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Socio-National, Arab, and Humanitarian Problematics in Algerian Very Short Fiction: A Thematic and Critical Analysis of the Works of Bashir Khalf

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Issue web link<https://imcra-az.org/archive/387-science-education-and-innovations-in-the-context-of-modern-problems-issue-12-vol-8-2025.html>**Keywords**

Very short story; Algerian literature; Bashir Khalf; thematic analysis; national issues; social critique; narrative condensation.

Abstract

The very short story has emerged in contemporary Algerian literature as a condensed yet expressive narrative form capable of engaging with complex social, political, and humanitarian concerns. Within this literary context, Algerian very short fiction has moved beyond purely aesthetic experimentation to become a reflective medium addressing national realities, Arab collective concerns, and universal human dilemmas. This study examines the thematic dimensions of the very short stories of Bashir Khalf, one of the prominent figures in Algerian narrative writing, whose works combine narrative brevity with critical depth. Adopting a thematic analytical approach, this research investigates the central issues articulated in Khalf's very short stories, with particular attention to national socio-economic challenges, moral paradoxes, and questions of dignity, justice, and social responsibility. The study focuses on two of his short story collections—*Not a Little Joy* and *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness*—both published by the National Library of Algeria in 2017 and largely unexplored from a strictly thematic perspective in existing scholarship. The analysis reveals that Khalf's narratives foreground pressing Algerian realities such as poverty, marginalization, distorted social values, and the failure of public policies to ensure dignified living conditions for working citizens. Through narrative condensation, symbolic suggestion, and anonymous or typified characters, the author exposes the contradictions of social life, particularly through motifs such as begging, lawful provision, and survival strategies. These themes are not treated merely as individual moral failings but as symptoms of broader structural and ethical crises. The study further argues that the engagement with national and Arab issues does not diminish the literary specificity of the very short story. On the contrary, it reinforces its expressive power by transforming minimal narrative space into a site of dense social critique and human reflection. By situating Bashir Khalf's works within the broader landscape of contemporary Algerian literature, this research contributes to the reassessment of the very short story as a serious narrative genre and highlights the importance of thematic approaches in uncovering its aesthetic and ideological dimensions.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary Algerian narrative discourse has witnessed remarkable diversification, encompassing the novel, the short story, and the very short story. This multiplicity has enriched the literary landscape and allowed writers to experiment with form, language, and thematic focus. Within this context, the very short story has gained particular prominence due to its ability to convey complex meanings through minimal narrative space, relying on implication, irony, and symbolic compression.

In Algeria, the very short story has frequently engaged with national concerns, Arab issues, and global human questions, without sacrificing its formal and aesthetic integrity. It has provided a platform for both established writers and emerging voices, thereby ensuring the continuity and renewal of narrative creativity. Bashir Khalf represents a significant figure in this trajectory, as his works exemplify the genre's potential to articulate social critique within a tightly controlled narrative framework (Khoya, 2019, pp. 158–167).

This study raises the following central research question: **What are the main issues that Bashir Khalf seeks to highlight in his Algerian very short stories?**

From this overarching inquiry emerge several subsidiary questions:

- What national issues are foregrounded in Bashir Khalf's narratives?
- To what extent do his stories address Arab and broader human concerns?
- Does the engagement with social and national issues compromise the literary specificity of the very short story?

The present research is framed under the title *Issues in Algerian Very Short Stories: A Study of Bashir Khalf's Works*. Its objectives are threefold. First, it aims to introduce and re-evaluate the contribution of Algerian writers whose works have not received sufficient critical attention. Second, it seeks to enrich the study of the very short story by applying a thematic approach capable of revealing its semantic depth and aesthetic strategies. Finally, it encourages renewed engagement with contemporary Algerian literature, which remains underrepresented in comparison to Eastern Arab literary studies, despite its richness and originality.

Methodologically, the study adopts a thematic analytical approach, focusing on selected texts from two short story collections by Bashir Khalf: *Not a Little Joy* and *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness*, both published by the National Library of Algeria in 2017. These collections have not previously been examined through a purely thematic lens, which justifies the present investigation.

