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PhD Thesis

Cultural Identity in Selected Arab-African Novels

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By

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Under the Supervision of

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الهوية الثقافية في روايات عربية أفريقية مختارة

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Table of Contents

<u>Introduction</u>	1
<u>Chapter 1: An Arab Stranger in <i>A Palace in the Old Village</i></u>	33
<u>Chapter 2: A Failed Afropolitan in <i>Dongola</i></u>	60
<u>Chapter 3: The Becoming of an Arab Afropolitan Family in <i>Lyrics Alley</i></u>	93
<u>Conclusion</u>	122
<u>Works Cited</u>	133

Abstract

This thesis is informed by a postpositivist realist approach, with special reference to Stuart Hall's concept of identity making, Judith Butler's performativity, and Bakhtin's dialogism, in order to analyze the "making" of Arab-African cultural identity in Tahar Ben Jelloun's *A Palace in the Old Village* (written in French in 2009 and translated into English in 2011), Idrīs 'Alī's *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* (written in Arabic 1998 and translated into English in 2006), and Leila Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* (written in English in 2010). In a comparative manner, this thesis tackles these three Arab-African novels that exhibit the experiences and struggles experienced by the modern Arab-African individual to explore his/her cultural identity in relation to the MENA geopolitical position. Between fragmentation and integration, the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) citizen goes through different experiences that leaves him/her with either a fragmented—and sometimes distorted—self or a self that is capable of embracing the different—and seemingly contradictory—cultural landscapes in an integrated and a balanced manner which is applicable to the three selected novels where three different special cases of the MENA citizen are represented: *Dongola* and *A Palace in the Old Village* present fragmented protagonists who lose sense of who they are and are torn between their Arab and African heritage, while *Lyrics Alley* presents more than one character who come into good terms with his/her integrated Arab-African cultural identity. Consequently, since the main focus is investigating the Arab-African cultural identity, Arabism and Afropolitanism are inspected in relation to each other, which leads to the conclusion that Afropolitanism can be an application of postpositivist realism.

Introduction

Identity is no longer considered a linear concept. An individual's identity is in a continuous process of being constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed—whether partially or totally. This process is multilayered, holding history, politics, race, and gender within its folds. As the term “identity crisis” might seem overused or a kind of cliché, the question of identity is still—and seems to still go—under investigation. As one of the most important, if not the most important, and influential thinkers of cultural identity, Stuart Hall believes that identity as a concept is no longer an essentialist one, but “this concept of identity does not [any longer] signal that stable core of the self, unfolding from beginning to end through all the vicissitudes of history without change; the bit of the self which remains always-already ‘the same’, identical to itself across time” (3). Accordingly, identity is no longer the solid or stable part of the self that stays unchangeable; on the contrary, identity is an ever-evolving being as long as the individual interacts with different social, political and historical positions.

The Question of Identity

Hall's notion about identity is that it is “always in the making” (Drew 173). Hall further elaborates that there are mainly two positions or approaches to define identity though he refuses to follow any of these two approaches which he explains as, first, “one idea of identity as a fixed position, and another [second] idea that identity is relative to the extreme” (Drew 173). Hall supports a third balanced position in which he believes that “people [who follow any of the two previously mentioned approaches] have moved away from identity as process and have sometimes gone right over to the point where identity is nothing at all” (Drew 173). Thus, Hall maintains a middle-ground position where he attempts to find a realistic balance between the two positions of perceiving identity as a concept; therefore, the concept of identity cannot be “essentialist, but a

strategic and positional one” (Hall 3). In other words, Hall highlights the necessity of giving up on the rigid “absolutist vision of identity” that hinders and suppresses the rich aspects of “contradictory (and always incomplete) cultures of hybridity” (Hall, *Essential Essays: Volume 2*. 57). Hall is aware that embracing and accepting these contradictory incomplete cultural hybridities is not an easy process “given the necessarily uncomfortable stresses and strains of multicultural societies” (Hall, *Essential Essays: Volume 2*. 57). In other words, Hall recognizes that culturally diverse societies may pose unsettling ethnic and traditional challenges, among other challenges, among its individuals.

