

تشكيل الهوية بين الجذور والمسارات:
دراسة الشتات لرواية حنان الشيخ فقط في لندن
Identity Formation between Roots and
Routes: A Diasporic Study of Hanan Al-
Shaykh's *Only in London*

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الكلمات المفتاحية: الشتات، تشكيل الهوية، الهوية الشخصية، الهوية الجمعية، الذات المنشتة.

Keywords: Diaspora, identity formation, personal identity, collective identity, diasporic self.



المخلص

تساهم التجارب الحياتية التي تتعرض لها النساء باستمرار في تشكيل وإصلاح هوياتهن الفردية. وعلى هذا الأساس تناول الفن القصصي النسوي في المهجر مفهوم الشتات بالإشارة إلى النساء العربيات اللواتي يشكلن ويعدن تشكيل هوياتهن وانتماءاتهن في بيئة غربية تعطي الأولوية لمفهوم الهوية الفردية. ومن هذا المنطلق تناقش المرأة العربية باستمرار محوري الانتماء للجذور العربية من ناحية والتكيف مع بيئة البلد المضيف من ناحية أخرى. يناقش البحث رواية حنان الشيخ (فقط في لندن) حيث يسلط الضوء على إحدى بطلات القصة ألا وهي لميس العراقية التي تسافر هويتها عبر العديد من حدود الشتات ساعية لتحقيق توازن صحي بين جذور الوطن والرغبة في التكيف مع والانتماء للدولة المضيفة. استناداً لمفهوم الرحلة تناقش رواية الشيخ الوسائل التي تحاول بها المرأة العربية في الشتات بذل قصارى جهدها لبناء "ذات" جديدة ذات بنية عراقية بحتة قادرة في ذات الوقت على تكيف انسيابية التحول في الهوية من حالة التعلق بالجذور نحو إعادة التشكيل في بيئة الشتات. تتبع أهمية البحث من ضرورة تسليط الضوء على التحديات التي تواجهها النساء في الشتات. تختبر هذه التحديات قدرة المرأة إما على الاندماج في ثقافة المجتمع المضيف أو تحقيق توازن بين ثقافتها الأصلية والثقافة المضيفة. اعتماداً على الإطار النظري الخاص بالهوية وتشكيلها يتبع هذا البحث نهجاً نقدياً وتحليلياً للإجابة على سؤالين يتمحور الأول حول المحاولات التي تبذلها المرأة العربية في الشتات لتأسيس هوية حقيقية تمثل ذاتها الحقيقي فيما يركز الثاني على النسيج القصصي السرد الذي يطر صراع الهوية في رواية حنان الشيخ (فقط في لندن).

Abstract

women form and reform their identities in response to the experiences they constantly confront. Writing in English, diasporic Arab women writers tackle this issue with reference to Arab women who merge their identities within a Western milieu that prioritizes individualism. Arab women constantly negotiate and renegotiate their connections to the spaces of their Arab roots on the one hand, and the spaces of the host country on the other hand. This research argues that Hanan Al-Shaykh's *Only in London* presents an Arab female protagonist, namely the Iraqi Lamis, whose identity cross several diasporic boundaries to achieve a healthy equilibrium between home and the host country. Relying on the motif of a journey, Al-Shaykh's novel discusses the means by which Arab woman in diaspora tries her best to construct a new diasporic "Self" whose raw materials are purely Iraqi yet capable of adapting the fluidity of transforming from attachment (home\ root) to detachment (diaspora\ routes). The importance of the research springs from the necessity to highlight the challenges faced by women in diaspora. Related to both the country of origin and the host one, these difficulties test women's ability either to integrate into the culture of the host community, or to strike a balance between their native culture and the host culture. Depending on the theoretical framework of identity formation, this research follows a critical and analytical approach so as to answer the question of how Arab women in diaspora struggle to establish a real, self-representative identity and how does Hanan Al-Shaykh weave the poetic knot (literary devices) to suite the conflict of identity in *Only in London*.



