and exile, as well as escape and resistance. Drawing upon history, it carries the burdens of the reality that Africans endure, particularly racial discrimination based on form, color, and race. It championed African causes, defended the human right to live with dignity, and exposed the apartheid regime. The novel transformed into a cry for coexistence, rejecting all forms of racism and fanaticism.

In the modern era, the African novel has articulated specific issues that remained unresolved within the local context of the African individual's concerns. The post-colonial era witnessed the diagnosis of cultural residues left by the colonizers in Africa through political and cultural elites. The African novelist attempted to manipulate the strings of history and oral tradition to rewrite historical events that writers had depicted through narrative methods blended with imagination. Experimental novels and chaotic works emerged in the process of doubt and loss of trust in the official and narrated accounts of specific entities. This sometimes led the African novelist to shed the shackles of traditions and customs, addressing partial issues and sometimes returning to the self and all that is human, transcending borders due to conflicts and bloody wars.

This genre bestowed upon the African tale a global value and distinction. Although the African novelist continued to write in the language of the other, the voice calls out in reading the stances of the other who was once a colonizer at the hands of the white man. Africa's experience in the written novel is recent, while in the oral sense, storytelling is rooted in the memory of man and his folk heritage. People narrate the past and memories, and stories are told from daily experiences and the experiences of ancestors. Rituals and beliefs are evidence of the fertile legacy of storytelling. In West Africa, attempts to author novels in the Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo languages flourished, all within Nigeria. Similarly, attempts in the East flourished in the Swahili language in Tanzania, the Kikuyu in Kenya, and the Acholi in Uganda. However, these attempts have not yet gone beyond the realm of individual adventures⁷.

Consolidating a culture of rejection through creative writings about tyranny and division within the homeland and the marginalization of the Igbo ethnicity, the

modern novel has increasingly focused its attention on ordinary reality. Ordinary reality, in turn, has become the focal point of the modernist novelist's attention⁸. The statement here applies to the mechanisms of the novelistic narrative, far from the linear narrative and the era of heroes and fixed values that used to glorify heroism.

When reading the modern African novel, one is struck by this narration of place, history, characters, the logic of humor and irony, and the exposure of African reality. The African novel has come to reveal the forgotten and marginalized aspect of the realistic issues that the continent suffers from. If the statement applies to neutralizing the previous narrative symbols of the new generation of novelists, then the matter is also reasonable, provided that African issues are at the heart of the story. The novelist is not a self that represents all selves and, conversely, does not reside in concrete towers, addressing minds and changing people's convictions when he possesses the ability to construct human positions from just causes without seeking flimsy justifications for Western colonialism for example.

The African individual's right to his land and the organization of his affairs are imperative. Therefore, when the African novelist wrote about fundamental issues, he wanted to convey an important message to the world about Africa in terms of cultural specificity and identity. When the African novel depicts specific scenes in an artistic way in which the place and characters are evident, the work is nothing but the obsessions and dreams of the self in reform, development, and return to the roots. An endless dialogue between the self and itself in the language of the tribe and the literary language itself, spoken and written, because it is unique, not only based on its general linguistic signs in an abstract way but according to the forms of its interpretations. It is a language arranged in layers and linguistically diverse in its concrete appearance, which is semantic and expressive in the eyes of others⁹.

It can be said that the novelist was nourished by history; every society has a fundamental complex that must be unraveled. If we return to history and the past, we will find the secret to the current crises that Africa suffers from. Why is there racism in African societies? The reason is the white man and discrimination based on color, race, and culture... And why is there a multiplicity of religions in Africa? The answer is the other. Knowing that African society is diverse in traditions, customs, and local values, Africa has become teeming with movements and groups that fight for identity under the banner of the sovereignty of one creed. It would have been more appropriate for Africans to choose what suits them with conviction, without coercion or

compulsion in adopting values from any other civilization.

The African novelist conveys phrases and words from a world rich in stories, traditions, and celebrations to the other. The narrative discourse is woven by a thoughtful self that possesses a vision of the phenomena that penetrate society and a vision from the heart of the story derived from reality and colored with the colors of narration and imagination. It is clear that the person who speaks is not only a person and not only a speaker; the African novelist does not conceal the affiliation to the text that expresses the affiliation to the roots, origin, and place. His discourse in the novel is not directed towards consumption or free propaganda, nor the production of certainty and solid truth because the novelist expresses the possible from a world that he draws with imagination and flowing language, where the words and the story leave impressions on the reader; to reconsider the world, and educate man to respect the feelings of the other.

