



# مجلة بحوث الشرق الأوسط

مجلة علمية مُدكَّمة  
(مُعتمدة) شهرياً

العدد مائة وعشرة  
( أبريل 2025 )

السنة الخمسون  
تأسست عام 1974

يصدرها  
مركز بحوث  
الشرق الأوسط

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مجلة بحوث الشرق الأوسط

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العدد مائة وعشرة ( أبريل 2025 )

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(اثنا عشر عددًا سنويًا)  
يصدرها مركز بحوث الشرق الأوسط  
والدراسات المستقبلية - جامعة عين شمس

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## الرؤية

السعي لتحقيق الريادة في النشر العلمي المتميز في المحتوى والمضمون والتأثير والمرجعية في مجالات منطقة الشرق الأوسط وأقطاره .

## الرسالة

نشر البحوث العلمية الأصيلة والرصينة والمبتكرة في مجالات الشرق الأوسط وأقطاره في مجالات اختصاص المجلة وفق المعايير والقواعد المهنية العالمية المعمول بها في المجالات المُحكَّمة دولياً.

## الأهداف

- نشر البحوث العلمية الأصيلة والرصينة والمبتكرة .
- إتاحة المجال أمام العلماء والباحثين في مجالات اختصاص المجلة في التاريخ والجغرافيا والسياسة والاقتصاد والاجتماع والقانون وعلم النفس واللغة العربية وآدابها واللغة الانجليزية وآدابها ، على المستوى المحلى والإقليمي والعالمي لنشر بحوثهم وإنتاجهم العلمي .
- نشر أبحاث كبار الأساتذة وأبحاث الترقية للسادة الأساتذة المساعدين والسادة المدرسين بمختلف الجامعات المصرية والعربية والأجنبية .
- تشجيع ونشر مختلف البحوث المتعلقة بالدراسات المستقبلية والشرق الأوسط وأقطاره .
- الإسهام في تنمية مجتمع المعرفة في مجالات اختصاص المجلة من خلال نشر البحوث العلمية الرصينة والتميزة .



## مجلة بحوث الشرق الأوسط

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## شروط النشر بالمجلة

- تُعنى المجلة بنشر البحوث المهمة بمجالات العلوم الإنسانية والأدبية ؛
- يعتمد النشر على رأي اثنين من المحكمين المتخصصين ويتم التحكيم إلكترونياً ؛
- تقبل البحوث باللغة العربية أو بإحدى اللغات الأجنبية، وترسل إلى موقع المجلة على بنك المعرفة المصري ويرفق مع البحث ملف بيانات الباحث يحتوي على عنوان البحث باللغتين العربية والإنجليزية واسم الباحث والتايتل والانتماء المؤسسي باللغتين العربية والإنجليزية، ورقم واتساب، وإيميل الباحث الذي تم التسجيل به على موقع المجلة ؛
- يشار إلى أن الهوامش والمراجع في نهاية البحث وليست أسفل الصفحة ؛
- يكتب الباحث ملخص باللغة العربية واللغة الإنجليزية للبحث صفحة واحدة فقط لكل ملخص ؛
- بالنسبة للبحث باللغة العربية يكتب على برنامج "word" ونمط الخط باللغة العربية "Simplified Arabic" وحجم الخط 14 ولا يزيد عدد الأسطر في الصفحة الواحدة عن 25 سطر والهوامش والمراجع خط Simplified Arabic حجم الخط 12 ؛
- بالنسبة للبحث باللغة الإنجليزية يكتب على برنامج word ونمط الخط Times New Roman وحجم الخط 13 ولا يزيد عدد الأسطر عن 25 سطر في الصفحة الواحدة والهوامش والمراجع خط Times New Roman حجم الخط 11 ؛
- (Paper) مقاس الورق (B5) 17.6 × 25 سم، (Margins) الهوامش 2.3 سم يمينًا ويسارًا، 2 سم أعلى وأسفل الصفحة، ليصبح مقاس البحث فعلي (الكلام) 13×21 سم. (Layout) والنسق: (Header) الرأس 1.25 سم، (Footer) تنزييل 2.5 سم ؛
- مواصفات الفقرة للبحث : بداية الفقرة First Line = 1.27 سم، قبل النص = 0.00، بعد النص = 0.00، تباعد قبل الفقرة = 6pt) تباعد بعد الفقرة = 0pt)، تباعد الفقرات ( مفرد single) ؛
- مواصفات الفقرة للهوامش والمراجع : يوضع الرقم بين قوسين هلاي مثل : (1)، بداية الفقرة Hanging = 0.6 سم، قبل النص = 0.00، بعد النص = 0.00، تباعد قبل الفقرة = 0.00، تباعد بعد الفقرة = 0.00، تباعد الفقرات (مفرد single) ؛
- الجداول والأشكال: يتم وضع الجداول والأشكال إما في صفحات منفصلة أو وسط النص وفقًا لرؤية الباحث، على أن يكون عرض الجدول أو الشكل لا يزيد عن 13.5 سم بأي حال من الأحوال ؛
- يتم التحقق من صحة الإملاء على مسئولية الباحث لنقادي الأخطاء في المصطلحات الفنية ؛
- مدة التحكيم 15 يوم على الأكثر، مدة تعديل البحث بعد التحكيم 15 يوم على الأكثر ؛
- يخضع تسلسل نشر البحوث في أعداد المجلة حسب ما تراه هيئة التحرير من ضرورات علمية وفنية ؛
- المجلة غير ملزمة بإعادة البحوث إلى أصحابها سواء نشرت أم لم تنشر ؛
- تعتبر البحوث عن آراء أصحابها وليس عن رأي رئيس التحرير وهيئة التحرير ؛
- رسوم التحكيم للمصريين 650 جنيه، ولغير المصريين 155 دولار ؛
- رسوم النشر للصفحة الواحدة للمصريين 25 جنيه، وغير المصريين 12 دولار ؛
- الباحث المصري يسدد الرسوم بالجنيه المصري (بالفيزا) بمقر المركز (المقيم بالقاهرة)، أو على حساب حكومي رقم : (9/450/80772/8) بنك مصر (المقيم خارج القاهرة) ؛
- الباحث غير المصري يسدد الرسوم بالدولار على حساب حكومي رقم : (EG71000100010000004082175917) (البنك العربي الأفريقي) ؛
- استلام إفادة قبول نشر البحث في خلال 15 يوم من تاريخ سداد رسوم النشر مع ضرورة رفع إيصالات السداد على موقع المجلة ؛

