

## **Cultural Bodies: Representations of Discourse in Body Texts**

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### **Abstract:**

This study addresses the issue of ethnographic bodies, exploring their nature and identifying markers. It also examines their characteristics within the society and culture to which they belong, highlighting the influence of these factors on ethnographic (cultural) bodies, their ethics, behaviors, and practices within their community and environment.

Examining the issue of ethnographic bodies and their behaviors and practices within society, especially in Arab societies, positions this study as both descriptive and inductive. Additionally, it includes a theoretical analysis, essential for constructing any research foundation. This approach defines the concept of ethnographic bodies and identifies key markers that help in understanding their language, behaviors, meanings, and the implications of their practices.

- **Keywords:** Body; Ethnography; Body Language; Society; Culture.

### **Introduction:**

Language serves as a medium for communication, expression, and fulfilling human needs, whether for Arabs or non-Arabs. However, language can sometimes be insufficient for various reasons, which may relate to linguistic differences among speakers, dialectal variations, or even certain medical conditions. Hence, body language emerged as an alternative or supportive mode of communication. This form of communication, produced through coordinated body movements, conveys meaning universally and is shared among people worldwide. Body language can also reflect the nature of the society and culture to which a person belongs, thus giving rise to the concept of the ethnographic or cultural body—a body through whose practices and behaviors one can identify its cultural and societal affiliations.

This research examines this concept through selected excerpts from the novel *The Mule's Wedding* by Algerian novelist Tahar Wattar, aiming to identify representations of body language within these texts, as well as their meanings and significance within the context of the society and culture to which the ethnographic body belongs. This concept also relates to the structural identity of the character within literary works, analyzed based on various body parts and the significance of each part's practices in its external environment and interactions within its community.

This issue raises a central question:

- What is meant by ethnographic bodies, and how do they contribute to defining the nature of the society and culture to which they belong, as well as how these societies and cultures view the nature of these bodies through their literature and discourse?

This question leads us to two hypotheses: the first suggests that ethnographic bodies help define the society and culture they belong to, while the second posits that society and culture shape the nature and identity of ethnographic bodies.

Consequently, the goal of this study is to highlight that the universal element across all societies is the human body structure, or what is known as the body. Therefore, body language is the shared language of humanity, whether Arab or foreign, and understanding the essential techniques, mechanisms, and strategies for interpreting and mastering this language is crucial. It is a universal language that enables the understanding of others' hints and thoughts without translation, as the body parts used for communication are shared among all humans.

Our objectives, question, and hypotheses will be examined through selected examples and models believed to provide, albeit partially, a clear understanding of this issue, the methods of studying it, its impact on culture and society, and how to utilize and engage with it effectively.

### **First: The Concept of Ethnographic Bodies**

What is meant by ethnographic bodies? Where does their importance lie in the study of the society and culture to which they belong? And what is the relationship between language and the body, forming what is known as body discourse?

#### **1. The Concept of Ethnographic Bodies:**

"Ethnographic bodies" is a compound term derived from "bodies," which is the plural of "body." The root of the word in Arabic is (ج س د), which conveys "the gathering and strengthening of something, as in the human body" (Ibn Zakaria, 2002, p. 407).

"Ethnography" is a borrowed term originating from "ethnography," which means the method and tool used to understand the lifestyles of a particular community by studying the beliefs, values, and behaviors of its members, as well as the objects they produce and interact with. Ethnography serves as a method to describe a society's culture and conduct studies in natural settings (Fattoum, Baya, 2021, p. 41).

Ethnographic or cultural bodies, as commonly referred to, are defined by experts as symbols within a specific symbolic system, indicating affiliation with a particular social model. According to sociologist Khaloud Al-Sibai, sociology considers the human body as a marker within a symbolic structure, highlighting its alignment with social organization and subordination to dominant ideologies of production and reproduction. Sociology also examines social practices related to the body, such as forms of discourse, rituals, eating and drinking habits, bathing, sitting, greeting, and other movements that denote social belonging, thus rendering the body a blend of relations, symbols, structures, and myths (Al-Sibai, 2011, p. 29).

