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Exploring Postcolonial Hybridization in Betool Khedairi's Novel *A Sky So Close*

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استكشاف اختلاط الثقافات ما بعد الاستعمار في رواية بتول خضيرى كم بدت السماء قريبة

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Abstract: This study explores Betool Khedairi's novel *A Sky So Close* from a postcolonial perspective. Examining the notion of hybridity through the protagonist's experience in two different cultures. Providing an analysis of multiple situations to expose the effect of hybridity on the construction of the protagonist's identity. The nameless protagonist represents each hybrid person struggling for their independent existence. Both of the protagonist's parents impose their thoughts and traditions upon her neglecting her right to decide her destiny. The novel portrays the tension between the opposing cultures through the interaction of the parents which eventually affects their daughter's identity. This implies that constructing a stable identity is accepting being different, embracing both cultures, and generating something unique that represents the individual's reality. It is a call to stop the stereotypical image of a certain culture, race, or anything considered different or unacceptable by the dominant power or society. It is an urge to look for the positive sides of hybridity.

Keywords: Betool Khedairi, *A Sky So Close*, Hybridity, In-betweenness, Postcolonialism, Identity.

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المستخلص:

تستكشف هذه الدراسة رواية بتول خضيرى "كم بدت السماء قريبة" من منظور مابعد الاستعمار. تفحص فكرة اختلاط الثقافات من خلال تجربة عيش الشخصية الرئيسية في الرواية بين ثقافتين مختلفتين. تقدم الدراسة تحليل لمختلف المواقف للكشف عن تأثير ازدواجية الثقافات او اختلاط الثقافات على هوية الشخصية الرئيسية في الرواية تمثل هذه الشخصية كل شخص ولد في بيئة مزدوجة الثقافه محاولاً اثبات وجوده بشكل مستقل. يفرض كل من والدي الشخصية الرئيسية معتقداتهم و عاداتهم الخاصه عليها متجاهلين ان القرار لها في تحديد مصيرها. اوضحت الرواية التوتر بين كلا الثقافتين المتضادتين من خلال التواصل بين الوالدين والذي أثر على هوية ابنتهم. تتناول هذه الدراسة تقبل الشخص كونه مختلفاً ليحتضن كلتا الثقافتين ويتميز بهوية مستقلة. تدعو هذه الدراسة الى ترك الصورة النمطية المفروضه على ثقافة معينة او عرق او اي شيء مختلف او غير مقبول من قبل القوى المهيمنة والمجتمع وتحت على النظر الى الجانب الايجابي من اختلاط الثقافات.

Introduction

Postcolonialism tackles the encounter of two different cultures and how one of them with its superiority dominates the other. This interaction eventually generates a new culture and civilization. The theory provokes a movement against the false beliefs the West imposed upon the East and other cultures, but its significance is to explore the issue of constructing identity with the effect of the dominant nation and cultural displacement. The postcolonial theory is a contestation for colonial domination. It is developed from the philosophy of anticolonial and is considered "hybrid" (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 112-116). *A Sky So Close* is a testament to the notion of hybridity, starting with the protagonist's identity as a hybrid child of an Eastern father and a Western mother. The novel presents the difficulties of living in between two different cultures and its effect on the protagonist's identity, as well as showing the privilege of being hybrid.

Betool Khedairi is an Iraqi novelist who was born in Baghdad to an Iraqi father and a British mother in 1965. Throughout her life, she witnessed the US invasion

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of Iraq in 2003 and was briefed on the war and its damage. She acquired a B.A. in French literature from The University of Mustansirya. The mixed cultures she was raised within influenced her as a novelist; she tackled hybridity, tradition, race, and other related issues in her writings. In her novel *A Sky So Close*, Khedairi explores the issue that deals with the generation of the third space due to mixed marriages and the colliding cultures. Speaking of a girl who lives in between the cultural diversity of her Iraqi father and English mother. The novelist shows the tension and differences between the parents in their style of living, beliefs, attitudes, and how they raise their daughter. They were struggling to overcome the differences, but it resulted in the psychological separation of the family and the enforcement of their costume over each other and their daughter. She was stuck in between them, as she could not decide what was better to do and whom she should please. The novelist urged to take advantage of being hybrid and to double-learn both cultures.

literature Review

The study focuses on postcolonial literature, in general, and hybridity, in specific. The construction of identity in a hybrid community. In this concern, Khedairi is known for making her characters as real as humans. She always deals with issues related to real-life situations, diaspora, hybridity, and war damage. *A Sky So Close* is her first novel, written in Arabic in 1999 and translated into many languages, and the second novel *Ghayeb* (Absent) in 2004 explores these issues. Through her writings, she tries to open the eyes of readers and grow people's awareness to stop blindly following what those of dominant power impose upon them. Understanding that the world is constructed of different living things and every person has a message and a role to play. People are not the same, yet they should be treated equally.

