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Representations of Social Discrimination and Mechanisms of Exclusion in the Novel "Bent Hab El Mlouk" by Abderrahim Khadidja.

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the representations of social discrimination in the novel Bent Hab El Mlouk. by examining manifestations of spatial and color-based differentiation and the associated forms of unequal treatment and social representation within the fictional world. It adopts a critical approach to explore how the relationship between spatial belonging and social status is represented. It also traces forms of discrimination manifested in the contrast between rural and urban populations, along with the prejudices and exclusionary practices accompanying this contrast, particularly within the school environment. Furthermore, the study examines discrimination based on skin color by analyzing narrative passages that reveal its presence in relationships between characters and the social implications it entails. The study aims to highlight how social discrimination is embodied in the events, situations, and relationships constructed by the novel, while taking into account the specific characteristics of each form of discrimination and uncovering its significance in shaping the characters' social experiences.

Keywords: Social discrimination- spatial differentiation- color- based discrimination- village and city-Bent HabEl Mlouk.

Introduction:

It may be agreed that linguistic discourse generally aligns with the social conditions, customs, and traditions firmly established within the surface and deep structures of the social hierarchy. This is because linguistic convention requires a degree of mutual understanding and agreement among members of a linguistic community. It is also influenced by prevailing social conditions and, in turn, contributes to reproducing or questioning them. Consequently, patterns of discourse vary according to social groups and classes, while modes of expression are linked to the positions these groups occupy within the social hierarchy. Such variations may reveal relations of inequality and domination, as well as the forms of discrimination and exclusion that arise from them.[1]

In this context, the novel Bent Habb el-Mlouk can be situated among literary works that offer an opportunity to examine social inequalities through the representation of relationships between groups belonging to different geographical settings, as well as perceptions associated with skin color. By depicting these relationships, the novel invites a critical examination of how social boundaries are formed between individuals and groups, and how spatial or color-based differences may, in certain contexts, become grounds

for social hierarchies and exclusion. Accordingly, this study seeks to investigate the forms of social discrimination in the novel Bent Habb el-Mlouk by examining the manifestations of differentiation between rural and urban populations, identifying forms of discrimination associated with skin color, and analyzing how the narrative discourse contributes to highlighting these phenomena and their social and cultural implications.

Racial Discrimination:

The issue of racism and discrimination among human beings has received considerable attention from philosophers, intellectuals, and legal scholars around the world, given its historical and social implications and the exclusionary practices it has engendered, which have often been associated with projects of imperial domination that used discrimination as a means of consolidating control over peoples and subjugating them[2]. The multiplicity of manifestations of this issue and the complexity of its dimensions have given rise to diverse approaches to its examination, thus making it necessary to consider the concept of racism and clarify its meanings.

In this context, it is noteworthy that the word "element" is used "in two opposing senses: as the smallest component of anything that is or is composed of its atoms or individual units; however, an element also refers to the sphere or domain encompassing a diverse group of things, serving as the space that brings them together. Accordingly, the term ‘racism’, in its prevailing sense, refers to the practice or institutionalization of unfair discrimination against anyone who differs from us.[3]

While this concept generally refers to the practice of unfair discrimination against the different other, understanding its dimensions requires examining the foundations on which it is based and the factors that contribute to its emergence and entrenchment. Racism is a social and intellectual phenomenon based on the belief that one human group is superior to another, according to racial, color-based, or ethnic criteria, and the conceptions associated with them concerning origin and belonging. It manifests itself in practices of discrimination, exclusion, and unequal treatment among individuals and groups, and may take legal, social, or cultural forms. Its causes are linked to prejudices and beliefs that reinforce inequality among human beings and give certain groups a sense of superiority and entitlement at the expense of other groups, thereby leading to the justification of marginalization and deprivation of rights. Discrimination is not limited to differences in color or race; it may also extend to religion, language, culture, and social affiliation, making racism a multidimensional phenomenon in which intellectual, social, and political factors intersect.[4]

Representations of Social Discrimination in the Novel:

The novel Bent Hab El Mlouk by Algerian writer Khadidja Abdelrahim embodies a profound human and emotional experience, imbued with self-expression and social memory. The events take us on a journey into the Algerian social environment, exploring the cultural and social transformations that Algerian society underwent during critical periods, such as the "Black Decade" and its aftermath. The novel employs the symbolism of cherries as a sign that bridges the beauty of authenticity and the bitterness of human suffering. Building on these narrative and symbolic dimensions, this study examines the phenomenon of "social discrimination" as the central driving force behind the text’s dramatic structure. The research sheds light on how class-based and gender-based disparities shape the identities of the characters and determine their positions between the margins and the center, and how the novel transforms from a mere record of individual self-expression into a critical instrument that deconstructs manifestations of social marginalization and exclusion and explores the mechanisms of resistance and resilience in confronting them.