1.1 Introduction

In their English-language works, Arab women authors in diaspora frequently challenge the Orientalist discourse that stereotypes Arabs and presents them as primitive, homogeneous, and irrational nomads. In their quest for women's rights, these Arab female writers voice the subjugated subaltern; they rely on their personal as well as public experiences to establish a dialogue with the past, present, and future in order to explain the injustice of the community within a political and gendered framework. As such, in the aftermath of September 11, diasporic Arab women writers may serve as a conduit between other cultures and a voice for Arab women. Hanan Al-Shaykh, one of the most acclaimed award-winning writers in the contemporary Arab world, is motivated by her passion and interest in the Lebanese/Arab psyche and the plight of the repressed women's condition in the Arab world, a matter that is evident in all her writings. Edward Said saw al-Shaykh as the "premier woman writer in Arabic who has done more than any other to explore the misperception of Arab women's lives, and an artist who has a calm assurance, not embattled or polemical." (Said, quoted in *The Guardian*, "Review: Conflicts Unveiled"

<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2001/jul/07/fiction.books>)

Hanan Al-Shaykh is one of the Arab world's most acclaimed writers.

She is the author of the short story collection *I Sweep the Sun off Rooftops* alongside other published novels, namely *The Story of Zahra*, *Women of Sand and Myrrh*, *Beirut Blues*, and *Only in London*, which was shortlisted for the Independent Foreign Fiction Prize, *The Locust and the Bird*, a memoir of her mother's life, and *One Thousand and One Nights*, her acclaimed reimagining of Arabic folktales. Most recently she published her novel *The Occasional Virgin*. The fictional production of Al-Shaykh is based on the fundamental principles of cultural conflict and resolution. It aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the identity of diasporic Arab women in both Western and Eastern circumstances. In response, Hanadi Al-Samman in her *Anxiety of Erasure: Trauma, Authorship, and the Diaspora in Arab Women's Writing* (2015) underscores that The literature produced by Arab women writers in diaspora highlights the diasporic site as a unifying force that motivates individuals from diverse backgrounds to create linguistic, political, and cultural spaces. (14)

According to certain critics, Hanan Al-Shaykh possesses the ability to reflect on topics that are prohibited in the Middle East due to her diasporic status. It is noteworthy that physical distance from Eastern critics does not necessarily provide immunity for her. Al-Shaykh is subjected to a persistent series of criticism, writing chosen topics in English is viewed by some as an indication of a deficiency of loyalty as well as national pride. In terms of using foreign language, Yousef Awad in his *The Arab Atlantic*:



Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-Cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers (2011) believes that: "Language functions as a mode of transformation, subversion and resistance that Arab women employ to express their cultural difference in the language of the dominant culture and to challenge assumptions that literature is an elite Western discourse." (8) This, in fact, falls into two different extremes. On the first level, it echoes what Bill Ashcroft considers as a postcolonial strategy aims at voicing the colonized and thus gain global audience. On the second level, it strengthens the Western strategy of playing on an established anti-Muslim bias. It can be concluded that both the publishing industry and academic institutions make an organized effort to scrutinize and evaluate such works with the aim of advancing and reinforcing a distorted portrayal of the East that aligns with Western preconceptions.

Al-Shaykh's literary output reflects the notion that the critique she receives is a minor sacrifice in exchange for attaining feminist independence. She has to deal with various limitations imposed on women's personal liberties, such as prevailing ideological and cultural stereotypes encountered in Western societies. Labeled as a feminist, Al-Shaykh confirms that: "Feminism is like the air you breathe. Everyone should be a feminist, men and women." (quoted in *The Guardian*) As such, Al-Shaykh, quoting Al-Samman, 'materialize [s] Shahrazad's literary erasure and the historical nightmare of wa'd in [her] narratives, thereby bringing these traumas to the surface and using them as a distant memory that propels the writings of [her fiction] and inspires, above all, [women's] survival.'" (12) According to this context, Al-Shaykh aims at shifting the cultural trope of the subjugated Shahrazad from the feminine accommodated context to that of feminist significance and female political power relation. In other simple words, Al-Shaykh herself as well as her characters are capable of crossing the boundaries and the checkpoints of traditional Shahrazad and thus estranged from "the exotic East" so as to reflect on the endless possibilities of being and becoming.