Therefore, ethnographic bodies are male or female human bodies associated with a specific society and culture. By studying their practices—such as eating, drinking, and other daily activities—one can identify the human essence of the individuals within that society and culture. This is achieved through examining a sample of individuals and generalizing findings across others in that society, with the studied samples serving as primary references for assessing those that share the same social and cultural background.

## **2. The Importance and Social Role of the Body:**

Based on the previous discussion, Janat Zarad defines the body, and specifically the cultural body, as a "communicative system that extends to all aspects of life. It is not merely a static entity but rather a dynamic being with its own gestural discourse filled with semiotic symbols, ready to be interpreted by the recipient to create meanings and facilitate communication. The body presents discourses with their own laws, logic, and secrets. It is the organizing principle of action and the identity by which we know, perceive, and classify; it is

also the facade that reveals our most secret intentions" (Zarad, *Al-Atheer Magazine*, special issue, p. 277).

In essence, the body can be characterized by a set of features:

- A communicative system: It is a structure used to interact with other bodies or objects within the same space, which allows it to engage in various life activities.
- A dynamic entity: It represents a semiotic marker, conveying a range of communicative signs and hints, which the speaker or writer uses to communicate with the recipient or reader, especially when the body appears as a character in literary work.
- The body conveys multiple discourses with inherent laws and secrets, understood as body discourse.

According to Khaloud Al-Sibai, "the image of the body is not solely shaped by individual perceptions but is a product of social values and customs defined by one's culture of belonging" (Al-Sibai, 2011, p. 11). This means that the body reflects its owner's social identity within a sociological context and is formed by internal and external influences—what we know as the customs and traditions inherited from the community in which the body was born and raised.

Thus, the body is not simply the structural form of the human frame or what some writers might call "the corpse"; rather, it is a sociological marker that exists in reality to fulfill a set of functions and convey a range of signs, gestures, and symbols to its community or even to other communities. This aids in understanding human nature from one perspective and uncovering the secrets the body aims to communicate to the observer from another.

### **3. The Relationship Between Language and the Body:**

Language is a medium for communication, conveying emotions, feelings, opinions, and thoughts. However, it can sometimes "fall short in expression, and body movements emerge to support it; these can serve as an alternative or complement to spoken language" (Nassima, 2017, p. 8). Therefore, there is a close relationship between language, words, expressions, and the body. The body, with its various parts—like the hands—can substitute for spoken language when it fails to convey our ideas, serving as a means of communication.

This gave rise to what is known as body language and signs, which have drawn considerable interest due to their importance in fulfilling specific communicative purposes.

Pierre Guiraud explains body language, stating, "We have come to talk about our bodies, and our bodies speak to us in diverse ways and on different levels. Our body communicates through our emotions, which, in a literal sense, are movements of our limbs" (Afida, 2013, p. 1). For example, nodding up and down to greet someone or moving the index finger from side to side to indicate refusal are gestures that communicate on behalf of the individual. Such gestures can reveal whether the speaker is lying, cowardly, insecure, or experiencing fatigue and laziness. All of these fall under what is known as body language—a language that allows our bodies to communicate on our behalf without us uttering a single word.

In summary, body language can be defined simply as "the act of speech" (Tuhami, 2013, p. 78), meaning it involves performing physical actions through body parts that serve as a substitute for expressive language, fulfilling its role in the communicative process.

### **Second: Manifestations of Discourse in Examples from Body Texts**

After understanding body language—its nature and purpose—we can observe that it is used either to support expressive language in performing its communicative function or as a substitute when language falls short. Janat Zarad states: "The body has its own unique reading, aimed at revealing the way the body generates its meanings. These meanings are inherent expressive potentials that form a self-sufficient and complete sign capable of producing an endless series of meanings through the diversity of the modes that shape its essence. It is the privilege of distancing itself from objects and delving deep into the cultural field" (Al-Atheer Magazine, p. 277).

Due to the relationship between language and the body—resulting in what is known as body discourse—and the social nature of language, which represents the culture and sociology of a particular community, the body performs symbolic social functions within or outside literary works and other types of body discourse. "The body merges in its function between work and culture. By work, we mean the physiological and biological aspects, or the practical movement; as for the cultural, which is broader, it refers to its systematic reading. If the body creates, through its movement in space, a series of gestural units, these units create a series of shifts" (Zarad, *ibid.*, p. 278). These semantic and expressive shifts help in understanding

human nature through the recognition of the body's functions and physiological practices within the society it belongs to.