Spatial Discrimination between Rural and Urban Populations:

The novel Bent Habb El-Mlouk explores the experience of social discrimination through Souad’s transition from a rural environment to the setting of a boarding school, where she encounters a pattern of social

relations unfamiliar to her in her original surroundings. The narrator reveals this transformation by stating: "**But her sadness deepened, and her freedom faded as she bid farewell to her village and joined the girls' boarding middle school, where freedom was nonexistent and the day was a breeding ground for racism and tyranny. Souad had never imagined that these people treated human beings in such a manner. She had never heard of classism, either because she was still a child or perhaps because the people of the countryside were equal, despite their quarrels and disputes, for they constituted an integrated whole**."[5]

This narrative passage highlights the contrast between the character's perception of social relations in the countryside, where a sense of solidarity prevails despite disagreements, and a new reality in which she discovers practices based on discrimination among individuals. The significance of this contrast lies not only in the differences between the two environments, but also in the transformation of the character's awareness, as she begins to realise that social relations may be governed by a logic of differentiation and exclusion rather than solidarity and coexistence. This discrimination is further reinforced by the narrator's description of the atmosphere at a social gathering, where she states: "**The attendees in the hall were divided into two groups: one representing the groom's family and the other consisting of the rural people, who were our family. I noticed that some women were displeased with the situation. They were whispering and mocking, especially Hayat and the group sitting with her. She would look at our family and laugh, behaving in an inappropriate manner**" .[6]

While the transition from the rural environment to the new setting allowed Souad to encounter different social patterns, this interaction also revealed differences in outward appearance, which the character invokes in her perception of other women and in defining her own position in relation to them. This is evident in her statement: "**I was seeing faces I had never seen before and reading thoughts I had never encountered in my previous life. But… I will remain as I am; no one will change me. In fact, I will be better than any woman who says, 'Here I am.' I will not be dazzled by blonde hair, blue eyes, or revealing clothing. I believe I am the best among them, for I am educated and cultured too, and I lack nothing in terms of beauty**."[7]

The significance of this excerpt lies in its combination of spatial difference, which brought the character into contact with a new social environment, and differences in physical appearance, which she invokes to define her position in relation to the other women. The references to blonde hair and blue eyes point to differences in physical features, while her assertion that she possesses education, culture, and beauty reveals her attempt to affirm the equality of her status with theirs.

Class-Based Discrimination within the Educational Institution:

The novel presents the boarding school as a space in which social disparities are manifested. The narrator describes the system of assigning female students to classes, stating: **"The middle school's system is arbitrary, and the discrimination between the rich and the poor is clear. The wealthy students are placed in the first class, F1, followed by F2, then F3... As for the boarding school girls, nicknamed the rural girls, they are placed in the last class, F7**."[8]

This Narrative passage shows that class-based discrimination is not limited to individual judgments or passing attitudes, but takes an institutional form within the educational establishment. As presented by the narrator, the arrangement of classes is linked to the disparities between wealthy students and those to which the boarding school girls belong, making the school environment a reflection of social hierarchy. In this sense, the school does not appear to be a space separate from society; rather, it is an environment that may reproduce existing inequalities instead of overcoming them. The impact of this hierarchy becomes evident in the daily practices to which the boarding school girls are subjected, as the narrator states: "**How much I**

detested discrimination! Whenever the teachers came in, they ordered the door and windows to be opened despite the intense cold, as though they could smell sheep and goats. During the break, the girls from the other classes would stand in front of our classroom and mock our clothing and the way we spoke…"[9]**.**

This behaviour reveals the shift of discrimination from the level of institutional organisation to everyday practices among female students. Clothing and ways of speaking become markers of social belonging, which are then used to justify ridicule and disparagement. Consequently, differences in appearance or linguistic expression cease to be natural differences between individuals and instead become means of highlighting the social distance between them and reinforcing the targeted group's sense of being inferior in status to others. Reading the two excerpts together makes it possible to identify the interaction of two levels of discrimination: an organisational level, represented by the hierarchy the narrator describes within the institution, and an interactional level, manifested in the students' mockery of their classmates. This interplay reveals that exclusion can take shape through institutional and everyday practices simultaneously.