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Besides the current study, the following writers provided a significant contribution to analyse *A Sky So Close* from the postcolonial perspective of hybridity and the construction of an individual's identity.

Jabbar Hashim Al-Zubaidy and Shaymaa Hadi Abdulridha from Baghdad University in their essay "Woman's Identity Crisis in the Clash of Cultures: A Study of Betool Khedairi's Novel: *A Sky So Close*," discusses the impact of postcolonialism as well as the influence of belonging to two different cultures, her Iraqi father and her British mother and the differences between their traditions that affected the protagonist's identity and the difficulties of being a black woman in the land of white. In addition to investigating the identity crisis that the narrator ended with.

"The Diaspora of Iraqi Identity in Western Exile: A Cultural Study of Batoul Al Khedairi's *A Sky So Close*", a research by Zainab Abdullah Hussein (Tikrit University, tackles the issue of identity crisis in societies that suffer from internal war, particularly in Iraq where people experienced displacement and loss of identity relating to Batool Al-Khedairi's novel *A Sky So Close* (1999) which explores the cultural and intellectual clash between the East and the West which resulted in constructing a confusion to the protagonist for having a hybrid identity that is swinging in between, not belonging to her father's nor her mother's culture.

Ikram Masmoudi, a researcher at Princeton University, presented a research entitled "Depicting and Challenging War in *A Sky So Close* of Betool Khedairi ACLA, Ann Arbor, Michigan 16-18 April 2004", that studies the intensification of the conflict between two different cultures as well as the multiculturalism effect on the life and identity of individuals. Due to the union of her British mother and Iraqi father, the protagonist is a hybrid person, which causes her uncertainty and bewilderment.

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Research Methodology

The study counts on analyzing the postcolonial theory to manage the exploration of hybridity in the postcolonial literature. It emphasizes the differences between the East and the West in Betool Khedairi's novel *A Sky So Close*. The framework of the postcolonial theory is shaped by how the West sees itself as superior to other cultures. In *The Location of Culture* Bhabha claims that hybridity results from different forms of colonization. Thus, the research sets forth objective and thematic questions concerning the relationship between the cross-cultures, the connection between the colonizer and the colonized, or the collation between the Self and Other.

The novel will be analyzed using descriptive and analytical techniques to identify the elements the novelist used to discuss the issue of discrimination, diaspora, and hybridity in a multicultural society. The findings are to be compared to the arguments of the writers on this topic that support the contribution of Khedairi's novel in postcolonial studies.

Significance of the Study

The main focus of the study is recognizing the ambivalent space of cultural identity in Betool Khedairi's novel and providing a solution for having the feeling of not belonging anywhere, even to the homeland. It also explores growing cultural awareness to accept diversity and hybridity. This can free individuals from the burden of living In-betweenness. The study provides an analysis of *A Sky So Close* through the experience of the protagonist to construct her identity and how she is affected by the outside circumstances of the two different worlds.

Framework of the Study

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Background Information on Hybridity

Ashcroft suggested that the postcolonial culture is described as “inevitably a hybridized” (1989, p. 195). A new identity that is constructed through the interaction between the colonized and the colonial system. Hybridity is a socio-cultural concept that is connected with the appearance of postcolonial discourse which studies the effect of mixture or variety upon culture and identity. The hybrid identity does not represent a fixed, united entity; it suggests unstable, fragmented, and multiple entities. It is described to be “a term for a wide range of social and cultural phenomena involving ‘mixing’; it has become a key concept within cultural criticism and postcolonial theory” (Brah & Coombs, 2000, p. 220).

Edward Said stated about the appearance of postcolonialism and hybridity that “a very large mass of writers, among whom are poets, novelists, philosophers, political theorists, economists, and imperial administrators, have accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point for elaborate theories” (2003, p. 8). Hybridity is a major theme in postcolonial literature and one of the key features of postcolonial identity. It represented a central place in post-immigrant literature and became an alleviating factor between the homeland and the host land. Homi Bhabha defined this term in his book *The Location of Culture*:

“The sign of productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal.... [It] is the revaluation of the assumption of colonial identity through the repetition of discriminatory identity effects. [Hybridity] displays the necessary deformation and displacement of all sites of discrimination and domination.” (1994, p. 112).