• **المراسلات :** توجه المراسلات الخاصة بالمجلة إلى: merc.director@asu.edu.eg

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## دراسات العلوم السياسية

- 370 – 343 أحمد محمد علي "إشكالية بناء الدولة المدنية في العراق" 8
- 422 – 371 جعفر الصادق مهدي "الحركات الاجتماعية في العراق وتأثيرها على وعي الناخب بعد العام(2019)". 9

## دراسات اللغة الانجليزية

- 38 - 1 Eman Qassem The Fragmentation of Power between Adults and “ Young Adults in Selected Young Adult Dystopias.” 10

## دراسات علوم الاتصال والاعلام

- 68 - 39 Rasha Adel El A Postcolonial Constructivist Criticism of the Politically Redrawn Syrian Boundaries of Space and Time in the Diasporic Micro-narratives of Alia Malek and Samar Yazbek 11

## افتتاحية العدد 110

يسر مركز بحوث الشرق الأوسط والدراسات المستقبلية صدور العدد (110) إبريل 2025 من مجلة المركز "مجلة بحوث الشرق الأوسط". هذه المجلة العربية التي مر على صدورها حوالي 50 عامًا في خدمة البحث العلمي، ويصدر هذا العدد وهو يحمل بين دافتيه عدة دراسات متخصصة: ( دراسات قانونية، دراسات اللغة العربية، دراسات اجتماعية، دراسات اقتصادية، دراسات لغوية) ويعد البحث العلمي Scientific Research حجر الزاوية والركيزة الأساسية في الارتقاء بالمجتمعات لكي تكون في مصاف الدول المتقدمة.

ولذا تعتبر الجامعات أن البحث العلمي من أهم أولوياتها لكي تقود مسيرة التطوير والتحديث عن طريق البحث العلمي في المجالات كافة؛ ولذا تهدف مجلة بحوث الشرق الأوسط إلى نشر البحوث العلمية الرصينة والمبتكرة في مختلف مجالات الآداب والعلوم الإنسانية واللغات التي تخدم المعرفة الإنسانية.

والمجلة تطبق معايير النشر العلمي المعتمدة من بنك المعرفة المصري وأكاديمية البحث العلمي، مما جعل الباحثين يتسابقون من كافة الجامعات المصرية ومن الجامعات العربية للنشر في المجلة، وتحرص المجلة على انتقاء الأبحاث العلمية الجادة والرصينة والمبتكرة للنشر في المجلة كإضافة للمكتبة العلمية وتكون دائماً في مقدمة المجالات العلمية المماثلة. ولذا نعد بالاستمرارية من أجل مزيد من الإبداع والتميز العلمي.

والله من وراء القصد

رئيس التحرير

د. حاتم العبد



**A Postcolonial Constructivist Criticism of the Politically  
Redrawn Syrian Boundaries of Space and Time  
in the Diasporic Micro-narratives  
of Alia Malek and Samar Yazbek**

**نقد بنائي ما بعد الكولونيالية  
لإعادة رسم الحدود الزمنية والمكانية السورية  
في روايات الشتات الصغرى لعلياء مالك وسمر يزبك.**

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**مُدريس مساعد بكلية اللغة والإعلام، الأكاديمية العربية للعلوم**

**والتكنولوجيا والنقل البحري، فرع الإسكندرية.**



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المُلخَص:

يتناول هذا البحث مقارنة نهج بنائي ما بعد الاستعمار لفشل الهوية الوطنية السورية في روايات الشتات الصغرى للكاتبة والصحفية السورية "علياء مالك" لروايتها *"The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoir Of Syria"* (2017) والكاتبة والصحفية السورية المنفية "سمر يزبك" عن روايتها *The Crossing* ((2015 و *Into The Shattered Heart Of Syria* . هذا ويرتكز البحث على نظرية "ألكسندر ويندت" و"كينيث جيرغن" للبناء الخطابى لهيكل السلطة المهيمنة في النظام الدولي. ويُناقش البحث كيف تشكل مفاهيم ما بعد لاستعمار لهومي بهابها كالتهجين والاختلاف الثقافي والتقليد والغربة وسياسات النزوح الثقافي البنية الأيديولوجية لسوريا في عهد "حافظ الأسد" وابنه "بشار الأسد"، مع التركيز بشكل خاص على الانقسامات الطائفية والسياسية داخل البنية الدقيقة للمجتمع السوري من خلال روايات الشتات الصغرى لعلياء مالك وسمر يزبك التي جسدت الاستحواذ الفكري والسياسي منذ بناء هوية سوريا الكبرى حتى السنوات الأولى من الحرب الأهلية التي عقب اندلاع الحرب.

### الكلمات المفتاحية:

نقد ما بعد الكالونيلية - ضياع الهوية الوطنية - الثقافة - روايات الشتات الصغرى.

**Abstract:**

This paper adopts a contemporary post-colonial constructivist approach to the failure of national identity in the micro-narratives of the diasporic Syrian American writer and journalist, Alia Malek's *The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoire of Syria* (2017) and the exiled Syrian writer and journalist Samar Yazbek's, *The Crossings: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria* (2015). The paper starts by underlining Alexander Wendt's and Kenneth J. Gergen's constructivist approach to the discursive construction of the dominant power structures of states in the international system. It then investigates, with reference to the post-colonial world of the Middle East, how Homi Bhabha's post-colonial concepts of hybridity, cultural difference, mimicry and the uncanny and the politics of cultural displacement shape the ideational structure of Syria under Hafez al-Assad and his successor son, Bashar al-Assad, with particular emphasis on the sectarian and political divisions within the micro-structure of the Syrian society. The paper finally examines the interplay between the pedagogical macro-structure of the Syrian state and the performative agency of its individual subjects through which the power of story-telling as a performative act is emphasized with reference to the micro narratives of Alia Malek and Samar Yazbek where represented are identity and its political appropriation ever since the identity construction of Greater Syria until the early years following the outbreak of the civil war under Bashar al-Assad.