The Vulnerability of Social Status and Violence within the Educational Institution:

The novel presents a more distressing picture of the suffering endured by vulnerable groups through the characters of the twins Fatima and Zahra. The narrator states:"**In the classroom were the twins Fatima and Zahra from the village of Ain Gharaba. Their poverty was evident. Their father was an illiterate farmer, and their academic level was poor. Every night, Miss Souria would bring a glass of tap water from the toilet and a piece of paper on which the multiplication tables were written. Fatima and Zahra would recite the multiplication tables, and, as usual, they would begin to tremble with intense fear and burst into tears. Miss Souria, however, forced them to eat the multiplication tables with the water. We watched them trembling, while Miss Souria shouted and added one piece after another without mercy."**[10]

This scene brings together references to the twins' social circumstances, characterised by poverty and rural origins, and a depiction of the harsh treatment they endure within the educational institution. The narrative details, from fear and crying to being forced to swallow the papers, reveal how the educational encounter is transformed into an experience of humiliation that undermines the dignity of the two students and intensifies their sense of helplessness. The significance of the scene extends beyond the cruelty of the educational treatment, as the portrayal of the twins through their economic and social circumstances places their suffering within a broader representation of vulnerable groups within the institution.

Souad's experience of discrimination becomes particularly evident during her middle school years, when girls from rural areas—the 'aroubiya—suffered from discrimination based on social status and geographical origin, accompanied by various forms of mockery and exclusion. However, this situation begins to change as she moves on to secondary school, where the novel portrays a more open school environment that is more accepting of difference. This is reflected in her statement: **"The first week passed, and everyone liked the boarding school and the secondary school as a whole. Perhaps the girls there were more mature, and there was interaction between the rich and the poor, with no distinction between the 'aroubiya and the urban girls..."**[11]

This narrative passage reveals a decline in the forms of discrimination that characterized the previous experience, as girls from different social backgrounds are brought together, with no distinction between the "aroubiya" and the urban girls. The narrator's reference to the girls' maturity also suggests that this change may be linked to a level of awareness that allows for the acceptance of difference and the reduction of preconceived judgments. Accordingly, the novel does not present discrimination as a fixed practice across all educational settings; rather, it reveals variations in its presence from one institution to another, thereby

allowing for a comparison between a school environment that reproduces social and geographical inequalities and another in which these inequalities diminish in favor of integration and coexistence.

Mechanisms of Social Exclusion and Their Manifestations:

- Social Belittlement and Mockery of Difference:

The mechanisms of exclusion are manifested in the novel through everyday practices targeting the boarding school girls because of their geographical background and appearance. The narrator expresses her rejection of this treatment, stating: **"How much I detested discrimination! Whenever the teachers entered, they ordered the door and windows to be opened despite the intense cold, as though they could smell the scent of sheep and goats. During the break, the girls from the other classes would stand in front of our classroom and mock our clothing and the way we spoke."**[12]

This narrative passage derives its significance from the combination of the narrator's rejection of discrimination and her description of the practices through which she perceives it. The suggestion of the presence of the smell of sheep and goats, in the context of opening doors and windows, evokes a stereotype that associates the boarding school girls with their rural environment, while the mockery of their clothing and speech reveals the targeting of visible markers of their social background. These practices serve a purpose that goes beyond merely expressing aversion; they make difference a basis for belittling the other and place the targeted group in an inferior social position. Thus, social categorization becomes a mechanism of exclusion through which individuals are reduced to their background and appearance, rather than being regarded as persons with their own individuality and dignity. Through this portrayal, the novel reveals that exclusion is not necessarily enacted solely through material deprivation; it may also be practised through language, mockery, and expressions that convey preconceived judgments about social groups.