Moreover, since the individual’s social location and experience are in a constant mode of change and evolution, identity cannot be a one-leveled fixed concept. Hall believes that “identities are constituted within, not outside representation” (4). This entails that identity—as a concept—has been previously related to how the individual performs and is expected to perform among and in relation to other individuals within his/her social scope; in other words, it is how he/she is represented. Defining identity came across several difficulties, the most crucial pitfall of defining identity was the attempt to unify or group certain individuals who do not share the same experiences or social, political, racial, geographical and historical backgrounds under one broad umbrella. Moreover, it highlights the main challenge that faces defining the term identity across humanities and social sciences—not only literature—which is that almost all statements and definitions about identity as a concept are questionable even if they are strongly professed.

In his attempt to define “identity” as a concept, Hall believes that it can be a term used “to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which

construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken’. Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us” (5-6). He further explains that the individual is implicitly forced to occupy his/her identity with acknowledging the fact that he/she is a representation of his nation (be it a society, religion, country, or race) against everything that is opposite to the collective ‘national’ identity (6). This adds a pressure on the individual as he/she does not want to be misrecognized in his/her community and leads to performing social roles that may add up to the individual’s struggle. Such a kind of ideology is effective as it “works at both ‘the rudimentary levels of the psychic identity and the drives’ and at the level of the discursive formation and practices which produce the social field” (Hall 7). Tahar Ben Jelloun’s *A Palace in the Old Village* (written in French in 2009 and translated into English in 2011), Idrīs Alī’s *Dongola: A Novel of Nubia* (written in Arabic 1998 and translated into English in 2006), Leila Aboulela’s *Lyrics Alley* (written in English in 2010) demonstrate a process of interpellation where the character’s Arab-African identity is put into test. Therefore, Hall’s notion about identity is relevant to the three selected novels as they represent special cases of Arab-African individuals where finding and accepting a meeting point between their intercultural identities is the only route to salvation.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler questions “if ‘identity’ is an *effect* of discursive practices” (24). Moreover, she implies that “it is the action that produces the subject, or at least the semblance of what the subject ‘is’” (Nayak and Kehily 461). Butler defines performativity as “not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (xv). Although Butler uses performativity on gender, she acknowledges the “question of whether or not the theory of performativity can be transposed onto matters of race has been explored by several

scholars”; she resumes “I would note here not only that racial presumptions invariably underwrite the discourse on gender in ways that need to be made explicit, but that race and gender ought not to be treated as simple analogies. I would therefore suggest that the question to ask is not whether the theory of performativity is transposable onto race, but what happens to the theory when it tries to come to grips with race. Many of these debates have centered on the status of ‘construction’” (XVI). Butler here summed up how obliged performativity—whether gendered or racial—may have different yet equal impact on the individual’s identity. In this thesis, I apply Butler’s performativity on ethnicity in the three previously mentioned texts where to demonstrate how some cultural performative acts related to Arab/Islamic or African cultures and heritage lead to identity mystification and nourish cultural essentialism.

Moreover, in expanding more on Butler’s concept of performativity, Jagger states that “identity is rather an effect of signifying practices rooted in regimes of power/knowledge” which is “a matter of social and political regulation rather than any sort of innate property of individuals, or source of agency in a traditional, liberal humanist sense” (20). In *A Palace in the Old Village* and *Dongola*, the protagonists Mohammed and Awad, respectively, are very fixated on the performative practices that ensure that their cultural identities are not contaminated: Mohammed clings to his religious rituals and his village’s heritage and Awad seeks radicalism and separatism. In other words, the signifying practices—that are culturally set and enforced—are embedded in the social and political everyday routine and are naturalized through the frequent repetition. To reiterate, Butler aims to demonstrate that these ostensibly fundamental identity categories are essentially cultural creations that produce the sense of the inherent, the basic, and the unavoidable, and these cultural products, consequently, turn the individual into “an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts” (Jagger 18, 22). As a result, performativity is interested in the “significatory