This process, namely of being and becoming, is depicted in many of Al-Shaykh's novels through the motif of a journey. In addition to *Only in London*, the examined novel of this research, the journey of self-discovery and identity reformation is recognized in *The Story of Zahra*, the novel chronicles the journey of a young woman during the Lebanese civil war. Moving back and forth between Beirut and Africa, Zahra finds empowerment in her life and learns ways to negotiate the world around her. The narrative encompasses multiple layers and employs diverse perspectives, yet at its core lies a disoriented and purposeless young lady named Zahra, who discovers in the midst of the Lebanese civil war a chance to break free from subjugation and establish some degree of



authority over her existence. Being autobiographical in its nature, *The Story of Zahra* meets what Richard Van Leeuwen believes that: “the practice of autobiography is essentially an effort to conceive, confirm or stress a sense of identity.” (Leeuwen 1998 27) Writing down memories is an attempt to confirm one’s positionality and connectedness to individual and collective history. In other words, *The Story of Zahra* is a powerful assertion for a non-erasable position of identity in history and language.

Most modern works written in English have a central character: the migratory subject, who moves freely between nations (roots) and cultures (routes) but also experiences alienation, loneliness, and ultimate self-realization. Studying literature pertaining to migration, exile, diaspora, and self-displacement can prove advantageous in comprehending the political and social efficacy of individuals who migrate. Migrant subjects whose identities are characterized by transcultural and transnational identities deconstruct the dominant national narrative and suggest an alternative forms of identity and belonging.

The necessity to reconsider both individual and social identities in the light of their fluidity and changeability is a recurring theme in Al-Shaykh's novels. This is accentuated by the technique of polyphony, international settings, and multicultural characters which attempt to establish themselves in their new countries of residence. For a better understanding of this issue in *Only in London*, one needs at first value to place it in its theoretical framework, namely theory of identity formation.

What makes up an individual’s sense of identity are the labels given to him because of his affiliation with various groups, the roles he plays in society, and the claims he makes about who he is. The goal of identity theory is to shed light on how people make sense of and make use of their many different identities, how they relate to one another, how they are affected by those influences, and how they in turn connect to society at large.

The self is a crucial element of identity. Peter J. Burke and Jan E. Stets in their *Identity Theory* (2009) believe that

Because the self emerges in social interaction within the context of a complex differentiated society, because people occupy different positions within society, the self reflects this differentiation into components [that are] called “multiple selves.” Each of these smaller “selves” within the overall self is called an identity. (10)

Since the emergence of identity theory, researchers have focused on categorizing the self as an active participant in different social roles, such as a student, worker, spouse, and other related roles.



One has to distinguish between role identities and social identities. While role identity is constructed out of being located in the social system that shapes people's behavior and perception about themselves, social identity is constructed out of being identified with a particular group. Burk and Stets explain that: "A social group is a set of individuals who share the view that they are members of the same social category." (118) Possessing a distinct social identity entails conforming to the norms and values of the group and adopting the group's viewpoint. There is a common assumption that individuals, when functioning as members of a group, exhibit a tendency to share similar thoughts and behaviors. Consequently, group members exhibit consistency in their thinking and behavior. It is not necessary for individuals to engage in social interaction with other members of a group in order to adopt the group's cognitive and behavioral patterns. Mere identification with a group is sufficient to trigger a sense of similarity in attitudes and conduct among members of the group.

Burke and Stets identify accessibility and fit as two processes through which a social identity operates in such a relevant and active ways. The concept of accessibility pertains to the ease of access to social categories that are frequently present in an individual's memory or are readily available in various situations. These categories may include gender, race, age, or other significant classifications. Individuals utilize these readily available classifications to comprehend and interpret their immediate circumstances. Fit, on the other hand, relates to the behavior of certain gender, race, age, or any other category in particular situation. The activated category is determined by selecting the category that most appropriately fits the given situation. (Burk and Stets 120)

Through an examination of the diverse ways in which individuals are linked to collectives, such as social and role identities, scholars are able to gain a fascinating perspective on groups. According to the basic principles of social identity theory, the distinction between members of an in-group and those outside of it is ascribed to the presence of a shared sense of commonality in their identities, perspectives, and norms. According to the perspective of identity theorists, a group can be perceived as a system comprising of individuals who are interdependent and carry out unique yet interrelated roles. Each member of the group provides a unique perspective and works together with others to define the parameters of their partnership.

