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**CULTURAL IDENTITY AS A CONCEPT
«A THEORETICAL SURVEY»**

**مفهوم الهوية الثقافية
«دراسة نظرية»**

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المخلص:

يبدوا لوهلة ما أنه تم الإفراط في استخدام مصطلح "أزمة الهوية" إلى حدٍ ليس بقليل، ولكن في واقع الأمر، مسألة الهوية لا تزال قيد البحث والتعريف. لم يعد للهوية مفهوم ثابت أو، بمعنى أدق، أصبح من المقبول جداً للهوية أن تكون بعيدة عن الثبات أو الجمود، حيث أن هوية الفرد شيء ديناميكي في عملية مستمرة من البناء والتفكيك وإعادة البناء - سواء جزئياً أو كلياً. وبناء على ذلك، لم تعد الهوية هي الجزء الثابت أو المستقر من الذات الذي يبقى غير قابل للتغيير؛ بل على العكس من ذلك، فإن الهوية تتطور باستمرار طالما أن الفرد يتفاعل مع مواقف اجتماعية وسياسية وتاريخية مختلفة.

يعتقد ستيوارت هول أن الهوية في حالة دائمة من الصناعة المستمرة. يقول ستيوارت هول أن هناك موقفين أو نهجين لتحديد الهوية وهما إما أن الهوية جامدة أو أنها نسبية بشكل جامع. يرفض ستيوارت هول هذين النهجين ويتبع موقف وسطي حيث يحاول إيجاد توازن واقعي بين موقعي أو نهجين إدراك الهوية كمفهوم. وبما أن موقع الفرد الاجتماعي وخبرته في حالة مستمرة من التغيير والتطور، فلا يمكن أن يكون مفهوم الهوية ثابت أو أحادي المستوى. وهذا يستلزم أن تكون الهوية - كمفهوم - مرتبطة بالأداء الاجتماعي والنوعي للفرد الذي يتوقع أن يؤديها فيما بين الأفراد الآخرين وفي نطاقه الاجتماعي.

ويمكن القول بأن الهوية والكتابة هما أنماط إنتاجية حيث إن عملية الكتابة جزء حيوي وديناميكي في العملية المستمرة لتشكيل الهوية وإعادة تشكيلها. لذا، إن مفهوم الهوية معقد ومتعدد المستويات وليس من السهل تعريفه أو إدراكه حيث إن فئات الهوية الواحدة المختلفة توفر



طرقاً لفحص ودراسة الارتباطات الهامة بين التجربة الحية والموقع الاجتماعي للفرد. ترى بولا مويبا أن الهويات الاجتماعية والثقافية هي أيضاً تصورية ونتاج الخيال كالكتابة الروائية. وبالتالي، فإن استكشاف صنع الهوية ممكن من خلال فحص ودراسة الكتابات الخيالية الروائية.

الرواية - كنوع أدبي - تسمح للمؤلف والقراء الإتصال مع الاحتمالات المختلفة التي يمكن للفرد من خلالها أن تتكشف له هويته المجسمة متعددة الأصوات. وبالتالي، فإن الرواية الحديثة هي الحيز الأفضل لاستكشاف تعقيدات الهوية. الرواية عند باختين هي نوع أدبي يسرد أنواع الخطاب الاجتماعي وتنوع الأصوات الفردية بشكل منظم فنياً. وعلاوة على ذلك، يضيف باختين أن الرواية هي البطل الرئيسي في دراما التنمية الأدبية في عصرنا الحديث على وجه التحديد لأنها أفضل نوع أدبي يستطيع أن يعكس ميول عالم جديد لا يزال في مرحلة الصنع. تهدف الدراسة إلى استكشاف الطبيعة المعقدة للفرد المعاصر وكيف يمكن له أن يحتضن الأصوات المختلفة داخله في عملية مستمرة من بناء وإعادة بناء هويته، خاصةً التجارب و الصراعات التي يعيشها الفرد العربي الأفريقي الحديث لاستكشاف هويته النفسية والثقافية فيما يتعلق بموقعه الجغرافي السياسي لمنطقة الشرق الأوسط وشمال أفريقيا.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الهوية الثقافية ، الدراسات الثقافية ، الأداء

Abstract:

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. This theoretical survey is part of a study that aims to explore the modern individual's polyphonic nature and how he/she can embrace the different voices within him/herself in the process of constructing-deconstructing-reconstructing his/her identity.

Keywords: Cultural Identity, Cultural Studies, Performativity



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 the 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).

Moreover, since the individual's social location and experience are in a constant mode of change and evolvment, 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, 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 (314).

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).

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.