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Hybridity can be considered positive and enriching as well as depressing. Postcolonial literature helped to correct the false beliefs about colonized people. Furthermore, Hybridity is not only related to postcolonialism; it is related to political and cultural negotiation between the colonized and colonizer. This implies that every culture has received and submitted something to another culture, leading to cultural diversity. The exchange between cultures generates a distinct society that is hybrid.

The novel *A Sky So Close* is a persuasive exploration of hybridization through the protagonist's journey in the quest for her identity. The novel insists on the relationship between the West and the East, and the effect on the children of mixed cultural marriage. Therefore, the novel highlights the protagonist's trial to figure out her message in life, her real home, to achieve her dream of a normal life. It is typically a healing journey to let go of her family and society's-imposed thoughts and forced traditions. It urges for achieving personal growth to accept both cultures and accept being hybrid which is the major theme of *A Sky So Close*.

Interpreting Betool Khedairi's *A Sky So Close* from the Postcolonial Perspective.

Betool Khedairi usually takes the issues of the generation of mixed cultures, in relation to mixed marriages, dual heritages, the clashing of civilizations, and migration. Her first novel "*A Sky So Close*" explores all the previous themes. The novel tells the story of the daughter of an Iraqi Muslim father and a British Christian mother. They fell in love while studying in Britain and married despite their differences then moved to Iraq. The father is a trader in food flavorings, the mother

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does not speak Arabic with her husband, and their daughter (the novel's unnamed narrator) struggles to find a stable identity between the differences of her parent. Khedairi built her imaginary story on the basis of her reality as a hybrid person.

In the novel, the protagonist (the narrator) represents the position of the colonized or the other. She was forced to obey because her parents controlled her behaviors, language, and dreams. She had to deal with two different worlds, to find a common ground that fits her parents' expectations. Throughout the novel, the mother sets on imposing her thoughts and beliefs onto her daughter. She tries to convince her daughter that the Western culture, tradition, and style of living are better for her. Without giving her the freedom to choose and decide for her life. Preventing her from mixing with their uneducated and simple Iraqi neighbor's daughter Khaddouja. Habermas stated that the division among cultures is due to the colonial authority which persuaded the Western part to be superior to the East, and there comes the postcolonial theory to reveal the cruelty of the colonial regime "Postcolonial perspectives emerge from the colonial testimony of the third world countries and the discourses of minorities within the geopolitical division of East and West, north and south" (Habermas, 1978, p. 384).

The relationship between the protagonist's parents who are from different cultures shows that each one of them tends to the people of her/his culture rather than the other one. Due to her association with both Eastern and Western cultures, the daughter holds a binary position. Living in such diversity would ultimately affect her identity and confuse her about her origin and future. This is what Stuart Hall calls "cultural identity" which "is a matter of 'becoming' as well as 'being'. It belongs to the future as much as to the past" (Hall, 1990, p. 225). The protagonist is searching for her identity though she naturally chose to combine the two while looking for her particularity.

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One of the most symbolic illustrations of hybridity that expose her swinging between two different cultures is when:

“Khadouja had set up a swing for us between two palm trees... we take turns, Khadouja lets out several hoarse cries of joy... then it’s my turn. I kick the air with my feet ... I rise upward... I kick harder... I’m framed in the milky blue. All the palm trees are below my two bare feet. The sun is swimming in the waters of the river. I spread out my toes ... pencils of light pass through the four gaps between them. With my other foot I kick even harder ... I rise higher towards the heavens... I breathe in the horizon... then ... A sky so close!” (Khedairi 1999, p. 16).

As the unnamed narrator was swinging on a seat hanging from two palm trees, she fancied that she could reach and touch the sky to free herself from the boundaries of both cultures. However, the swing broke down, and she fell to the ground. The Swing resembles the in-between space of the protagonist, how she is controlled and cannot reach her desire without her family's interference. They do not understand that she is different from them. She is not Iraqi as her father nor British as her mother; she is a mixture of the two and holds features from both. According to Bhabha it “is the ‘in-between’ space that carries the burden and meaning of culture, and this is what makes the notion of hybridity so important” (Khedairi, 1999, p. 109). The Father encourages his daughter to mix with those local people, unlike his wife, asking her to learn and act as he does because they live in Iraq, and it is more accurate to adopt what suits the Eastern culture. “Oh, madam, let her mix with the customs of the people and the countryside...let it relate to the land and humans as we were brought up” (Khedairi, 1999, p. 5). On the other hand, the mother as a Western person has a stereotyped image of the East as barbarian and backward, encouraging her daughter to mix with her civilized society, not with the primitive society of her Iraqi husband.

