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Representing Female Identity in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* and *An Unnecessary Woman*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the question of female identity in some Anglophone Arab Literary works: Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* and *An Unnecessary Woman*. Essentially, the question of female identity brings to the surface questions of femininity, womanhood, and sexuality. These notions are intensively represented in various modes of expression such as cinema, media, and literature. The latter includes distinct genres and modes of writing; Anglophone Arab Literature can be considered a crucial scope in literature, where such topics are represented, treated, and questioned. Thus, drawing on a textual and thematic analysis, this paper examines the various ways in which the female identity in these novels is represented while considering the notions mentioned above. Furthermore, it attempts to view how these female identities navigate their lives in their communities and how their female identities are being treated, represented, and viewed by themselves and by their communities. Moreover, the influence of mobility, violence, and war is also considered when exploring the female identity construction in these novels. Thus, this paper compares the three novels and explores the main similarities and differences that they hold about the female identity and how each novel represents it through its lens. Regardless of the differences between the three protagonists in each novel and how their identities are represented, they share one main feature: a wounded femininity and a troubled identity. Accordingly, this paper explores the question of female identity through examining the experiences of the three protagonists: Najwa, Sarah, and Aaliya.

Keywords: Representation, Female identity, Womanhood, Femininity, Identity.

1. Introduction

The representation of identity in the context of Anglophone Arab Literature is very significant, especially when considering the influence and implications of notions such as mobility, violence, immigration, exile, etc. Representing identity in such a context is prone to complexity, as identity is already a problematic concept that is affected by various factors. Identity can also be viewed as a continuous 'process' as Stuart Hall claims: "Identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think ... we should think, instead, of identity as a 'production', which is never complete, always in process." (Hall, 1996, p. 16). In the novels, the female identity construction is primarily affected by mobility and instability. That is to say, the milieu where their identities are constructed is both mobile, in its unfixed and unstable nature. Also, it is violent: in its unsafe and traumatic nature as well. Given that the context is warzones and the immigrant community, their identities are in between these two dimensions. Hence, since their identities are already problematic and complex, the process of identity construction becomes even more complex.

The three female protagonists in these novels are hybrid and transnational identities. They are also immigrants and war survivors. Their identities are very interesting in the sense that they represent a wide range of other identities in the same situation. Najwa, in *Minaret*, represents a war survivor and an immigrant, now living in a host country. Sarah, in *I, the Divine*, represents the "hybrid" and "transnational" identity, belonging to two countries, living away from home, and "in-between" two spaces, the home country and the host country. Aaliya, in *An Unnecessary Woman*, represents a war witness, living at the heart of the Civil War. Regardless of their different experiences, moments, and traumas, they share the same struggle for survival and the constant urge to find their authentic selves. They also represent identities that attempt to resist the same difficult conditions. Thus, their identities are "in-between" these two dimensions that are mobile and violent. As they are females surviving such circumstances, the process of their identity construction becomes more complex. Such complexity manifests in their troubled femininity and womanhood, not to mention their identity crisis.

Generally, these questions are significant in the context of Anglophone Arab Literature because of its diverse background, where there are various identities struggling either for survival and existence or for maintaining their voices within their societies and communities. Another significant point that distinguishes this literature is that it usually includes issues that concern two nations, two geographical spaces, two cultures, etc. Sarah in *I, the Divine* is the example of an identity existing in such "in-between" situation since she is Lebanese American. Essentially, when we consider two different things, cultures, or nations, we necessarily consider two cultural encounters or interactions and, at times, clashes; thus, the experience becomes a dichotomy, and it usually produces interesting experiences, stories, and moments to write about that translate into fiction or literature. The latter, as a genre, as an effective

mode of expression, of representation, and of depiction of various issues and themes that concern societies at large, specifically the question of identity, grant us the opportunity of not only representing a specific issue or theme but also interpreting and attempting to suggest probably possible solutions to these issues, regardless of being fictional works: "Representation... enables us to refer to either the "real" world of object, people or events, or indeed to imaginary worlds of fictional objects, people and events." (Hall 1997, p. 17).

