

Marginal Discourse and Strategies of Textual Resistance in the Postcolonial Algerian Novel

Widad Zaidani

Academic Degree: Ph.D.

Country: Algeria

Email: mthe6232@gmail.com

Received: 15/12 2025

Accept: 04/07/2026

Published: 20/07/2026

Introduction

Textual marginalia are an ancient typographical phenomenon that has appeared across various forms of discourse and literary genres. They constitute one of the paratextual elements that facilitate the understanding, interpretation, and reconstruction of a text through renewed readings. Marginal discourse has become one of the prominent features of contemporary Arabic narrative, although it appeared only modestly in earlier narrative texts.

As a manifestation of literary experimentation and modernity, marginal discourse seeks to revive an adjacent text that interacts with the main body through dialogue, intertextuality, imagination, and the representation of background knowledge and cultural references. Through these references, the writer invites readers to participate in decoding and reconstructing the text after unraveling its cultural, referential, and artistic codes. This parallel discourse also aims to broaden the reader's horizon and transcend the conventional boundaries of the text.

The contemporary Arabic novel has evolved into a comprehensive narrative structure enriched by diverse cultures and interdisciplinary knowledge. It integrates folklore with economic, political, social, philosophical, theatrical, and visual arts, particularly within postcolonial contexts. Consequently, the contemporary Arabic novel has become a vast field where multiple forms of knowledge and cultural expressions converge.

This study aims to explore the nature of marginal discourses in the contemporary Algerian novel by addressing the following research questions:

- What is meant by the concepts of **center** and **margin**?
- Has marginal discourse succeeded in transcending the authority imposed upon it by central discourse?
- What cultural references and marginal discourses characterize the postcolonial Algerian novel?

To answer these questions, the study is divided into two parts. The first provides a theoretical examination of the concepts of center and margin from both linguistic and terminological perspectives. The second presents an analytical application to the Algerian novelist **Ezzeddine Djaoui's** novel *Head of Hardship (1+1=0)*. The analysis seeks to identify the novel's marginal discourses, contrast them with central discourses, and clarify their significance in addressing the proposed research questions.

The study adopts the framework of **Cultural Criticism**, drawing upon structural-genetic and semiotic approaches. The structural-genetic method is employed to analyze binary oppositions that shape the narrative, while the semiotic approach deciphers the signs and symbols that reveal suppressed marginal voices and the cultural systems underlying these representations.

1. The Linguistic Definition of Center and Margin

The concepts of **center** and **margin** are among the most controversial terms because they are employed across numerous disciplines, including politics, sociology, economics, mathematics, physics, and the humanities. Their multidisciplinary nature makes it difficult to establish a single precise definition. Therefore, this study focuses on their linguistic and literary meanings.

1.1 The Concept of the Center

According to **Lisān al-‘Arab**, the Arabic root *R-K-Z* denotes planting or fixing something upright, such as a spear in the ground. The term **center** also refers to a fixed position, the location assigned to soldiers, or the midpoint of a circle.

Similarly, **Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ** defines the center as the middle of a circle, a person's proper place or position, and metaphorically associates it with stability, wisdom, knowledge, and wealth.

From these definitions, the center represents what is stable, deeply rooted, and established. It forms the focal point around which all surrounding elements revolve. The concept also encompasses both material values, such as gold and silver, and symbolic values, such as knowledge, intellect, and authority.

1.2 The Concept of the Margin

According to **Ibn Manẓūr**, the Arabic word *hamsh* refers to excessive or inappropriate speech and unnecessary movement. In this sense, the margin carries a negative connotation, describing speech that lacks value or correctness.

However, **Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ** defines the margin simply as the **margin of a book** or the notes written alongside the main text.

Socially, a **marginalized person** is someone who lives isolated from mainstream society. Likewise, marginal notes are often described as secondary or unrelated to the principal subject.

Nevertheless, such a definition underestimates the significance of the margin. The main text often depends on marginal notes to explain terminology, clarify meanings, remove ambiguities, and guide readers toward a more accurate understanding of the text.

Part Two

2. The Terminological Definition of the Center and the Margin

Scholars generally agree that every circle has a center surrounded by a margin. This concept extends beyond geometry and applies to numerous disciplines and fields of research. Every central issue—whether economic, social, political, or literary—is inevitably accompanied by marginal elements whose significance varies according to the nature of the subject.