**Keywords:** post-colonial criticism, national identity failure, diaspora, trans-nationalism, post-colonial nostalgias, testimonial life writing, culture, constructivism, micro-narrative





## Introduction

The interplay between structure and agency, as explained by the social constructivists of International Relations (IR), Alexander Wendt and Kenneth J. Gergen, transform the macro-politics of states in the international system whose power structures are both material and ideational. The appropriation and transformation of the ideational structure of states, which ascribe meaning and significance to their material base, is achieved through the constructivist agency of individual actors whose identities, which are shaped by the discursive structures of their given societies, can still challenge the dominant power structures of their states in social interaction on the micro level (Wendt 139), (Gergen 10-11). With reference to the post-colonial Middle East, given that national reality is discursive, the dominant power structures of the post-colonial national states of the Middle East are contested by new cultural and social processes that reconstitute their identities and interests on the micro level. Constructivism thus foregrounds state structure and individual agency in the examination of the intersubjective collective ideas, norms and values that inform social behavior through the construction of the national interests of actors, their human rights and their state identities at large.

Unlike national states in Europe, the post-colonial nations of the Third World, specifically of the Middle East, suffered colonial domination which greatly influenced their transition to modernity and the nation-state. This is clearly reflected in how the national identities of modern Lebanon, Syria and Iraq did not systematically evolve in the post-independence era, as they had been arbitrarily drawn by England and France who, after seizing control over the territories of the Ottoman Empire during WWI, they divided up the lands to serve their colonial and commercial interests with total disregard to their indigenous populations.



As these modern national-states are ruled by the same dictatorial regimes, the fragility of their national identities is emphasized by the outbreak of civil wars, assassinations, coups and uprisings by their multi-ethnic and religious communities over political power and the control of the lands' natural resources. Such violence committed by insurgent groups compels the sovereign entities of the state to ensure national security by excluding other groups from sharing power (Sharkawy, Identity and its Political Manipulation 35-44)

The power structures of the post-colonial national states are thus appropriated and transformed through acts of subversion and mimicry, hybridity, cultural difference and ambivalence which underline the shifting power between the oppressor and the oppressed in the colonial and the post-colonial national worlds. According to Homi Bhabha, given that cultural meanings and cultural identities are temporalized, such temporality foregrounds the metaphoric representation of national states and national identities (Nation and Narration 292). As such, colonialism is not a thing of the past insofar as its neo-colonial power structure characterizes the macro structure of the post-colonial national state and its controlled narrative of nationalism which are continuously challenged by the minority groups of the oppressed and the marginalized. This is clearly reflected in how Bhabha's post-colonial concepts of hybridity and cultural difference, mimicry, the uncanny and the politics of cultural displacement, which foreground the issues of the post-colonial Third World, are used as methods of thematic analysis of Alia Malek's and Samar Yazbek's depiction of the post-colonial national state of Syria and the politics of its ideational structure in their mini-narratives understudy. The post-colonial national state of Syria, as depicted in the texts understudy, where the state's identity and its political manipulation are represented, is constructed as a contesting site of hybrid identities and multi-culturalism.



In light of the above, the macro structure of the post-colonial national states foregrounds their anxiety towards the presence of the subaltern, who is the product of heterogeneous hybridity that threatens the homogeneity of the nation. With reference to Bhabha, the metaphor of national unity derives from an illusory past that is re-inscribed by the national discourse of the present to ensure a nationalist future. Such national unification is threatened by the presence of the subaltern whose voice cuts through its unity of time as it rewrites the nation's history from an alternative, non-violent, hybridized perspective (The Location of Culture 207). In light of this, the cultural identity of the subaltern is influenced by certain regulative, constitutive and perspective social norms and national interests that appropriate the national identity of the state at large

As conflict zones are sites of hybrid identities and multi-culturalism, post-colonial Syria is a conflict zone where the voice of the Other emerges in a "Third Space" that is an "in-between space" of resistance. The "Third Space", with reference to Bhabha, "constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity, that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, re-historicized and read anew" (The Location of Culture 37). In light of this, the concept of the "Third Space" transforms the fixed signs of national identity, which reconfigures and destabilizes the power structure of the state. This process of hybridization best emerges out of the experience of the diaspora, as clearly reflected in the micro-narratives of Alia Malek and Samar Yazbek, where identity and its political manipulation in Syria are represented. The texts understudy, in this respect, depict the material and ideational structures of the totalitarian state of Syria where the state's national ideas, social norms, identity, interests as well as its mimicry of the colonized discourse



are examined. It could be thus inferred that the process of hybridization is the outcome of the subjective experiences of both authors, who did not only cross the borders of their country, but were also expelled from their own traditional homeland as well as from their own past and heritage. As such, the performative power of their story-telling foregrounds writing and representation as new social processes through which the dominant power structures of the state are contested by the hybridity and cultural difference of the authors' language, culture, politics and religion. Hybridity is, therefore, a post-colonial excess method, through which the authors' voices do not only occupy fractures within the Syrian nationalist discourse but they also exceed its boundaries and transform its sovereign power in a contesting structure that is open-ended.

In his discussion of mimicry, Bhabha explains that both identities of the colonizer and the colonized undergo a continuous process of appropriation and transformation through mimicry. The anxiety of the colonizer is clearly reflected in the agency of the colonized to challenge the colonial discourse by mimicking its language and culture. However, Bhabha indicates that the colonized mimicry of the colonial culture is not a pure adaptation of it but is rather an imitation with difference. Such mimicry is thus a type of mockery which undermines the power of colonial domination over the colonized. Bhabha illustrates the ambivalence of mimicry in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man" where he foregrounds mimicry as an ironic representation of the colonial discourse which signifies the agency of the colonized in challenging the dominant colonial structures of language and thought. Mimicry as a discourse is thus characterized by difference that results in "ambivalence" where the cultural and intellectual binary oppositions between the colonizer and the colonized are redressed (The Location of Culture 86). The same applies to the post-colonial national state of Syria where the state's mimicry of the pre-existing French colonial power structures of sectarianism to establish control over the country ends in menace against its apparatus of



power when the multiple ethnic societies of Syria, as clearly foregrounded by Malek in the society of the Tahaan Building, experienced the ethnic tensions that existed in the country during Hafiz al-Assad's presidency before some of them resisted assimilation by the state and its totalitarian regime whose politics were characterized by favoritism and nepotism rather than social cohesion.