2. Issues in Very Short Stories

In his very short stories, Bashir Khalf addresses a wide range of issues that reflect the complexities of Algerian society. These issues can be broadly classified into national, Arab, and universal categories. This section focuses primarily on **national issues**, which constitute a central thematic axis in his work.

2.1 National Issues

One of the most striking national issues explored by Bashir Khalf is **begging**, which he treats not merely as an individual moral failing but as a symptom of deeper structural and institutional dysfunction. In the very short story *Comfortable Income*, the author employs narrative condensation and suggestive imagery to expose the paradox of profitable begging as an alternative to honest labour. The protagonist, who once worked diligently, finds that his earnings are insufficient to meet basic household needs. As a result, he resorts to begging, which paradoxically provides greater financial security than legitimate work:

“He placed a small plate in front of him, merely extended his hand, and returned home moments before sunset carrying whatever he desired.” (Khalf, 2017, p. 71)

Through this brief yet powerful scene, Khalf highlights the contradictions inherent in social policies that fail to protect and reward hard work. Begging, in this context, becomes a rational response to systemic injustice rather than a personal choice. The “small plate” functions symbolically, representing minimal dignity and sufficiency. Its size invites a critical question: if a small plate can ensure survival, why are institutional mechanisms incapable of guaranteeing a dignified and abundant life for productive citizens?

Notably, the protagonist in this story remains unnamed, a deliberate narrative strategy that universalises the experience and transforms the character into a collective symbol of the marginalised Algerian worker. Anonymity reinforces the idea that the problem is not individual but societal.

A similar theme is revisited in the very short story *Lawful Provision*, where begging is portrayed not as a consequence of deprivation but as an addiction to effortless gain. Here, the protagonist is an elderly blind woman in her nineties, whose prolonged engagement in begging has shaped her worldview and moral reasoning. She justifies her practice by invoking religious legitimacy: "It is a good, lawful provision that God has granted me; would I refuse it?"

This narrative shift allows Khalf to explore the moral ambivalence surrounding begging, contrasting necessity-driven behaviour with habitual exploitation of public sympathy. Together, the two stories present begging as a multifaceted social phenomenon shaped by economic policy, moral rationalisation, and individual psychology.

Another significant national issue addressed in Khalf's very short stories is **negligence**, closely associated with corruption, favouritism, and the erosion of public responsibility. In the story *Negligence*, the protagonist is a reckless bus driver whose repeated traffic violations endanger public safety. Despite having his licence revoked, he successfully retrieves it through bribery and personal connections, commonly referred to as the "Beni Amist" policy. The narrative exposes the cyclical nature of corruption through a moment of ironic confrontation:

"The traffic police stopped him again, astonished. The radar recorded him speeding once more. 'You weren't stopped yesterday... why? And here you are, driving at the same speed.'" (Khalf, 2017, p. 71)

This episode underscores the normalisation of corruption and the failure of accountability mechanisms. Negligence here is not limited to individual recklessness but extends to institutional complicity, revealing a broader crisis of governance and ethical responsibility.

Deception constitutes another national issue in Khalf's narratives, exemplified in the story *The Soothsayer*. The narrator situates the event explicitly in *Bab Azoun*, a well-known area in Algeria, thereby anchoring the narrative in a concrete socio-cultural space. A woman with striking Naïli features offers to read the protagonist's palm, promising wealth and happiness. However, the protagonist's self-awareness allows him to recognise the futility of her claims:

"Beauty, wealth, power... you live your days happily, she said, scrutinising my face. I withdrew my hand... I fled, murmuring to myself: 'A beggar who cannot even afford coffee.'" (Khalf, 2017, p. 54)

Through irony and self-reflection, the story critiques social deception and the exploitation of hope in contexts marked by economic hardship. The soothsayer's performance reflects broader patterns of illusion and false promise that thrive in times of uncertainty.

