

Tracing the relationship between cultural blending and identity formation in Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*

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Abstract

The conflict between Israel and Palestine has long been a sort of crucible of political trauma, its impacts that extends to the individual as well as collective identities. This research embarks on an exploration of the complex relationship of cultural blending and identity formation within the narratives of Abulhawa's *Against the Loveless World*. The concept of hybridity proposed by Homi. K. Bhaba has been taken as research methodology for this research. Hybridity is the concept that challenges the conventional and orthodox notions of cultural purity and fixed identities. This novel follows the story of the protagonist Nahr, a Palestinian woman who bears various troubles and hardships as she goes through personal and political struggles. The novel discovers the themes of love, resistance, identity crisis, confrontation and the impact of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the lives of individuals and their identities. Abulhawa creates a strong narrative that explores the intricacies of protagonist's life and the wider context of the struggle of Palestinian people for justice and freedom. The main objective of this research is to show the characters in the novel that how they negotiate their identities through cultural blending amid political trauma. Qualitative research method has been adopted for the present research engaging textual analysis.

Keywords: *Hybridity, Cultural blending, Political trauma, Israel-Palestinian conflict*

The present research explores the complex relationship between cultural blending and identity formation in *Against the loveless world* by Susan Abulhawa. Homi K. Bhabha's concept of hybridity has been taken as the theoretical framework for the present study. Hybridity is the term that questions the conventional ideas of cultural purity and static identities. The research focuses on the impact of cultural blending on the characters of the novel that shape their identities within the backdrop of Israel-Palestinian conflict.

The study embarks on the themes of hybrid identities, survival, resistance, memory and trauma, power dynamics and displacement which are central in the process of cultural blending and identity formation. Hybrid individuals experience a mixture of cultures that challenges cultural boundaries through comprehensive practices and opposing exclusive norms (Ngestirosa 1). The story revolves around the journey of the protagonist Nahr and her family from one place to another. In this journey they face different environment in different cultures and ethnic background that leads to hybridity. The concept of hybridity given by Bhabha has been incorporated as theoretical framework to analyze the text.

Bhabha, an Indian post-colonial critic, proposed the idea of hybridity which is one of the most prominent theories in cultural criticism nowadays (Mizutani 1). The influence of hybridity spreads beyond comparative literature and cultural studies to the fields like criticism, art, anthropology, history and political science which makes it a global idea (2). Bhabha demonstrates how culture transforms and how historical narratives that define themselves are not always dependable (Yazidha 3). According to Bhabha, Hybridity isn't about separating histories and narrative to form an identity rather it is about imagining a connected collective identity (7). The present research has grasped the idea of hybridity to apply it on Abulhawa's *Against the loveless world*.

Susan Abulhawa, a Palestinian-born US writer and social activist, who is known for her meaningful contributions to literature. After moving to America as a teenager, she adopted the profession in biomedical science before consecrating to writing. Abulhawa founded a non-governmental organization (NGO) in July 2001 with the aim to support the concept of right to play for children in Palestine which reflected her obligation to social causes. Her major works are *Mornings in Jenin* (2010), *The Blue Between Sky and Water* (2015) and *Against the Loveless World* that determine the themes of identity, resilience, displacement and trauma within the Palestinian context. *Mornings in Jenin*, her first novel, is considered as a classic in the Palestinian literature and it has been translated into 30 languages which makes Abulhawa one of the most widely read Palestinian authors of all time. She reinforces Palestinian narratives and cares for social justice on a global scale through her writing.

The novel portrays the picture of refugees displaced from Palestine and living in Kuwait after Israel-Palestinian conflict. The protagonist of the novel, Nahr, faces personal and political problems throughout her journey. She bears the trauma of marginalization, racism and sexual abuse in her stay at Kuwait. The family had to shift to Jordan after the war in Kuwait and then to Palestine. This whole journey demonstrates displacement, trauma, anxiety and resistance faced by the protagonist and her family. Abulhawa has revealed the intricate relationship between Nahr and her surroundings throughout the journey.