Citing one's affiliation with a social group can enhance one's self-esteem by supplementing their perception of being a part of a broader community. Individuals frequently arrive at the conclusion that they are acknowledged and esteemed by their peers when engaging in introspection regarding their self-assessments. Individuals who possess self-assurance and a strong sense of their own value tend to have a more distinct



understanding of the significance and direction of their lives. An individual's social identity as a member of a group can be validated through the group's acknowledgment, support, and incorporation of the individual, provided that the individual demonstrates values and behaviors that align with those of the group as a collective entity. Consequently, this could result in a more positive emotional disposition. Consequently, an individual's sense of self-esteem is enhanced upon joining communities where they perceive acceptance and appreciation for their authentic selves, rather than their accomplishments.

A thorough examination of the theory of identity requires a differentiation between social identity and personal identity. The diverse concept of social identity maintains value not only in self-understanding but also in navigating one's environment. At a fundamental level, social identities can be defined as the answer to the question: what is your identity? A potential strategy for clarifying the differentiation between social and personal identity is to emphasize that social identity prioritizes collectivity, while personal identity prioritizes individuality. The notion of personal identity concerns the differentiating attributes that an individual possesses in relation to others, accentuating their distinct qualities. On the other hand, social identity refers to the shared characteristics among individuals, emphasizing their affiliation with a specific social group. Burke underscores that:

person identity meanings are based on culturally recognized characteristics that individuals internalize as their own and that serve to define and characterize them as unique individuals. These meanings serve as identity standards, guiding the identity-verification process. They may include such characteristics as how masterful, dominant, and controlling the person is, how moral the person is or what the person values. Because the person identity meanings of being controlling or moral and so forth are culturally shared, others will draw upon these same meanings to identify the individual and thus facilitate the verification process. (125)

One's sense of self in connection to other people is central to the idea of personal identity. In contrast, social identity refers to how one sees himself in connection to other people who share certain traits. While social identity refers to things that people have in common, personal identity emphasizes what makes each person unique.

The integration of various identities into a hierarchical perceptual control system raises questions about the interrelationships between multiple identities, the mechanisms for activation or deactivation, and the strategies employed by individuals to verify each identity while it is active.



When dealing with multiple identities, it is important to give priority to the identification of the most significant identity over the identification of any other identities. Similarly, an individual who demonstrates a greater degree of commitment, particularly one who is relied upon by a larger group of people, is more likely to be verified, thus allowing them to fulfill their responsibilities to the majority rather than the minority. This is suggested by McCall and Simmons (1978) who believe that “performances strongly suggested by more prominent (important) identities are more likely to be carried out than are those suggested by less prominent identities.

Only in London by Hanan al-Shaykh delves into the complexities and potentials of characterizing the constancy and variability of identity amidst the confrontation between roots (personal identity) and routes (group identity), as explicated in the aforementioned conceptual framework. The concept of binary oppositions involves a conflict for supremacy over a shared aspect of significance within an individual. The exploration of either one's ancestry or life trajectory has the potential to result in a conflict with one's behavioral choices. The central theme of *Only in London* revolves around the characters' quest for self-discovery, with a specific focus on their familial and cultural heritage. This entails a thorough analysis of the complexities inherent in their individual identities. The characters strive to establish new connections and revive pre-existing ones through their behavior and reactions, ultimately reflecting on the cultural artifacts that bridge the flexible boundaries between their homeland and the diaspora. Each of these aspects has been subject to inquiry in this research.

1.2 Critical and Textual Analysis

Only in London deals with the lives of three Arabs: The British-Iraqi Lamis, the Moroccan Amira, and the Lebanese homosexual Samir. These three characters travel to London, aiming at establishing a new life, leaving behind them in Dubai their frustrated personal and financial dreams. Each of these three characters leaves in Dubai (roots) an old identity fueled by familial, cultural, or financial obstacles, namely poverty (Amira), war (Lamis), and restrictive sexual norms (Samir). However, this imagined freedom is crushed when they fail to escape their “black skin and white mask” that capture their identities in the fixed forum they initially aimed to demolish. The rout (London), in this sense, functions as an epitome of imagined freedom and as a binocular that clarifies the impossibility of demolishing roots in diaspora.