Therefore, Hall’s and Butler’s views on the question of identity are interrelated. Hall indicates that identity is an ever-evolving construct that is affected by discourses, practices, and individual attachments (e.g., social, religious, racial...); Butler believes that these discourses and practices—whether related to gender to race—lead to certain patterns of performance enforced upon the individual to shape and construct his/her identity. In other words, these patterns are not necessarily coercive; they are constituted of small repetitive performances—molding one’s identity—that help the individual to belong and fit in his social environment; that is, to be accepted among his/her social group. Thus, taking Hall’s and Butler’s accounts on the question of identity work together in grasping the core factors that construct and keep reconstructing identity.

Defining Culture

An essential cog in the process of shaping identity is culture. Culture—as a term—is a common factor in many social studies such as anthropology and literature, and now cultural studies is a discipline on its own. There have been several turns in the history of such a term since the nineteenth century; starting from perceiving culture as good manners and civilization (i.e., Matthew Arnold's definition of culture) and developing the term to include mass culture as part of it in order to represent people's social everyday lives—working social classes everyday lives to be more specific. Abu-Lughod states that culture as a concept holds some inclinations towards sustaining the previously established concepts like race and ethnicity—in spite of culture's anti-essentialist notion in general (470). Abu-Lughod believes that “culture is the essential tool for making other... [and] the anthropological discourse gives cultural difference (and the separation between groups of people it implies) the air of the self-evident” (470). Abu-Lughod is aware of the active dynamics that help in defining culture; she further elaborates on the concept of culture as she believes that culture “operates much like its predecessor—race—even though in its twentieth-century form it has some important political advantages” (470). She then highlights the main aspect of the modern concept of culture as she says that “unlike race, and unlike even the nineteenth-century sense of culture as a synonym for civilization (contrasted to barbarism), the current concept allows for multiple rather than binary differences” (470). This goes hand in hand with the idea of integration rather than fragmentation, which shows how culture “is learned and can change” through several factors including race, religion, time, and place (470).

According to John Fiske, the modern definition of culture no longer includes artistic aesthetics:

The term culture, as used in the phrase "cultural studies," is neither aesthetic nor humanist in emphasis, but political. Culture is not conceived of as the aesthetic ideals of form and beauty found in great art, or in more humanist terms as the voice of the 'human spirit' that



transcends boundaries of time and nation to speak to a hypothetical universal man (the gender is deliberate - women play little or no role in this conception of culture). Culture is not, then, the aesthetic products of the human spirit acting as a bulwark against the tide of grubby industrial materialism and vulgarity, but rather a way of living within an industrial society that encompasses all the meanings of that social experience (Fiske 1268).

Fiske believes that “culture is ideological”; that is, culture is neither static nor linear: it is a complex web of dynamic interchangeable beliefs and not a “static set of ideas imposed upon the subordinate by the dominant classes but rather a dynamic process constantly reproduced and reconstituted in practice - that is, in the ways that people think, act, and understand themselves and their relationship to society” (1269). Consequently, “the ideological norms naturalized in their practices constitute not only the sense of the world for us, but also our sense of ourselves, our sense of identity, and our sense of our relations to other people and to society in general” (Fiske 1270).

In the introduction of *Writing Culture: the Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, James Clifford elaborates that culture is “composed of seriously contested codes and representations,” bearing in mind that “the poetic and the political are inseparable, that science is in, not above, historical and linguistic processes” (2). According to Clifford, cultural studies basically highlight “the constructed, artificial nature of cultural accounts” and weaken the “overly transparent modes of authority”; moreover, and in relation to the focus of this study, cultural studies “draw [the] attention to the historical predicament of ethnography” (2). Within the scope of culture—as a concept—it can be argued that ethnography “decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes processes of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes” (Clifford 2-3).

Cultural Identity, Ethnicity and Nationalism

Cultural identity is related—in a way or another—to politics that nourishes the “linked fate” concept among the individuals of the same nation as identity formation can be “something that is socially based and historical rather than stable and inherent” (Alcoff 319). In other words, sometimes an individual’s sense of cultural identity is driven by the question of where he/she is (among a group) going to more than how much he/she has in common with his/her surrounding group. Any nationalist discourse feeds the importance of unity and harmony to guarantee a safe national “linked fate.” Foucault was concerned with the “group categories of identity that work to integrate individuals ‘by a conscience or self-knowledge’ under a unified condition with ‘a set of very specific patterns’” (qtd. in Alcoff 319). Moreover, ethnicity is an indispensable part of the individual’s cultural identity. According to Hall, “‘everybody has an ethnicity because everybody comes from a cultural tradition, a cultural context’, and the essentialist notion of ethnicity is “extremely damaging” because it “doesn’t allow for pluralization; it doesn’t allow for hybridization,” but since ethnicity as a concept is necessary, there must be, for Hall, a “contestation around the very term itself” (Drew 173).