"The body in these cases is like lexical units; it does not possess meaning on its own. It lives through its uses, which makes a single gesture a source of a large series of interpretations" (Zarad, *ibid.*, p. 278). In this context, the body acts as a substitute for language, with its movements resembling dictionary entries; they carry an original, fixed meaning that is adaptable and open to interpretation depending on the situational and contextual settings in which they are used. For example, circling the index finger can signify a planned meeting or indicate an impending confrontation, depending on the circumstances and relationship between the speaker and recipient.

Zarad describes body movement as "a representative movement simulating an act that has a pre-existing conception in the recipient's mind. Hence, we should not be surprised if two people from different linguistic regions communicate not through language, but through simple, instinctive movements such as expressing hunger, pain, or joy" (*ibid.*, p. 279). Since body language is a shared language among most people worldwide, it can be interpreted and translated across all languages, as humans around the world share the same body parts to perform similar movements, except in cases involving people with disabilities.

After examining the nature of body language and its relationship with expressive natural language, culture, and society, as well as the roles the body performs within society, we will now select a series of texts and excerpts that fall under what is known as body discourse. These texts are drawn from Algerian literature and society, allowing us to compare them and determine the nature of the human essence embodied by the studied body, the sociological role that this body performs within the context it is used, and the society and culture to which it belongs. Finally, we will interpret the body language employed in the text within the situational and contextual framework of the chosen body discourse.

The following are selected excerpts of body expressions from the novel *The Mule's Wedding* by Algerian writer Tahar Wattar.

In the context of Algerian-Maghreb culture, as seen in this novel, the body appears open and rich in connotations; it conveys meanings of desire and seduction at times, while at other times, it symbolizes thought, Maghrebi identity, and intellectual transformations. This is evident in the author's style and his clever use of body language to convey varied meanings

across different body parts and elements. The body speaks and interacts with others, defending and expressing its identity and existence. As previously discussed, the ethnographic body is defined by its relationship with other ethnographic bodies, whether they belong to the same society and culture or otherwise.

The ethnographic body serves as a mediator between the internal self and the external world, conveying the human emotions of its owner and expressing them to peers and others in the community. This communication helps in constructing and shaping the character in the recipient's imagination. Thus, body language is a communicative tool that closely approaches reality. Through body language, the writer reflects meanings tied to their perspectives on existence. In other words, literature, as produced by the writer and populated with characters who communicate through both natural language and body language, serves as a reflection of their external reality. Consequently, the ethnographic bodies mentioned in a literary work represent the writer's society in one way or another.

Here's a breakdown and interpretation of the bodily representations in the selected passages from *The Mule's Wedding* by Tahar Wattar:

### **1. Decay of the Body (Page 8):**

"He sank into silent weeping as the discarded body began to decay, turning into worms."

- In this passage, the body is portrayed as a mere vessel, lifeless without its soul. Once the spirit departs, the body decays, symbolizing its insignificance on its own. This perspective aligns with the Arab and Algerian cultural view that the body is merely a physical shell enlivened by the divine spirit.

### **2. Retreat and Physical Strength (Page 85):**

"Hammoud the judoka had to allow his legs to take two steps back, his body retreating while keeping his head steady, so that the calf would feel weakened and bow down."

- The body here symbolizes human resilience and adaptability. Hammoud's retreat demonstrates a physical survival tactic, commonly seen across cultures as a response to threat. Interestingly, his physical strength contrasts with his retreat, implying that mental agility and strategy can surpass brute force. This conveys a universal cultural truth that strength of character isn't solely defined by physical might.

### **3. The Female Body as Seductive (Page 104):**

"Oh honey-colored body, my beautiful Oranian daughter, only the devil would think in this age of emptiness that it's enough for a woman to love a ghost like me..."