The fictional genre of the novel serves the aim of rediscovering identity. Lauren Gabrielle Judy (2006) states that:

The structure of the text allows an author to develop his or her character and plot in the context of realistic social, spatial



and temporal conditions. As such, some authors utilize the standard, seemingly simplistic form for a broad range of semantic and even aesthetic purposes. Such texts may then be used to explore the social conditions of the societies and class characteristics that frame (and are framed by) within the principle characters' perspectives. (42)

female bildungsroman narrates the self-journey of the protagonist towards identity and the achievement of the heroine's true identity by the end of the journey. This is clearly recognized in *Only in London* which begins its first scene in an airplane. This particular trope indicates the symbolic significance of a journey as well as the theme of uncertain in-betweenness. Al-Samman (2015) explains that the opening scene of the novel depicts the characters suspended between sky and earth emphasizes the "troublesome Arab world they left behind and the uncertainties awaiting them in the diaspora." (198) The process of embarking on a journey and the subsequent personal development that ensues are emblematic of fundamental human preoccupations. The journey towards the city of London provides a unique prospect for exploring a spiritual pursuit, rather than solely engaging in social activities.

Only in London explores topics related to post-colonialism, ecological perspectives, and victimization, which enhance the analysis of the female Bildungsroman. This meets what Brah tackles concerning the diasporic experience. Brah (2003) offers a set of powerful ideas on diaspora, including the view that diaspora is a historical narrative about journeys that involve settling down in another place outside the homeland. The identity of the diaspora as an imagined community is neither fixed nor pre-given. Brah describes diasporic journeys as "embarked upon, lived and re-lived through multiple modalities...for example, of gender, 'race,' class, religion, language and generation." Thus, they are "differentiated, heterogeneous, contested spaces, even as they are implicated in the construction of a common 'we'." (45)

The novel depicts the act of surpassing ethnic boundaries through a diverse range of characters. Lamis embarks on a journey of self-discovery, which involves accessing the gateway to London that was previously impeded by her ex-husband and his mother. The approach she has formulated to facilitate this noteworthy shift in affiliation involves complete assimilation into English culture while simultaneously relinquishing her Arabic traits. Lamis demonstrates empathy as she articulates her commitment to embracing this nation as her own.

Undoubtedly, language plays a pivotal role in shaping one's identity, and could arguably be considered the most significant factor in this



process. This phenomenon is particularly evident in socio-ethnic, politico-linguistic contexts. In this regard, Lamis intends not only to secure herself by means of finding a job and a shelter, but also to speak English properly. Kramsch (1993) states that the aim of foreign language learning is “cultivating international understanding, responsibility, and effective participation in a global age” Lamis, however, abandons Arabic language and Arab food, which is another means of communication in diaspora, in an attempt to reform a new identity. Motivation in the initial stages of identity theory was associated with both commitment and salience. According to Stryker (1980) and Stryker and Serpe (1982), the level of effort put into enacting an identity is positively correlated with the degree of commitment to and salience of that identity. According to Stryker (1980), self-esteem can serve as a motivator, whereby an individual's evaluation of their performance is influenced by their salient role identity, ultimately affecting their feelings of self-esteem. Lamis is resolute in her pursuit to acquire English language proficiency akin to that of a native speaker. This endeavor, though a mere assimilation project, endows her with a sense of self-esteem to the extent that she unambiguously asserts London, where she relocated from Iraq at the age of twelve, as “her first a home” (53).

With the aim of achieving her objective, Lamis initiates a structured English language program with the intention of refining her language skills and eradicating any recollections of her Arabic affiliations, which includes her Arab acquaintances, locations, and cuisine. The instructor has instructed Lamis to seek out English acquaintances and “keep a way from anything Arab even in [her] mind. [She] should stop eating Arab dishes, because subconsciously [she will] be saying their names.” (54) Lamis adheres to strict regulations with some degree of efficacy. Nevertheless, her exasperation intensifies upon receiving instructions from her instructor that she must refrain from entertaining any thoughts in Arabic language, even after departing from the classroom. These instructions, by its very nature, indicate nothing but depersonalization and strong identification with an out group by means of self-regulation.