In light of the above, the power structure of the post-colonial Syrian national state is a metonymic structure that represents the identity of the people and their cultural difference. Mimicry is thus used as a method of thematic analysis to illustrate the symbolic narrative of the nation which resembles and exceeds colonial domination in the formation and representation of the national state and its identity. National authority is therefore characterized by ambivalence insofar as the national elites of the post-colonial national state of Syria mimic the pre-existing power structures of colonial domination before their mimicry ends in menace against their apparatuses of power. A case in point is the process of state building of post-colonial Syria, which required the use of coercion and state violence to establish power over oppositional forces through cultural assimilation, ethnic cleansing and bureaucracy, as clearly depicted in the representation of the state ever since the rise of Hafiz al-Assad to power until the outbreak of the Syrian revolution under the rule of Bashar al-Assad.

Yazbek's mini-narrative represents the macro-structure of the Syrian state under the rule of Bashar al-Assad as a power structure of political organization which creates societies of individual subjects that either serve the objectives of the state or transform its power-structure. In this respect, similar to the politics of the structure of colonial authority according to which the colonizer and the colonized engage in a



relationship of mutual appropriation and transformation, a state-society framework connects between states and their societies through social interaction on the micro-level. It could be thus inferred that Yazbek's mini-narrative that depicts the stories and the testimonies of the rebels and the young fighters she met with during the Syrian revolution serve as a foundation upon which the power of the macro- structure of the state can be reduced to the civil societies of individual subjects whose social activism either meets the state's interests or rises against them.

The concepts of homeland and identity are therefore continuously reimagined as neither are they foundational nor stable. The existence of diaspora and the exiled is thus symbolic since they metaphorically move between different cultures and social practices, as explained by Stuart Hall in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" where he underlines how the diasporic identity is always "in context ... positioned" (222). The diasporic identity is, in other words, characterized by a continuous change in position, which results in a continuous change in metaphorical representation as well as in meaning and significance. In this respect, Hall underscores how the diasporic identity is not a fixed identity, but rather a transformative one that derives its significance from both the future and the past – that is from "some essentialist past ... [and] the continuous play of history, culture and power" (225). A case in point is the authors understudy, whose micro-narratives are characterized by a powerful sense of double consciousness and uncanniness. Such temporality of writing and representation destabilizes the state's homogeneity of national culture and identity.

The post-colonial concept of the uncanny describes the dual quality of identity which is associated with transnationalism. The uncanny, as Bhabha suggests, is the "unhomely" whose identity, like that of the colonized, is partial and whose presence is a repetition marked by difference and transformation through which the past is revived in the



present. The uncanny does not only refer to the colonized but also to the migrant and the exiled who involuntarily experience double consciousness. The feeling of uncanniness as such is an ambivalent feeling where the margins between the past and the present, the private and the public and the familiar and the unfamiliar are redrawn. The uncanny, in other words, foregrounds the dual identity and the cultural displacement of diaspora in the 21st century where they are stranded between a national culture and a transnational location. The concepts of home and identity for the authors of the texts under study are therefore imaginary constructs through which they yearn for the construction of a country that is unified and stable and an identity that is cohesive and empowered.

Bhabha's discussion of the concept of uncanniness extends to include the temporality of national culture insofar as it is homely for those who belong to it and benefit from it whereas it is unhomely and changing for those who feel alienated by it and those who cross its borders. In this respect, the concept of foreignness, with reference to Julia Kristeva's book, *Strangers to Ourselves* (1991), is an aspect of uncanniness which defines nations that are always in a process of becoming insofar as they are subjected to new social norms, cultural identities and forms that influence their behavior and their social relationships with one another (170). With respect to the diaspora and the exiled, the uncanny, as a method of analysis, examines the dual quality of identity which is associated with transnationalism. In light of this, the identities of the diasporic Alia Malek and the exiled Samar Yazbek are both "plural and partial" in the sense that both authors are stranded between two different cultures and two different places, as they continuously reimagine the concepts of homeland and identity in their micro-narratives. The existence of both authors as transnational subjects





is thus symbolic insofar as they cross between different cultures and social practices, which characterizes their writing and representation with a powerful sense of double consciousness and uncanniness. Given that the authors' performative act of story-telling represents their feelings of uncanniness towards al- Assads' Syria that is unhomely to them, the state's homogeneity of national culture and identity is foregrounded in their micro-narratives as part of the metonymic structure of national life, which is destabilized not only by the authors' dual identity and cultural displacement but also by the Syrian civil society that is alienated by it.

The tension between the pedagogical and the performative represents the transition of the nation from the stable structure of homogenous power to the heterogeneous social reality of the culture and identity of the people. Such transition is clearly reflected in metaphorical language through which there is no fixed signification of the image of national power. Metaphorical language, therefore, foregrounds how the nation and nationalism are characterized by temporality. This is clearly reflected in Bhabha's earlier discussion of the horizontal and vertical shifts of metaphor. Where horizontally the nation and nationalism assume stability, vertically they are a metonymy for a vast ambivalent array of symbolism. In this respect, Bhabha's concept of dissemination, where he argues that nations are structures of narration, foregrounds their temporality as well as undermines the possibility of perceiving them from a holistic historicist perspective (Nations and Narration 140). This is clearly reflected in Malek's representation of the national image of Hafiz al-Assad as constructing her national identity, which rather than exciting her feelings of nationalism towards the image of the president as the beloved father of the state, it triggered her feelings of anger and disgust at him and his loyalists (130). On a larger scale, despite the state's macro-politics of sectarianization and identity manipulation, the national identity of the state is a metonymic power structure where it is always in a process of becoming insofar as the state's multi-ethnic and religious





societies are subjected to new social norms, cultural identities and forms that influence their behavior and their social relationships with one another. This is clearly exemplified by Yazbek's representation of the power of the insurgent groups of the jihadists who manipulated the political sphere and infiltrated the social fabric of the Syrian society to their favor. Such politics of cultural appropriation, therefore, account for the socio-political and cultural shifts that occur within the ideational structure of the state, which foregrounds the power structure of the state as a metonymic structure through which the state's national identity is depicted as a temporal cultural identity that is neither complete nor fixed (97).