The African novelist observes the vicissitudes of politics and collective life and turns to the past, both distant and recent, to explore the weakness that afflicted the African individual in the face of the white man. The weapon of irony, even in the Socratic manner, appears to be a process and a function for the African novelist in tracing the path of the novel's characters and the story's rhythm.

The African novelist is a conscience and a bell that rings in the ears of the reader and is directed towards the idea that forms the unity of the group through a narrative world that combines description and narration of times and places and present and absent worlds. He is a historian of a different kind who is not interested in examining archives and manuscripts; however, from the historical material, he creates a unique and rich world with stories from Africa's distant and recent history, and subjective impressions are formed in the reader in changing established opinions and positions. This is how criticism works for the African and global novel towards the birth of new horizons for creativity that overthrow the traditional image and leave impressions of the features of the new novel, or what is now known as the postmodern novel.

2. The Lost Identity and the Crisis of the Self in the Novel *Samrawit* by Haji Jaber:

The novel *Samrawit* is the first work of the Eritrean writer Haji Jaber, published in 2012 and won the Sharjah Prize for Arab Creativity in the same year. The novel carries within it a mixture of memories, reflections, and the search for identity and deals with deep

political and social issues, such as exile, alienation, and tyranny.

The novel revolves around an exiled Eritrean young man named Omar, who spent most of his life in Saudi Arabia and carries within him a conflict between his homeland, which he is far from but lives in his conscience, and between the life of alienation that provided him with material stability but increased his spiritual alienation.

The narrative begins with Burhan's decision to return to Eritrea after many years spent away from it. The journey represents a desire to reconcile with the past and understand identity, and during his journey, the political and social vision that Eritrea went through deepens, and the effects left by colonialism and internal conflicts.

The events of the novel start from its hero "Omar", who left Eritrea as a fetus in his mother's womb and his father emigrated with him to Jeddah, where he was born a stranger and lived in it as a stranger to his homeland written on his forehead and on his passport the journey of Omar's tragedy, Omar, who was born and lived in Jeddah and breathed its air and was saturated with its dialect and encouraged its clubs, to be shocked later by his foreignness and he did not exceed the age of seven until he was exhausted by the search without success for a school that embraces him, and he fails because he is a foreigner, and because the quota allocated to foreigners is limited, he is forced at that time to join an evening school to eradicate illiteracy, but Omar does not comprehend his foreignness, he tries to coexist by playing the role of his companions, even through lying, so every day at noon he plays the role of the student returning from school, so he throws his empty wallet and goes out to play in the neighborhood like his peers, then he goes every evening secretly to literacy lessons carrying his heavy bag with representation that lasted for two years and after it he was enrolled in school.

Omar grows up, and his awareness of his foreignness grows with him when he is unable to obtain a scholarship to enter university and then when he practices journalism, his suffering increases from being Eritrean and not a Saudi citizen, and this is through a survey of opinions that he conducted, and this is what revealed their resentment against the foreigner, and they call him the jerboa accused of all the ills of society, from unemployment to pollution, this difficult situation proved to him that he is a stranger to his homeland, and the homeland of birth continues to expel him until he realizes that he lives with half a heart and half a mind, to decide to return to Eritrea in search of his origins

and his homeland that he knows nothing about except its name and its location on the map.

Omar returns to Eritrea and discovers his torn homeland between the national liberation political movements. Here, the feeling of joy and sadness mixes inside Omar as he approaches himself by standing on the ruins of his parents' birthplace, so he wakes up to the disappointment of throwing himself into the arms of the homeland and thus ends the journey of completing the halves that Omar collected between Jeddah and Eritrea, but in the end, nothing remains but Omar, who consoles his fragmented self.

The hero "Omar" meets "Samrawit," an Eritrean girl who bears a name that reflects the authenticity of the country. He meets her during his journey, and a love relationship full of challenges begins between them. And here we stand before a character that symbolizes Eritrea itself, with its beauty, history, and suffering.