- The female body is depicted here as an object of seduction, focusing more on its appearance than the individual's humanity. By emphasizing the "honey-colored body" rather than the woman's personality or intellect, the writer critiques the objectification of women in a superficial society. Wattar terms this period as an "age of emptiness," where the sacred, respected roles of women—as mothers, sisters, or wives—are diminished, emphasizing a societal disconnect from the value system of Islam.

### **4. Hands and Face as Symbols of Aggression and Beauty (Page 9):**

"Slap whoever you can with your hands, give your cheek to be slapped."

- Wattar uses body parts like the hands and cheeks to explore cultural symbolism. In Arab and Maghrebi culture, hands are often associated with the power to deliver justice or express anger, while cheeks are traditionally seen as the place for receiving physical reprimand. The passage hints at the cheek's dual role as a symbol of beauty, particularly for women, and a focal point of societal discipline, highlighting the physical and symbolic dynamics of different body parts.

### **5. Loss of Hand Function (Page 117):**

"As soon as the hand reached his belt, it froze, fingers relaxed, and lost the ability to move. The right hand, which was to be relied upon, was completely immobilized, and pain began in the arm, then descended."

- Here, Wattar emphasizes the significance of the right hand, which in Arab and Maghrebi culture is traditionally the hand used for essential daily tasks—eating, writing, and working. The right hand's sudden immobilization and subsequent pain in the entire arm underscore the vital role of hands and fingers in physical autonomy. This loss of movement symbolizes vulnerability, indicating that even minor injury can impact broader bodily functions.

These excerpts reflect the deep-rooted cultural views on the body, emphasizing its role in societal rituals, survival, and relationships, as well as the unique symbolic meanings attributed to each part. Wattar's narrative brings forth the idea that, while the body's form and



movement carry universal messages, they are interpreted differently within specific cultural and societal frameworks.

In this analysis, we explore the ethno-graphic representation of bodies in *The Mule's Wedding* by Tahar Wattar, focusing on the way bodily characteristics and physical conditions reflect broader cultural and societal attitudes:

#### **6. Physical Weakness and Illness as Cultural Indicators (Pages 32-33):**

"The door opened... an emaciated, blue-eyed, blue-lipped, yellow-faced old man with a drooping gaze and black teeth."

- Here, physical frailty signifies illness, a common association in Arab societies. Emaciation, yellowish skin, and drooping expressions commonly symbolize sickness or exhaustion, suggesting that physical appearance alone can reflect inner health. The portrayal of blue lips and blackened teeth, possibly due to smoking, evokes an image of decay and mortality. This portrayal highlights how a body's external appearance is laden with cultural interpretations—weakness is often synonymous with sickness, emphasizing society's view of aging and physical decline.

#### **Conclusion**

In our study of "Ethnographic Bodies – Representations of Discourse in Body Texts," we addressed the question: "What are ethnographic bodies, and how do they help define the society and culture they belong to, as perceived through literature and body discourse?" Our analysis leads to several insights:

**Definition of Ethnographic Bodies:** Ethnographic bodies—male and female—are culturally and societally rooted physical forms whose behaviors, actions, and attributes reflect the human nature of individuals in a particular society. By analyzing certain samples, one can draw generalizations about the broader cultural group.

**The Body as a Communication System:** The human body acts as a communicative entity, a semiotic sign that conveys various meanings through its interactions with others within the same space. Such bodily discourse carries communicative signals that the body transmits from speaker to listener.

**Body Language as an Action of Speech:** Body language, through gestures and bodily movements, substitutes for spoken language and fulfills its communicative function within interactions.

**Limitations of Studying Human Nature Solely Through Ethnographic Bodies:** Literary works are reflective of society and culture, yet are filtered through the perspectives and biases of the author. Therefore, it's challenging to assess an entire society based solely on one author's perspective, as literature embodies personal insights that may not fully represent societal norms.

**Body Language in Ethnographic Study:** Analyzing body language within a group of ethnographic bodies from the same society can offer insights into the values, practices, and cultural codes of that society. However, a comprehensive understanding of body language requires a comparative study across various societies to understand its universal and culturally specific functions in communication.

In sum, the ethno-graphic study of bodies in literature offers a window into societal values, illustrating how individuals' appearances and movements reveal deep-seated cultural meanings.

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