1.1 Statement of Problem:

This research explores the complexities of identity formation and cultural blending within the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as shown in the novel. The focus remains to see that how individual and collective identities are formed through cultural hybridity in this longstanding conflict. This includes discovering characters' ways in which they face the diverse cultural backgrounds and devotions in a tense political, historical, and social environment. Furthermore, this study examines the implications of cultural blending on identity formation and to observe how this phenomenon effects observations of self and other, means of resistance and sense of belonging within Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

1.2. Research Objectives:

- To analyze the role of cultural blending reflected by the characters in *Against the Loveless World*.
- To discover the implications of cultural blending on identity formation within the narratives of Israel-Palestinian tussle.

1.2 Research Questions:

- What role does cultural blending play in shaping the individual and collective identities of characters as portrayed in the novel *Against the Loveless World*?
- How do the experiences of cultural blending and identity formation depicted in the novel reflect broader socio-political dynamics and power struggle?

1.3 Review of Literature

This chapter presents a brief synopsis of the researches which has been done previously on the novel *Against the Loveless World* by Abulhawa. Review of the related literature is a vital aspect of every research (Das 1). A study of current researches depicts that the researcher is familiar with what has been done earlier by others and what is still unidentified and unknown (2). An examination of the previous body of the reviewed literature showed the themes of identity crisis, marginalization, colonization and resistance. This research, however, deals with the exploration of complex relationship between cultural blending and identity formation.

In '*Palestinian Woman's Identity Shift from Implicit-Being to Explicit-Becoming: A Review of Susan Abulhawa's Against the Loveless World*', the authors have talked about the identity formation of Nahr, the protagonist of the novel. They discuss that the people of Palestine have been forcefully transported and displaced from their indigenous land to the different parts of the world specially to middle east. Furthermore, the concern of establishing a Palestinian identity in exile by the characters have been thoroughly discussed by the authors (Bibi et al. 1). This period of exile increased the feelings of nationalism that shaped strong bond among the

Palestinian refugees. The protagonist Nahr experienced unwanted circumstance like occupation, invasion, imperialism and colonialism (6). Her family also had gone through various problems including economic crisis as they lived a life of poverty and did odd jobs to meet their ends (7). The protagonist is willing to face the music and is resolute to find love in a loveless world. The authors have also established that the story of Nahr's journey from being nothing to become something and to assume the identity of her own.

In the article '*Representing Resistance in Abul Hawa's Against the Loveless World*' the authors have examined the text with the lens of Resistance theory and postcolonial feminism. They claim that Nahr bears violence and identity crisis in every part of the world she migrates, "Nahr grows up in Kuwait, where the sizable Palestinian refugee population maintains an underground and housing is only available temporarily" (Saadia et al. 8). The authors admit Nahr's incredible bravery and the resistance under the tough and unfair circumstances. She encountered the problems of exile, maltreatment and homelessness in a dominant patriarchal society which actually justifies the unjust treatment by the hosts countries (9). Furthermore, they consider that under such circumstances and conditions victims offer suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder and identity complex (11). Nonetheless, Nahr bore these situations courageously and stood determined and showed immense resistance against the brutal sexual and physical abuse. The authors admired her struggle to find a way to feed her family amidst the tough socio-economic conditions around her.

The author in his work '*Gender Roles and Perceptions: The Refugee Experience and Political Agency in Susan Abulhawa's The Blue Between Sky and Water and Against the Loveless World*' compares the two novel of Abulhawa to examine women's role in Israel-Palestinian conflict. He claimed that the impact of war and conflict affects not only the lives of men but also creates problem for women as well (Ahmad 62). The article depicts the issues of women's painful experiences during this conflict i.e. loss of identity and respect, denying independence and displacement (63). "Abulhawa explores the legacy of Palestinian dispossession across continents and generations with a devastatingly clear-eyed vision of its political and personal trauma" (65). Moreover, the author argued that it is quite difficult to live in exile under the tough socio-economic issues. The people of Palestine have been in exile for a long time, their basic rights are denied and they are also ridiculed by the hosts in their own land. The protagonist at the end of the novel was a transformed girl who became the part of the Palestinian resistance and took revolutionary measures to fight for her own identity and country's freedom against the illegal oppression of Israel (67). Her character depicts the life and misery of Palestinians under Israeli colonialism that shows the troubles of unlawful occupation.