In anthropology, “nationalism is usually defined as an ideology which holds that cultural boundaries should correspond to political boundaries; that is to say, that the state ought to contain only people ‘of the same kind’” (qtd. in Eriksen 275). This goes in synch with what Abu-Lughod proclaims—in her article “Writing Against Culture”—about how culture operates in an “anthropological discourse to enforce separations that inevitably carry a sense of hierarchy” through emphasizing the oneness of a certain group of individuals (466). The sense of hierarchy and positioning of one group above the other within a larger group that Abu-Lughod discussed is the key element in an essentialist discourse. According to Benedict Anderson in his book *Imagined Communities*, “nationality, or, as one might prefer to put it in view of that word’s multiple significations, nation-ness, as well as nationalism, are cultural artefacts of a particular kind. To understand them properly we need to consider



carefully how they have come into historical being, in what ways their meanings have changed over time, and why, today, they command such profound emotional legitimacy” (4). Thus, nationalism is the intersection of how the cultural heritage—or legacies—is a tool to unify people in order to serve a “bigger” political purpose.

The individual’s nationalist ideology and cultural identity are strongly knotted with ethnicity as “most nationalisms—some would say all—are special cases of ethnic ideologies” (Eriksen 275). Furthermore, Eriksen demonstrates that the difference between kinship ideology and nationalism is “the fact that the latter postulates the existence of an abstract community”; and this enforces Anderson’s concept of imagined communities in which “the nation only exists if one is capable of imagining its existence—it cannot be observed directly” (277-278). This may explain why individuals are concerned with their identities in a retrospective manner where culture and heritage (i.e., ethnic or religious) are in the focus. The problem with the nationalist ideology—which is based on ethnicity in a way or another—is that it is very essentialist, while cultural identity is neither final nor finished; therefore, individuals who are extreme believers in nationalism are often in struggle with their own cultural identity that is always evolving and embracing differences that a nationalist discourse would shun. In relation to this, identification with and belonging to a certain group of people (or a nation) is driven basically from “both the discursive and the psychoanalytic repertoire, without being limited to either” (Hall 2). Since ethnicity is one major factor of grouping people, the “unities” which identities proclaim are, in fact, constructed within the play of power and exclusion, and are the result, not of a natural and inevitable or primordial totality but of the naturalized, overdetermined process of ‘closure’” (Hall 5).

Identity and Writing

The individual may suffer in this inward struggle and might solve this through writing in order to “emphasize [the] diversity rather than [the] fragmentation” of his/her non essentialist identity (Drew 177). It can be argued that identity and writing are both modes of production and “there is no final, finished identity position or self

simply to be produced by the writing”; as a consequence, “identity is also in part becoming through the writing” (Drew 173). In other words, the process of writing is a crucial and a dynamic part in the continuous process of shaping and re-shaping of identity. Identity as a complex and a multi-layered concept is not easy to be defined or grasped since different identity categories “provide modes of articulating and examining significant correlations between lived experience and social location” (Moya 4). As Moya demonstrates, “social and cultural identities are similarly fictitious because the selves they claim to designate cannot be pinned down, fixed, or definitively identified” (6). Hence, to explore the making of identity is possible through examining fictional writings.

Moreover, Bakhtin states that “it is characteristic that the novel does not permit any of these various individual manifestations of itself to stabilize” (6). Namely, the novel—as a genre—allows the author and the readers to get in touch with the different possibilities by which the individual can reveal his/her polyphonic identity. In other words, the novel “as a whole” is a “variform in speech and voice”; it has the ability to articulate different voices that no other literary genre can do (Bakhtin 261). Therefore, the modern novel as a genre is one of the most legitimate venues to explore the complexity of identity as Bakhtin defined the novel as “a diversity of social speech types and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organized” (qtd. in Saugestad 20). Moreover, Bakhtin adds that the novel is “the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it best of all reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making”; thus, a piece of work which reflects a world that is “still in the making” is the best to articulate something like identity which is—according to Hall—“always in the making” (7).

According to Saugestad, “the task of distinguishing between, on one hand, the crisis the heroes suffer because of their subjectivity, and, on the other, the anguish of the self that is set apart from or against external forces is a difficult one” (32). Saugestad’s “heroes” might mean not only novel protagonists, but also heroes who fight against oppressive social, political, and racial conventions and performative acts. For Saugestad, the critical issue to be concerned



with is “not how the hero appears in the world, but how the world appears to the hero, and how the hero appears to himself” (37). The modern novel articulates how the protagonist “perceives the world around him—not what he sees, but how he sees it, alienated and plagued by anxiety as he is”; he further explains that these heroes “fight a battle on the metaphysical level to articulate a new sense of universality and a new concept of individual identity in the face of adverse circumstances... [this hero searches] for meaning and fulfillment in his society in general, and in his own life in particular” (Saugstad 267).