- Humiliation as a Practice of Exclusion:

Humiliation is manifested in the scene in which the novel portrays Miss Souria's treatment of the twins, Fatima and Zahra, who are forced to swallow the papers on which multiplication tables are written, amid fear, crying, and screaming. The significance of this scene is not limited to physical and psychological cruelty; it also reveals a distortion of the educational relationship, as educational authority shifts from a means of guidance and development into an instrument for subjugating and humiliating the two pupils. The cruelty of the scene is intensified by the twins' vulnerable social circumstances, as presented by the narrator. Nevertheless, its fundamental significance remains linked to the violence they experience within the institution.

The disparity between the village and the city in the living experience and its psychological effects:

The disparity between village and city in the novel is not limited to social relations within the educational institution, but extends to the different lived experiences during the Black Decade. The village stands out as a central space for events related to terrorism and the suffering of its inhabitants. This is evident in the character's question: "**I sat with a feeling of not belonging to this society. I began to listen to them and say to myself: Why didn't these people know about terrorism?" Didn't these groups find anyone but us to terrorize, intimidate and kill our loved ones?! ...In their conversation, they touched on the topic of terrorism, but their knowledge was what they saw in the news, or what was reported to them from here and there.There is a difference between what you see and what you live**."[13]

This narrative passage reflects the character's sense of the specificity of the suffering experienced by his village surroundings compared to others. This sense is confirmed by the distinction between indirect knowledge of terrorism, based on following news and transmitted narratives, and the direct experience that the character lived and witnessed its effects. The phrase **"there is a difference between what you see and what you live**" highlights the distance between watching and living, and reveals the difficulty of conveying

the painful experience to those who have not experienced it themselves. This distance is reflected in the character's sense of belonging, as she feels that there is a gap between her and an environment that does not share the depth of the experience she lived. Thus, the novel reveals the diversity of human experiences related to the field, and the resulting differences in the perception of pain and the comprehension of its effects.

Social distinction between prejudices and resistance to them

-Refusing to reduce man to his class status:

The novel not only depicts social disparities and manifestations of exclusion, but also includes a discourse that refuses to link a person's value to his financial situation. This is evident in the talk about the doctor who comes from a poor family, as the following phrase appears: **"This doctor is the son of the concierge. There were six children, and the mother and father lived on the roof of the building, and every Friday my mother would send me plates of couscous as charity for them". They were all in the same room but they were raised in the best way. Some of them became doctors and some became managers. They all hold high positions. He has one daughter who is now a specialist in ophthalmology. Blessed be God, the fault is not in poverty or in the social situation, the fault is in the lack of will, determination and diligence**."[14]

This statement explicitly rejects judgments that use poverty as a criterion for evaluating individuals or assessing their potential. By invoking the example of a doctor who grew up in difficult living conditions and subsequently attained a prestigious professional position, the novel challenges the assumption that an individual's social background determines their future and emphasizes that material circumstances are not a sufficient basis for judging their abilities or worth. This passage also highlights class-based discrimination. Having exposed manifestations of social stratification and the ridicule directed at vulnerable groups, the novel introduces an example that challenges prejudices surrounding poverty. Thus, the novel's discourse does not merely document the phenomenon but also invites a critical examination of the assumptions underlying certain social judgments.

Souad as a Model of Fairness:

The novel presents the character of Souad as a model of resistance to social discrimination through an educational practice based on equality and human solidarity. After completing her studies and graduating, she became a teacher and did not allow material differences to determine how she treated her pupils. Instead, she was careful to treat them all equally, as the novel confirms: **"Souad loves her work, and, more importantly, she loves her pupils. She makes no distinction between rich and poor. She treats orphans with kindness and shows them compassion, and she feels sympathy for the poor, to the extent that she uses her own money to buy school supplies and Eid clothes for those in need. She would often comb the girls' hair and sew buttons onto some of their school smocks...**"[15]

This attitude is not limited to equal treatment; rather, it extends to providing material and moral support to vulnerable groups, particularly orphans and the poor. Souad would buy school supplies and Eid clothes for those in need using her own money, in addition to attending to the pupils' appearance, from combing their hair to sewing buttons onto their school smocks. These practices reveal Souad's awareness of the effects that material deprivation may have on pupils' lives and dignity. She therefore seeks to alleviate such hardships through practical actions that go beyond verbal sympathy to provide tangible assistance. The significance of this attitude lies not only in material generosity but also in the nature of the relationship Souad establishes with her pupils. She treats them as individuals deserving care and respect, rather than as representatives of social groups occupying different positions in the social hierarchy. Her attitude thus stands in contrast to the exclusionary practices depicted in the novel's boarding school. Considered together, this passage and the example of the doctor reveal two forms of resistance to discrimination: the first rests on rejecting judgments

of individuals based on their social class, while the second is embodied in practical conduct that treats individuals on the basis of fairness and solidarity.