Through our reading of the novel, we can sense two discourses, the first of which expresses Burhan's journey into himself, where he recalls his memories in exile and his reflections on identity and belonging, and the second discourse reveals sensitive social details through the family life of the hero, and the negative effects that tyrannical wars have produced on society.

We can feel the hero's suffering through the conflict he lives between his Eritrean identity, which he lost contact with due to exile, and between the life of diaspora that imposed a strange reality on him, and we can feel this from the beginning through the title that symbolizes the homeland he is looking for, the novel reflects the state of permanent exile, whether inside the homeland due to political oppression, or outside the homeland due to geographical alienation, and here we find ourselves not in front of alienation with geographical boundaries, but it extends to a spiritual and psychological alienation, and the threads of this narrative become clear through Burhan's relationship with Samrawit, which is a means of reconciling with the self, but it is full of challenges that reflect the reality of life in Eritrea, the novelist sheds light on the troubled history of Eritrea, from the era of colonialism to colonialism and what followed it of wars and conflicts.

It is undoubtedly true that most of the people who emigrated from their homelands did not do so out of love for being away but rather to escape the bitter reality they experienced in their homelands and in search of possibilities and opportunities that their countries failed to provide for them. The reason for emigration may be the political situation, as well as the lack of freedom or war, which prompts them to emigrate in search of a

safe place that embraces them, shelters them, and provides them with the minimum rights of living. This is the case with Omar's parents, as they emigrated during the war in the mid-seventies from Eritrea to Saudi Arabia, hoping for a better life. They try to settle down and adapt to the new environment and the new homeland, but this does not make them forget their homeland or diminish their love for it in any way, but rather increases their longing and yearning for it. Throughout the novel, we will see Eritrea through the eyes of all the characters, sometimes we see it through the eyes of longing in the words of Omar's grandmother and through the words of his parents, and sometimes, we see it from the point of view of Omar's Eritrean friends, the expatriates. It is obvious to us that whoever lives as a refugee or an immigrant is not like someone who lives in his homeland, as he is always accompanied by a feeling of deficiency that stirs in his chest. This is also the case with our hero Omar, who says: "In Saudi Arabia, I did not live as a pure Saudi, nor as a pure Eritrean, I was something in between, something that possesses half belonging, half longing, half patriotism, and half attention"¹⁰.

Through the secret passage, we can feel an internal conflict that the hero lives with himself, and the reason is clear he is deprived of his homeland, and he lives racism and discrimination in his second homeland that rejects him at every opportunity, so he suffers from a feeling of alienation and estrangement, and he sees himself lost in a closed vortex, he says: "In Saudi Arabia, I did not live as a pure Saudi, nor as a pure Eritrean, I was something in between"¹¹. The character lives in constant anxiety about identity and alienation, an anxiety that every expatriate lives, as he possesses half longing, half alienation, half patriotism, half belonging, and half loneliness, especially since the feeling of alienation increases when the land that fate has led him to rejects him, as if it is calling him to return to his original homeland, regardless of his destiny.

The racial discrimination and Omar's longing and yearning for his homeland led him to search for the fragments of himself and his lost identity; this lost self in Saudi Arabia. The hero aspires to return to the homeland to prove his identity and completeness and even to get rid of the halves that haunted him in his residence in Saudi Arabia so that the hero's suffering is renewed to live the conflict of the stranger in his homeland when Eritrea treats him as a visitor to it and not as someone returning to it, laden with his longing, yearning, and regret for the time he lived away from it.

Upon his arrival in the capital, Asmara, the journey of searching for completeness begins, where he meets a girl named "Samrawit," an Eritrean girl coming from her Parisian exile. Samrawit, who is Christian, from an

Eritrean father and a Lebanese mother, begins with their joint search for their dream homeland. This meeting is a meeting of two Eritrean young people who are separated by their religions and their social environment and who are brought together by their Arabism and their love for every inch of the homeland they lived far from, but they aspire to discover its features, to live a strong love relationship, but it soon ends due to religious differences. This rejection is a direct reference to the social situation that was marked by the distance that the regime left between the sects of Eritrean society, Muslims and Christians. Here ends the journey of completion after Omar fails in trying to unite with that half-Arab Christian liberated because it has a deeper dimension, as Samrawit is more than a woman; she is the motherland, which is Eritrea, for which Omar fought, but its features were not completed.