Arab Issues in Bashir Khalf's Very Short Stories

Bashir Khalf continues to address national concerns while simultaneously expanding his narrative horizon to encompass broader Arab issues. Through his very short stories, he contributes to the critical discourse on contemporary Arab realities, drawing attention to subtle yet significant social transformations. His narrative project reflects a firm belief that social reform and individual welfare can only be achieved by employing storytelling as an aesthetic medium capable of transmitting ideas, values, and critical awareness. As Khalf himself asserts, "*creative texts do not emerge from a vacuum; rather, they carry messages and convey discourses*" (Khalf, 2017, p. 37).

Among the most pressing social challenges confronting Arab societies today is the phenomenon of **divorce** and its increasing prevalence. This issue is examined in the narrative titled "*Apprehension*", which extends over two pages and offers a nuanced, multidimensional exploration of marital breakdown within contemporary Arab society (Khalf, *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness*, 2017, p. 33). The narrative approaches divorce from two complementary yet distinct perspectives, thereby enriching its thematic depth.

The first perspective focuses on divorced men who experience difficulty establishing new and stable relationships. This difficulty is often attributed to their tendency to seek marriage with significantly younger women, resulting in profound imbalances in awareness, expectations, and life experience. The narrative subtly exposes how such relationships are frequently doomed to failure due to incompatibilities rooted in age, social status, psychological

maturity, and accumulated life responsibilities—particularly when the male partner brings the burden of a previous marriage and children into the new relationship.

The second perspective highlights the growing **consciousness and autonomy of young women in the twenty-first century**. Unlike previous generations, contemporary young women are no longer inclined to accept marriage as a social obligation imposed by tradition or family authority. Instead, they demonstrate critical awareness and an insistence on transparency, mutual understanding, and informed decision-making. This shift reflects a broader transformation in Arab societies, where women increasingly assert their right to comfort, dignity, and self-determination.

Although the narrative of "*Apprehension*" does not explicitly define all elements of its narrative structure, the setting is clearly identified as the bride's house during an engagement ceremony. Temporal markers remain implicit; however, the story is unmistakably situated within the socio-cultural framework of the twenty-first century. In this context, time becomes secondary to the thematic focus, as the narrative prioritises the exploration of divorce and its social ramifications over chronological precision. The central tension arises from societal reluctance to accept divorced individuals as marital partners, a reluctance rooted in perceived incompatibilities of class, age, awareness, and social status.

The male protagonist is revealed to be divorced with four children, a fact disclosed not by him but by the female protagonist. The bride, a young woman in her twenties, embodies the new generation's critical consciousness. Her questioning of the fiancé marks a decisive break from traditional marital norms, as she whispers to him:

"You have four children and a wife whom you married ten years ago. Why did you divorce her?" (Mohamed, 1996, p. 5)

This moment serves as a pivotal narrative turning point, revealing the bride's refusal to enter marriage without understanding the full context of her partner's past. Her insistence on transparency underscores the belief that prior experiences significantly shape future marital dynamics. Knowledge, in this sense, becomes a prerequisite for building a meaningful and sustainable relationship.

Through this interaction, Khalf foregrounds the emergence of a new Arab female voice—one that is assertive, inquisitive, and resistant to silence. This representation stands in stark contrast to earlier generations, in which marriages were often arranged according to tribal, familial, or clan-based norms, with little regard for women's consent or awareness. Historically, marriage functioned as a collective social institution governed by inherited customs, marginalising women's agency and denying them the right to interrogate the past experiences of divorced men.

The narrative culminates in a decisive act that symbolises this profound socio-cultural transformation: "*Her face wrinkled... her body sagged. She removed the ring and returned it to him amid the astonishment of those present.*" (Khalf, *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness*, 2017, p. 31)

This gesture, though minimally narrated, carries powerful connotations. It signifies the rejection of imposed marital expectations and affirms the woman's right to self-determination. The scene cannot be fully understood without reference to the broader frameworks of the twenty-first century, in which women have achieved higher social visibility and greater freedom of expression. As societal authority gradually dismantles patriarchal structures, women increasingly reclaim their voices after decades of marginalisation (Monufy, 2000, p. 7).