Discrimination Based on Skin Color: Physical Appearance and Its Significance:

The presence of differences in skin color and physical appearance in the novel is evident in the external descriptions of certain characters, as the narrative focuses on skin tone and physical features in portraying them and presenting them to the reader. One example is the description of Dalila, as the novel states: **"Dalila resembles Aunt Malika. She is kind-hearted and blonde, with blue eyes and fair skin. After her divorce, she met a foreign man of Australian origin and American nationality, who was on a work assignment with an Algerian company specializing in natural gas...."**[16]

This description reveals the role of skin color and physical features in shaping the character's narrative portrayal, through an emphasis on blonde hair, blue eyes, and fair skin.

Discrimination in the novel is also revealed through the narrator's description of the character Nouria, who is portrayed as follows: "**Nouria worked as a nurse at the university hospital. She was a heavily made-up woman whose clothes came above the knees and whose hair was dyed blonde. As for her dark complexion, she used various shades of makeup to conceal what she considered signs of ugliness. She worked alongside European women and considered herself one of them**."[17]

This narative passage reveals how the character is constructed through the combination of physical, appearance-related, and social attributes. The description focuses on skin color, clothing, and hair dye in a descriptive context that goes beyond presenting external features to attach evaluative connotations to them. The description of Nouria's dark complexion is particularly significant because it is associated with a reference to ugliness, opening the way for a critical reading that explores the role of aesthetic judgments related to skin color in shaping the character's portrayal. Furthermore, the reference to Nouria's working alongside "**European women**" and her belief that she is one of them suggests a distance between her and the group she seeks to emulate, revealing a tension between social belonging and self-perception of identity. Thus, this description invites a critical examination of the social and aesthetic standards by which characters are judged, as well as how physical features and appearance may intersect with value judgments in shaping their representation within the novel's discourse.

Conclusion:

This study has concluded that social discrimination in the novel Bent hab El-Melouk manifests itself in various forms, relating to differences in spatial belonging and physical appearance, and the perceptions of self and other that these differences generate. The analysis of spatial differentiation between the village and the city has shown that movement between these spaces involves more than a geographical transition; it is also associated with a social and psychological experience that reveals differences in lifestyles, perceptions, and values, and the feelings of disparity that may arise among the characters. Examining physical features has also highlighted the presence of differences in appearance in shaping characters' awareness of themselves and others. Thus, the novel highlights the potential of narrative to represent social inequalities and reveal their effects on human relationships and on the development of characters' awareness of themselves and their surroundings.

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Notes

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[2] - See: "Manifestations of Racial Discrimination against Immigrants to Europe: A Thematic Approach—The Novel How to Breastfeed a Wolf Without Being Bitten by Amara Lakhous as a Model," by Salah Eddine Ben Mguidich and Abla Maanadi, Dirasat Journal, Vol. 14, No. 1, June 2025, pp. 53.

[3] - Migration to Humanity, Fathi Al-Mak-Al-Dhifaf Publications, Beirut, 1st ed., 2016, pp. 70–71.

[4] - See: "Manifestations of Racial Discrimination against Immigrants to Europe: A Thematic Approach—The Novel How to Breastfeed a Wolf Without Being Bitten by Amara Lakhous as a Model," by Salah Eddine Ben Mguidich and Abla Maanadi, 2025, p 53–54.

[5] - The Novel،p7-8.

[6] - The Novel،p41.

[7] - The Novel،p42.

[8] - The Novel،p8.

[9] - The Novel،p8.

[10] - The Novel،p10.

[11] - The Novel،p14.

[12] - The Novel،p8.

[13] - The Novel،p55-56.

[14] - The Novel،p58.

[15] - The Novel،p35.

[16] - The Novel،p53.

[17] - The Novel،p60.