Fiction can be imagination, but it can also be a reflection of reality or society, in one way or another. It's a powerful tool to address certain issues and suggest certain solutions or answers. Thus, the essential role of representation can be evoked; it serves as an effective tool to construct and deconstruct various meanings that a literary work can carry through its language, themes, and characters. Indeed, representation in literature and the use of language is significant in the sense that it is an attempt to depict and represent those realities to reach adequate solutions, to suggest change and to be able to negotiate whatever topic or conflict or issue is there through literature and the power of words, speech, and language as Stuart Hall claims: "...written language uses words...these elements -... words ... are part of our natural and material world; but their importance for language is not what they *are* what they *do*, their function. They construct meaning and transmit it." (Hall: 1997, p. 5).

Additionally, mobility can also be a trigger when considering identity construction. It can be viewed with movement, to the human capacity of change and evolvement, and to the unstable and unfixed nature of the world and humans, especially with phenomena such as difference, hybridity, liminality, globalization, immigration, border crossing, more restrictions and checkpoints at the borders, and violence, and all those new trends that the world is witnessing in our postmodern and post-postmodern ages. When exposed to movement and one or all of the above-mentioned notions and factors, identity and identity formation become the target of extreme transformation and constant change. In other words, the process of identity formation is intensified, and identities, thus, undergo an intense and critical experience of identity formation, transformation, and existence. Consequently, these identities remarkably end up in a state of restlessness, anxiety, "in-betweenness", and confusion, and it is exactly what the characters in the selected novels are undergoing. Thus, this paper explores these aspects while considering their experiences as females.

2. Female Identity in *Minaret*

In *Minaret*, the female protagonist is a young woman named Najwa. After the Sudanese Civil War broke out and her father was executed, Najwa and her family managed to run away to London and had to face a completely different life from the privileged one they had back in Sudan. Najwa's exploration of her identity and existence started from there; however, it was always accompanied by feelings of loss, guilt, and shame as she navigated their new life along with the hardships and difficulties they had to face. Najwa is also surrounded by feelings of alienation and displacement; she feels isolated and those feelings drive her to constantly question her existence as well as her identity; such loss translates into her feelings of displacement: "And you and I are displaced," (Aboulela, 2005). It could be said that a big portion of Najwa's feelings of alienation, displacement, and crisis are related to her family, particularly after they escape from war. Facing the truth of their situation and coming to the realization that they have lost what they once had was not instant, but it was a long process that took some time. Najwa and her family members survived and managed to escape the war; however, they were affected by its memory years after they fled the country.

The protagonist in this novel faces an identity crisis that escalates periodically, sometimes intensively. It all started on her first arrival in London after the incident of her father's arrest and the cruel conditions of the Civil War. Najwa realized something was wrong; however, it was not as obvious as she came to understand later: "Our first weeks in London were OK. We didn't even notice that we were falling." (Aboulela, 2005). Najwa's mother was the only one who sensed the disconnect right away; she realized earlier that they would no longer have the lavish conditions they once had, nor would they have the privileged life: "But Mama was not herself at all; she was in a daze, sometimes crying for no reason, muttering to herself in the middle of the night, immune to the excitement of London." (Aboulela, 2005)

Najwa's family starts to have a troubled relationship as the years go by. This is a result of their traumatic experience of leaving their homeland and leaving their father there to face execution. Najwa, in turn, has a troubled relationship with herself that is problematic in the sense that she constantly falls into the same pattern of relationships, problems, and behaviors. Besides, she constantly had to explain herself as she could maintain strong relationships with neither her family nor her lovers. She is always surrounded with feelings of guilt and shame even though there were no valid reasons for such feelings: "The more I learnt, the more I regretted and at the same time, the more hope I had." (Aboulela, 2005). Najwa experiences an identity crisis that constantly pushes her to question her self-worth. Her inability to forget the past, to accept her identity the way it is, and to find purpose in life led her to seek validation in situations and with people who could not fulfill those needs. She ultimately resorts to religion and faith as an escape; she decides to embrace religion thinking that it would save her and give her life meaning.