Beyond individual social relationships, Khalf extends his thematic engagement to collective Arab experiences, particularly the **Arab Spring** and its devastating consequences across multiple Arab countries, including Iraq, Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt. In *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness*, the Arab Spring is not portrayed as a moment of liberation but rather as a period marked by destruction, fragmentation, and prolonged suffering. This perspective is vividly articulated in the very short story "*The Vikings*":

"The Vikings attacked from the air. They burned everything green and dry. They wiped out all life. They separated loved ones. Instead, they sowed the seeds for brothers to kill each other. They incited hatred and division among the children of one nation. The scythe of death has been reaping lives for seven years..." (Khalf, *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness*, 2017, p. 32)

Through metaphorical language, the “Vikings” symbolise external and internal forces of destruction that exploit political upheaval to dismantle social cohesion. The narrative condemns the transformation of revolutionary aspirations into prolonged cycles of violence, sectarianism, and civil strife, emphasising the shared tragedy experienced across the Arab world.

Another recurrent Arab issue in Khalf’s work is **the corruption of political authority**, particularly the monopolisation of power by elite groups who exploit public resources for personal gain. This theme is addressed in the story *“The Closest Ones”*, which exposes how authority figures, once entrusted with representing the people, gradually detach themselves from public interests. Instead, they engage in systematic embezzlement, distributing wealth among family members and loyal allies.

Although the narrative context is not confined to a specific country, the issue resonates strongly across multiple Arab states, as evidenced by widespread popular movements rejecting corruption and authoritarian governance. Countries such as Iraq, Libya, and Saudi Arabia exemplify this phenomenon, where access to power often marks the beginning of exploitation rather than service. Khalf’s narrative thus transcends national boundaries, positioning corruption as a shared Arab dilemma that undermines social justice, economic stability, and public trust.

Global and Humanitarian Issues in Bashir Khalf’s Very Short Stories

In addition to national and Arab concerns, **Bashir Khalf** extends the thematic scope of his very short stories to encompass **global and humanitarian issues**, thereby situating Algerian narrative production within a universal human framework. This expansion is particularly evident in the collection *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness*, whose paratextual threshold introduces the notion of *Narrative Twitters*, signalling a mode of writing characterised by brevity, immediacy, and global resonance.

Despite the multiplicity of issues addressed, these texts are unified by their emphasis on shared human experiences that transcend geographical, cultural, and temporal boundaries. Among the most prominent of these is the theme of **betrayal**, which operates as a fundamental existential motif linking the self to the other across the continuum of human history. Betrayal, in Khalf’s narratives, is neither confined to a specific cultural context nor restricted to a particular historical moment; rather, it is presented as an enduring human condition that continually reappears in new forms.

This thematic focus is articulated through suggestive narrative markers such as *“He lured him...”* (Khalf, *Not a Little Joy*, 2017, p. 20), while the narrative closure often culminates in expressions of alienation and distancing, as in *“sticking to someone else, distancing myself”* (Youssef, 2017, p. 11). These phrases encapsulate a universal psychological experience in which trust is manipulated and intimacy becomes a site of rupture. The very short story *“Their Cunning”* exemplifies this approach by condensing complex events into a minimal narrative space without diminishing the gravity of the central issue. Although spanning only two pages, the story succeeds in foregrounding betrayal as a profound moral and existential dilemma.

Beyond interpersonal relations, Khalf’s global vision extends to **artistic and cultural dilemmas**, particularly those related to creativity, originality, and intertextuality. The stories *“The Greatest of All”* and *“Contemporary Art”* address issues that are inherently universal, raising fundamental questions about the nature of artistic production in the modern world. These narratives interrogate whether intertextual engagement with previous artworks constitutes plagiarism or represents a legitimate and necessary creative practice. They further explore how artists can establish originality while operating within a dense network of cultural references.