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The protagonist is not convinced of her mother's thoughts (Western imposition), and she tries to resist her: "the more she refused Khaddouja, the more I longed for the second half of the day when I encounter her brown face on the dusty track" (Khedairi, 1999, p. 24). Through this line, the aim of postcolonial theory can be noticed. To resist colonial authority and free the colonized people from its chains. The mother wants her daughter to acquire an important societal position that could improve her life. She enrolled her in the School of Music and Ballet in the city for a better education. On the contrary, the father worries that joining this school might spoil her because she is Muslim. He keeps quarreling with his wife over raising their daughter, asking her to understand the differences between their cultures, and considering that some of the Western beliefs and attitudes are inappropriate and prevented in Islamic culture. The mother is an atheist; she has a falsely stereotyped image of Muslims. According to the theory of Orientalism "The web of racism, cultural stereotypes, political imperialism, dehumanizing ideology holding in the Arab or the Muslim is very strong indeed" (Said 2003, p. 30).

The father "The girl will be spoiled!"

The mother "But the schools out here are so deprived. I want my daughter to learn languages, dancing, and socialization. I'm not asking for much."

The father "Don't you realize, woman, that we're now in the Arab, Islamic world, and she and I are Muslims? This education, which you are calling 'arts', could damage her future prospects."

The mother "It would be better than damaging her morale in your local girls' schools. She's showing promise and talent. Why do you

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want to keep her in isolation? Isn't it bad enough that she mixed with that Gypsy girl and those illiterate fools" (Khedairi, 1999, pp. 9-10)

The protagonist's house symbolizes a mini-war; she is torn between two distinct worlds. She realizes she is aging between their East-meets-West conflict that affects her personality to sense being part of the two worlds "I tried to mesh and to benefit from both cultures" (Khedairi, 1999, p. 20). This state of the protagonist fits what Rutherford identified as "in-betweenness, the straddling of two cultures and the consequent ability to negotiate the difference" (Khedairi, 1999, p. 158). The novelist tends to bridge between both cultures rather than deny them. The protagonist said once that due to her family; she encounters and learns from both cultures: "Your disagreement allowed me to mingle with both worlds. Just like our house, which was two worlds" (Khedairi, 1999, p. 11). The mother realizes she cannot cope with her husband's religious beliefs and traditions and they decided to put an end to their marriage. She feels unable to decide where she belongs since she left her homeland to live in Iraq, but now, she failed to accept their style of living and has returned to Britain. She was confused to find that she lost the ability to sense her homeland. This is the effect of Diaspora and migration. Clifford (1994) stated that Diaspora is a mixture of the emotion for the homeland and the host land and that Hybridity is a concourse of two distinct cultures. Which explains the mixture of feelings the mother was struggling with.

Although the protagonist's parents got married after falling in love, they failed to detect their identity in such a simple way as a couple of the same nationalities do. Maalouf stated that considering the construction of a person's identity in his book, *In the Name of Identity*, "both partners will always carry within them the ties their parents handed down at birth, but these ties will henceforth be perceived

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differently and accorded a different importance” (2000, p. 11). Cultural and traditional differences between the West and East made the gap between the couple even bigger. The differences were made in the roles of a man and a woman conquer in the family in accordance with different cultures. The mother sees herself as a victim of the oriental patriarchal suppression due to her husband’s demand not to work outside the door and to stay at home to take care of their daughter. In her country and culture women are allowed to work outside the home. Yet Eastern husband has a different opinion and wants to stick to some roles:

“husband is the supporter; wife is the incubator, so to speak as it that must fulfill her duties as a mother and take care of the house. He prioritizes his house and daughter’s service over his wife’s desires. The association of home with women and femininity is a commonplace that is often considered natural. Women’s identity seems to be derived from their domestic life” (Domosh 2000, p. 1).