In the article '*Susan Abulhawa. Against the Loveless World: A Novel*' the author argues that Nahr marries a famous Palestinian man and becomes famous herself among local Palestinian community (Mami 2). The author associates Karl Marx's theory of communism with the Nahr's choices as says that if Marx's concepts are difficult to understand, her choices make it quite easier to comprehend (3). He claims that Nahr's mindset is revolutionary because her past isn't hidden where she worked as a sex worker (4). However, she reflects on the injustices bear by the refugees in the gulf. According to Miami, Abulhawa invites readers through Nahr's story to reflect on the struggle for dignity and self-determination which transcends cultures and borders to resonate with audiences globally.

Previously, this novel was studied and analyzed in the context of resistance, double colonization, agency and communism. The troubles and violence faced by the protagonist have been emphasized by different authors. However, the present research deals with exploration of cultural blending and identity formation in Israel-Palestinian conflict. This research intends to focus on the complex relationship between cultural blending and identity formation.

3.1 Research Methodology

Bhabha's concept of hybridity is indisputably central within modern cultural criticism alongside his allied concepts of 'sly civility' and 'colonial non-sense'. These concepts had arisen to the forefront of theoretical discourse and have since regained substantial influence (Muztani 2). Their impact exceeds disciplinary boundaries to comparative literature, art criticism, cultural studies, history and anthropology (2). The term hybridity usually induces the concept of racial mixture or 'miscegenation'. Nevertheless, in Bhabha's construction of the term, it transcends the racial aspect and is not envisioned to oblige as a moral justification for racial mixing against colonial ideas of racial purity (3). British subjects in late colonial India were considered as representatives of British white racial superiority and they were regarded as the agents of colonial progress and development. Bhabha's concept suggests that colonial oppression depends on diverse cultural identities, that separates the colonizer from the colonized (Bauhn & Tepe 3). Consequently, if the colonized affirm themselves as hybrids, they can possibly damage the identity-based hierarchy enforced upon them by the colonizers (3).

The theory of hybridity, however, is hybrid itself, derived from the conceptual frameworks of Jacque Derrida, Jacques Lacan, Frantz Fanon, Edward Said and Michel Foucault (Bellour, 1). Hybridity since its emergence in 1990 has significantly effected postcolonial studies. Binary oppositions such as colonizer/colonized and self/other, according to Bhabha, are deconstructed after the advent of a hybrid space between them which is often referred as 'third space' (1). Bhabha evaluates the notion of fixed and consistent cultural identities and warns against the vulnerabilities of fixation

of identities, promoting for an understanding of cultural identities as continuously growing and dynamic. In his words;

“The intervention of the Third Space of enunciation which makes the structure of meaning and reference [...] challenges our sense of historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originally Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People [...] It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which 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, rehistoricised and read anew” (Bhabha 37).

Bhabha exploits the post-colonial religious context to demonstrate the hybridity. He illustrates how some people of colonized lands recognize the Bible as symbol of colonial hegemony and desires (Bellour 3). Despite their attraction with the new religion, these inhabitants do not carelessly adopt the ideas of colonizers. As a substitute, they used hybridity as a device of resistance, declining baptism and interpreting the project of conversion unsustainable (3). This validates how hybridity can be employed as a mean of subverting colonial dynamics and affirming agency within a post-colonial religious background.

Transculturation refers to the development of cultural exchange and transformation that happens when diverse cultures come into a connection (3). The hybrid identity bridges between these cultures, assisting acceptance and adaptation. Hybrid identities have the capacity to negotiate and mediate amid cultural affinities and differences (3). They can negotiate the intricacies of cultural exchange and insertion within a vibrant framework, encouraging mutual understanding and alliance. Hybridity is often misunderstood as an attempt to establish a universal culture, targeting to homogenize and remove differences in a world categorized by variety and Otherness (4). Nonetheless, hybridity actually highlights the response of difference amid cultural mixing and impurity. It promotes a stable coexistence of different cultures that conserves their distinctive identities (4). Notwithstanding the changeability of cultural boundaries, uniqueness and discreteness remain resilient.

3.1 Migration and Hybridity:

The association between migration and hybridity is complex and interconnected. Migration involves the freely or imposed movement of people from one place to another, often causing in meetings with diverse cultures, languages and social customs (Bauhn & Tepe, 4). This practice of relocation and cultural communication can lead to the establishment of hybrid personalities among migrants.