The word Samrawit, derived from Astra, which means the brown color that expresses the beauty of the African woman, which is a distinctive feature that distinguishes her from the rest of the women of the world, and carries different semiotic connotations that enable the reader to see the content of the novel. It is like a passport and a tourist guide to Eritrea, as it takes us around its alleys and informs us of its secrets. It occurs to the recipient that the events of the novel take place in Eritrea through the image of the outer cover as well as through the name that means ancient Eritrea, and as for Samrawit here, it is the name of a major character of the novel's characters that the hero of the story, "Omar," falls in love with when he meets her in Asmara and a love relationship arises between them. The name Samrawit is a well-known female name in Eritrea, and it is derived from Asmara, the capital of Eritrea then the suffix "white" was added to it, which means the color white in English. The writer and novelist, author of this novel, "Haji Jaber," indicated that the name Samrawit means ancient Eritrea, as he stated in a press interview.

The novelist was keen to send a coded message to the other, the meaning of which is that the identity of the African is no longer covered and secured for the benefit of others and that the African person is no longer that primitive person with less mental abilities as claimed by the most famous philosophers and thinkers, especially the Western ones, but has become their equal, strongly rejecting what many of those with a racist and biased view of the white man have gone to, that racist binary of white/black, which is directly opposed by the binary of civilized/savage.

This racist vision prompted the novelist to express his philosophy through which he affirms his identity and defines his intellectual system about his perception of reality, so he was keen to have a pure African philosophy that is based on examining the general philosophy

that draws the general lines of African wisdom that complements human wisdom.

Based on this, the issue of defining the identity of the Africans was very important, as some African researchers say. Identity is a common term at present, but it is not always used clearly, and its prominence today indicates the growing interest and concern about its subject. Therefore, the interpretation of the term identity was very important. ¹³Identity includes individual and personal characteristics in addition to the material and spiritual aspects approved by these groups¹³. Thus, it includes the individual and the collective and focuses on the societal components that distinguish the essence of this society from others.

The novelist places the reader within the game of storytelling, starting from the title and the cover as a textual threshold. Perhaps what distinguishes the cover is the dominance of the color of nature in different shades and the color of the Eritrean environment, which indicates poverty, poor social conditions, and the suffering experienced by the people of Eritrea in light of this barren land. The cover came in the color of Bedouin nature, which represents the Eritrean heritage that the writer tried through his fertile imagination to shed light on¹⁴. Then the tragedies and suffering appear, as we mentioned, in the depths of that Eritrean woman who walks worried, pale-faced, drooping her head, and heavy-footed, heading towards the fields seeking a livelihood, wearing traditional Eritrean clothes, which is nothing but a symbol of the motherland, Eritrea.

¹Said, E. (2004). *Culture and imperialism* (K. Abu Deeb, Trans.). Dar Al-Adab, p. 146.

² Ibid., p. 18.

³ Ibid., p. 18.

⁴ Shalash, A. (1987). *African literature*. Dar Alam Al-Ma'rifa, p. 15.

⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶ Lukács, G. (1985). *Studies in realism* (N. Blouz, Trans.). Al-Mu'assasa Al-Jami'iyya, p. 25.

⁷ Shalash, A. *African literature*, p. 131.

⁸ Matz, J. (2016). *The evolution of the modern novel* (L. Al-Dulaimi, Trans.). Dar Al-Mada, p. 125.

⁹ Bakhtin, M. (1987). *The dialogic imagination* (M. Barada, Trans.). Dar Al-Fikr, p. 60.

¹⁰ Jaber, H. *Samrawit*, p. 11.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² David kirwa tarus & Stephanie Lowery, African Theologies of identity and Community: The Contributions of John Mbiti, Jesse Mugambi, Vincent Mulago, and Kwame Bediako, African theologies of identity- and Community, published by De Gruyter Open, Open Theology, 2017, p305.

¹³ Ibid., p. 305.

¹⁴ Al-Basri, A. (2013, March 29). *Sanrawit by the Eritrean writer Haji Jaber: The search for self and homeland*. Al-Quds Al-Arabi.

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