Abrams (1994) tackles the motive of self-regulation in theory of identity, according to Abrams, when people's social identities are highlighted and emphasized, they are more likely to respond thoughtfully and voluntarily. In order to strengthen and improve their feeling of belonging to a group, members of that group will often act in ways that are consistent with the norms and values associated with that identity. Lamis encounters anxiety that originates from her Arab lineage. The proscription on her disclosure of her own name or that of her son Khalid, whose name bears the indicative of its Arab heritage, namely the sound "kh", serves as proof of her identity being recognized. Lamis tearfully admits to her



teacher that her "memory[...] all in Arabic. As if I'm a parrot. Don't parrots ever lose their memories?" (180). Lamis puts forth a persuasive contention concerning the plausible hazards linked to the detachment of the diasporic individual from their aspirations and belongings associated with their native land. The act of separation could potentially lead to the forfeiture of determined recollections, culminating in the metaphorical disintegration of the migrant's sense of self. The resemblance of the English tutoring sessions to a "torture chamber" is not unexpected, as "the English teacher hurls one whip after another on her mouth, ears, larynx, eyes, and nose" (265).

Lamis' challenge in reconciling with the rigorous British pronunciation guidelines of the English language is reflected in the unsatisfactory endeavor of establishing social connections with English acquaintances. During a social gathering hosted at Nicholas's residence, Lamis endeavors to initiate intellectually stimulating dialogues with a few of his acquaintances from the United Kingdom. Nonetheless, she experiences frustration upon realizing that the majority of the guests express interest in her background and as a representative of Iraqi refugee, whose character and story are anticipated to conform to their preexisting orientalist model of Arab identity. Lamis disappoints their imagined representation of Arabs when she tells them that she has left Iraq not because of the oppressive regime of Saddam Hussein, but rather due to her arranged marriage to a prosperous Iraqi. Another example when another guest converses with Lamis in formal Arabic, and conscientiously rectifies her Arabic syntax while inquiring about the quantity of Iraqi migrants residing in London. Paradoxically, Lamis realizes that she must conform to the orientalist perspective of Iraq to sustain their attention. Assuming the official Iraqi performance "Lamis felt like a geography book and history book rolled into one. A thought crept into her mind and nudged her increasingly low self-esteem into the abyss: Nicholas thinks of me in the way these people do," she laments (154). Because Lamis cannot share them their orientalist perspectives, she is pulled by her low self-esteem into abyss. This is echoed by the perspective that Language gives a sense of who we are and helps one to understand what it means to be part of a society or group of people. Just as Hall says, "members of the same culture must share sets of concepts, images and ideas which enable them to think and feel about the world, and thus to interpret the world, in roughly similar ways. They must share, broadly speaking, the same 'cultural codes. Hall reflects on Lamis's problem concerning her sense of belonging to Europe's cultural identity. She concludes that her lack of European heritage, rather than their inability to speak English, is the root of her problem. Lamis has come to the frustrating conclusion that her inability to adhere to English customs is impeding her efforts to embrace a distinct British identity.



Language serves as a conceptual metaphor of ebb and flow, transporting Lamis between the sea of roots and the shore of routs. Arabic language, in contrast to English language, pulls Lamis back to her roots at the moment she finds a manuscript written in Arabic at the British library. The textual content of the manuscript serves as a source of inspiration for Lamis to embrace and embody her cultural heritage. This is due to her ability to easily recognize and comprehend the written letters, which establish a sense of intergenerational connection with the manuscript's original author. Additionally, Lamis rediscovers a strong affinity with the Arabic language and her ancestral roots through her engagement with the manuscript. She experiences a sense of pride in the rich cultural heritage and historical legacy of the Arab civilization, as well as in her grandfather's intellectual pursuits. However, this sentiment is accompanied by a feeling of melancholy stemming from the manuscript's displacement from its original Arab birthplace, both spatially and temporally. How to respond emotionally is among the most important aspects which theorists of identity tackle. In the realm of identity theory, the discourse surrounding emotions typically pertains to emotions in a general sense, rather than focusing on individual emotions. Turner and Stets (2005) argue that the distinction lies in whether individuals are encountering positive or negative emotions in given circumstances. Emotions can be perceived as a continuum ranging from negative to positive. In a given situation, individuals have the ability to traverse this continuum, exhibiting negative or positive responses at different points in time. The examination of a potential shift in emotional tone within a given situation is not within the scope of identity theorists. They are primarily concerned with identifying the specific eliciting condition(s) that give rise to either negative or positive affective states:

Although the manuscript was so old, reading the Arabic, she saw that the language was still as it had been hundreds of years ago: she read the sentences with the greatest of ease; her heart pounded with affection of her language. So it was true, then, the picture that they'd painted at school, of the way Arab civilization flourished in the past—here was a proof of its long history. She thought about the hands that had turned these pages, and felt a sharp pang of regret that, when she'd been in Dubai, she'd thought that being Arab was an obstacle in her life. (125)

The act of excavating this ancestral repository establishes a connection between Lamis and her neglected Arab lineage, evoking cherished recollections of her grandfather from her childhood, and emphasizing the significance of written documentation as a means of safeguarding cultural heritage. She fondly reminisces how her grandfather



would recite a thirteenth-century verse sourced from a manuscript originating from Damascus, as a means of preserving his memory from being forgotten: “my hand has written so many books; my hand will wither but the books remain.” (125) Upon rediscovering a desolate Arabic manuscript at the British Library, Lamis modifies her initial aspirations of acculturating to British society.

Upon Lamis' tactile interaction with the Arabic words, the manuscript assumes a tangible quality and establishes a link to the female form that is in search of a sense of belonging and self-identification, much like the manuscript itself, despite its dispersed geographical setting. Lamis's actions serve to emancipate the subaltern body from the fixed identity positions that are imposed upon it by both imperialist English and postcolonial Arabs of native origin. The protagonist experiences a sudden realization that her previous endeavor to relinquish her Arabic identity and language in favor of an English one is illusory. This is due to her inability to evade the societal expectations imposed upon her by Londoners, as well as her inability to eradicate her cultural heritage and recollection, which are uniquely Arabic.

Lamis fluctuates between the ebb and flow of Iraq and London. She is torn between the need to be a member of in group and the desire to be part of out group. This conflict is engendered by Iraq, the war-torn country, because of which she thinks that she can “grow up without roots.” (228) Iraq, as a site of trauma, terrifies Lamis to the extent she becomes “afraid to travel..., even as a tourist to any Arab country.” (184) Brah argues that the inclination to return to one's homeland is not a universal ideology among all diasporas. Individuals belonging to a diasporic community have the ability to establish their presence in the host nation and affirm their sense of self as native citizens. Therefore, at the end of the novel, Lamis starts to welcome the plurality of her identity as it provides her with the freedom to read the features of her belonging in such a contrapuntal way. She starts to acquire a flexible citizenship and thus compare her new Self to “an eagle circling [he] can alight on any spot [he] chooses and declare that this is where [he is] going to settle down. “ (263) The tension between Iraq and London is no more there, her consciousness starts to welcome the negativity and positivity of her homeland and her adoptive country.

Conclusion

The diasporic experience may involve a progression of introspection, consciousness, recognition, and identification of oneself. Lamis's experience in diaspora offers a unique opportunity to engage in a journey that allows for the flexibility of movement between her homeland and her adoptive country, ultimately establishing an interstitial position.



Lamis has demonstrated the ability to attain equilibrium between her individual identity and societal norms, transcending the limitations of cultural rigidity to establish a more adaptable sense of self. Lamis moves back and forth between Iraq and London, caught between the want to fit in and the drive to stand out. Iraq, the war-torn nation, is the source of this friction that goes against Lamis' idea that she can "grow up without roots." However, her return to the Arab World enhances the fact that one cannot ignore his roots and reform a new identity without an original Self.



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