Hence, the representation of the female identity in this novel is manifested through the constant attempts of Najwa to go back to her faith as the only way to save her identity and redeem herself for her wrongdoings, as she believes, especially those related to her sexual identity. Her body image is affected by her constant feelings of guilt or shame whenever she acts in a way that contradicts her beliefs. She ultimately decides to become a devotee Muslim and wears the scarf and attempts to avoid any behavior that could cause her to be trapped in feelings of guilt and shame about her body, her femininity, and her identity. Najwa concluded that strengthening her faith, dressing modestly, and starting over as a devotee will save her from the traumatic life experiences she has had: "I stood in front of the mirror and put the scarf over my hair. My curls resisted; the material squashed them down. They escaped, springing around my forehead, above my ears. I pushed them back," (Aboulela, 2005)

3. Female Identity in *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* and *An Unnecessary Woman*

An Unnecessary Woman revolves around a female protagonist, a 70-year-old woman, who is childless, divorced, and lonely. The Lebanese Civil War surrounds her, and thus her experience is remarkably affected by the violence that created her extreme perspective towards not only her identity but also her body, femininity, and womanhood. Her identity becomes slightly aggressive, almost toxic, and resistant as a result of the harsh circumstances in which she exists. On the one hand, Aaliya is resisting the war and its violence; on the other hand, she is resisting the social pressure and constraints of choosing a certain lifestyle. Being a lonely old woman with no children motivates her society to judge her existence and life choices a certain way; she has to either abide by societal norms and maintain their validation and acceptance, or reject those imposed social norms and face rejection from society and exclusion. Regardless of the difficulty, Aaliya chooses her own rules decisively.

Her decision affected her perspective towards her female identity, which is a neutral perspective, and also towards men in the sense that she becomes quite aggressive towards them and maintains strong boundaries on that matter. Even though these characters, the protagonists, are female identities, they do represent a specific category of people who are in the same situation. For example, Aaliya, the main character in *An Unnecessary Woman*, through her anxious identity, her various psychological mechanisms of surviving war, and her constant escapism, represents identities in a warzone, how they survive and how they struggle for life, primarily through developing their escapism, for Aaliya it was through immersing herself in literature and translation of books, as well as her “social isolation” from her family and community as they were of a passive influence on her.

Aaliya represents female struggle and resistance through her struggle for survival inside the home, amidst war, and thus she undergoes a “double resistance”. Her view towards her identity and existence is neutral, somewhat passive, resorting to escapism through her obsession with literature and translation as a mechanism to survive war and violence: “How safe I will feel once I begin my translation, how sheltered, seated at this desk in the dark night, as Sebald as Jacques Austerlitz described, seated at this desk ‘watching the tip of my pencil in the lamplight following its shadow, as if of its own accord and with perfect fidelity... from left to right’ – right to left, in my case – ‘line by line, over the ruled paper.’ ... I feel at home in my rituals.” (Alameddine, 2014, p. 24). Aaliya represents anxious identities that share the same struggle for survival amidst the chaotic situation of a world characterized by violence, conflict, and instability, specifically amidst war, leaving her and people in the same situation with few options to navigate life, society, and community. Through her “Social isolation”, which is “basically the inability to feel connected to the society” (Singh, 2016, p. 5), Aaliya chooses to celebrate her loneliness: “My home, my apartment; in it I live, and move, and have my being.” (Alameddine, 2014, p.18).

In *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters*, the female protagonist is a middle-aged woman with a Lebanese father and an American mother. She is typically a “hybrid”, “transnational” identity. Growing up in a Lebanese household during the Lebanese Civil War, and facing a cruel rape incident while being 16, affected Sarah’s perspective towards her body and her identity. Also, she struggled with the absence of her American mother throughout her childhood and adolescence. As an adult, Sarah decided to move to the USA in an attempt to run away from the past; however, her past experiences shaped her present and future, as she could not get over the past, and that shaped her perspective towards her identity as well. That perspective is very much passive and represented through her constant failed relationships and interactions with her family. Sarah’s experience is shaped by war and violence as well as her solitude away from the home she grew up in. Her feelings of not being good enough were also reflected in her unhealthy relationships in her life, all stemming from her unhealed trauma and absent mother figure.