In the Arabic community “Raising a daughter is more difficult in this part of the world than raising a son” (Khedairi, 1999, p. 47). However, the protagonist’s mother behaves differently when dealing with her friends from her homeland. She experienced a different life with David since they both share the same homeland, language, and attitudes, “how similar they are in their hand’s movements and their heads’ turning and the way they pronounce: oh, aha. Really? Between a sentence and another one” (Khedairi, 1999, p. 27). Years later, the husband reminds his wife that he has priority and power and that the law is by his side as well as the custody of his daughter. The mother dreams of breaking her chains. She wants to look for her aspirations and identity. she departs from the house explaining to her husband “your presence at home forces me to leave it as long as possible. I do not want your favors, reminding me that you are the master

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of the house. I will be satisfied by my work, friends, and my daughter” (Khedairi, 1999, pp. 68-77).

Khedairi explores in her novel “a glimpse of how the Western eye looks at an issue and how the Eastern eye looks at the same issue” (Bhabha, 1994, p. 211). This is what postcolonialism aims to expose. The protagonist is lost within their quarreling and feels she belongs to neither of them which is the representation of hybridity and the third space “the mixture of two different original materials to generate a new material that fails to identify itself or to belong to either of the two”. (Van Aarde 2007, p. 1173). The protagonist could not understand that time is passing by and she is getting older. Her skin turns darker, and she becomes taller and slimmer than before but what matters is that she becomes confident about herself when she starts dancing. She accepts her skin color and starts believing in herself while dancing ballet in the best way as she stands in front of the mirror “I couldn’t believe that I was leaping with total control.” (Khedairi, 1999, p. 112). The way she accepts her dark color and her mixed language proves that she could live a normal life as a hybrid person and this ensures how the “Postcolonial theory is always concerned with the positive and negative effects of the mixing of peoples and cultures” (Young, 2002, p. 69). This paves the way for her to figure out her true self “For the first time in my life I was pleased by the reflection I saw before me” (Khedairi, 1999, p.112)

The construction of an identity “is shaped by continuous experiences and perpetual displacements” (Al Deek, 2016, p. 66). The protagonist lost her father, her mother got sick, and the war struck in Iraq. She starts wondering if one day she will cure herself from the remains of war and survive the damage it caused. “_A time will come when we’ll have to create new identities for ourselves in order to bear the difficulties we’ll encounter in civilian life, in a new era of

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survival.” (Khedairi, 1999, p. 161). The protagonist falls in love and informs her mother that he is foreign and has a different religion which disturbs the mother “You are Muslim and he is Christian; that will create problems for you in this society” (Khedairi, 1999, p. 167). The daughter is trying to accept hybridity as a normal matter; she welcomes diversity and is not afraid of starting a mixed family like hers. This is a positive view and a hope for people like her to encourage them to find their place in the world. She decides this time because she realizes “Situations had been forced upon me and decisions had been made on my behalf” (Khedairi, 1999, p. 181) and she wants to stand by her own.

In the novel, when the protagonist moves to London to treat her mother. She joined Iraqi people who stood to support their homeland and pray for their freedom despite their different colors, class, and religion. “The sky is as clear as pure as the prayers, which are floating toward the heavens in every language and religion.” (Khedairi, 1999, p. 191); it symbolizes accepting hybridity. The protagonist chooses to stay in London and works as an Arabic translator before losing her mother. The last is pleased that her daughter handled her hybridity “At least your childhood confusion between the two languages was not wasted” (Khedairi, 1999, p. 216). She mixes both languages and uses them for a living. She starts accepting her hybrid identity. Khedairi explored the conflict between cultures, diaspora, and hybridity and successfully presented these themes in *A Sky So Close* to explain that it is all right to be different and that things can be changed the way you choose them to be. It is never too late to discover what you really are and your role in the world.

Conclusion

The current study explores Khedairi’s novel *A Sky So Close* from the postcolonial perspective. *A Sky So Close* is a contemporary novel that contains

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postcolonial literature elements and investigates the themes of identity, hybridity, migration, and the clash between the West and the East, which is represented by the protagonist and her family's relationship. Throughout the novel, the novelist intends to explain that the quest for identity is an ongoing process, and the hybrid culture cannot be separated nor combined but multiple. This study's findings rely on analyzing the elements of hybridity in the text and expose the wrong stereotyped image imposed upon the East, Arabs, and Muslims. In addition, it presents an insight into some prominent theorists concerning hybridity. For future research, this study can be considered a beneficial resource for scholars and students of postcolonial literature.

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