The title *“The Greatest of All”* (Khalf, *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness*, 2017, p. 13) suggests that creative excellence does not emerge from isolation but from meaningful dialogue with existing artistic traditions. The narrative implicitly argues that every great creator builds upon the achievements of predecessors, reworking them into new forms that bear a distinctive personal imprint. In this sense, originality is not negated by intertextuality; rather, it is achieved through transformation and reinterpretation. The metaphor underlying the narrative implies that just as a lion remains a lion even if it feeds on sheep, a creative work maintains its uniqueness even when it incorporates elements from other texts or artworks.

Similarly, the story *“Contemporary Art”* examines a pressing global debate concerning the boundaries of artistic legitimacy in visual art. The narrative questions whether contemporary artistic practices are grounded in theoretical

knowledge and aesthetic principles or merely consist of arbitrary gestures devoid of intellectual depth. This critique is conveyed indirectly through a performative scene in which the artist pours paint onto a canvas and manipulates it with a broom while proclaiming: “*Visual art keeps pace with modernity... it merges with cosmic struggles.*” (Khalf, *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness*, 2017, p. 14)

Through irony and minimalism, the narrative exposes the tension between genuine artistic innovation and superficial experimentation. While acknowledging that artistic creativity is a key indicator of societal development, as suggested by Fathi’s proposition that “*we now measure the progress of societies and their radiance in the world by their capacity for artistic creativity*” (Khalf, 2017, p. 44), the text simultaneously insists that creativity must be anchored in knowledge, discipline, and aesthetic awareness. Artistic production—whether in literature, painting, music, sculpture, or performance—requires foundational sciences and cumulative expertise; one cannot produce meaning without possessing the necessary tools and understanding.

A crucial question arising from this discussion concerns what renders Bashir Khalf’s texts **global** rather than merely local. Although his narratives are deeply rooted in personal and national experience, they articulate concerns that function as a **shared human denominator** across cultures and eras. This universality is not accidental but results from deliberate narrative craftsmanship. Khalf employs a linguistic strategy that avoids rigid temporal, spatial, or cultural markers, opting instead for carefully selected words that “*carry meanings not tied to a specific experience but rather refer to elements chosen from that experience*” (Khalf, *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness*, 2017, p. 63).

By abstracting experience through language, the author enables his texts to transcend immediate contexts and resonate with readers in diverse settings. As a result, his very short stories operate within the sphere of **humanistic and global meaning**, embodying what Triki describes as the capacity of literature to transform individual experience into universal significance (Triki, 2009, p. 207).

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated that Algerian literature has witnessed the flourishing of the **very short story** as a distinctive narrative genre, largely through the contributions of contemporary writers, foremost among them Bashir Khalf. His collections *Not a Little Joy* and *Chants in the Presence of Ugliness* constitute a substantial and innovative body of work that remains insufficiently explored in existing literary criticism.

The analysis reveals that the issues addressed in these collections are thematically diverse and multilayered. At the national level, Khalf engages with pressing Algerian concerns such as negligence, deception, begging, and the popular movement, exposing structural contradictions and social injustices. At the Arab level, his narratives interrogate phenomena including divorce, political corruption, and the aftermath of the Arab Spring, portraying their far-reaching social and moral consequences. At the global and humanitarian level, the stories address universal issues such as betrayal, the relationship between self and other, and the dilemmas of artistic creativity in the modern world.

Despite this wide thematic range, the very short story in Khalf’s work does not lose its literary specificity. On the contrary, it preserves its defining characteristics—condensation, brevity, suggestion, and symbolic density—while effectively engaging with sensitive and complex issues. This confirms that the genre remains capable of combining aesthetic integrity with critical depth, positioning it as a powerful medium for contemporary literary expression and social reflection.

Ethical Considerations

This study is based exclusively on the qualitative analysis of published literary texts and publicly available academic sources. It does not involve human participants, personal data, interviews, surveys, or experimental procedures. Consequently, formal ethical approval from an institutional review board was not required. The author has adhered to the principles of academic integrity by ensuring accurate citation of primary and secondary sources, respecting intellectual property rights, and avoiding plagiarism. All interpretations and analyses presented in this paper are scholarly in nature and aim to contribute objectively to literary and cultural studies without misrepresentation or bias.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper. The research was conducted independently, and the views expressed are solely those of the author.

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