3.1.1 Desire for migration:

- The need for migration often roots from a perception that the present conditions negate rather than affirm one's ability for agency (5). Migrants may think of migrating to those places where they believe they will get more chances for individual growth and fulfillment.

3.1.2 Uncertain Evaluation of Hybridity:

- Migrants may have diverse experiences and insights of their hybridity. Though some may recognize it as a benediction and a cradle of empowerment, others may observe it as a curse that obscures their lives and declines their capability for agency.

In short, Bhabha argues that hybridity occurs in the interstitial space of cultural meeting, where the colonizer and the colonized exchange their identities. This negotiation disturbs essentialist concepts of identity and contests binary oppositions i.e. the difference between the colonizer and the colonized. The notion of home is problematized by the practices of individuals who feel like strangers within their own lands. Bhabha's theory of hybridity discloses the agency and power that hybrid persons may enjoy, but it also directs the concerns and hindrances they face in navigating several cultural influences.

4. DATA ANALYSIS

Hybridity occupies an important place in the investigation of cultural identity and it has been reclaimed and distinguished as a vibrant aspect of resistance and cultural intelligence (Meredith 1). Bhabha's theory of hybridity highlights the attempt of powerful entity to execute a singular common framework onto the subjugated class, causing in the advent of a new, hybrid identity that encounters essentialist concepts of identity and culture (1). Qualitative research method has been incorporated with close textual analysis for the present research. The novel 'Against the loveless world' is about the refugee Palestinian family who is living in Kuwait. Nahr, the protagonist of the family is the only financial supporter for them. However, due to political turmoil in Kuwait they had to leave to Jordan and then to Palestine. In the journey of the protagonist from one place to another, she encounters different cultures and norms as contrary to her indigenous one.

The mixture of two different cultures can be due to numerous reasons i.e. wars, displacement, diasporic movement and migration. Nahr who indigenously belonged to Palestine was migrated to Kuwait due to political issues they faced in Palestine. She lived for a long time in Kuwait and admitted the culture of the host country, "I loved Kuwait. It was my home, and I was a loyal subject of the royals [...] I sang with passion and allegiance to Kuwait's successive ruling emirs" (Abulhawa 18). The traits and love of host culture had been developed in Nahr's nature. She had managed to adopt Kuwait culture and language even when she was in her school, "I loved

everything about Kuwait [...] I even taught myself to speak their delicate and could dance Khaleeji better than their best" (18).

Hegemony is defined as the domination of a specific social group over others by the construction and preservation of a set of cultural, political and ideological norms that are acknowledged as legitimate by society at large (Lears 7). While living in Kuwait, Nahr have adopted the norms and customs of the dominant host culture as contrary to the Palestinian one, "My family wouldn't believe a wedding could go on that late" (Abulhawa 36). Being a refugee, the family faced socio-economic problems and to deal with these, Nahr started working as dancer with a new name Almas given by her friend, "So it is! Almas. A fitting name for a gem like you" (37). Nahr's spent her childhood in Kuwait and she adopted the culture and norms of the host city. However, when she migrated back to Palestine, she didn't feel comfortable in her indigenous culture, "Palestine was my mother's world. It belonged to Sitti Wasfiyeh's stories. Palestine did not want me, nor I her any longer" (Abulhawa 156).

The dominance of Kuwaiti culture had effected the lives of many Palestinian. Nahr's grandmother, Sitti Wasfiyeh, was from old school of thought who tried her best to assert her indigenous Palestinian culture and norms. After the political turmoil, the family had to move from Kuwait to Iraq but she kept asserted her decision to stay in Kuwait, "I'm not going anywhere. I'm tired of being chased out of wherever I am in the world. Out of Haifa, then out of Ein el-Sultan, then Jordan and now Kuwait" (78)? This is the resistance she is showing against the blending of culture.

Ambivalence refers to the concurrent existence of conflicting identities, values, and meanings within subjugated subjects and cultures. It is an ambiguous way in which both colonizer and colonized regard each other (Ashcroft et.al 9). Ambivalence indicates that the colonial relationship is integrally unbalanced and comprises the seeds of its own departure (10). Nahr's character has been an ambivalent one after she adopted the profession of prostitute, "He repulsed me initially, but in time I came to pity him. Now, in cube, I am grateful for him" (Abulhawa 50).