Sarah is a restless, hybrid, and transnational identity, constantly struggling between the dichotomies of two things. Sarah’s unstable childhood, her rape incident, and her estrangement and constant movement from one home to another caused her to have a passive view on her identity and female existence. Her constant movement from one place to another denotes her inner conflicts as a result of the instability of her life and her identity as a hybrid, transnational identity: “Can there be any *here*? No. She understands *there*. Whenever she is in Beirut, home is New York. Whenever she is in New York, home is Beirut. Home is never where she is, but where she is not.” (Alameddine, 2002, p. 99). Sarah represents restless identities, usually those who are hybrid or transnational, belonging to two different homes or migrants and refugees, especially those coming from a traumatic background, and who are in a constant search for stability, safety, and peace in a constantly changing world.

Alameddine’s two novels present the experiences of two women who share similarities and differences; they both struggle for stability and inner peace, even though they never achieve them. To conclude, Sarah survived by escaping her homeland, as the latter represents trauma, and she, thus, chooses to stay away from anything that could trigger her past wounds, including her family. However, she still suffered from the “in-betweenness” and identity crisis as a result of the violence she experienced. The latter could be seen as one of the many consequences of Sarah’s constant mobility and her lack of stability. *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* presents the struggle of a woman who constantly attempts to heal from her past traumas and come to terms with her femininity. On the other hand, Aaliya is an anxious identity, struggling with the process of aging, with loneliness, with societal and communal constraints, and with the violence of the war. *An Unnecessary Woman* presents the struggle of a woman to maintain her identity, to protect her body, and to navigate her life amidst a conflicted situation.

4. Conclusion

Through these fictional characters, we understand the significance of one’s existence in such violent mobile contexts in determining their identity. The characters in these novels opt for various mechanisms through which they attempt to protect their identities. In each novel, each female protagonist reflects a unique struggle, experience, and perspective towards her identity and existence. In Each novel, there is the experience, the moments, and the perspective of a female identity. Besides, how they navigate their existences, identities, and social interactions within their communities or societies is

essential in understanding their behavior as well as their decisions. Each character has developed strict and decisive mechanisms to survive the mobility and violence that surround them. They may have different conditions; however, they share the same struggle when it comes to their identity.

In conclusion, it could be interpreted that the representation of female identity in the three novels is manifested in their struggle for survival within their communities and outside of them, while facing the constant instability and unfixed nature, and the continuous violence of the world they exist. Regardless of their differences, their unique experiences, and their distinct beliefs, they share almost the same identity crisis. That is, troubled, indecisive, and disoriented. This crisis manifested more in their inability to maintain healthy relationships. It also manifests in their decisions and the way they perceive themselves, their situation, and those in their community. They may have created various mechanisms to cope with their situation, yet they all share the same weight of an identity in crisis.

Aaliya maintained her identity through resistance. She is neutral towards her female identity and existence. However, she represents a typical anxious female identity struggling to survive. On the other hand, Sarah represents a restless hybrid, transnational identity. Her struggle with her identity is manifested in her estrangement and her constant attempts to run away from her family, her relationships, and, ultimately, herself. She is a wounded feminine identity and has a negative self-image about her body as well as her existence overall, and that is manifested in her interactions with others as well.

It could be interpreted that the two female protagonists in Alameddine's *I, the Divine* and *An Unnecessary Woman*, struggle with instability and passive interactions, which are reflected in their approaches to their bodies, identities, womanhood, and femininity. In addition, they both have a neutral relationship with religion. On the other hand, the female protagonist in Aboulela's *Minaret* has some passive interactions with her surroundings, yet she is less neutral towards religion and her faith. Finally, it could be interpreted that each identity in these novels represents a category of identities that constantly struggle to maintain their existences, their voices, and their identities through surviving with different mechanisms in such a mobile, violent world.

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