2.1 The Center and the Margin from a Sociological Perspective

The concepts of the **center** and the **margin** emerged in French sociological thought during the early nineteenth century, when the central government expanded its authority over local and political institutions. Sociologists subsequently adopted these terms to describe the relationships between the core of political and cultural power and the peripheral regions surrounding it.

From this perspective, the concepts reflect social stratification within a society. Wealthy and influential groups occupy urban centers, whereas poorer and less privileged populations are often confined to peripheral districts, rural areas, or marginalized communities.

A **marginal region** is therefore defined as:

"A region situated on the edge of a particular cultural area, where two or more cultures intersect and where the cultural characteristics of neighboring societies coexist."

When marginalized groups become fascinated by the values and lifestyles of the dominant center, they may attempt to imitate them while abandoning their own traditions and customs. As a result, they often find themselves trapped between two identities—neither fully accepted by the center nor completely belonging to the margin.

2.2 The Center and the Margin from an Economic Perspective

In economics, the concept of the **center** refers to industrialized and economically developed countries, whereas developing nations are commonly regarded as peripheral or marginal.

These peripheral countries generally export raw materials at relatively low prices to industrialized states, which process them into finished products and export them back at much higher prices. Consequently, marginalized economies remain dependent on central economies and lack sufficient domestic markets or industrial capacities to attract investment or participate effectively in shaping the global economic order.

2.3 The Center and the Margin from a Political Perspective

In his *Muqaddimah*, **Ibn Khaldun** argues that political leadership is founded upon superiority and collective solidarity (*'asabiyyah*). Political authority belongs to the strongest social group capable of exercising dominance.

According to Ibn Khaldun, political power depends on three principal elements:

- Material power
- Military power
- Psychological or moral authority

Possession of these elements transforms an individual or group into the political center.

However, political centrality is not permanent. If those occupying the center fail to remain loyal to their responsibilities, they become vulnerable to criticism, exclusion, and eventually removal from power.

Political authority may also shift through either direct or indirect means. Direct change occurs through foreign occupation or colonial domination, whereas indirect change may result from military coups or popular uprisings in which marginalized groups become the driving force behind political transformation.

2.4 The Center and the Margin in Literature and Culture

The relationship between the center and the margin has existed throughout literary history, although it remained largely implicit until modern critical studies brought it to the forefront. Historically, literature has been closely linked to political authority. Governments often supported writers who praised ruling institutions, thereby elevating their works to the status of **central literature**. In contrast, works that challenged or ignored official ideologies were relegated to the margins.

In this context, the writer frequently depended on patrons or institutions for financial and social support. Such sponsorship often required the author to satisfy the cultural and ideological expectations of those in power.

Consequently, **central literature** came to represent the interests of dominant social classes, while the literature of marginalized communities received far less recognition regardless of its artistic quality.

These neglected writings were frequently labeled **popular literature**, **low literature**, or **marginal literature**. Nevertheless, they often preserved the authentic cultural heritage of society, including its traditions, customs, folklore, and collective memory.

Because marginalized communities tend to remain more attached to their cultural identity, their literary production reflects a stronger commitment to inherited traditions and local values.

Accordingly, marginal literature can be broadly defined as:

Any literary production created outside official political, social, or academic institutions.

Before concluding this theoretical discussion, it is important to note that the concepts of the center and the margin have acquired additional meanings in literary studies. A margin may refer to:

- Topics that have been silenced because of political, religious, or sexual taboos.
- Neglected aspects of a broader subject.
- Footnotes and annotations that document, explain, or reference sources.
- The marginalization of particular characters, places, or events within a literary work, where certain narrative elements become central while others are intentionally pushed to the background.

In this sense, the relationship between the center and the margin is dynamic rather than fixed, constantly shifting according to ideological, cultural, and artistic priorities

3. Representations of Marginal Discourses in *Head of Hardship*

Following Algeria's independence, the Algerian novel underwent remarkable transformations characterized by innovation and experimentation. Writers sought to affirm their cultural identity and artistic individuality while embracing modern narrative techniques capable of reflecting the country's complex social, political, and economic realities.

Among these novelists is **Ezzeddine Djilaoui**, whose narrative writing departs from traditional literary conventions. In *Head of Hardship (1+1=0)*, he challenges the dominance of central discourse and rebels against conventional literary norms, giving voice to marginalized perspectives and cultural identities.