Given that story-telling is a performative act that threatens the pedagogical structure of the state, Alia Malek and Samar Yazbek retrospectively recount their experiences in war-torn Syria through the power of story-telling. The performative acts of their micro-narratives foreground the competing ideologies that reconfigure the relationship between the subject and the state. Both writers seek to change consciousness towards a totalitarian regime that violates human rights. The author's narratives of story-telling thus foreground the effect of nationalism on sectarianism in Syria as the marginalization of the multi-ethnic communities from the sociopolitical sphere has had political consequences that drove the state to a sectarian conflict which ended in an armed rebellion against al-Assads' regime and, consequently, in the fall of Syria's national identity. Identity, in this respect, is a powerful tool used by the state to shape its macro-politics through the ostracism of certain ethnic and religious communities which refused to internalize the pedagogy of the regime's unified national identity. The micro-narratives of both writers therefore embody their performative agency in story-telling as well as in reconfiguring the state's national discourse.



## Methodology

The selected texts under study are the post-colonial nostalgic micro-narrative of the diasporic Syrian American writer and journalist, Alia Malek's *The Home That Was Our Country: A Memoire of Syria* (2017) and the testimonial life writing of the exiled Syrian writer and journalist Samar Yazbek's translated memoir, *The Crossings: My Journey to the Shattered Heart of Syria* (2015), both of which depict the failed state of Syria and the fall of its national identity.

With reference to Alexander Wendt's and Kenneth J. Gergen's constructivist approach to the discursive construction of the dominant power structures of states in the international system, the paper applies post-colonial constructivist criticism to the texts under study to deconstruct the nationalist pedagogy that frames the ideational structure of the post-colonial nationalist state of Syria throughout modern history until the early years following the outbreak of the civil war in 2011. In this respect, Homi Bhabha's post-colonial concepts of hybridity, cultural difference, mimicry, the uncanny and the politics of cultural displacement are used as methods of thematic analysis of the micro-narratives under study to underline the politically redrawn boundaries of space and time between the pedagogical macro structure of the Syrian state and the performative agency of the non-national other, which appropriates and transform the ideational structure of the state and its national identity at large.

The post-colonial constructivist criticism of the texts under study, in this respect, underlines which factors changed which aspects of state identity as it investigates the underlying mechanisms behind the appropriation of state identity which influence state behavior. In light of this, the material structure of the post-colonial national state of Syria, with reference to its economic base and geographical position, cannot



explain the appropriation of its national identity without the examination of the ideational structure that ascribes meaning to it.

## Analysis

The application of Bhabha's post-colonial concepts to the examination of the ideational structure of the post-colonial national state of Syria in the micro-narratives under study, through the authors' performative acts of story-telling, the complexities that influence the interplay between the pedagogical structure of the state and the performative agency of individual subjects in redrawing the boundaries of the state's macro politics of sectarianization and the manipulation of its national identity between the past and the present. This is clearly reflected in Alia Malek's micro-narrative which begins with a map of Syria in historical and current times. Underneath the picture of the map, Malek indicates that "Bild al-Sham does not refer to a fixed geographic entity with sharp border distinctions as shown on the map" (viii). Her entry suggests how the issue of identity in Syria dates back to earlier times than al-Assads' totalitarian regimes insofar as the colonial aftermath of the French occupation of Syria, after the fall of the Ottoman Empire, influenced Syrian politics, precisely under Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad, by dividing the Arab land between the French and the British with total disregard to the multi-ethnic minorities of the entire region. As such, the borders that were eventually set are completely different from the lines drawn on the map, as it resulted in the construction of states with multiple identities and ideologies. In light of this, the macro-structure of the national state of Syria, after the French mandate, had to impose a unified Syrian identity on the multiple societies of its nation.

Greater Syria therefore suffered the aftermath of European colonization with reference to its transformed identity and geography,



where certain sects were favored to others. A case in point is how as the territories of Aleppo and Damascus in Syria turned into states, the marginalized areas of the Alawites and the Druze in the northwest and in the south also turned into states named after their sectarian identities. However, it was not until the end of WWII that the French finally departed Syria after twenty-six years through which the Middle East, as Malek indicates in her book, should have transformed from “Ottoman Savagery to European modernity” (26). Certainly, as the French withdrew from Syria, they did not only leave the land “sliced up” unreasonably, but they also left the infrastructure of the land underdeveloped as their chief concerns were rather directed to “security and administration” at the expense of other sectors such as “transportation” and “education”. In light of this, Malek underlines how the intelligence agencies, created by the French, influenced the politics of al-Assads’ mukhabarat (27).

Malek thus succeeds in representing the identity of the Syrian state as one that has been appropriated throughout history. Her narrative foregrounds how the French colonization of Syria relied on sectarianism as a political tool to maintain its power over the country, which left it structurally, socially, economically and politically weak. Such factors transformed the identity of Syria, specifically with reference to Hafiz and Bashar al-Assad whose authoritarian regimes that mimic the French colonial power structure are characterized by favoritism and nepotism rather than development, economic progress and social cohesion. In light of this, sectarianism and identity politics are two of the underlying mechanisms that constitute the macro structure of the state’s system through which the power of its authoritarian regime is consolidated, as clearly reflected in Samar Yazbek’s micro-narrative which foregrounds the political organization of the ideational structure of the Syrian state ever since the outbreak of the civil war in 2011.