The structures of hegemonic culture according to Bhabha present a sense of ambivalence among subjugated individuals, as they are placed in a liminal space amid the dominant imposing culture and their own native cultures (Ashcroft et.al 10). Um Buraq, a Kuwaiti lady, exploited Nahr and led her to join prostitution but Nahr had ambivalent feelings for her, "The contradiction of our relationship cemented. I felt affection for this woman who had blackmailed and prostituted me. The force of sharing unspeakable secrets created a closeness with her, at the same time that I had an urge to get away from her and never see her again" (Abulhawa 57).

Bhabha's concept of ambivalence shows the intricacies of hegemonic subjectivity and the ways in which imperial powers shape individuals' experiences of culture, identity and resistance (Mizutani 8). Nahr's mother

was deeply saddened after the political chaos in Kuwait. She resisted her Kuwaiti identity and tried to assert herself as Kuwaiti to save themselves from the wrath of Kuwaiti police, “We are not collaborators. You’re making a mistake. We have been in this country for twenty-five years. We love Kuwait” (Abulhawa 81). This love and hate relationship continued to deepen its roots and the Palestinian family had become an ambivalent one. Though Nahr loved Kuwait and danced for Kuwaiti independence day but at times she disliked the host city, “It pained to see my mother’s leg. I hated those men. Now, I hated Kuwait” (81).

Cultural blending plays a significant role in shaping the identity of individuals in the novel. The experiences of Nahr, her family members especially her grandmother and the rest of Palestinian refugees reflect the blending of Palestinian norms, values, culture and traditions with the dark realities of displacement and diaspora. Nahr had to change her name to Almas to adjust herself in Kuwaiti culture as the name ‘Nahr’ could reveal her Palestinian identity (Abulhawa 37). So, in this way cultural blending allows the characters to adopt difference cultural practices and shapes the identities of individuals and communities by fostering complexities and interconnectedness.

The implication of cultural blending remains effective in the lives of characters of the text. It resulted to form a new, hybrid identity which resulted in change it attitude, behavior and traits of characters. Jihad had sent to jail under suspicion and he was never the same person after his bail gets confirm, “His time in Kuwaiti jail had changed him forever. Jihad had become a man of compressed, dense quiet” (107). This exploration of different cultures has created intricacies and strengthen the ambivalent traits in Nahr’s nature, “You are like two different people. One minute you’re nice, the next you are vicious” (109).

Gramsci’s hegemony is important to understand the control of imperial powers over colonized peoples by influencing their beliefs and ideals to support with Euro-centric ideals (Ashcroft et. al 107). Consent is attained from the colonized subjects, leading them to accept colonizers’ values as natural and treasured, while concurrently observing themselves as peripheral or marginalized to those values. Israel has subjugated Palestine and tried to manage people by using the same ideology of superiority. Nahr’s return to Palestine proves the statement that the subjugation of Palestinian land through economic and military power is to create hegemony, “All the checkpoints, foreign Jews everywhere. I hardly recognize the place. I felt like a stranger in my own country” (Abulhawa 112).

Cultural blending also reflects the interconnecting identities of individuals who face different social-cultural and political contexts. Nahr shares bond of solidarity with other Palestinians who were facing oppression and brutality of Israeli forces when she went back to Palestine, “It shocked me how many checkpoints there were just to go from one village to the next.

It seemed that Palestinian could not drive for more than five minutes” (Abulhawa 133)

In conclusion, the exploration of cultural blending and identity formation proves valuable understandings of the intricacies of human experiences within socio-political turmoil. Through a detailed analysis of the portrayal of cultural blending amid characters, this research has shed light on the complex interplay between identities and the wider sociocultural context. Bhabha’s concept of hybridity has been incorporated as theoretical framework for this study. The implications of cultural blending on identity formation continue to be apparent as characters face their personal journeys within the backdrop of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. By exploring these narratives, this research has gained a profound understanding of the adaptability, resilience and struggles of individual character determined to resolve their complicated identities within the challenging realities of the conflict.

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