Saugstad states that “through the fragmentation of the cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality, our personal identities changed, and our sense of ourselves as integrated subjects was undermined” (25). Consequently, modern man tends to be categorized as a fragmented being: as if he/she is torn between several cultural, social, historical, and political forces; however, the modern individual has the capability of embracing all the seemingly different aspects that shape his/her identity. 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.

Postpositivist Realism and Cultural Identity

Postpositivist realists suggest that the achievement of a realistic balance is possible though it is not easy since the idea of reality itself is relative. Unlike postmodernist critics, who do not believe in objectivity, realists “contend that humans can develop reliable knowledge about their world and about how and where they fit into that world” (Moya 12). The postpositivist realist critics offer a balanced view about objectivity as they “replace the simple correspondence theory of truth with a more dialectical casual theory of reference in which both shape our perception and refer to casual features of a real world” (Moya 12). In other words, postpositivist realists accept that the subjective human point of view can hold true

objective knowledge with a different percentage of accuracy. Moreover, according to the postpositivist realist theory, “understanding [the self] emerges from one’s past and present experiences and interactions as interpreted in sociopolitical contexts. Understanding, then, is relative to one’s experiences as a raced, gendered, classed, nationalized, and so forth, being” (Gilpin 10). Therefore, postpositivist realism is a very convenient framework for studying cultural identity where discursive forces and ideological apparatuses play a major role in exploring the making of one’s cultural identity.



Conclusion

This theoretical survey is part of a study that aims to explore the modern individual's polyphonic nature and how he/she can embrace the different voices within him/herself in the process of constructing-deconstructing-reconstructing his/her identity. Moreover, this theoretical framework is part of a study that attempts to discover and highlight how the Arab-African identity reconciliation provides agency to the MENA citizens since this unique cultural identity can provide us with "enabling, enlightening and enriching structures of attachment and feeling" (Moya 8).

Taking into consideration all what has been mentioned, this study is informed by the postpositivist realist approach in order to analyze the "making" of Arab-African cultural identity in the three novels mentioned earlier with special reference to Bakhtin's dialogism as far as acknowledging and embracing the diverse voices of individual characters. As previously stated, since identity stems from the lived experience and the social location of the individual, the characters' inner and outer dialogues and "real" experiences in the text should be analyzed closely in order to grasp the struggles faced by these characters. Moya states that "subjects exist only in relation to ever-evolving webs of signification" in which objective knowledge is lost and, as a result, "the self—as a unified, stable, and knowable entity prior to or outside language—is merely a fiction of language, an effect of discourse" (6). Therefore, naturalizing identities will only lead to mystifying them and the only way out is to "subvert [these] identities in order to destabilize the normalizing forces that bring them into being" (Moya 7).

Emphasis on Bakhtin is of special relevance to the current study since the narrative nature of the novel as a genre allows dramatizing the "gaps that always exist between what is told and the telling of it, constantly experimenting with social, discursive and narrative asymmetries"; therefore, looking into the characters' words among their social position—especially in the modern world with regards to global politics—helps the reader to unfold the multilayers of the character's identity hidden under his/her performative social

identity (Bakhtin xxviii). Furthermore, since “the novelist is drawn toward everything that is not yet completed,” then the novel is the best outlet for the identities that are never finished and will never be finished (Bakhtin 27). Hence, the current study will make use of Bakhtin to highlight the narrative techniques that reflect the way the characters struggle with and come to terms with their identity crisis.

Tracing the characters’ “reality” through the narrative unravels their identities’ crises/ struggles; the tricky part is with defining reality. As previously mentioned, this study uses the conception of reality/realism adopted by the postpositivist realists. Poststructuralists do not believe in objective truth or reality as they believe that reality is always constructed by discursive forces; thus, no one view point can hold the absolute objective truth, it is almost non-existent. Unlike the poststructuralists, postpositivist realists “endorse a conception of objectivity as an ideal of inquiry rather than as a condition of absolute and achieved certainty” (Moya 12). Postpositivist realists embrace all the odds; in other words, since it is a possibility to be mistaken about one’s experience, they believe that the other—opposite—possibility exists as well; that is, it is possible to attain “more accurate interpretations” of the same experience (Moya 13). Hence, they neither deny the existence of reality nor they emulate a non-changing form of reality. Indeed, they affirm an undeniable link between the individual, the community and everyday reality/experiences.



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