3.1 Marginality in Form: The Main Text and the Footnotes

As previously discussed, footnotes constitute explanatory texts placed at the bottom of a page to clarify unfamiliar words, expressions, or cultural references. Although they remain separate from the principal narrative, they function as an integral complementary text that assists readers in understanding the novel.

Djlaoui adopts this classical narrative technique by incorporating a limited number of explanatory footnotes throughout *Head of Hardship*. While the principal narrative remains dominant, these marginal notes enrich the reader's interpretation.

For example, the novelist writes:

"Two guests of spring, Al-Soum and Al-Sa'id, my brothers of the Revolution, came to visit me... I was overwhelmed with joy. I opened my heart and welcomed them into the Qibliyyah."

An asterisk directs readers to a footnote explaining that **Qibliyyah** refers to a traditional room whose entrance faces the direction of the **Qiblah** (toward Mecca).

Similarly, the author explains several regional and colloquial expressions through marginal notes, enabling readers unfamiliar with local Algerian culture to understand their meanings.

Thus, although limited in quantity, these footnotes perform an important cultural and interpretive function.

3.2 Marginality in Content: Center versus Margin

Djlaoui constructs his novel upon a network of binary oppositions that organize both its narrative structure and ideological vision. These include:

- Central versus secondary characters
- City versus village
- Present versus past
- Standard Arabic versus Algerian dialect
- Free verse versus popular poetry

These oppositions reveal an implicit conflict between the center and the margin throughout the novel.

The Title as the First Threshold of Meaning

The title represents the reader's first encounter with the novel. It serves as the gateway through which the narrative world is entered and its symbolic meanings begin to unfold.

The title *Head of Hardship* ($1+1=0$) is remarkably condensed yet rich in symbolic significance. Although composed of only two simple words—**Head** and **Hardship**—it carries profound historical and political implications.

The word **Head** symbolizes the Algerian people, whose suffering continues from one ordeal to another despite successive historical transformations. The nation endured a prolonged colonial occupation that claimed millions of lives before achieving independence. Yet independence itself did not bring lasting peace, as Algeria subsequently experienced the violent civil conflict of the 1990s, commonly known as the **Black Decade**.

During this period, fear, violence, and insecurity once again dominated everyday life.

The Symbolism of the Equation

The mathematical equation $1 + 1 = 0$ deliberately contradicts logical reasoning.

Within the novel, however, it acquires powerful symbolic significance:

- The **first "1"** represents **1 November 1954**, the beginning of the Algerian War of Independence.
- The **second "1"** symbolizes Algeria's independence in **1962**.
- The resulting **"0"** expresses the novelist's pessimistic conclusion that neither revolution nor independence fulfilled the aspirations of the Algerian people.

Despite the immense sacrifices made during the liberation struggle, the nation continued to experience suffering, political instability, and violence.

Thus, the impossible equation becomes a metaphor for disappointed hopes and unrealized dreams.

Folklore and Cultural Heritage

Djlaoui also draws heavily upon Algerian popular heritage.

The title itself is inspired by the traditional folk tale "**Head of Hardship**" (**Rās Bin Ādam**), which recounts the life of a man whose suffering continues even after death. According to the legend, floods uncover his skull, which eventually reaches a fortune teller. The skull subsequently becomes associated with a series of humiliations and misfortunes, symbolizing endless hardship beyond the grave.

Through this intertextual reference, the novelist connects contemporary Algerian suffering with collective cultural memory.

He further enriches the novel by incorporating legendary figures from the **Hilalian Epic**, such as **Al-Jāziyah** and **Dhiab**, who symbolize courage, nobility, intelligence, and authentic Arab identity.

In addition, the novel celebrates Algerian folk traditions by depicting:

- Spring festivals
- Traditional foods
- Local clothing
- Popular customs
- Rural social life

These cultural elements reinforce the novelist's commitment to preserving popular heritage and restoring the value of marginalized culture

Part Four

The Chapter Titles and Their Symbolic Significance

The novel's chapter titles are equally rich in symbolism and contribute significantly to the narrative structure.

The First Balcony

This opening chapter offers readers an introductory overview of the novel and presents its major themes and narrative direction.

Departure into the Coffin

This title symbolizes the protagonist **Ṣāliḥ's** departure from his peaceful village toward the city. The metaphor of the **coffin** suggests death, alienation, darkness, and suffering, implying that urban life has become spiritually lifeless.