Samar Yazbek's micro-narrative foregrounds the ideational structure of the Syrian state under the rule of Bashar al-Assad, where objective goals and national interests influence certain social actions as well as trigger insurgent responses. Given that the national identity of Syria, ever since Hafiz al-Assad's consolidation of it to unify the state and prevent it from crumbling into civil war, is a unifying factor that informs the national interest of the state, the macro-structure of the state is thus a power structure of political organization which creates societies of individual subjects that either serve the objectives of the state or transform its power-structure. As such, similar to the structure of colonial authority according to which the colonizer and the colonized are in a relationship of mutual appropriation and transformation, states and their societies are also interconnected in a state-society framework where they influence one another through social interaction that is selected on the micro level of the state.

At the beginning of her micro-narrative, Yazbek refers to the upcoming eighteen months through which she made her second and third crossings into war-torn Syria. As a non-national other, she describes the changes that she witnessed, upon sneaking through the barbed wire that separates between Turkey and north Syria, with specific reference to Antakya airport which she represents as a microcosm of the macrocosm current state structure of Syria under Bashar al-Assad. Yazbek describes her surroundings as full of "machines of destruction" and "blazing ski[es]" (4-5), which makes her reminiscent of her early childhood and teenage years as she relives the past of a Syria that she believes had been one of the most beautiful places in the world. This is clearly reflected in her personal narrative about her early life in Syria, before growing more independent as an adult who determines, after obtaining divorce, to move with her daughter to the capital city, Damascus, "at a distance from [her]"



family, community and [Alawite] sectarian ties” (5). She underlines that her decision to live independently with her daughter in Damascus, years before the outbreak of the civil war, had jeopardized her reputation as a female in a conservative society who seeks to rebel against its laws. Such incidents foreground the culture of Syria’s conservative societies which is unhomely for the Syrians who crossed the border of the state and the Syrians who seek to change the social reality of their communities by confronting it. Yazbek elaborates on her stance when she narrates how, as she met with the women of her host family in the town of Saraqeb upon her first crossing into war-torn Syria, she had to explain that “a woman’s freedom lies in a life lived responsibly” which contradicts with the state’s representation of women’s liberation as “a chaotic violation of customs and traditions” (7).

In her micro-narrative, Yazbek foregrounds the difference between national identification and political organization with reference to the stories of the young men, Maysara and Mohamed, who escorted her during her first crossing. Where Maysara and Mohamed had once been “rebel fighter[s]” who took to the streets of Syria in peaceful demonstrations calling for social justice at the outbreak of the Syrian revolution, they ended up taking arms as they joined the armed resistance after the regime responded with violence at the protesters and the situation deteriorated into ethnic conflict (4). In light of this, Yazbek underlines how the successive regimes of Hafiz and Bashar al- Assad are confronted by the juxtaposition of felt-membership and state-authority which underlines the ideational structure of the Syrian state where its national identity is contested as the people’s sense of it is both static and changing.

Given that grand narratives characterize the ideational structure of the modern national state, which resorts to rhetoric as a political tool to unite its people against the non- national other who stands out as a



different identity of one society from the rest, Yazbek depicts Syrian calligraphers and painters of graffiti as a rebellious society that is non-national in threatening the power of Bashar's regime through the use of the art of graffiti as a revolutionary act of opposition. She depicts the calligrapher of Saraqeb's graffiti not only as a painter but also as a gravedigger who, after "provid[ing] the artwork on Saraqeb's walls, [he] consigned its martyrs, the victims of bombing, to the grave" (12). Although the depiction of the calligrapher's multi-tasks foregrounds death as the only winning pole vault in the Syrian revolution, his agency in resisting the state's meta-narrative of nationalism underlines how the cultural identity of the non-national other can be a means through which meanings are negotiated and identities are contested.

The ideational structure of the national state of Syria under Bashar's control is thus threatened not only by the division within the state's multi-ethnic and religious societies but also by the voice of the non-national other which deconstructs the metaphor of national unity. The Third Space is thus a contested site of hybrid identities and multiculturalism whereby the history of the nation is narrated from a different perspective. As such, Yazbek's interpretation of the ideational structure of Bashar's Syria in the micro-narrative of her first crossing underlines the power of writing and representation in re-historicizing the national identity of the state. The identity and political manipulation of Syria is further investigated by Alia Malek's representation of the social structure of newly independent Syria in the Tahaan Building ever since her grandmother, Salma, moved to Damascus in 1949 and until the late 1970s, where the social life of her family intersects with the political organization of the state during this period of time.



The construction of the Tahaan building had just been completed when Malek's grandmother moved with her husband to Damascus. Malek's grandparents were the first residents of the apartment they purchased in the building. She underlines how the design of the building enabled the residents to socialize with their neighbours from nearby buildings. Malek foregrounds the social life of the residents of the building as a microcosm of "the people who made up new and old Syrian society" (33). Where some residents suffered the aftermath of war and displacement, others just drifted from other countries to Damascus before the building had residents who held positions in the Syrian Army. Despite the state's adoption of French colonial politics of ethnic segregation and regional separatism, there was no question regarding the possibility of the coexistence of the different racial and social groups that inhabited the Tahaan building. Malek thus depicts the building as a "multifamily" building that stands out among the rest of the traditional "solitary family" households of the Arabs. Among the residents of the building were "Turks, Kurds, Arabs and [lately] Palestinians – all of different classes, some Christians and others Muslims," which underlines the intimacy and solidarity between groups of strangers that build up a unified Syrian identity (35).

Although Malek depicts Salma as an artistic woman who is fond of song and poetry as well as a powerful woman who is in close contact with the ruling elite of Syria, Salma suffered patriarchal oppression like many other women of her generation. Similar to the country that had been stifled by the colonial politics of sectarianism, Syrian women were also stifled by patriarchal authority that made them feel alienated among their families and social peers. Malek thus foregrounds the future of Syrian women, same as their country's, as a matter handled by the vision and the established rules "of a person's religious sect" (31).





The political structure of Syria, which was created by the first military coup, resembles the current political structure of the state insofar as it underlines the rise of the Alawites to power ever since. Given that the Alawites were the major sect that led the coup, the Sunni members of the military attempted a counter-coup, which was immediately suppressed by the Alawites. As a result, the minority groups of the Alawites, the Druze and the Greek Orthodox Christians were given more privilege in military service than their Sunni counterparts. Malek highlights how this period was very remarkable not only in Syria but also in the region as it coincided with the Egyptian military coup against the monarchy and the arrival of Colonel Gamal Abdel Nasser, who fought foreign intervention in Arab countries and called for the liberation of Palestine. During this period, Malek narrates how Salma and her neighbours in the Tahaan building were “swooned” by Nasser, whom they could not miss listening to his speeches on Pan Arabism. Nasser’s speeches did not only represent the frustration as well as the future aspirations of the entire Arab region, but they also preached domestically the politics of “nationalization and deprivatization” which as they had been applied in Syria, they greatly affected the assets of the established rich like Malek’s great grandfather, Abdeljawwad (55 -56).

After the 1967 war defeat, Hafiz al-Assad, changed the socio-political sphere of Syria from Pan Arabism to a more nationally reserved one, which depicts al-Assad as a shrewd “pragmatist” (Malek 59). Certainly, while the Ba’athist ideology supported the Pan-Arab identity, it changed its politics with reference to al-Assad’s Corrective Movement, where a Syrian national identity was reinforced. Accordingly, the neighborhood of the Tahaan building became less convenient for Malek’s grandmother, Salma, who decided to move somewhere else in the early 1970s. It was around this time when Salma rented her apartment to



Hassan Hamada, a national poet who came from one of the poverty-stricken areas of Dara'a before he was enrolled in the Syrian Army. Although Salma entrusted Hassan with one-year renewable lease, just as Hafiz al-Assad remained in power despite his term as president was completed, Hassan also remained in the Tahaan building and has not left ever since (60-62).

With respect to the political upheaval that broke out in Syria which transformed the country from an unlimited revisionist state to a sovereign state, the socio-political structure of the country under the Ba'athist regime adopted the same political tactics used by the French to empower the Alawite sect to combat any possible civil rebellion. Sectarianism has thus been a political tool reinforced by the regime to maintain its survival despite the state's advocacy of a unified national identity. In light of this, Malek succeeds in foregrounding the fragility of the socio-political structure of Syria with reference to the society of the Tahaan building and its residents who experienced the ethnic tensions that existed in Syria during Hafiz al-Assad's presidency and his totalitarian regime. In this respect, as the Islamists created a political opposition which sought the overthrow of Hafiz al-Assad's oppressive regime, the growing Islamic revival under Bashar al-Assad had taken an independent turn despite the president's efforts to draw the Islamists under his control. Consequently, during the early years of the civil war the Islamists along with prison released Jihadists changed the landscape of war-torn Syria into a battlefield of terrorists, as clearly depicted in Samar Yazbek's micro-narrative of her second crossing into Syria.

Since Yazbek's first crossing, she still suffered the horrors of a traumatic memory of mutilated bodies, bomb-shells, ruin and destruction. She begins her narrative in the city of Reyhanli on the Turkish borders where she made her second crossing. The city, which has once been a peaceful resort before the out-break of the civil war, has turned in



February 2013 into a site of dropped shells and a host of Syrian refugees, which foregrounds the Syrian-Turkish borders as an extended part of Syria's conflict zones. Yazbek expounds on this by highlighting the presence of Bashar's men on the ground, "conducting [their] operations and trying to infiltrate the networks of rebels and activists" (44-45). As such, given that Syria's border crossings with Turkey were engaged in conflict, a significant number of foreign fighters, among whom were Yemenis, Saudis, French speaking Tunisians and Chechens, joined the Free Syrian Army (FSA) battalions and the Islamists in their opposition of Bashar's regime.

As the conflict escalated within many of the Syrian territories such as the cities of Binnish and Saraqeb as well as within the poor villages of Rabia and Taqla in the summer of 2012, the Jihadist battalions grew more in power as they declared themselves, through the construction of a Salafist Islamic State, the protectors and defenders of the repressed Syrian population. Certainly, since massacres were committed by the regime's militants and Bashar's mercenaries, the shabiha, foreign fighters joined the battalions of the FSA which resulted in the creation of Jihadist groups such as the Nusra Front (Jabhet al-Nusra) that Yazbek foregrounds as "a new faction made up of young men with long beards" (51). Yazbek highlights that the integration of this Jihadist faction, which has been operating as an "invisible underground movement [whose] presence had not been tolerated in the villages," underlines the constructivist agency of certain individual groups in influencing the state's ideational structure.

Although during his early years of presidency, Bashar tried to accommodate the Islamists to establish control over them, their power spanned out of his control as their influence increased domestically in



urban and rural areas, which underlines how Syria as a post-colonial national state is condemned to failure with reference to the internal conflicts that characterize its macro and micro structures. A case in point is the strict interpretations of sharia law which were reinforced in certain regions of the country by the Islamists against liberal lifestyles. The same applies to the growing power and influence of the Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham over the socio-political structure of Syria despite the revolution's advocacy of such liberal ideals as human rights, justice, equality and freedom. On a larger scale, Yazbek underlines how the Nusra Front seized control over the "Sharia Court and its judges" thus changing the law into Islamic religious law (54). The growing influence of the Jihadists over the people is clearly reflected in Yazbek's depiction of the graffitied lines on the walls of the completely destroyed city of Saraqeb where inscribed next to the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish were "sentences glorifying the militant groups Nusra Front and Ahrar al-Sham" which depict them as Syria's "beating hearts".

Yazbek foregrounds the role of the rebels in their fight against the regime and the Islamists' militias in the media center of Saraqeb, which is located at the heart of the market that was the bombing target of al-Assad's militias. She underlines how the rebels were eager to take down their enemies, had they owned "anti-aircraft missiles" like those of Bashar's men that captivated the sky of Saraqeb despite the liberation of the land in 2013. In opposition to the Islamic extremists' appropriation of the identity and the culture of Syria, the rebels engaged in civil activities where they "set up enterprises such as graffiti workshops, privately run community schools and educational courses" (63). Yazbek illustrates the Islamists' appropriation of the identity and culture of Syria through the lack of women's presence on streets and in fighting against the regime as the only woman she came across in Saraqeb was accompanied by her husband and was wearing a khimar veil (a long headscarf that completely covers the upper body of women), which depicts women as the most



victimized by such extremist militant groups that are foreign to the Syrian society and its social fabric.

Yazbek, in light of the above, represents the dynamic role of the Jihadist insurgency in manipulating the political sphere as well as infiltrating the social fabric of the Syrian society to their favor. With reference to the Nusra Front, which has developed into an organization founded by insurgent mujahidin many of whom crossed into Syria from transnational fields of military jihad, the aim of the Islamists was to build an Islamic state in response to the totalitarianism of the state's regime. The Syrian population have, consequently, emerged from a "Sufic to a Salafist mentality" which underlines how the ideational structure of the state have been transferred from the culture of secular life to a different culture of religious extremism that seized control over the legal system and the state at large (97). Such politics of cultural appropriation foreground the liminality of culture across transnational borders which depicts the national identity of the state as a temporal cultural identity that is neither complete nor fixed. The manipulation of the state's national identity trace back to the last decades of Hafiz al-Assad, as experienced by Alia Malek and her family in Damascus ever since the summer of 1980 until the early 90s. It was during this period of time that a sectarian war between the Sunnis and the Alawites broke out through which the regime, in its consolidation of power, did not only exterminate the Sunnis' political opposition, but also any potential civilian threat to its national security, thus, leaving thousands of innocent civilians feeling culturally alienated and displaced not only beyond the Syrian borders but also within them ever since.

Malek depicts Syria, which her mother had been born and raised in, as a region characterized by "instability" and "violence" (85). Ever



since her mother was born, Syria has been in a state of war with its enemy Israel over regional hegemony before it turned into a conflict zone of a proxy war between the US and the Soviets over global hegemony. On a larger scale, as al-Assad's regime consolidated its power over the country and the fate of its people, life changed drastically. Malek expounds on this by revealing how Syrians, during the last decades of Hafiz al-Assad, felt unhomely within the territories of their homeland. A case in point is the massive disappearance of "dissidents of varying political leanings" which nobody could dare to question or investigate, lest the same fate would occur to them. Although Malek's family stayed away from politics, on June 28th the violence of the regime invaded the privacy of their social life when Salma's brother, Nazir, was arrested and severely tortured by the mukhabarat, following the civil war that broke out between the Sunnis and the Alawites (88).

Malek, thus, foregrounds silence as "the official position" of the country as well as its people who have been warned by the regime to "stay out of [its] way" (109). The Syrian society, as such, received totalitarian threats against any political agency that would intimidate the politics of the state, "making it clear that the punishment would be borne not just by individuals, but by families, neighborhoods and cities," which did not only consolidate the political authority of the macro-structure of Syria beyond any possible resistance or opposition, but also brought the country to a long phase of stagnation through which al-Assad remained in power.

Although being an Arab in diaspora had been a very difficult experience for Malek, whose conservative parents were concerned about her safety against the "American teenage experience," that she was subjected to, Malek's safety back home in Syria was further at risk. A case in point is having to conceal her Syrian identity often times for safety measures, which foregrounds her feelings of unhomeliness that are



intensified upon her second visit to Syria. Ever since she had landed in the airport of Damascus, Malek felt unwelcomed by the state rather than embraced by it. She had been escorted by police officials who investigated her Arab- American identity in an absurd fashion, which confused her as she felt she was neither “meant” to understand what was happening around her nor feel certain about anything. Such had been the case throughout her experience in Syria, which she depicts its micro-structure as being ruled by the politics of “arbitrariness” as a means to control the people and enforce submission upon them. In this respect, Malek, like many other Syrians, was left with no choice but to “follow” (116).

Malek’s experience at the mukhabarat building, which she had to visit to issue her Syrian ID, underlines the national uncanniness that she felt as a diasporic subject who is caught between a national culture and a transnational location. This is clearly reflected in how the picture of Hafiz al-Assad, which had filled the walls of the mukhabarat offices, did not

excite Malek’s feelings of nationalism unlike the regime loyalists’ who glorified the president as the beloved ruler of the Syrian state. Rather, the very sight of it triggered her feelings of anger and disgust. Although al-Assad’s pictures and portraits did not only occupy the walls of the mukhabarat offices but also the walls of houses, stores and restaurants as well as the windows of public transportation and the sides of buildings, to Malek, Hafiz al-Assad, with the look in his eyes which stared at her wherever she turned, resembled the tyrannical “Mr. Burns” from the American sitcom “The Simpsons” (130). The national uncanniness that Malek went through intensified as she felt interrogated rather than questioned regarding the issue of her ID, which left her with feelings of estrangement as she was suspected of having contact with



affiliates in prison despite her young age. Further, the fact that she had to remain silent while riding in public transportation, as Taxi drivers were “notorious informants,” underlines how the boundaries between the public and the private and the familiar and the unfamiliar are redrawn within al-Assad’s controlled state-society framework.

Malek’s experience in Syria during the last decade of Hafiz al-Assad’s rule foregrounds the uncanniness of national culture which is homely for those who benefit from it whereas it is unhomely and changing for those who feel alienated by it. Her happy feelings towards the expelled Jews, many of whom were Salma’s close friends, for having a better opportunity at leading a life somewhere “less chaotic and backward than Syria,” represent al-Assad’s failure of constructing a unified national identity as the people’s sense of it is not static but is rather changing (132).

### **Conclusion:**

The texts understudy thus depict, through the authors’ performative acts of writing and representation, the complexities that influence the interplay between the pedagogical structure of the state and the performative agency of individual subjects in redrawing the boundaries of the political discourse of Syria between the past and the present. Given that both authors are transnational subjects, whose diasporic identities are characterized by transformation and difference, their micro-narratives overhaul fixed references and meanings of self and place with respect to such Third World post-colonial issues as mimicry, hybridity and cultural difference. In light of this, the effect of the fall of national identity, which characterizes the authors’ micro-narratives in their constructivist perception of the power structures of post-colonial

Syria, underlines how despite the same political tactics which have been applied to appropriate the ideational structure of Syria and its national identity throughout time, the multi-ethnic identities of the Syrian society remain in a continuous process of becoming. The political





manipulation of the state's national identity thus accounts for the socio-political and cultural shifts that occur within the ideational structure of the state beyond boundaries of space and time.

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