Searching for the Nest

The word **searching** conveys displacement and the longing to recover something precious. The **nest** symbolizes warmth, family, security, and emotional belonging, emphasizing that true happiness lies not in wealth or luxury but in love and simplicity.

Pirates of Dreams

The term **pirates** evokes theft, violence, and usurpation. Combined with **dreams**, it represents the destruction of humanity's simplest aspirations—love, freedom, happiness, and self-realization. These stolen dreams are embodied in characters such as **Uncle Ṣāliḥ**, his family, and the intellectual **Munīr**.

Love and the Stench of Bullets

This chapter contrasts love with violence.

Ṣāliḥ's profound love for his homeland is confronted by the bullets of terrorism, which claim the lives of innocent civilians, including his son 'Abd al-Raḥīm, whose dream was simply to establish a peaceful family.

The same violence also destroys the love story between **Al-Jāziyah** and **Dhiab**, illustrating how extremism extinguishes hope and human affection.

Emerging from the Coffin

In contrast to the earlier chapter, this title symbolizes liberation from fear, sorrow, and oppression. It represents the return from the darkness of the city to the purity and tranquility of the village.

The Final Balcony

The concluding chapter accelerates the narrative toward its resolution. Justice ultimately triumphs over injustice, love over hatred, and the **margin** over the **center**, affirming the novelist's ideological vision.

Representations of the Center and the Margin

Throughout the novel, Djlaoui constructs a series of symbolic oppositions that consistently privilege the margin over the center.

1. Linguistic Level

The narrative is primarily written in **Modern Standard Arabic**, which occupies the central linguistic position.

Nevertheless, the author deliberately incorporates:

- Algerian dialect
- Popular oral expressions
- Folk poetry

These marginalized linguistic forms enrich the narrative and preserve Algeria's cultural identity.

2. Spatial Level

The **city**, despite being the social and political center, is portrayed negatively. It symbolizes:

- Death
- Corruption
- Moral decay
- Fear
- Alienation

By contrast, the **village** represents:

- Purity
- Security
- Peace
- Authenticity
- Human solidarity

Consequently, the novelist reverses conventional values by granting moral superiority to the geographical margin.

3. Temporal Level

The novel contrasts two historical periods:

The Past (The Algerian Revolution)

The revolutionary era is remembered with pride and nostalgia. It represents courage, sacrifice, patriotism, and collective unity.

The Present (The Black Decade)

Conversely, the contemporary period is characterized by violence, fear, political chaos, and civil conflict. Instead of fighting a colonial enemy, Algerians find themselves confronting one another.

Through this temporal opposition, the novel expresses deep disappointment with post-independence reality while celebrating the ethical ideals of the revolutionary past.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how **Ezzeddine Djlaoui** successfully subverts the traditional hierarchy between the center and the margin.

Rather than allowing political, social, and cultural centers to dominate the narrative, he restores dignity and visibility to marginalized voices. Rural life, popular culture, folklore, dialect, and collective memory become the principal vehicles through which the novel interprets Algerian reality.

Unlike many pre-colonial and colonial literary works that tended to reinforce dominant political and cultural institutions, *Head of Hardship (1+1=0)* challenges official narratives and exposes the contradictions of post-independence Algeria.

Through this literary strategy, Djlaoui constructs a parallel discourse in which the margin is no longer subordinate but becomes an equal—if not superior—source of meaning, identity, and cultural authenticity.

References

Primary Source

Djlaoui, Ezzeddine. *Head of Hardship (1+1=0)*. 2nd ed., Dar Houma, Algiers, 2004.

Secondary References

- Ibn Manzūr. *Lisān al-‘Arab*. Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1997.
- Al-Fīrūzābādī. *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*.
- Antoine Naama et al. *Al-Munjid in Contemporary Arabic*.
- Robert Escarpit. *The Sociology of Literature*.
- Ibn Khaldun. *The Muqaddimah*.
- Abdullah Al-Ghadhami. *Sin and Atonement: From Structuralism to Cultural Criticism*.
- Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Al-Shīrāzī. *Al-Qāmūs al-Muḥīṭ*.
- Muḥammad ‘Āṭif Ghaith. *Dictionary of Sociology*.
- Michael Mann. *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences*