



**Conceptualizing Diaspora in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men*
and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* and Leila Aboulela's *The
Translator and Minaret***

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Abstract

This study offers a comprehensive exploration of the concept of diaspora as depicted in the works of two prominent Anglophone Arab novelists, Hisham Matar and Leila Aboulela. Focusing on Matar's *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, alongside Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*, the research delves into the intricate portrayals of identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation that characterize the Arab diasporic experience.

Through a comparative literary analysis, the study examines how these authors articulate the psychological and social complexities faced by individuals and communities navigating life between homelands and host societies.

The research situates these novels within broader theoretical frameworks, including postcolonial and diaspora studies, to uncover the ways in which narrative techniques, character development, and literary devices are employed to express themes of nostalgia, hybridity, generational difference, and the ongoing negotiation of belonging. By engaging with the cultural and historical contexts that inform these narratives, the study not only highlights the unique contributions of Matar and Aboulela to Anglophone Arab literature but also advances scholarly understanding of how literature can illuminate the lived realities of diaspora. Ultimately, this research contributes to the evolving field of diaspora studies by foregrounding the voices and perspectives of Arab writers, offering nuanced insights into the formation of identity, the persistence of memory, and the search for home in a transnational world.

Keywords: Anglophone, diaspora, Hisham Matar, hybridity, identity, Leila Aboulela, memory

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	2
Acknowledgments.....	4
Introduction.....	5
The Significance of Diaspora in Anglophone Arab Literature	5
Research Problem and Significance.....	7
Research Objectives.....	7
Research Questions.....	8
Methodology and Approach.....	8
Literature Review and Theoretical Framework	9
The Novels: Hisham Matar's <i>In the Country of Men</i>	18
The Novels: Hisham Matar's <i>Anatomy of a Disappearance</i>	22
The Novels: Leila Aboulela's <i>The Translator</i>	24
The Novels: Leila Aboulela's <i>Minaret</i>	27
Comparative Analysis of Diaspora in the Novels.....	30
Chapter One: Theoretical Framework and Research Context.....	32
Chapter Two: Exploring Diaspora in Hisham Matar's Works: <i>In the Country of Men</i> and <i>Anatomy of a Disappearance</i>	71
Chapter Three: Unveiling Diaspora in Leila Aboulela's Narratives: <i>The Translator</i> and <i>Minaret</i>	121
Conclusion.....	168
Works Cited.....	182

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I. Introduction

This study explores the notion of diaspora in works by two Anglophone Arab novelists: Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) and *Minaret* (2005), and Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006) and *Anatomy of Disappearance* (2011). The study will contribute to the ongoing academic conversation on the political and cultural implications of the notion of diaspora. It will also offer insight into how Anglophone Arab writers view the notion of diaspora and how it resonates with similar semi-autobiographical accounts.

II. The Significance of Diaspora in Anglophone Arab Literature

Diaspora plays a significant role in Anglophone Arab literature, as it explores the experiences of Arab individuals and communities living outside their home countries. It is a theme that reflects the complexities of identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation. Anglophone Arab literature contributes to the representation and visibility of Arab diasporic experiences. It provides a platform for voices that are often marginalized or underrepresented in mainstream narratives, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences within the Arab diaspora.

The representation of diasporic experiences in the selected novels within Anglophone Arab literature delves into the diasporic experiences of their characters. Through vivid storytelling and nuanced characterizations, these novels offer insights into the challenges, emotions, and complexities of living in a diasporic context. These selected novels contribute to the understanding of identity formation and negotiation within the Arab diaspora. They delve into the characters' struggles with questions of cultural, religious, and personal identities, as well as their search for a sense of belonging in foreign lands. These novels shed light on the multifaceted nature of identity

and the ways in which diasporic individuals navigate their sense of self within different cultural contexts.

Diaspora in literature opens up avenues for cultural exchange and hybridity. It allows for the exploration of the intersection between different cultural traditions, values, and practices. Through the portrayal of diasporic experiences, literature showcases the ways in which cultures interact, influence one another, and give rise to new forms of expression and understanding. Diaspora literature often offers transnational perspectives, challenging national boundaries and emphasizing the interconnectedness of global experiences. It highlights the shared human experiences of displacement, longing, and the search for identity, fostering empathy and understanding across cultures.

The selected works often explore the complexities of identity, belonging, and displacement experienced in the contexts of diaspora. Aboulela's novels delve into the intersections of culture, religion, and personal experiences, highlighting the ways in which these elements shape the characters' sense of self and their place in the world. Furthermore, Matar's novels delve into the psychological and emotional dimensions of displacement and loss. His works often explore the impact of political upheaval on individuals and families, reflecting on the complexities of identity formation and the search for truth and belonging.

Diaspora studies provide a valuable framework for understanding and analyzing Arab literature. It allows for a deeper exploration of the experiences and perspectives of Arab individuals and communities living outside their home countries. By studying diaspora in Arab literature, scholars and readers gain insights into the complexities of cultural negotiation, the impact of displacement on identity, and the ways in which literature serves as a platform for marginalized voices.

III. Research Problem and Significance

Studies about Anglophone Arab writers are still embryonic to a certain extent, but have been growing, especially after 9/11 and the Arab Spring (El-Said; Hassan; Salaita). Given the current politically clouded landscape in the Middle East, waves of Arab refugees and exiles have been migrating to the West looking for a new home (Amin et al.; Andersson & Djeflat). In effect, the Arab diaspora is an increasingly pivotal topic from a socio-political perspective as well (Bazian; Abdul-Jabbar). The study tentatively addresses the following questions: How is the theme of diaspora tackled in each of the four novels? In what forms do the characters' experiences show different perspectives of diaspora? To what extent do the selected novels adhere or divert from the notion of diaspora as displacement? To what extent can the novels be analyzed as part of the wider terrain of diaspora as a narrative that mobilizes resistance and deconstructs cultural or political domination? How does diaspora help construct or deconstruct the notion of home/homeland? How do the characters develop a diasporic identity? Finally, hypothetically, because "the English language was mine, the tradition was not" (Bhabha 95), eventually "the migrant may mutate into the parvenu but struggle to become a citizen" (Cooper 44); In what ways do Aboulela and Matar's works negate or affirm that assumption?

IV. Research Objectives:

- 1- To analyze and compare the representation of diaspora in the selected novels by Hisham Matar and Leila Aboulela.
- 2- To examine how the authors depict the experiences of diaspora within the context of Anglophone Arab literature.
- 3- To explore the thematic, cultural, and historical dimensions of diaspora in the novels.

- 4- To assess the narrative techniques employed by the authors to convey the complexities of diasporic identities.
- 5- To contribute to the existing body of knowledge on diaspora studies and literature by highlighting the unique perspectives of Anglophone Arab writers.

V. Research Questions:

- 1- How do Matar and Aboulela conceptualize diaspora in their respective novels?
- 2- What are the key themes and motifs related to diaspora that emerge in the selected novels: *In the Country of Men, Anatomy of a Disappearance, The Translator, and Minaret*?
- 3- How do the cultural and historical contexts influence the portrayal of diaspora in the selected novels?
- 4- What narrative techniques and literary devices do the authors employ to depict the experiences of diaspora?
- 5- In what ways do the selected novels contribute to our understanding of diaspora in Anglophone Arab literature?
- 6- How do the selected novels by Hisham Matar and Leila Aboulela challenge or reinforce existing theories and concepts in diaspora studies?
- 7- What are the implications of the authors' perspectives on diaspora for broader discussions of identity, belonging, and displacement?

VI. Methodology and Approach

The methodology involves conducting a two-fold approach focusing on close reading and analysis of the selected novels by Hisham Matar and Leila Aboulela, examining the representation

of diaspora and related themes. It will also delve into analyzing the narrative techniques, character development, symbolism, and other literary devices used by the authors to convey the diasporic experiences. The thesis will also sustain a comparative analysis through comparing and contrasting the treatment of diaspora in the novels, identifying similarities and differences in the authors' approaches and narrative techniques. Finally, it will analyze how the novels complement or challenge each other in their portrayal of diaspora in the context of Anglophone Arab literature. By combining literary analysis, comparative analysis, contextualization, the methodology and approach will provide a comprehensive examination of the representation of diaspora in the selected novels by Hisham Matar and Leila Aboulela in light of postcolonial studies' contribution to this field.

VII. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Anglophone Arab literature is often viewed as the historic product of three waves of immigration (Ludescher) resulting in diasporic literary streams (Al-Maleh). In a post-9/11 world, Anglophone Arab writings address Islamophobia, social justice and the contemporary politically loaded realities: "The irony of Anglophone Arab Literature is that it did not gain attention or attain recognition until the world woke up one day to the horror of the infamous 9/11 and asked itself who those 'Arabs' really are" (Al-Maleh 1). She argues that the Arab literary output "was filtered through terror" (2). In "Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature" (2002), Wail Hassan draws attention to the significance of Arab studies as a pivotal component of the overarching framework of Postcolonial studies:

One of the ironies of postcolonial studies is that colonial discourse analysis began with several theorists who studied colonialism in the

Arab world: Albert Memmi (in Tunisia), Frantz Fanon (in Algeria), Edward Said (in the Levant). However, the work of those critics led to the development, in the 1980's and 1990's, of a sophisticated theoretical apparatus that rarely takes Arabic literary and cultural production into account. (45)

Steven Salaita explores the rise of Anglophone Arab literature in terms of academic classification. He suggests that the title can be used “to organize college classes, professional organizations, and bookshelves” (3). Salaita is a bit uneasy about the categorizing attempt that may indirectly reduce literature to sheer “cultural authenticity” (4). He identifies Anglophone Arab writers in terms of their origin and the intended subject matter thematized in their literary works: “I tend to emphasize the writer’s ethnic origin in addition to the thematic content” (4). For instance, Orfalea observes that the novel *The Wanton Summer Air*, written by the Arab-American author Samuel Hazo, cannot be categorized as part of Anglophone Arab writing because “there is nothing Arab about it” (117). Moreover, Salaita explains how certain ethnic groups are often mistaken for Arabs: “Iranian, Afghans, Turks, and Pakistanis are not Arab. Although these groups are predominantly Muslim, a commonality they share with Arabs, each of them is culturally and linguistically distinct” (9). The question of how to identify Arab Anglophone writing is related to how Arabs themselves tend to be uncertain of how to define themselves in diaspora.

Critics often refer to the sudden rise of Anglophone Arab novels published over the last fifteen years or so. In *The Anglo Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English*, Geoffrey Nash discusses a sudden flow “from the trickle of Anglophone novels by Arabs mentioned by Said in 1992, to the stream of authors and texts” (14). He suggests three reasons that have led to the rise of Anglophone Arab literature. The first is a wave of translation and literary

interaction and profit (14). The second reason is tied to “the awarding of the Nobel prize for literature to the Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz in 1988” (15). The third cause “is embedded in the traumatic politico-cultural history of the Arab world in the twentieth century” (16). This study attempts to contribute to the increasing scholarship about Anglophone Arab literature and the politico-cultural history of the Arabs in diaspora.

In a post-colonial sense, diaspora refers to ethnic minorities who are displaced outside their original homeland. The term suggests migration to a new chosen land where people seek to create new homes. This act of movement generates issues of minority, subjectivity, race, ethnicity, class difference and identity. Over time, migrants end up with a faint idea of what their original home seems like and become displaced in the new country they have chosen for themselves. Etymologically, the word is derived from the Greek word ‘diaspeirein, which means “a dispersion or scattering from dia ‘across’ + speirein ‘scatter’” (Kenny 2-3). The term diaspora became widely used to describe the scattering of Jews after their captivity in Babylonia in the 5th century B.C.E. However, the term does not exclusively refer to the Jewish experience, as it can refer to the displacement of other groups at other times, especially after the Holocaust in the 20th century. Diaspora has become an umbrella term that describes all people who had a similar experience to that of the Jews in the sense that they were forced to leave their homelands (Kenny3-4). In the twentieth century, many other widely scattered groups began to use the word diaspora to describe their condition. Among the first to do so were the Armenians; similarly, the trans-Atlantic passage of Africans during the slave trade of the 17th through 19th centuries has been called the African Diaspora. In his description of diasporic communities, Robin Cohen asserts that diaspora is “a notion often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore – always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions (ix). He argues that “a member’s adherence to a diasporic community

is demonstrated by an acceptance of an inescapable link with their past migration history and a sense of co-ethnicity with others of a similar background” (ix). John McLeod, on the other hand, refers to the concept of “generational differences” (205), which is arguably peculiar to both Aboulela and Matar’s conceptualization of diaspora from an autobiographical perspective. Addressing the situation of second generation, McLeod asserts, “their sense of identity borne from living in a diaspora community will be influenced by the ‘past migration history’ of their parents or grandparents” (207). He argues in favor of ‘diaspora identities’ rather than ‘migrant identities’” (205).

The term diaspora has been “increasingly used by academics and sometimes even by the media to refer simply to the mass migration of individuals from their homelands. ... In the process, the question of who is and who is not a ‘member of diaspora’ or is ‘in diaspora’ has become contested terrain” (Moghissi, Rahnema & Goodman 3). In effect, this study explores the notion of diaspora in the context of identity formation of Arabs in diaspora through Anglophone Arab writers who “resist being subsumed into a single narrative; instead, they demand that we address their cultural, historical, and ideological specificities” (Kamboureli vii). Diasporic people then tend to live in one country, but have their eyes and minds set towards their home country. They try to create a mini-representation of their home country in the host country. In their attempts to stay true to tradition, language and faith, they build a bridge that links them back to their origins. Though immigrants might be somewhat satisfied with this newly created diasporic community, issues may arise because of how their children perceive who they are. Their identity suffers in accordance with the immigration history of their family and the realities of their existence in the host country. According to William Safran, diaspora is a “metaphoric designation that could be

applied to various populations” (83). This study therefore examines the influence of diaspora on the formation of Arab identity within the frame of crossing cultural boundaries in Britain.

Previous studies on diaspora in Anglophone Arab literature have explored the complex intersection of Arab identity, displacement, and cultural hybridity. Scholars have examined the ways in which Arab writers, living in English-speaking countries or writing in English, depict the experiences of diaspora and articulate the challenges and complexities of belonging and identity formation. One notable work in this field is *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* by Al-Maleh. This book offers a comprehensive analysis of Anglophone Arab literature and its engagement with diaspora themes. Al-Maleh explores the works of various Arab diasporic writers, including those from Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, and Sudan, and examines how they negotiate their identities, negotiate with the English language, and engage with themes of displacement and cultural hybridity.

Another significant contribution is *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* edited by Steven Salaita. This collection of essays delves into the experiences of Arab Americans and the diasporic themes in their literature. The book examines how Arab American writers negotiate their dual identities, address issues of discrimination and racism, and navigate the complexities of cultural belonging.

In *Arab American Literature and Culture: A Critical Study* by Wail S. Hassan, the author analyzes the literary production of Arab American writers, including those writing in English. The book explores the ways in which these writers engage with diaspora, memory, exile, and questions of identity. Hassan provides insightful analyses of texts that capture the diverse experiences of Arab Americans and their negotiation of multiple cultural and linguistic spaces.

Literature, Migration and the 'War on Terror' by Fiona Tolan et al examines the representation of Arab and Muslim diasporic experiences in the context of the post-9/11 world. Tolan explores the ways in which Anglophone Arab literature responds to issues of homeland, exile, displacement, and the impact of political events on individual and collective identities. These previous studies offer valuable insights into the representation of diaspora in Anglophone Arab literature. They provide theoretical frameworks, textual analyses, and critical perspectives that can inform from the current research on the novels by Hisham Matar and Leila Aboulela, helping to situate their work within the broader scholarly discourse on diaspora in literature.

In an article entitled “Patriarchy, Subordination, and Rise of the Individual in Hisham Matar’s *In The Country of Men*”, Nevine Abraham explores the idea of standing up against social oppression and how ideas of loyalty and betrayal are manipulated in Hisham Matar's novel *In the Country of Men* (2006). The story is told through the eyes of 9-year-old Suleiman, who becomes critical of the power structure and dominance of men in Libyan society. Suleiman's resistance begins in his own family when his mother shares her experience of being forced into marriage at a young age, which makes him reject the idea of male dominance. In the wider society, Suleiman witnesses the revolutionary committee's control and suppression of dissenting voices, as well as a public execution and the crowd's enthusiastic response, which exposes the dynamics of subservience and division.

In her thesis, Rana Munir El-Bowety explores the revival of the *Kunstlerroman* genre in two modern autobiographical fiction works: J.M. Coetzee's *Summertime* (2009) and Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006). The main objectives are to examine how these authors reveal their childhood influences in their writing as a way to reinvent themselves artistically, and to understand how different genres blend together, creating hybrid genres that do not fit into one

specific category. The thesis also delves into the relationship between the author, narrator, and protagonist, aiming to understand the aesthetics of their connection. To explain the term "autobiography" and its meaning, the work references influential autobiography theorists like Philippe Lejeune, Paul John Eakin, and James Olney. Mikhail Bakhtin's essay is also used to analyze the dynamics between the author and the protagonist. The process of reinventing oneself relies on memory and recollection of the past, which means that what is remembered is often fictionalized and rearranged, absolute truth cannot be represented. Coetzee and Matar not only reinvent themselves through their writing, but they also actively participate in creating texts that defy genre conventions and constantly evolve. This results in narratives that reconstruct the past through writing and adopt new forms that don't fully belong to a single genre. While *Summertime* avoids establishing a definitive subject or protagonist, *In the Country of Men* extends beyond individual life to encompass broader human experiences.

In her dissertation entitled "The House on Mulberry Street: Authoritarianism, Orientalism, and the Experience of Interior Spaces in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men*", Isabel Abu-Absi states that Hisham Matar's first novel, *In the Country of Men*, tells the story of Suleiman El-Dewani, a young boy growing up in 1970s Tripoli, Libya, whose life is turned upside down when his dissident father suddenly disappears. While the novel addresses the political struggles of a country under despotism, it also focuses on the dynamics within a particular household and the connections that exist within the home. Matar challenges Orientalist portrayals of Arab domestic spaces, countering the Western perception of Arab homes as harems by expanding readers' understanding of private, interior spaces in the Arab world and the significance these spaces hold. Instead of relying on Western interpretations, Matar explores the poetics of private Arab spaces from a North African perspective. By doing so, he shifts the focus from how Westerners imagine

and interpret North African domestic spaces to how Arabs themselves attribute meaning to their homes. While Western representations often reflect Eurocentrism and fuel imperial-erotic fantasies, Matar explores the subjective value of Arab spaces, emphasizing the significance of these private spaces in shaping individuality and personal growth. In portraying the Dewani home as a place of liberation and a response to the dehumanization faced by Suleiman and his parents in a patriarchal and politically oppressive state, Matar highlights the importance of the home as a refuge and a source of empowerment.

In "Psychosomatic Angst in Hisham Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance*", Evangeline A. Jemi assures that In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Hisham Matar sheds light on the reality of the Arab world, where intellectuals and writers often choose self-imposed exile in search of freedom. The protagonist, Nuri, exemplifies this experience. The novel explores the psychological impact of traumatic events on individuals, as they suffer from psychosomatic angst characterized by recurring flashbacks, avoidance, and numbing of memories long after the initial trauma. This paper focuses on the challenges faced by these characters, which lead to their sense of alienation from mainstream society. It also delves into the internal struggle that they undergo in order to overcome these challenges by accepting their identity and attempting to reconnect with the larger community.

In "The Question of Hybridity and the Possibility of Retaining Islamic Identity in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*", Amjad, Fazel Asadi, and Sarmad Abdalrazag Albusalih seek to analyze the possibility of maintaining an Islamic identity within a postcolonial context in Leila Aboulela's novel *The Translator*. The story takes place in Europe and features a Muslim woman named Sammar as its protagonist, making it a suitable work to be examined through a postcolonial lens. Sammar, a Sudanese widow who works as an Arabic translator for a Scottish Oriental scholar

and eventually falls in love with him, finds herself at a crossroads of cultures, navigating between the Orient and the Occident. This article seeks to explore the cultural and identity conflicts between the East and the West in *The Translator* and discuss whether the protagonist, Sammar, undergoes a process of hybridization or manages to maintain her own Islamic indigenous identity. To do so, the article investigates Homi Bhabha's concept of "hybridity" and examines its applicability or limitations within the Muslim community living in diaspora.

In "Negotiating the Veil and Identity in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*", Susan Taha Al-Karawi states that in *Minaret* (2005), Leila Aboulela offers a rich and authentic exploration of the Muslim Arab woman's struggle to establish a modern yet religiously traditional identity. This analysis utilizes the conceptual frameworks of Victor Turner's liminality and Homi Bhabha's hybridity and the third space to examine this struggle and demonstrate that the veil functions as a metaphor for both positive and negative experiences of Arab women. In *Minaret*, the protagonist Najwa undergoes a sense of in-betweenness or liminality as she navigates through various crises, transitions, and reconciliations between her secular and religious lives. The novel also explores the different hybrid identities that Najwa and the women around her adopt as they grapple with their evolving Muslim identities, particularly through the choice to wear the veil and dress modestly rather than to wear revealing clothing. Together, these themes form the basis of the analysis of the Muslim Arab woman's struggle to maintain her faith while wearing the veil while living in Britain. The veil in the novel serves as a symbolic representation of traditional Islamic culture and becomes a manifestation of the ongoing struggle to remain religiously faithful in a context surrounded by non-Muslims or non-practicing Muslims. By understanding individual mobility, empowerment, and agency within this context, the negotiation of liminality becomes a means to achieve a hybrid identity that incorporates both Eastern and Western cultures. The novel explores how the

characters successfully navigate these complexities, shaping their own identities while remaining true to their religious beliefs.

VIII. The Novels: i) Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* (2006)

Hisham Matar is a Libyan-American novelist whose debut novel, *In the Country of Men*, was shortlisted for the 2006 Man Booker Prize and won the 2007 Commonwealth Writers' Prize Best First Book Award. It has also been translated into 22 languages. His second novel, *Anatomy of Disappearance*, was published in 2011. Born in America, Matar grew up in Libya and then moved with his family to Egypt because his father was targeted by the Gaddafi regime. Matar lived in exile in both Egypt and then Britain where he finished his Masters at the University of London. Matar's father, a political dissenter, was kidnapped in Cairo and was brought back to Libya; since then, he has been reported missing. His second novel is believed to be partially autobiographical.

In the Country of Men is narrated by the nine-year-old Suleiman, who lives in Tripoli, and traces how Libya gradually becomes a state under the control of Gaddafi's police. Suleiman is trapped between his father's anti-Gaddafi activities and an alcohol-addict mother, and his story becomes a reflection of the regime. *In the Country of Men*, Matar explores various diasporic themes and motifs, delving into the experiences of displacement, cultural hybridity, and the challenges of belonging. Set in Libya during the 1970s under the oppressive regime of Muammar Gaddafi, the novel offers a poignant portrayal of a young boy named Suleiman navigating the complexities of his own identity and the impact of political turmoil on his family. One prominent diasporic theme in the novel is the concept of exile and displacement. Suleiman's father, Faraj, is in self-imposed exile due to his political activities against the regime. This results in a fragmented family, with Suleiman growing up without a constant male presence in his life. The absence of his

father and his yearning for a sense of belonging highlight the challenges faced by individuals and families in diaspora. Cultural hybridity is another significant theme explored in the novel. Suleiman's mother, Najwa, is of English origin, while his father is Libyan. This multicultural background contributes to Suleiman's sense of being caught between two worlds and struggling to reconcile his dual heritage. The clashes between Western and Libyan cultures are depicted through Suleiman's observations of his parents' contrasting behaviors, as well as his own struggles to navigate societal expectations and norms.

The motif of secrecy and hiding is recurrent throughout the novel, reflecting the experiences of individuals living under a repressive regime. Suleiman's family constantly conceals their true feelings and political activities, creating an atmosphere of fear and paranoia. The need for secrecy reinforces the sense of displacement and the struggle to maintain a sense of identity in a hostile environment. The novel also explores the emotional and psychological impact of political oppression on individuals and families. Suleiman witnesses the imprisonment and torture of his father's friends, which instills fear and a constant sense of danger. The trauma experienced by Suleiman and his family highlights the psychological toll of living in a diasporic context, constantly reminded of the political realities and the threat to their safety.

Furthermore, the theme of longing for freedom and a better life outside the country of origin is present in the novel. Suleiman dreams of escaping to a more open and democratic society, where he can be free from the constraints of the oppressive regime. This aspiration for a different future reflects the longing for a sense of belonging and the pursuit of a more fulfilling life outside the confines of the homeland. Overall, *In the Country of Men* captures the diasporic experiences of individuals and families in the context of political oppression. The novel explores themes of exile, cultural hybridity, secrecy, trauma, and the longing for freedom. Through the eyes of the

young protagonist, Hisham Matar illuminates the complexities of identity and the struggles faced by those living in diaspora.

In the Country of Men is deeply rooted in its cultural and historical context, providing a nuanced portrayal of Libya during the 1970s under the oppressive regime of Muammar Gaddafi. The cultural and historical backdrop plays a significant role in shaping the characters' experiences, motivations, and the overall narrative. Culturally, the novel explores the tensions between traditional Libyan values and the influence of Western culture. Suleiman's mother, Najwa, is of English origin, and her presence introduces elements of Western customs and values into the household. This clash of cultures is depicted through the characters' behavior and the conflicts that arise within the family. Suleiman, being exposed to both Libyan and Western influences, grapples with the expectations and norms of both worlds, highlighting the complexities of cultural hybridity and the challenges of navigating multiple cultural identities.

The historical context of the novel is set against the backdrop of Gaddafi's totalitarian regime. The novel portrays the atmosphere of fear and surveillance that permeates Libyan society at the time. The government's control over every aspect of life is depicted through the constant presence of informants and the pervasive atmosphere of secrecy. The political oppression and human rights abuses during this period are woven into the narrative, shaping the characters' actions, choices, and fears. Moreover, the historical events of the time, such as the Green Revolution and the subsequent purges, are interwoven into the novel's plot. These events create a sense of danger and uncertainty, with characters constantly living under the threat of betrayal, arrest, and violence. The novel captures the impact of political turmoil on individuals and families, highlighting the psychological and emotional toll of living in such a repressive regime. The historical context also provides insights into the socio-political dynamics of Libya during that

period. The novel portrays the complex power structures and the ways in which loyalty and betrayal are intertwined. It offers glimpses into the lives of ordinary Libyans, their struggles, aspirations, and the compromises they make to survive in an oppressive regime. Additionally, the novel touches upon the broader historical context of Libya's fight for independence and its post-colonial trajectory. It reflects on the legacy of colonialism and the challenges faced by a nation trying to redefine its identity and navigate its way through political and social transformations. Overall, the cultural and historical context in *In the Country of Men* enriches the narrative by providing a vivid portrayal of Libyan society during the 1970s. According to Dahood El-Oqla, the novel explores “the clash of cultures, the impact of political oppression, and the struggles faced by individuals and families in such a challenging environment. By grounding the story within its cultural and historical milieu, Hisham Matar captures the complexities of identity, power, and survival in a turbulent period of Libyan history” (87).

In *In the Country of Men*, Matar delves into the emotional and psychological dimensions of diaspora. Suleiman's mother, Najwa, is depicted as a woman caught between two worlds, embodying the cultural hybridity experienced by individuals in diaspora. Her English origin and her integration into Libyan society highlight the complexities of navigating multiple cultural identities and the challenges of assimilation. The author also explores the theme of longing for home and a sense of belonging. Suleiman yearns for his father's return and longs for a stable family life. He grapples with questions of identity and belonging, often feeling like an outsider in both Libyan and Western contexts. This longing for a place to call home reflects the universal human desire for a sense of rootedness and connection.

Matar's portrayal of diaspora in the novel is deeply influenced by the political context of Libya during the 1970s. The oppressive regime of Muammar Gaddafi creates an atmosphere of

fear, secrecy, and surveillance. The characters are constantly aware of the risks associated with their political activities and the need to conceal their true feelings and identities. This political dimension adds another layer to the experience of diaspora, as it intensifies the challenges faced by the characters and contributes to a sense of displacement and alienation. Matar's portrayal of diaspora in *In the Country of Men* captures the multifaceted nature of the experience. Through the lens of Suleiman and his family, the novel explores the physical, emotional, and psychological dimensions of displacement, cultural hybridity, and the longing for a sense of belonging. The exploration of these themes within the specific political context of Libya adds depth and complexity to the portrayal of diaspora in the novel.

VIII. The Novels: ii) Hisham Matar's *Anatomy of a Disappearance* (2011)

Anatomy of a Disappearance tells the story of Nuri, a teenager who lives in exile with his family in Cairo and who soon loses his mother and whose father mysteriously disappears. This is a rite-of-passage novel in which Nuri moves to London and tries to reconcile himself with the disappearance of his father. In “Zenga Zenga and Bunga Bunga: The Novels of Hisham Matar and a Critique of Gaddafi’s Libya”, Christopher Micklethwait argues that Matar’s novels have “confessional, testimonial qualities” and “somewhat personal, even autobiographical” traits (171). In *Arab Voices in Diaspora* (2009), however, Layla Al-Maleh thinks that Matar’s works are “more about relations among family members, friends, and neighbors who share life under the gaze not of an omnipresent God but of an ominous ‘Guide’” (20).

In the Country of Men and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Matar treats the theme of diaspora using different elements such as portraying displacement, cultural hybridity, identity, political context, and longing for home and belonging. In portrayal of displacement: Both novels delve into

the experience of displacement and its impact on the characters. *In the Country of Men*, the protagonist, Suleiman, grapples with the absence of his father and the resulting fragmented family structure. The physical separation contributes to a sense of rootlessness and a longing for stability. In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the protagonist, Nuri, experiences a different form of displacement following the disappearance of his father. The sudden absence of a parental figure destabilizes Nuri's world and creates a void in his life. Both novels explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of displacement, highlighting the challenges of finding a sense of belonging in the absence of key family members.

Both novels also address the complexities of cultural hybridity and its impact on the characters' identities. In *In the Country of Men*, Suleiman's mother, Najwa, embodies cultural hybridity as an English woman living in Libya. Her integration into Libyan society and the clash between Western and Libyan cultures contribute to Suleiman's struggle to navigate his own identity. In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Nuri's mixed heritage (half-English, half-Arab) plays a significant role in his sense of identity. His dual cultural background and the influences of different languages and customs shape his understanding of self. Both novels explore the challenges and conflicts that arise from living between multiple cultures, highlighting the complexities of cultural identity in a diasporic context.

The political context in both novels influences the characters' experiences of diaspora. In *In the Country of Men*, the oppressive regime of Muammar Gaddafi creates an atmosphere of fear, secrecy, and surveillance. In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the political backdrop is less overt, but the impact of political events on the characters' lives is still significant. The protagonist's father disappears under mysterious circumstances, and the subsequent political turmoil shapes Nuri's understanding of the world and his place within it.

Both novels explore the theme of longing for home and a sense of belonging. Suleiman in *In the Country of Men* yearns for his father's return and a stable family life. He struggles with questions of identity and belonging, feeling like an outsider in both Libyan and Western contexts. Similarly, Nuri in *Anatomy of a Disappearance* yearns for a sense of home and stability following the disappearance of his father. The search for belonging and a place to call home is a central driving force for the characters in both novels, reflecting the universal human desire for rootedness and connection. Through the previously mentioned points, it is revealed how Matar uses the different elements of portraying displacement, cultural hybridity, identity, political context, and longing for home and belonging in his portrayal of the diaspora experience.

VIII. The Novels: iii) Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999)

Born in Cairo and raised in Khartoum, Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese writer who moved to Aberdeen, Scotland, in 1990. She graduated from Khartoum University in 1985 and got her MPhil degree in Statistics from the London School of Economics. A winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing for her short story *The Museum*, which was included in the collection *Coloured Lights* (2001), Aboulela is the author of many novels and her latest one is *River Spirit* (2023): *The Translator* (1999), which was listed as one of the best 100 novels of the year, *Minaret* (2005), and *Lyrics Alley* (2010), which won the Scottish Book Award. Aboulela's novels have been listed for the Orange Prize and have been translated into twelve languages. Aboulela's *The Translator* "presents a cross-stitching of contrary cultural setups. In describing the life of the young Sudanese widow Sammar, who works as an Arabic translator at a British university, the novelist presents a god-fearing Muslim undergoing culture-shock in the Western world" (Butt 168) highlighting the dual perspective that the novel presents.

In *The Translator*, Aboulela explores the theme of cultural hybridity and its impact on the protagonist, Sammar. Sammar, a Sudanese widow living in Scotland, grapples with her dual cultural identity, caught between her Sudanese roots and the Western society in which she resides. The novel delves into the complexities of negotiating multiple cultural identities and the challenges of reconciling traditional values with the influences of the diaspora experience. Language and translation play a significant role in *The Translator* as a means of bridging cultures and navigating the diasporic experience. Sammar works as a translator, and her profession becomes a metaphor for the challenges of communication and understanding between different cultures. The act of translation becomes a way to both preserve one's cultural heritage and navigate the complexities of living in a foreign land. Related to this is the novel exploration of the theme of nostalgia and longing for one's homeland. Sammar frequently experiences a deep yearning for Sudan, its culture, and her past life there. Her memories and longing for home are intertwined with a sense of loss and displacement, reflecting the emotional complexities of diaspora and the longing for a sense of rootedness and belonging.

The Translator delves into the intersection of religion and diaspora. Sammar's Islamic faith serves as a source of solace and continuity in her life, connecting her to her Sudanese heritage. The novel explores the challenges of practicing religion in a foreign land and the ways in which spirituality can provide a sense of belonging and identity amidst the diasporic experience. Aboulela also addresses the theme of gender within the context of diaspora. Sammar navigates the expectations and cultural norms associated with being a Sudanese woman in both Sudanese and Western societies. The novel explores the challenges faced by women in diaspora, the tensions between traditional gender roles and newfound independence, and the negotiation of cultural expectations within a changing societal landscape. *The Translator* raises questions about

assimilation and the loss of cultural heritage that can come with the diaspora experience. Sammar's integration into Scottish society and her interactions with individuals from different cultural backgrounds highlight the complexities of assimilation and the potential erosion of one's original cultural identity.

The Translator, set in the late 20th century, explores the diasporic experience of its protagonist, Sammar, within the socio-cultural context of Sudan and Scotland. The novel highlights the influence of these contexts on Sammar's identity, relationships, and sense of belonging. In the novel, Sudan serves as Sammar's place of origin and is deeply ingrained in her identity. Sudanese socio-cultural values and traditions heavily influence her worldview and interactions. Aboulela portrays aspects of Sudanese society such as Islamic faith, communal ties, traditional gender roles, and social expectations. These elements shape Sammar's experiences and mindset, even as she lives in Scotland. As an immigrant in Scotland, Sammar is exposed to a different socio-cultural landscape. The novel explores the impact of Scottish society on her sense of self and diasporic experience. Aboulela examines themes of cultural assimilation, language barriers, multiculturalism, and the clash of values between Sammar's Sudanese background and the Western environment. Scottish societal norms, individualism, and diverse cultural influences shape Sammar's relationships and her struggle to find belonging.

The socio-cultural contexts of Sudan and Scotland play a significant role in shaping Sammar's identity and her diasporic experience. The clash of cultural values and norms creates a tension within her, leading to a sense of displacement and a search for a sense of belonging. Sammar grapples with reconciling her Sudanese heritage and Islamic faith with the Western values she encounters, which influences her choices, perspectives, and relationships. Moreover, the socio-cultural context affects language and communication dynamics in the novel. Sammar's job as a

translator reflects the importance of language as a bridge between cultures. The novel explores the challenges of language barriers, translation, and the nuances of cultural expression. The linguistic and cultural differences between Sudanese Arabic and English contribute to Sammar's sense of otherness and the difficulties she faces in fully expressing herself in her new environment. While not explicitly explored in the novel, the socio-cultural context of Sudan is influenced by its political and historical backdrop. Sudan's history of colonialism, post-colonial struggles, and political instability may indirectly shape the experiences and perspectives of characters like Sammar. Hence, political events such as the Sudanese Civil War create a sense of displacement and longing for stability experienced in the characters, though indirectly.

VIII. The Novels: iv) Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005)

Aboulela's second novel, *Minaret*, “is attuned to emerging female Muslim voices within the migrant communities of the West” (Nash 35). In *Minaret*, Aboulela “explores the relationship between Islam, migration, and Western society. Representing the experience of a young Sudanese migrant disconnected from her traditional Muslim culture, *Minaret* is a novel framed by a dialogue between Islam and Western secularization” (Nash 143). *Minaret* delves into the theme of displacement and the challenges of cultural adjustment faced by its protagonist, Najwa. The novel explores Najwa's journey from a privileged life in Sudan to her exile in London following a political coup. It delves into the complexities of adapting to a new cultural environment, grappling with feelings of alienation, and her search for solace and faith in a foreign country. Najwa, as a Muslim woman from Sudan, navigates her religious and cultural identity in the diasporic context of London. The novel examines her struggle to reconcile her Sudanese heritage, Islamic faith, and Western influences in shaping her sense of self. It delves into the tensions between different aspects

of identity and the quest for a cohesive and authentic sense of belonging. Religion, particularly Islam, is a significant theme in *Minaret*. The novel explores the role of Islam in Najwa's life as a source of solace, guidance, and identity. Aboulela delves into the ways in which faith and spirituality can provide a sense of continuity and stability in the face of displacement. The exploration of religious beliefs and practices within the diasporic experience reflects the complex interplay between religious and cultural identities.

Nostalgia and loss are prominent themes in *Minaret* in which Najwa experiences a deep longing for her home country, Sudan, and her past life there. The novel reflects on the emotional complexities of diaspora, the yearning for a sense of rootedness, and the impact of loss and displacement on personal and collective memory. The exploration of nostalgia underscores the challenges of reconciling the past with the realities of the present in the diasporic experience. Aboulela also tackles gender and power dynamics within the diasporic context in *Minaret* as the novel examines the challenges faced by Najwa as a Muslim woman navigating both her cultural background and the expectations of Western society. It delves into the complexities of gender roles, patriarchal structures, and the ways in which Najwa negotiates her agency and autonomy within these dynamics. The exploration of love and relationships is another significant aspect of *Minaret*. The novel portrays Najwa's romantic relationship with Tamer, a wealthy and politically influential man. It examines the complexities of love across cultural and social divides, the power dynamics within the relationship, and the challenges posed by societal expectations and personal desires.

Both *Minaret* and *The Translator* delve into the theme of displacement and its impact on the protagonists' sense of identity. In *Minaret*, Najwa experiences a forced exile from Sudan to London, while in *The Translator*, Sammar moves from Sudan to Scotland. The novels explore the

challenges of adapting to new cultural environments, grappling with feelings of alienation, and the search for a sense of belonging in foreign lands. Aboulela explores the concept of cultural hybridity in both novels. The protagonists, Najwa and Sammar, navigate their Sudanese heritage and Islamic faith alongside the influences of Western societies. The novels examine the challenges of negotiating multiple identities and the tensions that arise from the clash of cultural values and expectations. The characters' experiences reflect the complexities and nuances of living between different cultural worlds. Religion, particularly Islam, is a recurring theme in both *Minaret* and *The Translator*. The novels explore the role of Islam in the protagonists' lives as it provides solace, guidance, and identity. The exploration of how religious beliefs and practices create a sense of anchoring reflects the complex interplay between religious and cultural identities. Language and translation are significant elements in both novels. In *The Translator*, Sammar works as a translator, highlighting the challenges of communication and understanding between cultures. In *Minaret*, Najwa's bilingualism and her ability to navigate different linguistic and cultural contexts play a role in her experiences. The novels explore the power and limitations of language in expressing one's true self and the difficulties of finding linguistic and cultural equivalence in translation.

Both *Minaret* and *The Translator* delve into the theme of nostalgia and longing for one's homeland. The protagonists frequently experience a deep yearning for their home countries, Sudan, and the memories associated with them. The novels explore the emotional complexities of diaspora, the yearning for a sense of rootedness, and the search for belonging in the midst of displacement and longing for home. Aboulela also addresses gender and power dynamics within the diasporic context in both novels. The protagonists, Najwa and Sammar, navigate societal expectations and patriarchal structures in their respective environments. The novels examine the

complexities of gender roles, the challenges posed by cultural and social norms, and the ways in which the characters negotiate their agency and autonomy within these dynamics.

IX. Comparative Analysis of Diaspora in the Novels

All four novels explore the experiences of characters who have been uprooted from their home countries and are living in a foreign land, resulting in a sense of displacement and alienation. The protagonists in these novels grapple with the complexities of straddling multiple cultural identities, including their heritage and the influences of the Western societies they find themselves in. Each novel delves into the characters' yearning for their home countries and their longing for a sense of rootedness and belonging. However, the novels reflect different cultural backgrounds and contexts. Aboulela's novels focus on the experiences of Sudanese characters, while Matar's novels explore the Libyan diaspora. Each novel is situated within a specific historical and political context, shaping the characters' experiences of diaspora. *Minaret* and *The Translator* touch upon political events in Sudan, while *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* delve into the political landscape of Libya.

Aboulela's novels often emphasize the interplay between cultural, religious, and personal identities. She explores the role of faith, particularly Islam, in shaping her characters' experiences of diaspora. Aboulela's writing often highlights the nuances of cultural hybridity, the challenges of communication and understanding between cultures, and the complexities of gender roles within the diasporic context. On the other hand, Matar's novels delve into the psychological and emotional dimensions of the diasporic experience. He often explores themes of loss, memory, and the impact of political upheaval on individuals and families. Matar's writing delves into the complexities of

personal and collective memory, the search for truth and justice, and the impact of political oppression on the characters' sense of identity and belonging.

Aboulela often employs introspective storytelling techniques. Her novels frequently utilize first-person narration, allowing readers to delve into the characters' internal thoughts and emotions. Through vivid descriptions and lyrical prose, Aboulela captures the sensory experiences of the characters and their reflections on their diasporic journeys. Matar's novels often employ a reflective and introspective narrative style. He combines elements of personal memoir and fiction, blurring the boundaries between reality and imagination. Matar's writing is characterized by its poetic and evocative language, captivating characters and emotional landscapes.

The four novels reflect the cultural contexts of Sudan and Libya, respectively. They explore the clash and fusion of cultural traditions, the impact of colonial legacies, and the tensions between tradition and modernity within these societies. The characters' diasporic experiences are influenced by these cultural contexts, shaping their interactions, expectations, and sense of self. These novels are situated within specific historical periods since Aboulela's novels touch upon political events in Sudan, such as the coup in *Minaret* whereas Matar's novels explore the impact of political oppression and authoritarian regimes in Libya, particularly during the Gaddafi era. The historical contexts of the novels shape the characters' experiences of diaspora, reflecting the socio-political realities of their respective countries. The lingering impact of colonial legacies, and the tensions between tradition and modernity within their respective societies. They demonstrate the struggles faced by individuals as they navigate these complexities, often leading to personal identity crises and a reevaluation of their cultural heritage in the face of changing social dynamics.

Chapter One

Theoretical Framework and Research Context

In exploring the intricate dynamics of diaspora within the narratives of Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, alongside Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*, this chapter establishes a comprehensive theoretical framework that underpins the analysis of these texts. By situating diaspora as not merely a physical displacement but a multifaceted experience shaped by cultural, emotional, and political dimensions, this chapter aims to trace the rise and development of Anglophone Arab literature and illuminate how the two authors articulate the complexities of identity, belonging, and memory. Drawing on contemporary scholarship in diaspora studies, postcolonial theory, and narrative analysis, the chapter contextualizes the selected works within broader discourses of migration and transnationalism. This approach not only facilitates a deeper understanding of the characters' lived realities but also highlights the ways in which Matar and Aboulela navigate the tensions between home and exile, ultimately contributing to a richer conceptualization of diaspora literature.

Although studies on Anglophone Arab writers have gained more precedence after 9/11 and the Arab spring as explained by El-Said, Hassan and Salaita in the introduction, there is still more research to be done to explore this area especially with reference to issues of diaspora, the concept of home, identity and language.

The study of diaspora has garnered significant interest across various academic disciplines. Kenny notes that the Greek word 'diaspora' originates from the verb 'diaspeirein,' a compound of 'dia' (over or through) and 'speirein' (to scatter or sow)" (2). Similarly, in their work "Diaspora and Hybridity" Kalra, Kaur, and Hutnyk refer to the Greek origins of the term diaspora, stating that "in a conventional mode ... diaspora is related to the Greek gardening tradition (as is hybridity),

referring simply to the scattering of seeds and implying some description of dispersal" (9). This etymological origin suggests a sense of shifting locations and instability inherent in the concept of diaspora. In his book *Global Diaspora: An Introduction*, Robin Cohen also comments on the collective meaning of diaspora, highlighting its associations with dispersal and displacement. These interdisciplinary perspectives underscore the complex and multifaceted nature of the diaspora experience, which encompasses notions of cultural hybridity, spatial dislocation, and the negotiation of shifting identities. Cohen states:

The word 'diaspora' is derived from the Greek verb *speiro* (to sow) and the preposition *dia* (over) ... Diaspora signified a collective trauma, a banishment, where one dreamed of home but lived in exile. Other people abroad who have also maintained strong collective identities have, in recent years, defined themselves as diasporic, though they were neither active agents of colonization nor passive victims of persecution (ix).

The study of diaspora offers valuable insights into the lived realities of communities navigating the challenges and opportunities of transnational movements and the creation of new belonging across borders. Kenny observes that "in all its various uses, diaspora has something to do with scattering and dispersal" (2). He also adds that the term diaspora has historically been applied in a very specific sense, "referring principally to the dispersal and exile of the Jewish people" (1). However, over the course of the 20th century, the meaning of the term has gradually expanded to encompass the involuntary dispersal of other populations, such as Armenians and people of African descent.

In more recent decades, the theoretical framework of diaspora has further broadened to subsume a wide range of immigration experiences and conceptualizations of home and homeland.

This evolution reflects the growing recognition of the diverse ways in which individuals and communities grapple with the challenges and complexities of physical, cultural, and emotional displacement from their places of origin. The expanded application of the term diaspora enables a more nuanced understanding of the myriad forms of transnational movement, identity negotiation, and the reconstruction of belonging that characterize the lived experiences of various diasporic populations across the globe.

Yossi Shain provides a useful elaboration on the concept of diaspora, remarking that US diasporas encompass "all hyphenated or ethnic Americans who attempt to influence American policy toward their homeland" (83). These diasporic communities are "transnational collectivities whose members maintain some real or symbolic affinity (ethnocultural, religious, racial, or national) with their countries of origin" (83). This understanding of diaspora aligns with the perspective proposed by Brubaker (2005), who argued that the core elements of diaspora consist of "dispersion," "homeland," and "boundary maintenance" (5). In this paradigm, the issue of displacement is central to the conceptualization of diaspora, which operates within a framework that acknowledges the diverse ways in which individuals and communities maintain connections to their places of origin, even as they navigate the complexities of physical, cultural, and emotional dislocation. This expansive and inclusive view of diaspora allows for the recognition of the multifaceted experiences of various ethnic, cultural, and national groups within the United States, Britain and other host societies. By embracing this broader understanding, scholars and policymakers can gain deeper insights into the transnational dynamics, political engagements, and identity-shaping processes that characterize the lived experiences of diverse diasporic populations. In this sense, Kenny states:

Using diaspora to understand migration, then, does not mean that one must

remain trapped within the theological confines of the original Jewish model ... Throughout history, migrants of many different kinds have experienced their migration as coercive, made connections with their kinsmen abroad, and dreamed of returning to a homeland. Scholars seeking to explain the experience of these migrants can find in diaspora an analytical framework of broad historical and cultural range (6).

In its inaugural issue, the academic journal *Diaspora* "equated diaspora with population dispersal in general and urged that a concept previously defined to the Jewish, Greek, Armenian, and African cases be extended to cover a much wider 'semantic domain' that included such terms as immigrant, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, and ethnic community" (Kenny 10). This suggests that the concept of diaspora continues to evolve, encompassing an increasingly diverse range of experiences and identities. The impact of diaspora has been considered crucial to the process of identity formation and the shaping of the personalities of individuals from ethnic minority or immigrant backgrounds. For instance, in his work "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", Stuart Hall argued for the recognition of a cultural and ethnic structure of common connections and articulations. He emphasized that in the process of identity formation, there is an underlying sense of shared culture, "a sort of collective 'one true self,'" which serves as a frame of reference that brings a semblance of order to "the shifting divisions and vicissitudes" (223) that define the lived experiences of diasporic communities. Similarly, Ifeona Fulani elaborated on "the crucial function of articulation in establishing the linkages that bind the scattered parts of the diaspora" (6). Fulani pointed out that diaspora is a dynamic process of creolized articulations, where diasporic identities are continuously reshaped by the movement of people through migration and travel, and are constantly re-imagined through political struggle, exchange of ideas, and cultural

production. Diasporic identities may exemplify the condition of being caught between two or more seemingly incompatible cultures. Individuals may either feel an urgent need to assert a hybrid personality or feel compelled to blend into the perceived mainstream. The dilemma faced by the foreigner, the immigrant, the exiled, and the member of an ethnic minority community is the battle between authenticity and foreignness in the context of diaspora.

This understanding of diaspora highlights the fluid, negotiated, and often contested nature of identity formation among individuals and communities who have been displaced or have ancestral connections to multiple cultural and national contexts. By grappling with these complexities, scholars and policymakers can develop a more nuanced appreciation for the diverse ways in which diasporic individuals and communities navigate the challenges and opportunities of living in-between cultures. This expansive understanding of diaspora highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of identity, as individuals and communities navigate the complexities of displacement, belonging, and the maintenance of cultural, religious, or national ties to their places of origin. By embracing this multifaceted conceptualization of diaspora, scholars and policymakers can gain a more nuanced appreciation for the diverse ways in which individuals and communities construct and negotiate their identities within the context of migration and transnational movement.

Academic scholarship often examines the close relationship between diaspora and identity, particularly how the experience of diaspora shapes the formation of individual and collective identities. Diaspora is also viewed as a theoretical framework that explores the "linkages" between the cultures of the host and the originating countries. David Scott argued that diaspora is a fragmented sequence of "embodied disputes," characterized by "difference and contingent connections" (123). According to Yogita Goyal, the linkage of diaspora to identity reveals two

dominant narratives that impact the process of identity formation: "the return to roots narrative, based on a quest for identity, and the journey of the native from the periphery to the centers" (3). Moreover, Cohen noted a semantic shift in the conceptualization of diaspora. This shift could be pinpointed as transcending diaspora as a romantic mystical notion to a more positive construction of successful homes. In their study, Moghissi et al state that the defining aspects of diaspora "as this term, once a rather romantic, mystical notion ... is increasingly used by academics and sometimes even by the media to refer simply to the mass migration of individuals from their homelands" (3). As a result, "the voluntary or involuntary character of the departure seems to have lost its significance," and the question of who belongs to or is "in diaspora" has become a contested terrain (3). The concept of diaspora can, therefore, be widely applied as long as the designated members share "common features or contextual applicability" (Moghissi et al 3). This common feature can be the successful construction of a new homeland. However, if the new homeland is not successfully internalized and assimilated, a diasporic condition can then turn into a breeding ground for extreme views and radical behavior. This understanding highlights the fluidity, complexity, and contestation surrounding the notion of diaspora and its relationship to identity formation. It underscores the need for nuanced and contextual analyses of the diverse experiences and narratives that shape the lives of individuals and communities in diaspora.

Diaspora plays a significant role in Anglophone Arab literature, as it explores the experiences of Arab individuals and communities living outside their home countries. It is a theme that reflects the complexities of identity, displacement, and cultural negotiation. Anglophone Arab literature contributes to the representation and visibility of Arab diasporic experiences. It provides a platform for voices that are often marginalized or underrepresented in mainstream narratives, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the diverse experiences within the Arab diaspora.

Arab Anglophone fiction has garnered significant attention due to its portrayal of a deepened nostalgia and a strong desire to recover and define a sense of "home." Mara Naaman states that many of the stories published in the special collection *Post Gibran: An Anthology of New Arab American Writing* exhibit a tendency to reconnect with a past rooted in the "old country." However, this need to reconnect often contradicts the feeling of ultimately not belonging to that "home," whether or not one actually reaches or reclaims it. In the novel excerpt *Back in the Black* by Joe Geha, the Lebanese-American character Sam revisits his homeland, but realizes, "I didn't belong here, and everyone seemed to know it" (320). Although he has made the journey "home," it is no longer his home. He further adds, "Knowing the language wasn't enough in a foreign country. Understanding one another, I decided, was a stretch, a gulf to be leaped" (320). Sam recognizes that some part of his cultural consciousness has been damaged by the distance and time that have separated him from Lebanon. Other characters in Arab Anglophone works of fiction are depicted during the process of returning to a place they believe could be their home. In Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*, Jem Ramoud, a Jordanian-American living in New York with her sister and their widowed father, yearns to understand the sense of incompleteness she feels, sensing that she is a cultural misfit in both American society and the Arab social circles in the New York suburb where she lives. The idea of "returning home" is, for her, a self-deception. A visit by a distant cousin ultimately helps her understand that she does not have to make the physical journey in order to understand her identity, and that perhaps her identity can be comfortably reconciled somewhere between Jordan and New York.

Other characters in Arab Anglophone literature also discover a sense of "home" in the space between their different cultural identities, even if that in-between space feels unsettling and awkward. In her novel *The Map of Love*, Ahdaf Soueif creates two parallel worlds - the past and

present, Egypt and the United States - and focuses on the movement of women between those worlds. The novel's most significant achievement is Soueif's success in bridging the lives of women in the East and West, highlighting their common, seemingly timeless struggles for liberation and self-identification. Soueif's earlier short story collections, *Sandpiper* and *Aisha*, are thematically similar, offering glimpses of life in the East and West, and the various ways in which women constantly strive to realize their ambitions to fit into both worlds, and often to fit in between them. Her first novel, *In the Eye of the Sun*, was also a major success in which the heroine Asya is not entirely comfortable in her native Cairo due to her family's restrictions on her social freedoms, especially regarding dating. However, when she lives in England during the completion of her PhD, she becomes restricted in other ways. Her husband Saif, also an Egyptian, prides himself on being liberal and "modernized" in his thinking, but he is actually quite traditional, as Asya discovers. Their marriage becomes centered around his needs, and he dictates its direction, often neglecting her opinions and ignoring her attempts to express her own views on both major and minor issues. Deeply hurt by Saif's continuing indifference, Asya becomes involved in an adulterous affair. Yet, her lover Gerald, a budding orientalist with misguided preconceptions about Arab women, tries to control what she thinks and how she acts. "I hate people who go around trying to change people. The hypocrisy of it. 'I know you better than you know yourself'—shit—what you mean is that the way you think I should be is better for you than the way I am" (723). The postcolonial themes of sexual and political power in Soueif's work are made clear by her portrayals of both the East (Saif) and West (Gerald) as "imperialist" and patriarchal, resonate deeply with the exploration of diaspora in Matar and Aboulela's narratives. By examining these power dynamics, my work aims to uncover how the complexities of identity and belonging are

influenced by both cultural heritage and the legacies of colonialism, ultimately enriching our understanding of the diasporic experience.

Arab diasporic writers are working to challenge and redefine the prevalent image of the Arab people as a victimized "other". Through their writing, they are carving out a new chapter in the history of Arab literature in English. By using writing as a form of resistance and self-representation, these authors negotiate their complex, hyphenated identities and articulate new, multifaceted images of the Arab-hybrid self. These writers actively engage in a responsive dialogue that opens up new horizons and establishes novel spaces of defiance and empowerment. They also contest the Orientalist stereotypes that confine the Arab woman within the narrow limits of female oppression. Their work marks a significant shift in the portrayal and self-expression of Arab women in literature. It explores how Arab identity is constructed and shaped by the immigrant experience and the impact of place. Additionally, it examines the values of Arabness and Islam and their meaning to these immigrant writers. A key point emphasized is the representational burden carried by Arab migrant writers. As minority authors, they grapple with the need to represent their cultural and religious values, as well as address issues related to their homeland and gender. In navigating these multifaceted identities, the writers display an acute awareness of their hybrid and hyphenated identities.

Scholars have extensively explored the notions of identity and migration within Arab diasporic literature. In his book entitled, *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*, Wail Hassan examines how Arab émigré writers, from Ameen Rihani and Gibran Khalil Gibran to Edward Said and Leila Ahmed, challenge and counteract the problem of Orientalism. It also explores how these Arab writers have portrayed their experiences as migrants, positioning themselves as interpreters, negotiators, and

mediators between cultures, ultimately shaping new hybrid identities. Additionally, Leila El-Maleh's anthology entitled *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* contains essays that analyze the works of Arab-American, Arab-British, and Arab-Australian writers. Furthermore, Youssef Awad's essay, "Cartographies of Identities: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab-British and Arab-American Women Writers," compares the literary works of contemporary Arab-British and Arab-American women novelists. The aim is to delineate the emerging themes and poetics within the relatively nascent field of Arab-British literature. These scholarly works highlight the extensive research and critical examination of the complex issues of identity, migration, and cultural translation within the realm of Arab diasporic literature, particularly as expressed through the narratives and perspectives of Arab-Western writers. Furthermore, the article highlights how these writers engage in the deterritorialization of the English language, using it as a means to traverse and engage with diverse languages and cultures. This strategic use of language allows them to achieve specific creative and expressive effects, reflecting the nuances of their transnational experiences and identities. This chapter delves into the significance and complexities faced by Arab writers in the Western diaspora. This chapter delves into the unique challenges and complexities faced by Arab diasporic writers as they navigate their cultural, religious, and gender-based identities while asserting their presence and perspectives within the Western literary landscape. By analyzing the works of authors like Hisham Matar and Leila Aboulela, this chapter examines the intricate interplay between personal and collective identities, illustrating how these writers confront stereotypes and cultural misconceptions. Through a close reading of their narratives, the chapter highlights the strategies employed to reclaim agency and articulate diverse experiences, ultimately contributing to a broader understanding of the Arab diasporic voice in contemporary literature.

According to Grossberg's perspective, the formation of cultural identity is shaped by a combination of intertwining dimensions, including “difference, fragmentation, hybridity, border-crossing, and diaspora” (89). The concept of difference represents a negative relationship between the marginalized "other" and the dominant subject. The marginalized group aims to subvert the language and authority of the dominant group, becoming an integral part of constituting the dominant identity. The "other" must destabilize the powerful language to establish a more stable identity of their own. Fragmentation emphasizes the multiplicity of identities, where contradictory aspects of one's selfhood can coexist as defining features. Hybridity, on the other hand, defines the "third space" (Bhabha 1) - the in-between frontier where the migrant individual resides, without a clearly defined place. This productive "third space" (Bhabha 1) is more crucial to the issue of hybridity than the original sources from which it emerged. It suggests a site of inclusion that generates new signs of identity and innovative collaborations and contestations. Border-crossing is another term linked to hybridity, where people are compelled to live between two worlds. This echoes W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of "double consciousness" - the complex process of reconciling the divided self between the host country and the country of origin. The plurality of cultural elements generates both cultural similarities and differences. This suggests a model of doubleness, where one's identity is the result of fusing the two halves of the divided self - one connected to the host country, the other maintaining attachment to the country of origin. In this sense, T.S. Eliot suggests: “The culture which develops on the new soil must therefore be bafflingly alike and different from the parent culture: it will be complicated sometimes by whatever relations are established with some native race and further by immigration from other than the original source. In this way, peculiar types of culture-sympathy and culture-clash appear” (52).

Literature written in English by authors with an Arabic background is distinctly different from both Arabic literature and translations of Arabic literature into English. According to Geoffrey Nash, *The Anglo-Arab encounter: Fiction and autobiography by Arab writers in English*. Peter Lang, 2007., Anglophone Arabic literature “is qualitatively different from Arabic literature and Arabic literature translated into English” (11). This trend in Anglophone Arabic literature has influenced contemporary international, particularly postcolonial, literatures, as it examines the impact of colonialism and imperialism on non-Western literary traditions. The transnational nature of this body of work highlights the effects of globalization. Narratives by Arab writers in this category have often been classified under various labels, such as postcolonial, non-native, hybrid, or Anglophone literature. It was previously assumed that the body of English-language writings by Arab authors, mainly from the Middle East, was relatively limited compared to the French-language literature produced by North African or Lebanese writers. However, this view has been challenged by a growing number of English-language works by Arab writers, particularly women, such as Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Soraya Antonius, and Fadia Faqir. In recent years, there has been a significant increase in academic interest in these Anglophone Arabic literary works. More university courses are now devoted to studying them, and numerous books and conferences have focused on the unique characteristics of this literary discourse. The challenge with these Anglophone Arabic narratives has often been determining the appropriate literary framework to categorize them, given their hybrid nature blending English and Arabic literary elements. It is believed that a shared commitment to their Arab identity and cultural heritage is a common thread among most, if not all, Arab Anglophone authors, whether they are Arab Americans, Arab Britons, or Anglicized Arab intellectuals.

The novels by this group of Arab Anglophone writers contribute to the emergence of an independent literature that is neither purely Arabic nor purely English, but rather a linguistically and culturally hybrid form, with multidimensional discourses and literary heterogeneity. *The Translator* represents Rae and Sammar as products of cross-cultural encounters, as described by scholar Duncan McLean. The novel is a subtle investigation into the themes of exile, home, doubt, faith, loss, and love. The story is at times sad and troubled, but ultimately moves towards a poignant and affirmative conclusion. Aboulela's writing is beautifully observed, with a restrained lyrical voice, marking her as a writer of rare and original talent.

The issue of audience is a specific challenge for this group of Arab Anglophone writers. By excluding the relatively small bilingual readership who can read in both English and Arabic, these writers must assume a predominantly Anglo-American or European cultural perspective in their audience. This may lead to more thematic variation in their work, as they seek to present their Arabic culture to a Western-centric readership. The literary texts produced by authors of Arabic descent in foreign languages, particularly English and French, have recently become significant for scholars and academics. These scholars have identified an important new hybrid literary phenomenon in the writings of Arab Anglophone authors. These texts also present new dimensions in the representation of the Arab individuals, both in the West and within the Arab world. Such works that fuse a foreign linguistic background with an Arabic cultural context have contributed to reshaping transnational links, moving away from purely political, geopolitical, and socioeconomic arenas. For Anglophone writers of Arabic descent, the choice to write in a foreign language like English may be a deliberate one that satisfies their literary needs, or a natural choice if English is their mother tongue. In the former case, Ferial Ghazoul states: "many Arab Anglophone writers have also written literature, essays, or academic studies in Arabic, indicating

that writing in English is not a repudiation, but a choice offered by the individual writer's background and sensibility, and reinforced by her study of the language and her familiarity with English literature" (F. Ghazoul 302). For example, Ahdaf Soueif has produced both fiction and non-fiction works in both English and Arabic, such as her first English short story collection, *Aisha* (1983), and her political commentaries and articles in the Arabic newspaper Al-Ahram.

Anglophone Arab literature is conceptualized as a normal production of three waves of immigrations. The writings of Anglophone Arab authors after 9/11 often present a new perspective that is closely linked to issues of Islamophobia, radicalization, social justice, and anti-Arab racism. The literary corpus that emerged in the wake of 9/11 reflects a diverse response to the changing Arab and Muslim realities, which have been tarnished by radical views and extreme politics. Al-Maleh has noted the growing interest among readers and universities in incorporating Anglophone Arab writers into their curricula, remarking that the Arab literary output "was filtered through terror" (2). In this context, one can ponder whether post-9/11 Anglophone Arab writers are engaging in a form of "writing back to the Empire," with America, rather than Britain, as the perceived center of power. Additionally, it raises the question of whether the primary drive for Arabs in the diaspora to write is no longer the sense of estrangement resulting from exile, but rather the desire to exist in a welcoming country that does not perceive them as unwanted outsiders. It is worth considering whether Anglophone Arab writers have outgrown the challenges of exile, as they now face the more daunting task of constructing their Arab identity in the face of an already established discourse. Do they feel compelled to define or defend their identity? These are the pressing concerns that characterize the contemporary Anglophone Arab literary landscape, rendering their writing both culturally and politically captivating.

In his essay "Postcolonial Theory and Modern Arabic Literature", Hassan noted an interesting irony in the contextual framing of Anglophone Arab literature within the realm of postcolonial studies. He asserts that though ironically postcolonial studies focused on colonialism in the Arab world and its aftermath, prominent postcolonial critics like Said, Memmi and Fanon have rarely taken "Arabic literary and cultural production into account" (45). Hassan observed that while Arabic literary production has strong connections to postcolonial theory and diasporic literature, there has been a notable scarcity of scholarly interest in this field. He questioned why Anglophone Arab writers remain underrepresented in academia and are not widely recognized as part of the American cultural and social fabric. One potential explanation he suggests is that Anglophone Arab literature is still viewed as an ongoing or "work in progress" project. This viewpoint implies that the literary works of Arab authors writing in English have not yet been fully integrated or legitimized within the established academic and cultural discourses. The persistence of this perception may contribute to the relative lack of scholarly attention and mainstream recognition afforded to Anglophone Arab literature, despite its clear thematic and theoretical links to postcolonial studies and diasporic writing.

Scholars have grappled with the question of how to conceptualize and categorize Arab American literature as a distinct academic field. In *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader's Guide*, Steven Salaita acknowledged the usefulness of this classification "to organize college classes, professional organizations, and bookshelves" (3), even though he expressed skepticism about its legitimacy and meaningfulness. Similarly, Gregory Orfalea shared the same interest asking: "But how do we define an Arab American novel?" (117). Hassan and Knopf-Newman recognized the potential risks in this categorization project, particularly in terms of challenging misrepresentations of Arabs: "What are the implications of labeling a body of literature Arab

American? Can cultural criticism of Arab American literature challenge the political determination of Arab American subjectivity?" (5–6). Salaita shared this unease, as he did not want to fall into the reductive trap of categorizing literature based on "cultural authenticity" (*Modern*, 4). He proposed certain criteria to determine what can be considered Arab American literature, which could also be extended to Anglophone Arab literature more broadly. He explained that Anglophone Arab writers are those of Arab origin who engage in writing about Arab culture or themes related to Arabs, whether in their homeland or in exile. Ethnic origin was thus the primary identifying factor. Orfalea observed that even though a writer may be Arab American, their work may not necessarily qualify as Arab American literature if it does not reflect Arab themes or cultural elements. Given the diverse nature and thematic range of Anglophone Arab literary works, the question of categorization can be, as Salaita suggested, more descriptive than prescriptive in terms of origin and cultural or political representation (*Modern*, 7). The themes explored in Anglophone Arab literature should be pertinent to recurring Arab issues and conflicts. Both Salaita and Orfalea seemed to agree that an Anglophone Arab literary work is one written in English by an author of Arab descent with an Anglophone Arab protagonist. This approach provides a working definition that limits the cultural and linguistic scope, rendering the category more exclusive.

While Salaita's statement that Arab American literature is "an emerging subject (even now, we cannot properly call it a field)" (*Modern*, 1) may have seemed disparaging, it held some truth. He explained that writing by Americans of Arab origin is a predominantly 20th-century phenomenon, with significant growth in the past three decades (*Modern*, 3). However, the inclusion of British, Australian, and Canadian Arab writers has challenged the notion of Anglophone Arab literature as a niche or limited field. Salaita himself acknowledged "noticing an

upsurge" that rendered his own work outdated by the time of publication in 2007, as he "counted around seven or eight Arab American novels published" (*Modern*, 2) by then.

Similarly, in *The Anglo-Arab Encounter*, Geoffrey Nash observed a sudden surge "from the trickle of Anglophone novels by Arabs mentioned by Said in 1992, to the stream of authors and texts" (14). Nash identified three key reasons for the rise of Anglophone Arab writing. First, the "frame of cultural translation" introduced by scholars like Andre Lefevere and Susan Bassnett, which "instituted a systems theory" that prioritized the "profit motive" over the "ideological component"(14), creating opportunities for non-canonical literature to gain prominence. Second, the 1988 Nobel Prize awarded to Egyptian writer Naguib Mahfouz, which "pointed to some interesting questions regarding cultural hegemony and future directions for the Arabic novel" (207). Third, the "traumatic politico-cultural history of the Arab world in the twentieth century" (16) has significantly shaped the emergence of Anglophone Arab literature, particularly in the United States.

The history of Anglophone Arab literature is closely intertwined with the experiences of Arab immigrants in the English-speaking world, particularly the United States. As Tanyss Ludescher observed, "Arab American literature mirrors the patterns of Arab American history, which scholars have traditionally divided into three phases, based on the three distinct waves of Arab immigrants who came to the US"(93). This perspective can be expanded to include Anglophone Arab writing from other countries, such as Britain. From this historical lens, the growth of Anglophone Arab literature in both the US and the UK can be chronicled. The development of this literary tradition is a reflection of the broader social, political, and cultural dynamics that have shaped the experiences of Arab communities in the English-speaking world over time.

The patterns of Arab immigration and settlement in the UK and the US have occurred under different social, political, and economic conditions, and these differences have had a significant impact on the literature produced by Arab women writers living in those societies. Therefore, to fully understand the thematic variations in the texts created by these writers, it is essential to provide a historical and contextual backdrop to the lives and experiences of Arab women on both sides of the Atlantic. Over the past century or more, people from over a dozen Arab countries have settled in Britain for various reasons, such as colonial ties, academic pursuits, business, refuge, or asylum. While the connections between the Arab world and the UK stretch back centuries, there is relatively little knowledge about Britain's contemporary Arab community. In fact, Arab migration to Britain should be considered a relatively recent phenomenon, and even though it encompasses migrations from up to twenty-two states, it cannot be compared to the volume of migration from the Old or New Commonwealth states to Britain. In this context, El-Solh acknowledges that information about Arabs in Britain is "hampered by the lack of accurate quantitative data" (238).

The first wave of Arab immigration to the United States, occurring between 1880 and 1924, was predominantly comprised of Christian immigrants hailing from Lebanon and Syria. Ludescher states that these individuals were "Generally hardworking and law abiding, the immigrants enthusiastically embraced American values" (93). In "Gibran and Orientalism", Hassan assures that within this context, the United States became the setting for the first Arab American poetry collection, *Myrtle and Myrrh* (1905), the inaugural Anglophone Arab play, *Wajdah* (1909), and the pioneering Anglophone Arab novel, *The Book of Khalid* (1911). These seminal works were all penned by Ameen Rihani (1876–1949), who is often associated with Mikhail Naimy (1889–1988) under the moniker "Gibran and his Contemporaries" (66). These early 20th-century authors, who

would later inspire other writers of Arab descent, tended to adopt a writing style that was largely mystical and imbued with an oriental sensibility. As Al-Maleh notes, "In their quest for fame and a place in mainstream American literary circles, the question asked is whether they 'orientalized' themselves to increase sales and acceptance by casting themselves in the image of charismatic genius" (3). These early Anglophone Arab writers are also referred to as the Mahjar writers, with the term Mahjar meaning "place of immigration" in Arabic (Ludescher 95). They are often viewed as trailblazers and pioneers who successfully laid the groundwork for later examples of Anglophone Arab literature. The most well-known literary work from this period is Kahlil Gibran's *The Prophet* (1923), which has been translated into over 40 languages. While these early writers were largely innovative, they are primarily recognized for their historical significance as pathfinders, rather than being celebrated for their creative literary output.

The second wave of Arab immigration to the United States, which included both Christian and Muslim immigrants, began arriving after World War II. Ludescher states:

Unlike the first wave, which was predominantly Christian, the new wave contained a significant number of Muslims. This second wave of immigrants consisted of educated, skilled professionals, who were more likely to be familiar with the nationalist ideologies that permeated the Arab world.

Unlike the Syrian Christians, they staunchly identified themselves as Arabs.

The key distinction between the first and second waves of Arab immigrants was not merely religious or ideological in nature. Rather, Anglophone Arab writing experienced a notable shift in the latter half of the 20th century. Al-Maleh assures: "Whereas Arab immigrants to the USA in the 1930s and 1940s were busy settling down and assimilating, even vanishing, into mainstream American society, Anglophone Arab writing was beginning to shift its focus elsewhere"(6). Some

of the most prominent authors of this second era of Anglophone Arab writings include Rima Alamuddin, author of *Spring to Summer* (1963), and Isaak Diqs, author of *A Bedouin Boyhood* (1967). The Arab-descended writers of the 1950s through the 1970s demonstrated significant differences from their predecessors in both the themes they explored and the geographical shifts they reflected. As Al-Maleh observes: "The writing of these authors differed greatly from that of their predecessors (Rihani, Gibran, Naimy), in that they seemed to grow more out of the European tradition than the American literary scene of the time"(7).

In this regard, it was the experience of exile or the diasporic condition, representing being on the fringes of cultural centrality, that replaced the notion of the physical homeland. Thematically, these works were largely preoccupied with nostalgia, not yet entertaining the possibility of existing outside the homeland. The writings of Arab immigrants thus far have tended to convey a sense of longing for the homeland, a notion that was philosophically entrenched by the Mahjar group and largely romanticized by the second generation of Arab immigrants. However, for the third wave of Arab immigrants, writing about the experience of living in diaspora becomes more overtly political in nature.

The third wave of Arab immigration to the United States was sparked by a cluster of political upheavals, according to Ludescher: "In 1965, new liberalized immigration laws abolished the long-standing quota system. As a result, large numbers of West Bank Palestinians and Lebanese Muslims from Southern Lebanon fled to America after the 1967 war with Israel" (94). Additionally, the Lebanese Civil War of the 1970s and 1980s further increased the number of immigrants heading westward. This third wave of Arab immigrants was much more politically oriented than the previous waves. "It was driven by a spirit of defending Arab identity against negative representations, upholding the Palestinian cause, and fighting for recognition as an

integral part of American society” (Ludescher 94–95). This generation of immigrants sought an ethnic identity that they could readily celebrate, rather than constantly defend, which was a desire the previous generation had not fully captured.

The 1980s saw the publication of two anthologies of Arab American literature, and the following decade witnessed the emergence of various individual authors, such as Elmaz Abinader, Mohja Kahf, Khaled Mattawa, and Suheir Hammad. These writers explored themes of identity, belonging, and the Arab American experience through poetry, fiction, and political activism. The 1990s also produced a group of controversial Arab American novelists, including Elmaz Abinader, Leila Ahmed, and Diana Abu-Jaber. Abu-Jaber's "semi-autobiographical 1993 novel *Arabian Jazz*" was particularly noteworthy for breaking "an unwritten rule in the Arab American community that members should not criticize Arabs and Arab Americans in public" (Ludescher 104). In contrast to the first wave's emphasis on westernizing the Arab experience, the third wave took a more assertive stance, delving into the questions of what it means to be an Arab and the challenges of integrating into American society.

In this sense, Arab American identity is a blend of different social, political, and cultural aspects experienced by immigrants and asylum seekers. This diasporic phase was marked by nostalgia and strong national pride. Ludescher states: “By World War II, the Arab American community was virtually indistinguishable from the larger American community, a process that was facilitated by their shared Christian faith” (100). However, in the 20th century, Arab immigrants often emphasized their Christian identity and connection to the "Holy Land" to assert their identity. In “Arab Americans and the Meaning of Race,” Majaj explained that “they stressed their Christian identity [and] their geographical origin in the ‘Holy Land’” (328). This trend shifted in the late 20th century, as some novels began to highlight the struggles of Muslims to be accepted

in Western societies. After 9/11, Muslim identity and the representation of Arab women became a prominent concern, overshadowing other diasporic issues. The surge in interest in Arab American literature was a result of the rise in political consciousness and the need for solidarity to combat negative stereotypes. Paradoxically, the events of 9/11 increased public interest in this previously overlooked community, but also put Arab Americans under a cloud of suspicion. This post-9/11 literary renaissance reflects an attempt to revive a forgotten or suppressed cultural essence, identify historical roots, and celebrate Arab American traditions. This ongoing construction of identity is mirrored in the works of many Anglophone Arab writers.

In 2006, the Syrian-American author Mohja Kahf published her debut novel, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, which, while not directly addressing 9/11, explored the challenges faced by Muslim Americans in navigating their diasporic identity. In contrast, Laila Halaby's novels *West of the Jordan* (2003) and *Once in a Promised Land* (2008) tackled the direct impact of post-9/11 America on Arab-American communities. Salaita states: "Both novels focus on a range of socio-political issues involving Arab American identity, civil liberties, racism and xenophobia and the effects of September 11, 2001, on American society" (*Modern*, 79). Similarly, Diana Abu-Jaber's short story *American Sweater* followed the experience of Arab immigrant children visiting the Middle East in a post-9/11 context. Evelyn Shakir's short story collection *Remember Me to Lebanon* also grappled with cultural conflicts, women's roles, and the challenges of maintaining identity as an Arab American. Salaita assures that this collection discusses "cultural conflict among eastern immigrants and white Americans; the foundational role of women in Arab American society; anti-Arab racism and Islamophobia; and the anxieties of maintaining an identity in the United States" (*Modern*, 68).

Zainab Salbi, an Iraqi-American writer and activist, shared her own story of being caught between two worlds - Iraq and the United States - in her autobiography *Between Two Worlds: Escape From Tyranny: Growing Up in the Shadow of Saddam*. Salbi founded the non-profit organization Women for Women International, which supports female survivors of war. These works by Arab-American authors reflect a broader literary renaissance, as writers sought to humanize their communities and combat negative stereotypes that were exacerbated by 9/11.

Alongside the Arab-American authors who directly grappled with the post-9/11 landscape, a number of other Anglophone Arab writers emerged, though their works did not necessarily center on that traumatic event. Nevertheless, their writings still reflect the ongoing struggle to define and express a multifaceted Arab-American identity. This group includes Etel Adnan, who published the poetry collection *In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country* and the short story collection which is entitled *Master of the Eclipse and Other Stories*. Rabih Alameddine also made a mark with his novel *I the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001) and *The Hakawati* (2006). Additionally, Susan Muaddi Darraj's *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Philly* (2007) and Randa Jarrar's *A Map of Home* (2008) contributed to this growing body of Arab-American literature, each exploring the complexities of cultural identity and belonging. While not directly confronting 9/11, these authors nonetheless gave voice to the evolving Arab-American experience, further expanding the rich and diverse tapestry of literature emanating from this community.

The immigrant experiences of Arab-Americans and Arab-Brits diverged significantly. Unlike the Arab-American journey, which was often shaped by challenging circumstances and religious factors, the Arab-British immigrant story was more closely tied to the legacy of colonialism. While many Arab-American writers were part of broader waves of immigration, the majority of Arab writers in Britain had come on academic scholarships to pursue graduate studies.

This distinction is noted by Wail Hassan in *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature*. The contrasting histories are marked by the colonial ties of Britain versus the immigration policies that facilitated the arrival of diverse Arab communities in the United States. These foundational differences have influenced the trajectories and perspectives reflected in the literary outputs of Arab-British and Arab-American authors. In essence, the immigrant experiences, and by extension the creative works, of these two groups have been shaped by their distinct sociopolitical contexts - one defined by colonial legacies, the other by waves of migration. Hassan states:

In Britain, immigration is a post-imperial phenomenon and the total immigrant population is relatively small compared to indigenes ... Immigrants in Britain are mostly people from former British colonies in South Asia, Africa, and the Caribbean, with Arabs forming a tiny minority within the immigrant population (14).

The Arab British community is comprised of numerous individuals who originally hail from Arab League countries, including Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Sudan, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Oman, and whose native language is Arabic. While the majority of Arabs adhere to Islam, there have always been religious minorities within the Arab world, such as Jews and Christians, meaning not all Arab Britons are of the Muslim faith (Halliday 3).

The earliest known migration of Arabs to Britain occurred in the 19th century, with these migrants being primarily Syrian and Moroccan merchants engaged in trade, who settled in the industrial cities of the north around the middle of the century. Thereafter, towards the beginning of the 20th century, Somalis and Yemenis, recruited by the British Merchant Navy, began to settle

in British ports like Cardiff and Liverpool. When discharged from the navy after World War II, these seamen later became low-paid workers living in disadvantaged urban areas. During the 1940s and 50s, small numbers of Egyptians and Sudanese came to Britain for professional reasons, as did Palestinians displaced by the 1948 conflict with Israel. However, as El-Solh asserts: "these newcomers were numerically too insignificant to form distinct ethnic communities based on national origin"(240). Halliday too, concedes that compared to the migration from the Commonwealth countries, Arab migration to Britain has been relatively small in scale:

These Arab immigrants were relatively insignificant with the overall context of Migration to Britain over the same period. The numbers involved – a few hundred Lebanese and Syrians, a few thousand Yemenis, perhaps a few thousand North Africans and a few hundred Palestinians- were too tiny compared to the three four million immigrants who settled in Britain in modern times (6).

Additionally, the spatial dispersal of the Arab British community, as well as the fact that they were not concentrated in specific job sectors, very likely played a role in discouraging the formation of distinct ethnic communities, unlike the trends observed among the Yemeni and Somali seafaring communities, where clear ethnic boundaries had begun to emerge (El-Solh 240). El-Solh notes that the 1960s marked a significant turning point in the history of Arab settlement in Britain, both in terms of numbers and the increasing diversity of national origins and social class. This observation was confirmed by Karmi who stated that "It was not until the 1960s that Arabs in significant numbers began arriving to Britain, mainly to seek work" (9). In this context, Nagel argued that this period witnessed a relative openness in British policy toward skilled migration, student migration, and, for a short time, toward exiles and those fleeing civil conflicts

abroad. This enabled thousands of Arab students and professionals to settle in Britain and obtain British citizenship with relative ease.

The Civil War in Lebanon and the economic boom following the 1973 oil crisis, coupled with economic and political instability in parts of the Arab region, encouraged “brain drain as well as flight of Arab capital in search of investment opportunities” in Britain (Karmi, 1997). From 1984 onwards, a notable increase in naturalization occurred, with more Arabs applying for and being granted British citizenship. This surge appears to be largely the result of political and legislative developments in Britain, such as the passing of the British Nationality Act in 1983, as well as conflicts in the Middle East and North Africa. The influx of Arab migrants during this period included both highly skilled professionals, who were attracted by the economic opportunities, and those fleeing political unrest and instability in their home countries. The combination of these push and pull factors led to a significant growth in the Arab British population, as more individuals sought to establish a new life and obtain British citizenship.

Arabs have largely been excluded from the dominant narratives on race relations in both USA and UK. Arabness does not fit neatly into the publicly recognized categories of diversity and cultural difference in these countries. While they have not been portrayed as a "problem" or a "ghettoized" (Nagel 388) minority group, Arabs are often perceived in public discourse as a foreign element. Despite not being constructed as an overtly problematic or marginalized group, Arabs occupy an ambiguous space in the racial and cultural landscapes of these nations. Their exclusion from the dominant diversity discourse and their perceived foreignness contribute to the complex and nuanced ways in which Arab diaspora members navigate their identities and belonging in these host societies. The examination of Arabs' place within the established racial frameworks of Britain

and the United States is essential for understanding the particular challenges and experiences that shape the contemporary diasporic identities of Arab communities in these countries.

Arab migrants in Britain have historically faced a dual form of exclusion. The first stems from ethnic and racial discrimination, while the second arises from their marginalization within British multiculturalism, which has primarily focused on the experiences of Black and Asian minority groups. This dynamic highlights how Arab communities in Britain have grappled with a complex and multifaceted form of marginalization. While they have not been the central focus of British multiculturalism, which has tended to prioritize the experiences of other minority groups, they have also encountered ethnic and racial discrimination that sets them apart from the dominant societal narratives. This dual exclusion has shaped the unique challenges and lived experiences of Arab diaspora members in Britain.

In the post-colonial context, Britain maintained a central, dominant position, with everything else seen as subordinate or beholden to the former empire. As noted by Edward Said in “The Anglo-Arab Encounter”, there was a scarcity of English novels written by Arab authors within this British imperial framework. While Said did mention a few early Arab writers, such as the Palestinian Jabra Ibrahim Jabra who wrote *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1960) and the Egyptian Waguih Ghali, the writer of *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964), who are considered as predecessors to Ahdaf Soueif. Wail Hassan agreed with Said that the Anglo-Arab literary works “can be traced back to works by travelers, rather than immigrants or descendants of immigrants in Britain” (157). Examples include Assaad Y. Kayat's *A Voice from Lebanon* (1847) and Edward Atiyah's *An Arab Tells His Story* (1947). However, Hassan identified Atiyah as “the first Arab British writer”(158) with two novels that explored Arabic themes: *Black Vanguard* (1952) and *Lebanon Paradise: A Novel* (1953). This suggests that while the early Anglo-Arab literary landscape was dominated by

outsider perspectives, there were nascent efforts by Arab-British authors to claim a voice within this context.

Since the observation made by Edward Said about the scarcity of Anglo-Arab writings, there has been a surge in English-language literature by Arab-British authors. Nash states: “The new crop of Arab writers in English engages with the west primarily England and in the process discrete identities, both Arab and English, are blurred, even hybridized” (12). Some notable examples include Jamal Mahjoub, who authored a trilogy of novels - *Navigation of a Rainmaker* (1989), *Wings of Dust* (1994), and *In the Hour of Signs* (1996) - that interweave strands of Sudanese history from the colonial era to the late 20th century. Another is British-Palestinian writer Tony Hanania, whose novels such as *Homesick* (1997), *Unreal City* (1999), and *Eros Island* (2000) juxtapose Levantine settings alongside seemingly incongruous British ones. Nash assures that although novels by Mahjoub create “a trilogy of writings interweaving strands of Sudanese history from age of Gordon and Mahdi, through the period of decolonization, ending in the late eighties,” novels by Hanania “are broadly concerned with Levantine settings juxtaposed alongside seeming incongruent British ones” (13).

Alongside these male authors, contemporary Arab-British women writers have also gained widespread acclaim and commercial success. Examples include Ahdaf Soueif and Fadia Faqir, who have backgrounds in English literature and creative writing. This new generation of Arab-British authors is actively shaping a literary landscape that challenges traditional boundaries and explores the intersections of Arab and British identities in the modern era. Soueif moved to England with her family when she was four years old. She studied at Cairo University, earning a master's degree in English literature from the American University in Cairo, before pursuing postgraduate studies in England, where she obtained a PhD in linguistics from Lancaster

University. Soueif has published two collections of short stories, *Aisha* (1983) and *Sandpiper* (1996), as well as two novels, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) and *The Map of Love* (1999). Her 2007 collection *I Think of You* contains stories from the earlier two volumes. Soueif's academic background and her work in politics and journalism have strongly influenced her literary output.

Similarly, Jordanian-British author Fadia Faqir has an academic pedigree, holding master's and doctoral degrees in creative writing. Although Faqir's debut novel, *Nisanit* (1988), is set in Arab countries, her second work, *The Pillars of Salt* (1996), "stands between East and West, and combines Arabic traditional storytelling with postmodern narrative techniques" (Suyoufie 230). Such authors and their works demonstrate that, like the third wave of Arab American literature, British Arab writing is often highly autobiographical, grappling with questions of assimilation while maintaining a strong sense of Arab identity.

The experience of Arab immigration in Canada has been just as culturally rich and historically significant as in the United States and Britain. However, the literary landscape produced by Anglophone Arab-Canadians remains relatively nascent in comparison. In *Voices in the Desert: An Anthology of Arabic-Canadian Women Writers*, Elizabeth Dahab highlighted the origins of this emerging body of work stating: "There exists in Canada a literature that was born in the 1970s at the hands of first-generation Canadians of Arabic descent ...it was produced in all genres and covers styles ranging from the realist to the post-modernist. It is written in French, English and Arabic" (7–8). She also observed that during the period from 1963 to 1974, the majority of Arab-Canadian literary output was in Francophone, primarily by Arab-Québécois writers. Dahab states:

They write plays or documentaries for Radio-Canada or Radio-Quebec; they are radio-announcers, film script writers (Nadia Ghalem), stage-directors (Mona Latif Ghattas) or

write for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens (Anne Marie Alonzo). They contribute to newspapers, literary magazines and reviews [...] At least five of them teach in some capacity at L'universite du Quebec a Montreal (UQAM). (8).

This suggests that the development of Anglophone Arab-Canadian literature has lagged behind its Francophone counterpart, at least in the earlier stages of its evolution. This disparity reflects the complex linguistic and cultural dynamics within the broader Canadian context, where the experiences and literary expressions of diverse immigrant communities have not always received equal attention and support. As the Anglophone Arab-Canadian literary tradition continues to grow and gain recognition, it promises to offer unique insights into the multifaceted narratives of belonging, identity, and intercultural exchange.

The relative scarcity of Anglophone Arab-Canadian writers can be attributed to the dominance of Francophone Arab-Canadian literature. According to Elizabeth Dahab, "Roughly 15% of Arabic-Canadian literature is produced in Arabic, while 60% of it is written in French, and 25% in English" (11). Dahab argued that Arab-Canadian literature has also suffered from a lack of academic attention and scholarly representation. Even works like Baha Abu-Laban's *An Olive Branch on the Family Tree: The Arabs in Canada* (1980) did not provide any substantial information on the literary production of Arab-Canadians. This scholarly neglect was likely due to the relatively small number of literary texts by Arab-Canadian authors that were considered noteworthy at the time.

The first wave of Anglophone Arab-Canadian writers can be traced back to the group that immigrated to Canada between the 1950s and 1970s. This cohort includes several authors, some of whom are still actively writing today. Among them are Niam Kattan, an Iraqi-Jewish writer who migrated in 1954; Abla Farhoud, a Lebanese-Canadian writer who moved in the 1950s and writes

in French; Saad Elkhadem, an Egyptian-Canadian writer and academic who arrived in 1968 and writes in Arabic; Nadia Ghalem, an Algerian-Canadian writer who moved in 1965 and writes in French; and Mona Latif-Ghattas, an Egyptian-Canadian writer who arrived in 1966 and also writes in French. However, the majority of these early Arab-Canadian authors, with the exceptions of Kamal Rostom and John Asfour, primarily wrote in either French or Arabic, rather than English. This linguistic diversity reflects the complex linguistic and cultural landscape within the Arab-Canadian community, where Francophone and Arabophone literary traditions have historically been more prominent than the Anglophone one.

Kamal Rostom is an Egyptian-Canadian writer who immigrated to Canada in 1974. He edited the short story collection *Arab-Canadian Writing: Stories, Memoirs, and Reminiscences* (1989) and authored the short story anthology *The Mustache and Other Stories* (2005). John Asfour is a Lebanese-Canadian poet, novelist, and professor who moved to Canada in 1968. His notable works include three poetry collections: *Land of Flowers and Guns* (1981), *Fields of My Blood* (1997), and *Blindfold* (2011). Another prominent Anglophone Arab-Canadian writer is Marwan Hassan, a novelist of Lebanese descent who was born in London, Ontario. His work *The Confusion of Stones: Two Novellas* (1989) is considered an example of Canadian literature exploring migration and diaspora.

More recently, two leading Anglophone Arab-Canadian novelists have emerged - Rawi Hage and Dimitri Nasrallah. Hage, born in Lebanon in 1964, immigrated to Canada in 1991 and has written four acclaimed novels: *De Niro's Game* (2006), *Cockroach* (2008), *Carnival* (2012), and *Beirut Hellfire Society* (2018). He now lives in Montreal and has also published the short story *The Salad Lady* in the anthology *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (2004). Nasrallah, born in Lebanon in 1977, lived in Kuwait, Greece, and Dubai

before moving to Canada in 1988. His works include two novels, *Black bodying* (2005) and *Niko* (2011), as well as the award-winning short story *The Forested Knolls of Elbasan* which won the Quebec Writing Competition in 2007.

Leila Aboulela was born in Cairo and raised in Sudan before moving to Scotland in 1990. She attended an American school in Khartoum and later studied at the University of Khartoum, earning an MPhil in Statistics from the London School of Economics. Aboulela has written three novels that have been translated into twelve languages: *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005), and *Lyrics Alley* (2010). Her novel *Minaret* is particularly notable as it “explores the relationship between Islam, migration, and Western society. Representing the experience of a young Sudanese migrant disconnected from her traditional Muslim culture, *Minaret* is a novel framed by a dialogue between Islam and Western secularization” (Nash 143). Nash affirms that *Minaret* is one of the few novels that represent the emerging female Muslim voice within migrant communities (35). In this novel, Aboulela has openly acknowledged the religious focus that has permeated her literary work. She has demonstrated an awareness that this religious direction represents a rebuke and rejection of the leftist, secular tendencies that have often dominated Arab intellectual discourse. However, Hassan still pays Aboulela due respect by analyzing her writing in the context of the broader Arab postcolonial experience, as reflected in the works of acclaimed Sudanese novelist Al-Tayyib Salih. In essence, Aboulela has purposefully charted a distinctive religious course in her fiction, diverging from the more secular tendencies that have often characterized Arab literary and intellectual output. Her contemporaries have grappled with this religious dimension in her writing, some finding it a refreshing departure while others view it as a marked departure from prevailing norms. In a similar way, Jordanian-British author Fadia Faqir's *The Cry of the Dove*:

A Novel follows a protagonist named Salma who changes her name to Sally Ascher as she assimilates to life in rural Devon, England, and struggles to redefine her identity in the new setting.

Another prominent Libyan-British Arab writer to emerge in the 21st century is Hisham Matar, known for his works *In the Country of Men* (2006) and *Anatomy of a Disappearance: A Novel* (2011). Matar's novels explore the themes of exile from a dysfunctional Arab homeland and the accompanying feelings of guilt. In *In the Country of Men*, Matar adopts a multifaceted approach similar to that of fellow Sudanese author Jamal Mahjoub. Dahood El-Oqla assures that Matar's *In the Country of Men* "divided Libyan identities by highlighting traditionally marginalized perspectives, such as those of children, women, and political opposition groups, and their struggle against the violent and traumatizing practices of the country's authoritarian regime" (91). The horrors of the failed post-colonial Arab nationalist project are vividly depicted in the televised hanging of the protagonist's neighbor, Ustath Rashid. However, the central focus of the novel is on the protagonist's distorted transition into adulthood, a process that is radically disrupted and disabled by the brutality of the dictatorship.

Concern. I think that was what I craved. A warm and steady and unchangeable concern. In a time of blood and tears, in a Libya full of bruise- checkered and urine-stained men, urgent with want and longing for relief, I was the ridiculous child craving concern. And though I didn't think of it then in these terms, my self-pity had soured into self-loathing (*ITCOM* 166).

As Suleiman reaches early adulthood, he is sent to Cairo. However, neither his sense of displacement nor his self-loathing - which he associates with "the shameful pleasure in submitting to authority" (*ITCOM* 159) - diminish in the new city. Suleiman goes through a period of intense identification with his mother, Najwa, whose story of being forced into marriage with his father

has instilled in him a young man's guilt over the patriarchal oppression of women. This guilt is compounded by the state's oppression of its own citizens. Suleiman struggles with the question, "How much of him is there in me? Can you become a man without becoming your father?" (*ITCOM* 149). Though disillusioned with his mother "who tried to never have me... who resisted in all the ways she knew how" (*ITCOM* 245) by the end of the novel, when they are finally reunited in Cairo, Suleiman responds to her kisses. The novel charts Suleiman's tumultuous journey into manhood, marked by a deep unease with the patriarchal structures and authoritarian control that have shaped his family and society. His conflicted relationship with his mother becomes a symbolic microcosm of the larger tensions and traumas of the post-colonial Arab experience.

In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Matar explores similar themes of exile and disrupted childhood, but this time outside of Libya which is not explicitly named in the narrative. The story unfolds in settings like Britain, France, and Switzerland. Although *In the Country of Men* centered on the mother-son relationship, *Anatomy of a Disappearance* focuses on the pained separation between the protagonist Nuri and his absent father. The novel substitutes this with a teenage son-stepmother infatuation, further complicated by the young man's discovery that his biological mother was the family's servant. These traumatic gender dynamics intertwine the public and private spheres, compounding the individual's sense of unease with both the domestic and national spheres. This malaise follows the protagonist even into his state of exile. Matar's two novels grapple with the Arab predicament, particularly the failure of Arab nationalism to deliver the freedoms and aspirations of the secular middle classes, let alone the broader Arab populace. Interestingly, as Stephen Morton has noted, Matar's writing "barely evokes the West as a sponsor of democracy, making Egypt the refuge and home of modernity" (248). This is a pattern that holds true across both of his novels so far. Matar's novels explore the psychological and social

reverberations of displacement, family trauma, and the shortcomings of post-colonial Arab politics and society. The authors demonstrate the diverse and evolving nature of British Arab literature, as it grapples with issues of cultural identity, migration, and the intersection of Eastern and Western perspectives.

A key theme that has emerged in contemporary Anglophone Arab literature is the idea of crossing borders and navigating multiple cultural identities. Majaj states that such writers have asserted that “ethnicity cannot be understood as a singular cultural essence invoked through nostalgia but must be explored at sites of multiple border crossings” (286). Dwelling on the importance of border crossing and preserving cultural memory, Anglophone Arab writing continues to grapple with the challenges of identity and cultural validation, as these authors navigate the complexities of living between two worlds. Rather than claim a fixed, singular cultural identity, these works explore the nuances and tensions of inhabiting hybrid spaces, where the boundaries between East and West are blurred and redefined. This focus on border-crossing and the multiplicity of cultural affiliations reflects the lived experiences of many Anglophone Arab writers, who draw on their diverse backgrounds and perspectives to craft narratives that resist simplistic notions of identity. Through their literary explorations, these authors assert the richness and dynamism of Anglophone Arab cultural production, which continues to evolve and defy rigid categorization.

Scholars have noted the growing prominence of Anglophone Arab literature, with Layla Al-Maleh arguing that interest in who and what are Arabs emerged due to the horror of 9/11 creating growing interest in Anglophone Arab literature in an attempt to learn more about Arabs and the Arab world. Yasir Suleiman pointed out the diversity of Arab literary expression, noting that “while all Arabic literature is Arab, not all Arab literature is Arabic”(1). Anglophone Arab

writers often choose English over Arabic to address a wider diasporic audience in a language they and their readers are comfortable with.

The writings of Arab authors in English are increasingly reflecting the diversity of their cultural roots, as well as the varied ways these roots manifest in the Western context. For some, Arab Anglophone literature simply chronicles the process of leaving behind one identity and acquiring a new one. However, for many others, this literature has taken on a prominent global role, becoming a major component of the worldwide Arab diaspora - a space where cultural ties can be revived and reimagined. This notion of 'cultural ties' is particularly compelling and holds the potential to promote greater cross-cultural understanding. Al-Maleh has stated, Arab Anglophone writers play a crucial part in "disseminating through the wider world their images of hyphenated Arabs and of the Arab people as a whole, thereby fostering acceptance through understanding"(5). Such fiction, which blends foreign linguistic backgrounds with Arabic cultural contexts, can contribute to the reshaping of cross-cultural and transcultural dialogues. This is especially meaningful in an era marked by political, geopolitical, and socioeconomic tensions. By giving voice to the multifaceted experiences of the Arab diaspora, this literature serves as a bridge, challenging monolithic perceptions and fostering a more nuanced, empathetic engagement with the diversity of Arab identities and cultural expressions.

Most works by authors of Arab origin reject the boundaries imposed by Orientalist perspectives. They want to show throughout these writings that they blur the distinctions between 'us' and 'them', 'here' and 'there'. In today's globalized world, there is a need to know the "other" more intimately and promote mutual understanding between different sides, rather than romanticizing or fossilizing Arab Anglophone fiction within the confines of displacement, split

identity, and exclusion. Therefore, Arab Anglophone writers employ literary strategies to subvert the stereotypes commonly associated with Arabs in the West.

A key observation in Arab Anglophone fiction is the multifaceted articulations of the concept of home. Home is not a unified, singular experience, but rather takes shape through the ongoing interactions between the present and the past. As Sara Ahmed notes that “the definitions of home shift across a number of registers: home can mean where one usually lives, or it can mean where one’s family lives or it can mean one’s native country” (338). Some authors, like Laila Halaby, Rabih Alameddine, and Alia Yunis, portray the experience of having multiple homes. Across the works of Anglophone Arab writers, diverse conceptualizations of 'home 'are encountered. Notably, the perception of home has shifted over the three main phases of Arab immigration to the United States. For writers of the first immigration phase, the notion of home was not a major concern. As scholar Al-Maleh explains, their works reflected a "collective optimism, celebration, exultation" and a sense of "metropolitan" hybridity that allowed them to navigate the "identity politics" of their place of origin and chosen abode with less tension than their successors. She states: “they reflected in their works a sense of collective optimism, celebration, exultation, and there was a kind of ‘metropolitan’ hybridity ensconced in the heartland of both national and transnational citizenship, a hybridity that undoubtedly helped them negotiate the ‘identity politics’ of their place of origin and their chosen abode with less tensions than their successors” (4). In contrast to later generations, these earlier writers maintained a balanced perspective, preserving their dual allegiances without betraying their cultural memories or disowning their past. They viewed the past and present critically, without succumbing to the disjunctions of temporal and spatial distance. This shifting portrayal of home points to the complex, evolving relationship between identity, memory, and belonging that Arab Anglophone

writers grapple with through their literary creations. Their diverse perspectives offer valuable insights into the multifaceted experiences of the Arab diaspora.

Contrary to expectations, the backlash following the horrific 9/11 incident revived a strong sense of home and nostalgia among Arab American communities. According to Liza Marchi, "During the period of the third wave of immigration, stereotypical and biased representations of Islam and the Arab world began to be increasingly diffused by the media, to the point of damaging the status, reputation, and self-image of the Arab population and Arab American community"(7). Orfalea has also stated that "9/11 represents a crucial moment in Arab American history, as it subjected the Arab American community to an extreme visibility and gave rise to feelings of deep vulnerability"(312). Thus, readers and scholars see fear, despair, anger, and vulnerability reflected in the works by Arab American authors published after 9/11. Arabs faced collective hysteria that destabilized their emotional state and made them feel betrayed. They had come to the United States to pursue their dreams, yet after 9/11, America became a land of no promise, especially for Muslims and Arabs. The 9/11 tragedy marked a sharp turn in the lives of Arab Americans, prompting them to rethink and reconsider their sense of home and identity. Many Arab Americans had previously become infatuated with America and embraced a comfortable American lifestyle, nurturing a sense of belonging. However, the daily prejudice, suspicion, and outright racism they faced after 9/11 instilled a deep sense of injustice and outrage, which later transformed into a nostalgic longing for their roots and ancestral homelands. This shift highlights the profound impact of the 9/11 attacks on the emotional and psychological well-being of Arab American communities, leading them to re-evaluate their place and identity within the United States.

In conclusion, this opening chapter has established the theoretical framework and research context that will guide the analysis of diaspora and its various manifestations in the selected literary

works. By drawing on the influential theories of diaspora scholars such as Stuart Hall, Geoffrey Nash, and James Clifford, this study has developed a nuanced understanding of diaspora as a multifaceted and fluid concept, shaped by experiences of displacement, the negotiation of cultural identities, and the complex relationships between the homeland and the host country. The detailed exploration of the socio-political and historical contexts surrounding the authors - Hisham Matar and Leila Aboulela - has further contextualized the diaspora narratives that will be examined in the subsequent chapters. The chapter has highlighted the ways in which the authors' own personal and familial experiences of migration, exile, and belonging have informed their literary representations of the diasporic condition. By establishing this theoretical and contextual foundation, the thesis is now poised to delve deeper into the textual analysis of Matar's and Aboulela's works. The upcoming chapters will closely examine how these authors employ diverse narrative strategies, thematic preoccupations, and literary devices to conceptualize the complexities of diaspora identity, memory, and the (un)belonging experienced by their diasporic characters. This in-depth analysis will contribute to the growing body of scholarship on Middle Eastern and North African diaspora literature, offering new critical insights into the nuanced and multifaceted nature of the diasporic experience.

Chapter Two

Exploring diaspora in Hisham Matar's *In The Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*

In Hisham Matar's case, his life story is a tapestry woven with diverse threads. Born in New York, and raised in both Tripoli and Cairo, and his father, Jaballa Matar, was a figure deeply engaged in political matters. Tragically, Jaballa Matar was "abducted in 1990 and taken into detention in Libya," as noted by Derbyshire (57). These personal experiences, marked by a global upbringing and a father's sudden disappearance, have profoundly influenced Matar's fictional works. Through his writing, Matar seeks to grapple with the profound enigma and unsettling nature of such a disappearance.

Hisham Matar's unique vantage point, shaped by his privileged background, allows him to move beyond the simple clash of cultures and instead focus on the interplay between the private and the public realms. Despite the hardships depicted in his works, the narrators in his novels, *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of Disappearance*, come from affluent families, have connections to Europe, and have access to excellent educational opportunities. These characters are able to co-opt the advantages typically associated with wealthy Westerners, positioning themselves more as part of the landed elite than as displaced individuals seeking refuge.

This privileged status sets Matar's protagonists apart from the common struggles faced by many Arabs. They are not burdened by the same problems that often plague those grappling with the intrusions of the nation-state into their private lives. This, in turn, allows Matar to delve deeper into the fundamental spatial issues that truly impact the status of Arabs within Anglophone societies, moving beyond the simplistic associations of Arabs with a backward culture or an exaggerated relationship to Islam. In doing so, Matar, like Edward Said, is able to approach these

complex societal dynamics with a more nuanced and insightful perspective, one that is not hindered by the typical cultural clashes that often dominate discussions of identity and belonging.

Hisham Matar's privileged perspective brings distinct advantages to his writing. By drawing attention back to the interplay between the private and public realms, Matar is able to reclaim Arabs' rightful claim to private space within the imaginations of his Anglophone readers. This recovery of Arab private space in literature has a tangible impact, earning real-life Arabs a greater sense of both private and public agency within Anglophone countries, despite the persistent efforts of mainstream media to undermine this. The influential philosopher Hannah Arendt's ideas on the human condition provide valuable insight here. In *The Human Condition*, Arendt asserts that "public life... [is] possible only after the much more urgent needs of life itself [have] been taken care of in the private sphere" (65). This perspective, as Dana Villa notes in "Postmodernism and the Public Sphere," describes "the closure of space for action in the modern age" (718) - a phenomenon that can be "forcibly collapsed or eliminated (as Arendt argues it is under totalitarianism)" (714). Given the themes of totalitarianism that haunt both *Country* and *Anatomy*, Arendt's theory provides a compelling lens through which to understand the dwindling privacy of Arab homes in Matar's work. By leveraging this privileged vantage point, Matar is able to challenge the dominant narratives that often associate Arabs with a backward culture or an exaggerated relationship to religion. Instead, he explores space, both public and private as a force that truly impacts the status of Arabs within Anglophone societies, affording his readers a more nuanced and insightful perspective on identity and belonging.

Unlike Edward Said, who in his memoir *Out of Place* resigned himself to a sense of spatial confusion and displacement, Hisham Matar does not reject the notion of home or stability. Rather than embracing a position of being "not quite right and out of place," as Said described (295),

Matar seeks to reclaim and recover Arab private space and the space for meaningful action. At the core of Matar's literary endeavors is a desire to find a sense of home and belonging. By chronicling his father's disappearance in his fiction, Matar aims to revise and challenge the prevailing narratives surrounding Arabs in a more profound and impactful way than Said's *Out of Place*. While Said's work may have explored the disorienting experience of occupying an ambiguous cultural space, Matar's writing reflects a deeper yearning to reclaim the private and public spheres that are rightfully accessible to Arabs. In doing so, Matar's fiction provides a counterpoint to the often-limited perspectives that relegate Arabs to the margins of society or cast them as inherently at odds with the mainstream. By asserting Arabs' rightful claim to both private and public space, Matar's work ultimately seeks to redefine the stories we tell about this community, moving beyond the tropes of displacement and cultural clash that have so often dominated the discourse. In this way, Matar's fiction emerges as a more transformative and empowering revision of the narratives surrounding Arab identity and belonging.

Hisham Matar's literary journey, from his earlier work *In the Country of Men* to the more refined *Anatomy of Disappearance*, demonstrates a maturing of his ideas. At the core of Matar's storytelling is the belief that narratives have the power to shape the real world. His fiction aims to humanize Arabs by granting non-Arab readers access to the intimate inner lives of his Arab characters. Paradoxically, by making these fictional Arab private lives public, Matar actually restores a sense of privacy and agency to real-life Arabs. As Margaret Scanlan observes in "Migrating from Terror: The Postcolonial Novel after September 11," the Arab world, and Libya in particular, often lacks a domestic space that is accessible to non-Arabic speakers. Matar's work counters this by reminding readers that real-life Arabs also have a right to privacy that deserves protection. The psychological insights provided by theorists like Keith Oatley in *Such Stuff as*

Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction further illuminate how Matar's exploration of Arab inner lives can humanize and empower real-world Arab communities. Literature, as both Matar and Oatley affirm, holds the potential to enact meaningful change in the world. This raises important questions about the power dynamics at play in shaping public perceptions of Arabs. Given the ubiquity of media influence, how can literature hope to challenge and reshape the dominant narratives? And, recalling the questions raised in the earlier chapters, who holds the greatest sway in determining how we speak about Arabs - publishers, readers, or writers themselves? Matar's literary journey and the theoretical frameworks that inform it suggest that storytelling can indeed be a powerful tool for redefining and reclaiming the narratives surrounding Arab identity and experience. By granting access to the private lives and inner worlds of his Arab characters, Matar seeks to restore a sense of humanity and agency to real-life Arab communities, ultimately aspiring to transform the very ways in which we understand and engage with the Arab world.

The narrative techniques used in *In The Country of Men* reflect a desire to not only understand the traumatic events of the past but also to explore the ongoing relationships that connect to the present. The story begins with an adult narrator recalling moments that are infused with reflection and reinterpretation, suggesting a distance from direct experience. It opens with his voice from a place of displacement: "I am recalling now that last summer before I was sent away. It was 1979, and the sun was everywhere. Tripoli lay brilliant and still beneath it" (*ITCOM* 1). As readers progress through the novel, they see a complete transition from the adult narrator to his younger self. The thoughts and feelings of the child narrator are vividly expressed, seemingly unfiltered by his adult perspective. The adult narrator only returns at the end, completing the circular structure of the timeline. The events he recalls are marked by trauma: being chased by members of the Revolutionary Committee, witnessing his father's arrest for political conspiracy

and later seeing his tortured body, watching the execution of a family friend on national television, and observing his mother's struggle with alcoholism as she deals with an arranged marriage and political violence. These intense experiences form the core of a narrative about a childhood overshadowed by violence and fear.

The retrospective framework that opens the narrative serves to highlight not just what Sigmund Freud termed "traumatic neurosis" (275), which refers to the compulsion to repeatedly relive life-threatening experiences through involuntary psychological revisits to the past. Freud defined trauma as "an experience that presents the mind with an overwhelming stimulus too powerful to process or resolve in the usual way" (275). This "usual way" implies a simultaneous connection between experience and understanding, which is profoundly disrupted by the traumatic event. This disruption creates a clear divide between experiencing events and comprehending their significance, leading to the later emergence of traumatic memories through unconscious processes.

The complete shift in narrative early on in the novel suggests that storytelling goes beyond simply processing known events that were previously misunderstood, as Freud proposes. Instead, it brings back the full experience to capture not just what was known but also what was entirely unknown. As Cathy Caruth notes, "What returns to haunt the victim... is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known" (6). This means that the narrative is driven not just by the desire to understand familiar traumatic events stemming from extreme violence, but also by the need to grapple with the unknown aspects of how these experiences shaped the protagonist's identity within the context of power.

This quest to understand the unknown specifically, the complexity of being shaped by experiences of violence haunts the adult protagonist as a constant feeling of loss and absence. After his father's miraculous survival, thanks to a neighbor who works for the Revolutionary Committee,

Suleiman's parents decide to send him to a boarding school in Egypt, where he spends the next fifteen years away from his family. The absence he expresses in his adult life is tied to deeper issues than just violence and exile; it reflects a more profound sense of loss connected to his identity and the possibilities of who he could become. He states:

there is this void, this emptiness I am trying to get at like someone frightened of the dark, searching for a match to strike... My expressions shift constantly, like that of the prostitute who waits in your car while you run across a busy road to buy a new pack of cigarettes for the night. When you walk back, ripping the cellophane, before she has time to see you, you catch sight of her, temporarily settled in another role as a sister or wife or friend. How readily and thinly we procure these fictional selves, deceiving the world and what we might have become if only we hadn't got in the way, if only we had waited to see what might have become of us (*ITCOM* 233).

Revisiting the child's experience of these traumatic events serves as a way to explore identity and personal development amid the power struggles that shape these processes. The complexity of this narrative lies in the understanding that a person's formation in relation to power involves more than just repression. It is an interactive and generative process, encompassing both negative and largely positive influences from power. Because of its semi-autobiographical nature, the novel embodies a style of writing that effectively captures the experiences of a developing individual.

The main narrative drive to examine the complex experience of identity formation as an interactive and reflective process aligns with the discursive approach that historian Hayden White describes as writing the history of trauma in a "style of middle voicedness" (quoted in Friedländer 51). This middle voice, or intransitive writing, blends the subject and object within the same

action, enabling the text to convey the ambivalence, unpredictability, and uncertainty of being oppressed, conscripted, and shaped by political power. To effectively narrate the experience of a child caught in power struggles, the "middle voicedness" style is particularly important because it avoids presenting a fixed, independent subject. In contrast, both active and passive voices rely on clear distinctions between subject and object. The middle voice features a subject in the process of development, whose agency is uncertain as they occupy both roles. This flexibility enables intransitive writing to express the formation of identity as a simultaneous response to encounters with power, rather than a separate, pre-existing event. Its reflective nature illustrates how individuals are shaped as what Michel Foucault refers to as "correlative elements of power and knowledge" (204)

In Matar's *In the Country of Men*, the young narrator, Suleiman, has a father named Faraj who often travels to Europe for business. One day, Suleiman's sense of his surroundings is disrupted when he spots his father Faraj in a crowd in Tripoli, even though Faraj had just recently bid him farewell. He says: "only a couple days ago, he had kissed us goodbye" (*ITCOM* 5). Suleiman remembers the formality of this farewell, where he had dutifully kissed his father's hand as Faraj had taught him, and Faraj had whispered that Suleiman was now "the man of the house" (*ITCOM* 5). This transfer of household authority from father to son, in anticipation of Faraj's absence, leaves Suleiman feeling uneasy.

Although Faraj's words about Suleiman becoming the household's new leader are clearly not meant to be taken literally, given Suleiman's young age, the boy nevertheless takes his father's command seriously. He feels compelled to take on his father's responsibilities, even though Faraj is clearly still present in Tripoli, disrupting the family's domestic dynamics. This confusing situation hints at the impending intrusion of Faraj's political convictions into the private realm of

their household. Now that Suleiman has seen his father in the city, he is no longer certain what Faraj's presence in their home means, creating a tension between the public and private spheres that becomes the central conflict in Matar's novel. The contrast between Suleiman's expectations of his father's absence and the reality of Faraj's continued presence in Tripoli highlights the boy's growing awareness of the complexities and contradictions within his family's life. This sets the stage for Matar's exploration of the delicate balance between one's public and private roles, and the ways in which political forces can infiltrate and disrupt the domestic sphere.

In this passage, Suleiman is struck by the fact that his father Faraj is walking around in Tripoli, a place "where I could touch him, here where we should be together" (*ITCOM 5*), rather than being away on a business trip as Suleiman had assumed. Suleiman repeats this observation, noting that "Baba wasn't on a business trip, but here, in Tripoli, where we should be together" (*ITCOM 6*), but right there in the city where they should be united as a family. Suleiman's unease stems not just from the implications for the household power dynamics, but also from the fact that he can see his father in a public space without being able to approach him. Faraj has the ability to disappear behind the veil of a "small red towel on a clothesline" (*ITCOM 7*) and enter a mysterious building on Martyr's Square, suggesting the intrusion of his political life into the family's private sphere.

This unsettles Suleiman, as he recognizes that his father's presence in the public realm, rather than being away on the business trips that would sustain the household, signals the encroachment of political forces into their domestic life. As Hannah Arendt theorizes, economic activities like business belong to the private sphere, so Faraj's public presence disrupts this established order. This scene introduces a central question that Matar's writing seems to grapple with: what happens when the boundaries between Arabs' public and private lives become blurred

due to the intrusion of politics? And what power do Arab storytellers hold in exploring these dynamics? Suleiman's observations highlight the tension between the family's intimate, private space and the public, political world that Faraj inhabits. This sets the stage for Matar's exploration of how these realms collide, and the consequences for the individuals caught in the crossfire.

In *The Anatomy of Disappearance*, the narrator Nuri returns to Cairo with his stepmother Mona after his father Kamal has been kidnapped. Nuri, who had previously taken Cairo's presence for granted, now finds himself deeply disoriented, acutely aware of the "damp tarmac" and "heavy air" of the "old and overpopulated city" (TAOD139). This heightened sensitivity to his surroundings reflects Nuri's profound sense of loss and dislocation, as he has now been deprived of the stable domestic space symbolized by his parents. With both his mother and father gone, Nuri feels a "sudden, bottomless, unendurable" need to be beside his father, highlighting the therapeutic power of the home and family (TAOD 139). Similarly, *In the Country of Men*, Suleiman's unease stems from the disruption of the expected domestic dynamic caused by his father Faraj's unexpected presence in the public sphere of Tripoli. Just as Nuri becomes hyper-aware of his environment when the comforts of home are threatened, Suleiman grapples with the implications of seeing his father in a space where he "should be together" with his family. Both scenes illustrate how the intrusion of external, often political, forces into the private realm can profoundly unsettle the characters, forcing them to confront the fragility of their domestic stability. Matar's writing seems to explore the delicate balance between these public and private spheres, and the consequences when that balance is disrupted.

In *The Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the absence of Nuri's father Kamal also has a profound impact on Nuri's relationship with the city of Cairo. Without Kamal's presence, Nuri loses a sense of mastery and control over the familiar urban landscape, much like how Suleiman

in *In the Country of Men* is unsettled by the disruption of the expected domestic dynamic caused by his father Faraj's unexpected public presence. Nuri's father's disappearance has reconfigured his sense of space and belonging in the city. He now feels a "great emptiness" in his father's apartment (146), and desperately seeks to regain a sense of stability and comfort in his surroundings. For instance, he tries to hold his stepmother Mona's hand, seeking the physical connection and security that his father's absence has taken away. He places his "hand over, hoping she would hold it tightly" (*ITCOM* 142) Furthermore, when the family lawyer Hass implies that Kamal had a secret, parallel private life with his mistress Béatrice Benameur, Nuri is deeply disturbed. The thought of his father leading a "double life" which is "not too dissimilar from the life and mother shared with him in Cairo" (*AOD* 214). This upsets Nuri and makes him change his feelings and perceptions of his father. This highlights how the clash between the public and private spheres is a central concern in Matar's writing. Nuri's struggle to come to terms with the disruption of his family's private life by external, often political, forces mirrors Suleiman's unease in *In the Country of Men*. Both characters grapple with the fragility of their domestic stability and the unsettling intrusion of the public realm into their private worlds. Matar's exploration of these themes reflects a broader examination of how the boundaries between Arabs' public and private lives can become blurred, with profound consequences for the individuals caught in the crossfire.

The narrative details may differ between the scenes of *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance* - with one father unexpectedly appearing in public and the other vanishing from the private sphere. However, the impact on the young narrators is strikingly similar. In both cases, the disruption of the expected domestic dynamic leaves the protagonists, Suleiman and Nuri, feeling deeply unsettled and disoriented within the very cities they once knew intimately. The clear boundaries between their public and private worlds have been blurred, forcing them to confront

the fragility of the comfortable, familiar spaces they once took for granted. At the heart of Matar's exploration lies this central conflict between the public and private realms. The intrusion of external, often political, forces into the characters' domestic lives shatters their sense of security and belonging. Suleiman and Nuri are compelled to grapple with the implications of this upheaval, as the disintegration of their carefully constructed home environments leaves them unmoored and adrift. Matar's adept handling of this theme underscores a deeper examination of the complex ways in which the public and private spheres intersect and collide within the lives of his characters. The uneasy and often painful consequences of this collision become a driving force in Matar's narratives, as he explores the profound personal impact of broader sociopolitical disruptions. Matar's depiction of these pivotal scenes highlights his mastery in capturing the human experience of displacement and the fragility of domestic stability when confronted with the intrusion of the public realm. His characters' struggle to reconcile the two spheres reflects a universal struggle that transcends the specifics of time and place.

In *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, the father figure is depicted as deeply attached to a specific book, Badr Shakir al-Sayyab's *Rain Song*, which he has hardly set down since his wife passed away. Nuri, who typically tries to connect with his father's thoughts by reading the same newspaper articles or book passages, struggles to grasp what his father, a man so focused on unspoken plans and immersed in history and current events, sees in al-Sayyab's poetry. Nuri finds it hard to believe that his father, who is dedicated to his job and political activism, could possess such sensitivity and depth; he assumes that this is solely his mother's domain. However, he begins to wonder if he has misjudged his father. Perhaps his father does find meaning in al-Sayyab's verses and understands her in some way. Matar's work is infused with a love for literature, portraying it as both a source of enjoyment and a means of hope and comfort during the darkest moments.

Matar's narrative in *In the Country of Men* shifts its focus, moving from a more general unease surrounding the city space to a more specific examination of the disturbance and clash between the private and public realms within an Arab family's home. This clash emerges as the central force structuring the novel, replacing the earlier cultural tensions. Matar reflects this new dynamic through the paranoid setup of Suleiman's Libyan household, where the family has configured their home to keep the unfamiliar and the outside world at bay. The house is divided into a front and back section, "There was a front and a back half to [their] house, divided by the hallway swing doors" (*ITCOM* 52). The front "formal rooms" are designed for entertaining guests they do not know well. "The formal rooms: the reception room where we received guests we didn't know very well and where I practiced my piano, complete with a formal dining room they never use" (*ITCOM* 52). Whereas the back section houses the more intimate spaces where they keep "the television, then the kitchen, and beyond them the bathroom and bedrooms" (*ITCOM* 52). This meticulous compartmentalization of the home demonstrates the family's obsession with protecting their domestic space. The gradual increase in intimacy as one moves from the front to the back of the house is designed to keep unwanted visitors from penetrating their most private realms. Through this paranoid architectural layout, Matar illustrates how vulnerable Libyan private space is to intrusion by the Qaddafi regime's overbearing public presence. Despite the family's efforts to maintain a clear divide between their public and private spheres, Matar suggests that this separation can never truly be sustained. However, the house's configuration does provide a temporary respite, allowing the family to carve out a semblance of domestic sanctuary within the larger sociopolitical upheaval. Matar's nuanced exploration of this fraught dynamic lies at the heart of his examination of the public-private clash that structures the novel.

In *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt explores the dynamic relationship between the public and private realms. She posits that "everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest publicity" (50). This is centered on political action and discourse. It is akin to a table which is "located between those who sit around it," simultaneously "relating and separating men at the same time" (52). Arendt argues that while the public realm holds immense significance, a life lived entirely in the public eye can become "shallow" (71) as it leaves little space for deeper contemplation and the nurturing of personal relationships. Conversely, she defines the private realm as that which "stays hidden from the public, like birth, death, and love" (63). Despite the modern era's tendency to enrich the private sphere, Arendt cautions that a life confined solely to one's own thoughts is fraught with uncertainty and obscurity, a "shadowy" existence (50). She suggests that we require some degree of public validation to make our individual experiences tangible, as "the twilight which illuminates our private and intimate lives is ultimately derived from the much harsher light of the public realm"(51). Arendt's insights highlight the delicate balance between the public and private dimensions of human existence, underscoring the interdependence of these realms in shaping our lived experiences and sense of identity. Her work invites us to navigate the intricacies of this relationship, exploring the ways in which the public and private spheres intersect, complement, and challenge one another.

Arendt's analysis suggests that the traditional boundaries between the public and private spheres have been eroded in the modern age, with both positive and negative implications. However, for Arab societies, and particularly for marginalized Arab women, the relationship between private and public space has an inverse dynamic, posing significant challenges. Maggie Awadalla's article "The Labyrinth of Enclosures and Concealment in the Novels of Two Arab Women Writers: 'Your Gazes Behind Which to Hide Myself'" explores this dynamic through her

examination of Hanan al-Shaykh's Arabic novel *Women of Sand and Myrrh*. Awadalla observes how one of the protagonists, Nur "lives in a large extended house with surrounding grounds" where "she can drive a motor bike (which is otherwise prohibited by law for a woman to drive in public)" (52). She enjoys a certain level of freedom within the confines of her large, secluded family home, where she can even ride a motorcycle - an activity typically prohibited for women in public. However, Nur' "public life beyond the walls of the family house is severely curtailed" as she is required to have a male escort and lacks a passport, restricting her ability to navigate the public sphere. This spatial dilemma is not unique to al-Shaykh's novel; the author has observed a similar pattern in other Arab-Anglophone literature. In these works, the private domestic space often limits the characters' capacity to engage with and effect change in the public realm, while the constraints of the public realm, in turn, restrict their ability to fully express themselves within the private sphere. Among these authors, Matar appears to be the most privileged or best positioned to represent this intricate spatial challenge faced by Arabs, particularly Arab women, in navigating the complex interplay between the private and public realms. In Matar's *Anatomy of Disappearance* and *In the Country of Men*, he adeptly addresses the spatial challenges faced by Arabs, particularly women, in navigating the private and public realms. In *In the Country of Men*, the character of Najwa embodies the struggle for agency within a patriarchal society, where her domestic life is constrained by political oppression. Meanwhile, in *Anatomy of Disappearance*, Nuri's relationship with his mother reflects the impact of personal loss and societal expectations on women's identities. Matar's nuanced exploration of these themes highlights the resilience of women in the Arab world as they confront the complexities of their environments.

Without a meaningful presence in the public realms of media, literature, and politics, Arabs risk relegating themselves to the margins of society. However, an overemphasis on Arab

representation in the wrong public spaces, such as American media, can paradoxically undermine their ability to maintain a secure private life. This dynamic can leave Arabs feeling both exposed and powerless. Margaret Canovan, in her introduction to the second edition of Arendt's *The Human Condition*, notes that from the 17th century onward, governments began to intervene in "economic activities that had traditionally been private matters for the house" (xvi). This governmental intrusion caused individuals to perceive themselves as "helpless flotsam on the currents of socioeconomic forces"(xvi) beyond their control. In other words, the government's penetration of the private sphere - through the imposition of rules on how families subsist in their homes or the enforcement of those rules within the domestic space - can erode an individual's sense of agency and ability to effect political change in the public arena. While Arendt's analysis of this process presents it as a historical *fait accompli*, the author argues that this dynamic remains a particularly pressing issue for Arabs living in Anglophone societies. For Arabs, the balance between public representation and private life seems especially precarious. They risk losing their private space when they are represented in the public sphere, or becoming invisible altogether when they attempt to safeguard their private realm. Unlike the balance that Arendt advocates, Arabs appear to struggle to find a stable equilibrium between these two realms of human existence.

When Arabs are overexposed and misrepresented in the media, it becomes easier and more justifiable for their private spaces - their personal belongings, homes, and religious beliefs - to be invaded, all in the name of national security. Their religious practices are portrayed as irreconcilably foreign, and their desire for privacy is viewed as a cover for bombs, terrorism, and strangeness. By framing their critiques of Arabs as mere commentary on the perceived disposability of Arab Islam, rather than as an integral part of many Arabs' identity, the government and media are able to engage in thinly veiled racism. This public display of Arab private lives

allows American or Anglophone policymakers to misrepresent Arabs, selectively reporting on the aspects of their lives that serve to "ready the public for war," as described by Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky in *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*. When the private becomes public, and the media and government decide to intrude into Arab homes, Arabs lose control over how they are portrayed. And when they lose control of their own representation, Arabs also lose control over their place in society. The blurring of the boundaries between the public and private spheres has dire consequences for Arab communities, who find themselves vulnerable to mischaracterization and the erosion of their autonomy.

In Matar's *In the Country of Men*, the layout of Suleiman's home seems deliberately designed to maintain a clear separation between the family's private and public lives, rendering any intrusion into the deeper recesses of the house as scandalous and inappropriate. This architectural arrangement proves effective when the revolutionary committee - Qaddafi's loyalists - come looking for Suleiman's father, Faraj, at their residence. Suleiman and his family confine the uninvited guests to the reception room, which is where visitors are typically received. Suleiman's mother, Najwa, first attempts to keep the men from entering the home, asserting that "this is his home" and that they "are not coming in" (*ITCOM* 61). Moosa, Faraj's young friend and political confidant who frequently visits their home, tries to calm the situation. However, one of the men manages to sneak "deeper into our house" and returns with Najwa's "medicine," which turns out to be a bottle of alcohol - "not only forbidden by God and tradition... [but] also illegal" (*ITCOM* 64). This deeper penetration of the house and the subsequent discovery of one of Najwa's secrets reinforce the observation that the deeper one goes into the family's private domain, the more secrets and intimacy are revealed. The strategic layout of the home and the family's efforts to maintain the

boundary between the public and private spheres illustrate the importance of safeguarding their personal lives and the delicate balance that must be struck when faced with unwanted intrusion.

In a bid to diffuse the tense situation, Moosa, Faraj's young friend, takes a calming approach. He suggests to the revolutionary committee members that they should "have tea first, then you can search the house," guiding them into the reception room (*ITCOM* 64). This liminal space, intended for receiving guests they "didn't know very well" (*ITCOM* 52), serves as a kind of quarantine zone where Moosa can exert some control over the situation. Moosa demonstrates hospitality and intimacy, offering the men cigarettes, serving them tea, and bringing them food. This calculated display seems to convince the intruders that the reception room is the extent of the private space they need to see, deterring them from delving deeper into the house. The reception room creates the illusion of privacy, leading the men to believe that the rest of the home holds no greater secrets than this semi-public area. Importantly, Moosa's warm and personable demeanor has the most significant impact. By humanizing the family, he makes it socially unacceptable for the men to proceed further into the private spaces of the house, as they now have a personal connection to someone inside. This strategic use of hospitality and the creation of an intermediary zone between the public and private realms ultimately serves to protect the family's innermost sanctum from unwanted intrusion.

While Moosa keeps the intruding men occupied, Suleiman contemplates the character of Scheherazade from the classic tale *One Thousand and One Nights*. Scheherazade, the woman who told stories to the king to postpone her own execution, serves as a reflection on the practical benefits of storytelling in this particular scene. Suleiman wonders how the "secretly trembling... Scheherazade [kept] her nerve" before King Shahryar (*ITCOM* 66), and then affirms that "she... was one of the bravest people that had ever lived" because "it's one thing not to fear death, another

to sing under its sword" (*ITCOM 67*). In this way, Scheherazade's story illuminates the dynamics at play - Moosa, the literary-minded man who has "infect[ed] Suleiman 'with his love of language'" (*ITCOM 58*), is using his powers of oration to hold off those with political power, the revolutionary committee, by entertaining them. Moosa, like Scheherazade, is "singing under death's sword," ingratiating himself and Suleiman's family to the otherwise unfeeling committee. Although Moosa does not directly tell stories to keep the men in the reception room, his hospitable gestures and engaging demeanor effectively re-sacralize the family's private space, preventing the intruders from penetrating further into the home. The invocation of Scheherazade's tale serves as a powerful metaphor for the ways in which storytelling and interpersonal connection can be deployed as a means of resistance and protection in the face of authoritarian incursion.

When the "pockmarked man" (later revealed as Sharief) insists on searching the house, Moosa's calculated efforts convince the other committee members that they "came to find Faraj, not search the house" (*ITCOM 68*). Moosa's warm hospitality in the semi-public reception room leads most of the revolutionaries to believe they have seen all they need to see. However, the deceptive nature of the reception room itself also plays a role - it evokes a sense of intimacy without truly revealing any secrets, lulling the men into a false sense of having entered private space. Together, Moosa's performance and the room's illusion of privacy succeed in keeping the committee away from Faraj's incriminating book collection. This bizarre arrangement of storytelling and faux-private spaces underscores just how precious privacy is for Suleiman's family. After the committee leaves, Moosa recites verses from the Quran, adding his own words - a testament to his literary inclinations and further connection to the legendary Scheherazade. Notably, Moosa calls upon God by the name "Concealer," reflecting the characters' deep-seated anxiety and need for protection.

Matar's narrative highlights the precariousness of private space in Libya, emphasizing the great lengths the family must go to safeguard it. Faraj's political aspirations, which threaten the stability of his home, also paradoxically depend on the sanctity of that same home. Public life, as Hannah Arendt noted, is only possible once the "urgent needs of life itself" have been secured in the private sphere (*ITCOM* 65). This intricate interplay between public and private, between political convictions and domestic sanctuary, underscores the fragility of the characters' circumstances. Matar masterfully weaves together the themes of storytelling, piety, and the profound importance of the private realm in the face of encroaching political forces.

Matar's *In the Country of Men* emphasizes the rarefied and desirable nature of private space. This is exemplified through Suleiman's friendship with the neighborhood boys, particularly Adnan, a sickly boy with hemophilia and a compromised immune system. After much persuasion, Adnan agrees to let the boys witness his routine of taking "two injections a day" in the privacy of his home (*ITCOM* 126). However, he imposes a condition - the boys must not laugh or he'll slap each one of them (*ITCOM* 126). This sacred quality of Adnan's home is amplified by the fact that "none of [the boys] had ever been inside the house before" (*ITCOM* 127). As they watch Adnan administer the injections, the boys unanimously decide they "never wanted to see him do that again" (*ITCOM* 127). Adnan's ability to maintain this private, inviolable space grants him a unique kind of "higher moral authority" (*ITCOM* 128) in the public sphere, despite his physical vulnerabilities. The other boys, and even the adults, respect this boundary around Adnan's personal space, which he alone has the power to control. This dynamic underscores the profound value placed on privacy in Matar's narrative, where the ability to safeguard one's intimate domestic realm confers a sense of strength and dignity that transcends physical limitations. The boys' reluctance to intrude on Adnan's private rituals, even out of curiosity, speaks to the profound reverence they

hold for this sanctum of personal autonomy. Through this episode, Matar deftly explores the complex interplay between public and private realms, and how the preservation of individual privacy can become a source of empowerment and social standing in a world that increasingly encroaches on personal boundaries.

Suleiman openly expresses his envy of Adnan, acknowledging that Adnan's illness has "gained him something none of us had: a private world that involved books and syringes" (*ITCOM* 127). Suleiman goes so far as to admit that he has even "prayed for a disease that would give me what Adnan had" (*ITCOM* 127), highlighting just how deeply the neighborhood boys, and the characters in *In The Country of Men* more broadly, crave solitude and personal autonomy. The independence that Adnan's "own life and literature of illness" affords him, as he "seems to need no one" (*ITCOM* 128), becomes a source of allure for the young Suleiman. The fact that the nine-year-old boy is willing to compromise his physical well-being in the pursuit of this private realm underscores just how precious and coveted it has become. Matar masterfully uses Suleiman's candid self-reflection to unveil the profound yearning for seclusion and self-determination that permeates the social fabric of the novel's world.

Matar's portrayal of Adnan suggests that literature, particularly the "literature of illness" he immerses himself in, is essential to cultivating a sense of privacy. Much like Hannah Arendt's insights, Adnan's private sanctuary allows him to actively engage with the social and political realities around him. In fact, Matar notes that "the fact that he was closer to death aged him and gained him a higher moral authority" (*ITCOM* 128) within the community. Adnan uses this literary refuge as a means of warding off the ever-present specter of mortality, akin to the strategies employed by Scheherazade and Moosa, who were also "living under the sword" (*ITCOM* 128). Adnan's literary pursuits provide a stark contrast to the paranoia and fears that grip Suleiman and

his family regarding their home and the books it contains. While Adnan is not free from the burdens of his illness, he has found a way to counteract them through the power of the written word and the ideas it encapsulates. In this way, Adnan serves as a compelling foil, showcasing the transformative potential of private space when armed with the means to resist oppressive forces, such as the dictatorial regime of Qaddafi. His example suggests that the cultivated solitude and intellectual refuge afforded by literature could serve as a powerful bulwark against the encroachments of tyranny. By highlighting Adnan's resilience and the sustenance he draws from his private literary world, Matar invites the reader to envision the possibilities that might have unfolded had more Libyans been able to access such sanctuaries of the mind. Adnan's story becomes a testament to the profound agency that can emerge when individuals are empowered to craft their own unique narratives, even in the face of immense personal and political adversity.

The character of Scheherazade has been frequently invoked when discussing Matar's *In the Country of Men*, as she seems to hold a prominent symbolic role within the narrative. Examining Scheherazade's presence allows readers to delve deeper into the question of privilege - not just the privileges enjoyed by Matar's male protagonists, but also the potential privileges that storytelling can confer upon Arab women. This is reflected in Harpreet Kaur's article entitled "Thematic Threads in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men and The Return*" which has been tackled from an empirical standpoint, readers can explore how literature can generate tangible positive change in the real world, and speculate on how this might particularly benefit Arab communities. However, Matar appears to harbor a certain ambivalence towards the reliability of literature as a tool for advocacy, which becomes evident in the ambivalent reactions of his own characters to the Scheherazade archetype. By unpacking this tension, we might gain insights into how Matar's stories, told from the perspective of economically, socially, and educationally privileged Arab

protagonists, could potentially challenge and rework his readers' assumptions about the Arab experience. Matar seems to grapple with the complexities of using literature as a medium to authentically represent and empower marginalized voices, especially those of Arab women. This nuanced approach reflects Matar's own awareness of the inherent limitations and ethical considerations that arise when a male Arab author endeavors to depict the lived realities of diverse Arab communities through the lens of his literary creations. By acknowledging these complexities, Matar invites us to critically examine the power dynamics and potential biases that can influence the narrative choices of even the most well-intentioned storytellers.

In his book entitled *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, Keith Oatley provides a compelling framework for understanding the transformative power of literature. Oatley's empirical findings suggest that the act of reading fiction can profoundly shape our perceptions of others and our own place within the social landscape. Oatley asserts that "reading fiction might enlarge people's knowledge of selves in the social world" (158) and that "readers of fiction tend to become more expert at making models of others and themselves, and at navigating the social world"(160). In other words, the stories we engage with have the capacity to reconfigure the mental frameworks we use to represent and relate to those around us. Oatley's concept of "the art of the story" acting "as something... beyond" readers (162) is particularly intriguing, as it suggests that literature has the power to challenge the boundaries of our personal identities and disrupt our habitual assumptions.

Oatley's use of spatial metaphors, such as "enlarge," "navigate," and "world," further reinforces the notion that literature can serve as a vehicle for expanding our horizons and bridging emotional divides between disparate groups, such as Westerners and Arabs. However, this raises an intriguing paradox: Can literature's ability to erase emotional boundaries between Westerners

and Arabs simultaneously reinforce the boundaries between the private and public spheres? By making Anglophone readers value Arab private space as they would their own, literature might inadvertently strengthen the line that should exist between Arabs' public and private lives. This complex dynamic underscores the nuanced and multifaceted role that literature can play in shaping our perceptions, challenging our assumptions, and navigating the delicate balance between individual privacy and public engagement. Oatley's work provides a valuable framework for exploring these intersections and their implications for cross-cultural understanding.

Oatley's research suggests that the act of reading fiction can help readers overcome the common tendency to view others through a distorted lens. As he explains, fiction enables readers "to think oneself into the circumstances of people who have been harmed in society"(165), allowing them to better understand characters both in terms of their personality and by inhabiting their inner experience (166). By cultivating these new mental models and fostering empathy, Oatley argues that fiction can encourage readers to extend similar understanding and consideration to real-life individuals, including those from marginalized or unfamiliar backgrounds. In the context of the Arab world, this dynamic holds particularly intriguing implications. When readers are granted access to the fictional inner lives of Arab characters, they may begin to value the privacy and autonomy of real-world Arabs in a new light. Rather than viewing Arab lives through an exotic or othering lens, readers can develop a sense of familiarity and relatability that makes it harder for media and state actors to justify invasions of Arab private affairs. This process is illustrated in Matar's work, where the representation of fictional Arab characters' inner experiences paradoxically serves to render real Arab lives less penetrable and more deserving of respect for their private sphere. Matar's invocation of the Scheherazade story from *One Thousand and One Nights* further reinforces this notion, demonstrating how the power of storytelling can humanize

victims and reclaim the private spaces necessary for meaningful political participation. Oatley's insights and Matar's narrative strategies suggest that literature can play a vital role in dismantling harmful stereotypes, fostering cross-cultural empathy, and safeguarding the fundamental human right to privacy even in the face of pervasive public scrutiny and control. By granting readers access to the inner worlds of marginalized characters, fiction can reshape the mental models and social dynamics that have long perpetuated the violation of vulnerable communities.

Suleiman's mother, Najwa, offers a thought-provoking counterpoint to the perceived power of storytelling as represented by the Scheherazade narrative. While acknowledging Scheherazade's ability to secure a private domestic space to raise her children, Najwa questions whether the character truly used that domain to enact meaningful change in the public sphere. Najwa's critique centers on Scheherazade's meek request to simply "be allowed 'to live" (*ITCOM* 16), rather than asserting a more ambitious claim, such as demanding "to rule one of the corners of even a dirty little cave in his kingdom" or "be given a writing desk in a quiet room in the palace... a room the woman could call her own" (*ITCOM* 16). This echoes the feminist ideals articulated by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One's Own*, whereby private space is seen as a crucial prerequisite for public engagement and creative expression. Harlow states that Najwa reframes Scheherazade's celebrated bravery as mere "acts of tale-telling, even tattling," challenging the iconic depiction of the character as a heroic master of storytelling's power (442). In Najwa's view, Scheherazade's choice of private space was ultimately the wrong one, failing to translate into tangible political or social transformation. This perspective adds nuance to the discussion around the relationship between literature, privacy, and public life. While Oatley's analysis highlights fiction's capacity to foster empathy and reshape mental models, Najwa's critique suggests that the mere representation of private lives in the public sphere may not be enough to catalyze meaningful change. The nature

and purpose of the private space claimed or granted to marginalized individuals emerges as a critical factor in determining its broader sociopolitical impact. Najwa's skepticism invites readers to grapple with the complex interplay between personal narratives, domestic spheres, and the public good – a tension that scholars and activists have long grappled with in the pursuit of true equity and social transformation. By juxtaposing these competing perspectives, the text encourages a deeper, more nuanced understanding of the role that literature and storytelling can play in challenging entrenched power structures and advancing the interests of oppressed communities.

Najwa's critique of the Scheherazade narrative takes a more skeptical view of the character's success in securing a private domain to raise her children. Najwa suggests that Scheherazade's wish to "live to 'raise them [her children] as they should be raised'" was likely a temporary reprieve, with the "sword" of the king's wrath looming over her within a matter of "five, maybe ten years at the most" (*ITCOM* 17). In Najwa's assessment, Scheherazade's storytelling prowess may have earned her sympathy and a measure of privacy, but it did not translate into the lasting, transformative change needed to fundamentally improve her personal living situation, let alone effect broader political and social good. Najwa's perspective challenges the notion of storytelling as a panacea, casting doubt on the ability of mere narrative to consistently catalyze meaningful, long-lasting progress. Matar, through Najwa's voice, appears to be recalibrating the optimism surrounding the power of stories. The text suggests that effective storytelling should be viewed as a cyclical process: stories generate empathy and secure private space, which is then leveraged to drive public change, and the cycle repeats. However, Najwa argues that Scheherazade's narrative falters at the crucial step of translating private space into public transformation. This critique aligns with and expands upon the researcher's analysis. While the thesis has previously highlighted the impact of certain Arab-Anglophone narratives over others,

Matar now prompts the reader to consider the ethics of Arab storytelling, especially when produced by privileged voices. The text suggests that these storytellers, cognizant of their ability to shape public perceptions of Arab communities, may have an ethical obligation to approach their craft with greater nuance and care. Najwa's perspective introduces a necessary counterpoint to the celebratory view of storytelling, challenging the reader to grapple with the limitations and potential pitfalls of using narrative as a tool for social change. This nuanced examination encourages a more holistic understanding of the complex relationship between private experiences, public discourse, and the transformative power of literature.

The novel raises thought-provoking questions about the responsibility of Arab storytellers, particularly those with privileged platforms, to consider the broader impact of their narratives on public perceptions of Arab communities. Matar's work appears to challenge the notion that Arab authors should primarily focus on crafting stories that make readers "think better about Arabs". However, the text does suggest that these authors need to acknowledge the power and influence their writings wield in shaping social narratives. Najwa's character serves as a poignant example of an Arab individual whose social position and personal autonomy are constrained by the dominant storytelling traditions. Najwa is "forced to marry Faraj at fourteen," her "captive" status within her own home reinforced by the patriarchal machinations of her father and brothers (*ITCOM* 167). Particularly striking is the role of Najwa's brother, Khaled, a "gifted poet" whose "sensitivity" and "complex ideas" do not translate to empathy or understanding for his sister's desire for freedom and self-determination (*ITCOM* 169). Khaled's literary talents, rather than fostering a more nuanced perspective, instead enable him to betray Najwa to their father, condemning her to "life imprisonment" within the confines of her family's restrictive social norms. This example underscores Matar's assertion that Arab storytellers, even those with ostensibly progressive or

sympathetic intentions, must grapple with the ethical implications of their craft. The power of narrative to shape social realities, often in ways that perpetuate the oppression of marginalized groups, places a responsibility on these authors to approach their work with greater care and self-awareness. The novel thus invites a critical examination of the relationship between literature, social justice, and the ethical obligations of storytellers. It challenges the notion of storytelling as a purely artistic or entertainment-driven endeavor, instead positioning it as a domain fraught with political and social ramifications that must be navigated with nuance and a commitment to amplifying marginalized voices and experiences.

In a twist of irony, the very medium that Najwa had hoped would serve as a defense mechanism ultimately fails her. After her brother Khaled, a "gifted poet," betrays her trust and informs their father of her desire for socialization outside the confines of their home, Najwa is punished and confined to her bedroom (*ITCOM* 169). Najwa's father demands that she "contemplate her 'actions a thousand times'," a turn of phrase that inadvertently triggers Najwa's thoughts of the iconic storyteller Scheherazade (*ITCOM* 170). Najwa had initially hoped that reading could help her endure this punishment, but her father denies her this refuge, fearing that it would provide her with "more ammunition" - a telling choice of words that casts literature as a potential weapon (*ITCOM* 170). With her private space effectively stripped away, Najwa's "arsenal of literary characters" rapidly dwindles, and even the figure of Scheherazade, whom she had admired as a child, now comes to be seen as a betrayal (*ITCOM* 171). The weaponized vocabulary - "ammunition" and "arsenal" - underscores the degree to which Najwa had come to view literature as a means of defense against the constraints and oppression imposed by her family. This poignant reversal challenges the notion of literature as an unambiguous haven or sanctuary. Najwa's experience reveals the ways in which stories and narratives can be co-opted and wielded against

the very individuals they were meant to empower. The passage thus invites a deeper contemplation of the complex and sometimes fraught relationship between literature, personal agency, and the forces of patriarchal control. Through Najwa's eyes, the text highlights the precarious position of marginalized voices within dominant storytelling traditions, and the need for a more nuanced understanding of the ethical responsibilities that come with the power of narrative. The failure of literature to serve as Najwa's defense mechanism serves as a cautionary tale, urging readers to consider the ways in which storytelling can be both liberating and constraining, depending on the social and political contexts in which it is deployed.

Even as Najwa's mental reservoir of stories gradually fades, her deep-seated mistrust of books prevents her from finding any redemption or solace within them. The adult Najwa can no longer "read anything longer than a poem or a newspaper article" because "books demand too much trust," leading her to avoid them entirely (*ITCOM* 171). This aversion to books is significant, as they play a crucial role in the formation of private spaces - the kind that can command respect in the public sphere. As Adnan asserts, books function as liminal objects, simultaneously preserving public knowledge while being primarily stored and consumed in private. As Hannah Arendt argues, the public sphere has the capacity to "absorb and make shine through the centuries whatever [thing from the private sphere] men may want to save from the natural ruin of time" (55). Books, then, serve as the ideal intermediary, preserving knowledge for the public while also structuring further thought and contemplation in the private realm. It is this private-public duality of books that allows individuals to cultivate a sense of independence and agency. Tragically, Najwa's rejection of books, a result of her profound mistrust, robs her of this essential tool for maintaining her autonomy. Her well-being and private sphere are now entirely dependent on the fate of her husband, Faraj, further undermining her ability to assert her own identity and

sovereignty. This poignant narrative reveals the profound cultural and societal implications of marginalizing certain forms of knowledge and expression. Najwa's journey demonstrates how the erosion of personal access to literature and the associated private spaces can ultimately strip individuals of their fundamental rights and freedoms, trapping them within the confines of patriarchal control.

In The Country of Men, Matar underscores the vital role that the private sphere plays in reconnecting Arabs to the transformative power of books. For it is through the accessibility of books that individuals are empowered with the freedom of choice. The character Suleiman, for instance, imagines saving his mother by whisking her youthful self away to Europe, where he would "spend the money made on books for her" (*ITCOM* 174). Even after "all the books in the world were read," Suleiman envisions his mother meeting the boy she knew in Tripoli's café and falling in love, before it would be time for Suleiman's own birth (*ITCOM* 174-175). While this daydream may appear fanciful, it in fact underscores Suleiman's profound understanding of the liberating potential of books. By restoring his mother's access to literature, Suleiman is able to reconfigure her private sphere, granting her the authority to choose her own path in life - from her romantic partner to the timing of Suleiman's birth. In this way, Matar's narrative does not simply question the power of storytelling to effect social change, but rather asks a more pointed question: can Arabs afford the privilege of accessing books in the first place? Matar's work invites readers to grapple with the ethical dimensions of storytelling, challenging us to consider whose perspectives and experiences are amplified, and whose are often overlooked or marginalized. In Suleiman's imagined reconfiguration of private space, which ultimately restores Najwa's access to books, Matar urges us to reflect on how gender shapes both the accessibility of literature and the magnitude of its impact. Even as Matar's narratives are drawn from the vantage points of real and

fictional privilege, he expertly brings attention to the ways in which such privilege inevitably shapes the nature of storytelling and the social positions of Arab women. This nuanced exploration of the interplay between literature, gender, and power serves as a powerful call to action, urging readers to critically examine their own assumptions and biases, and to advocate for a more inclusive and equitable literary landscape.

While the male characters in Matar's *In The Country of Men* may initially appear to be in a position of privilege, the book's exploration of Najwa's repression ultimately paints a far more complex picture. Najwa is doubly removed from an ideal balance between private and public spheres - first through her forced marriage, and then by the relentless pressure exerted on her household by Qaddafi's regime. As previously discussed, the novel underscores the pivotal role that books play in connecting Arabs to the public domain. Matar's work also examines the interplay between storytelling and privacy on two distinct levels. On the one hand, the novel's protagonists lose both privacy and power when they are deprived of access to books. On the other hand, the very act of *Country* existing as a book serves to protect the privacy of real-life Arabs, even as the fictional private spaces within the narrative begin to unravel. The character of Sharief, with his pockmarked face and old woman's voice, provides further insight into the nuanced dynamics of storytelling at play in the novel. Through the pressure Sharief exerts on the family's book collection, Matar prompts readers to delve deeper into the ways in which the control and manipulation of literary resources can become a means of wielding power and suppressing individual autonomy. Ultimately, *In the Country of Men* exploration of the male characters' experiences, while initially seeming to position them as the privileged party, serves to underscore the far-reaching consequences of Najwa's oppression. Matar's masterful interweaving of private and public spheres, and the central role that books and storytelling play in this dynamic, invites

readers to grapple with the complex interplay of gender, power, and the fundamental human need for self-determination.

In the aftermath of Suleiman's family repelling the revolutionary committee, a striking scene unfolds. Moosa lends a hand to Najwa as she sets about burning her husband's prized book collection. Before doing so, they first make some changes to the family's reception room a space that straddles the line between public and private. The reception room features a prominent photograph of Faraj, the patriarch of the family, which has been meticulously doctored by the photographer. The image is blown up to "the size of a magazine cover and hung alone, too high up" (*ITCOM 71*), where it is almost out of sight. The photographer has made deliberate efforts to enhance Faraj's appearance, painting over the image to make him look more handsome and less dark-skinned, and placing him against a fake background of trees and sunlight. "The photographer painted over it to make Baba look more handsome, less dark" and put him in front of a fake background "standing among the trees in the sunlight" (*ITCOM 72*). Though Suleiman notes that the painting is "hung too high where it could easily be forgotten" (*ITCOM 72*), the mere presence of this carefully curated image serves to reinforce Faraj's position as the undisputed head of the household. It is a visual representation of the patriarchal power dynamics that permeate the family's domestic sphere. By first redecorating the reception room a space that bridges the public and private realms before embarking on the dramatic act of burning Faraj's books, Najwa and Moosa are engaging in a symbolic reclamation of the family's autonomy. The destruction of the books, a repository of knowledge and personal identity, becomes a defiant act of rebellion against the oppressive forces that have encroached upon their private lives. In this poignant sequence, Matar masterfully weaves together the themes of power, gender, and the multifaceted nature of private

and public spaces, inviting the reader to grapple with the complex social and political realities that shape the lived experiences of his characters.

The removal of Faraj's painting from the family's living space marks a turning point in his retreat from the public sphere. At the urging of his wife Najwa and under pressure from a zealous revolutionary committee eager to test their loyalty, Moosa takes down Faraj's carefully curated portrait. As he does so, a subtle shift seems to come over Faraj's painted expression - he now appears almost sheepish, and the trees in the background look even less vibrant than before. He is "embarrassed now, and the trees behind him look... even less lifelike" (*ITCOM* 90-1). In place of Faraj's image, Moosa hangs a portrait of Colonel Gaddafi, the authoritarian ruler with "two mysterious lines carved into his cheeks like brackets on either side of his mouth" (*ITCOM* 91) who has tightened his grip on the nation. The new painting features two enigmatic lines carved into Gaddafi's cheeks, almost like parentheses framing his mouth. Beneath the portrait is a brass plaque formally identifying him as "Colonel Muammar el-Qaddafi, the Guide of the Libyan Popular Revolution" (*ITCOM* 91). Moosa's decision to display Gaddafi's likeness in the family's living room is likely a calculated move to demonstrate their loyalty, should the revolutionary committee return. But this act of replacement has deeper implications - it not only supplants Faraj as the undisputed head of the household, but also introduces the overbearing presence of the state into their private domain. Any hopes Faraj may have harbored of leading a democratic revolution are now effectively extinguished. Through this poignant scene, the author powerfully explores the erosion of individual autonomy and the intrusion of authoritarian control into the most intimate realms of his characters' lives. The symbolic removal of Faraj's image and its replacement with Gaddafi's portrait becomes a potent metaphor for the suffocating grip of the regime and the diminishing prospects for meaningful change.

Arendt's theory posits that "the decline of the family indicates clearly that what actually took place was the absorption of the family unit into corresponding social groups" (40) and governmental structures. While Arendt sees this process as already complete, Matar's work demonstrates how this state-level encroachment unfolds within an Arab, specifically Libyan, context. The hanging of Gaddafi's portrait in the Suleiman home has two significant consequences. First, it replaces Faraj, the family patriarch, with Gaddafi - a public figure - as the symbolic head of the household. Secondly, this act forecloses the possibility that Faraj's own portrait could one day hang in other homes, supplanting Gaddafi's as a revered national hero. By hanging Gaddafi's image, Faraj's aspirations of achieving political fame and influence are effectively crushed. He had promised to "guide"(90) others, much as he had guided his own son Moosa (95). However, this vision cannot be fully realized until the true "guide" - Gaddafi himself - reclaims his rightful place within the Suleiman's family home. This powerful scene illustrates how the authoritarian state is able to infiltrate and subordinate the private domestic sphere, eroding the autonomy of the family unit. The replacement of Faraj's portrait with that of Gaddafi symbolizes the state's ability to displace traditional sources of authority and reshape the very fabric of the home, eliminating any hopes of an alternative political future.

Faraj's literary works had effectively distanced him from the public sphere. To further cement Qaddafi's threatening image, the revolutionary committee members, particularly Sharief, forced Moosa and Najwa to burn Faraj's books in their own neighborhood. Surprisingly, Faraj himself "endorses this book-burning" (*ITCOM* 101). Moosa and Najwa removed "mountains of books and papers" (*ITCOM* 92) from the most intimate space of their home - the master bedroom - and watched as Suleiman observed Faraj's "writing curl, turn red, grey, and vanish into black ash" while the books are burnt in the backyard (*ITCOM* 93). Suleiman managed to hide one book

from the fire, titled *Democracy Now*, but this could not prevent revolutionary spirit. As Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Private Sphere* suggests, Faraj was one of "those few individuals who still seek to form their opinions through literature"(247), rather than relying on the media. This was significant because literature had the power to shape "a kind of opinion capable of becoming public, but actually nonpublic" (Habermas 247) - meaning an opinion formed through private reading, but with the potential to inspire public, political action. By separating Faraj from his books, his revolutionary potential was effectively destroyed. This incident demonstrates the power of controlling and restricting access to intellectual resources as a means of suppressing dissent and stifling the growth of alternative political views. The burning of Faraj's books symbolized the erosion of his ability to engage in the kind of private, critical thinking that could have fueled public, revolutionary change.

Sharief's intrusion into Suleiman's home and neighborhood eroded the remaining sense of intimacy, fundamentally altering the dynamics of the community. The once semi-public, semi-private interactions between neighbors were now subsumed under the goals of Qaddafi's state. Neighbors became informants, offering both hospitality and information to the revolutionary committee. Suleiman's vivid description of Sharief, "Sharief, sitting in his white car, not minding the heat,... his gun probably still occupying the passenger seat beside him", conveys a sense of Sharief's transient presence - the car, not a permanent home, suggesting mobility (*ITCOM* 156). Yet, Um Masoud, the wife of a high-ranking government official named Jafer, brings Sharief cake, acknowledging his tireless efforts as he "works so hard, sitting in the sun all day" (*ITCOM* 163). This small gesture of comfort allows Sharief to linger a little longer in the neighborhood. Sharief's presence becomes a sinister fixture, a localized threat who refuses to leave until he captures Faraj. When Suleiman sees "Sharief waving at [him]," Najwa instinctively shuts the door and "the bolt

twice", desperately trying to physically exclude him (*ITCOM* 156). But Najwa's actions cannot stop Sharief from transforming the very fabric of their neighborhood's social dynamics. This erosion of the private sphere and the intrusion of state control into the intimate spaces of the community represent a profound disruption of the social order. Sharief's ubiquitous presence and the neighbors' complicity in the surveillance state demonstrate the pervasive reach of authoritarian power, as it encroaches upon the most private realms of people's lives.

Sharief's persistent presence in the neighborhood gradually transforms him into a father-like figure, especially with the children whose own fathers are absent. He even learns Suleiman's intimate pet name, "Slooma" (*ITCOM* 131), used only by close family and friends. Sharief claims that Faraj is "a good friend" and that he's "trying to defend him, but needs evidence" (*ITCOM* 131). While his true motives remain questionable, Suleiman finds himself trusting Sharief for two reasons. First, Sharief is aware of Najwa's alcoholism, a closely guarded family secret, and he chooses to "keep quiet" about it (*ITCOM* 131). This suggests that Sharief can be trusted with their private information. Second, Sharief uses his intimate knowledge of their lives - such as the "English fiery mints" (*ITCOM* 131) that Faraj used to give Suleiman, or Najwa's alcoholism - to manipulate Suleiman. As a result, Suleiman feels "so grateful he could have kissed his hand" (*ITCOM* 131). Sharief's performance of deep familiarity with Suleiman and his family grants him access to the private details and evidence that could ultimately condemn Faraj. This blurring of the boundaries between the public and the private, and the exploitation of personal information for political ends, demonstrates the chilling ways in which authoritarian power can infiltrate and disrupt the most intimate spaces of people's lives. Sharief's transformation from a menacing outsider to a quasi-parental figure in the neighborhood highlights the complex and insidious nature of the state's intrusion into the private sphere. The manipulation of trust and the leveraging of

personal knowledge illustrate how the pursuit of political control can undermine the very foundations of a community's social fabric.

When a fight breaks out among the neighborhood boys, Sharief steps in, assuming the role of a surrogate father figure to Suleiman. Suleiman had thrown a rock at the hemophilic Adnan, putting the boy's life at risk. Kareem, another neighborhood child, attacks Suleiman, but Sharief intervenes, telling "Slooma" that the boys "can't just hit each other over nothing" (*ITCOM* 164). By taking Suleiman's side - even though Suleiman's actions were certainly not "nothing" - Sharief ingratiated himself with the boy. Suleiman describes how Sharief, "pulling [him] off the pavement by hand," sighed "Slooma" and whispered to him with the kind of concern that Suleiman "craved." This paternal gesture of care and concern effectively claims Suleiman as Sharief's own. Sharief's decision to side with Suleiman and separate the boys creates a rift, "splitting the sea" and pulling Suleiman "even further away from [his best friend] Kareem" (*ITCOM* 164). By positioning himself as a father figure, Sharief obliges Suleiman to see him in that role. This leads Suleiman to eventually "handing [Sharief] what was supposed to be Baba's *Democracy Now*. Sharief's imposition of fatherly authority in a neighborhood lacking adult male presence gives a satirical twist to the book's title, *In the Country of Men*. But Sharief uses this power to deliberately destroy the relationships between neighbors, isolating families and gathering evidence of disloyalty, like the confiscated book. Sharief's actions represent the government's ability to infiltrate and disrupt the private domestic space through surveillance and coercion. This complex dynamic highlights the insidious ways in which authoritarian power can exploit the vulnerabilities of a community, undermining the very fabric of human connections and trust that hold a neighborhood together.

Upon Faraj's return to the family home, battered and bloodied, the balance and privacy of the domestic space appears to be somewhat restored. However, the damage inflicted by Sharief's

intrusion remains palpable. Suleiman's house becomes more segregated and less reflective, with "the mirror in the bathroom covered" to prevent Faraj from seeing his bruised and battered form (*ITCOM* 195). As Faraj recovers from his ordeal, Najwa restricts Suleiman's access to certain parts of the house and denies him the chance to see his father. The covered mirror distresses Suleiman, as it prevents him from even "peek in on Baba" (*ITCOM* 195). When Faraj finally returns, Suleiman notices that their usual family routine has been disrupted. He observes that "Mama didn't want me to wake him up when on Friday mornings I always ran to his bed and pounced on him" (*ITCOM* 196). The derangement of privacy within their own home, with Suleiman excluded from the deepening mystery surrounding his father's ordeal, deeply troubles him. This erosion of the family's intimate sphere reflects the broader societal disruption caused by authoritarian intrusion. The once-familiar domestic spaces have become fragmented and guarded, as the family struggles to reclaim a sense of privacy and security in the wake of Sharief's coercive presence. Faraj's diminished role as the father figure further underscores the damaging impact of this intrusion, as the traditional power dynamics within the family unit have been upended. The family's attempts to restore a sense of normalcy are thwarted, leaving Suleiman grappling with the unsettling reality of a home that no longer feels like a sanctuary.

Faraj's battered body speaks not only to Qaddafi's capacity for inflicting physical harm, but also to the regime's ability to render fathers unrecognizable to their own families. Suleiman begins to doubt "that the man in Baba's bed was Baba" (*ITCOM* 202). As he peers through the bedroom window and sees "a naked man sitting on the bed, his back crisscrossed in dark glistening lines, some oozing in blood" (*ITCOM* 202). The man's face frightens Suleiman, with "eyes full of air or water or blood... like split rotten tomatoes... and his lower lip... as fat and purple as a baby aubergine" (*ITCOM* 202). With Najwa restricting Suleiman's access to his father during Faraj's

recovery, and Suleiman's own doubts about the identity of this "monster," the family is unable to restore their intimate bond. When Suleiman runs into the house shouting "who's in there?" (*ITCOM* 202). Faraj turns away and instructs Najwa to "take him away, he'll get nightmares" (*ITCOM* 202). Faraj has become literally unrecognizable, and the once-clear boundaries between private and public space have been forever blurred by the state's intrusive interventions. This disturbing transformation of Faraj's familiar form represents the regime's power to disrupt and deform the very foundations of the family unit. The sanctity of the domestic sphere has been violated, leaving Suleiman and his family grappling with the unsettling reality that their home is no longer a safe haven from the encroaching forces of authoritarianism. The vivid descriptions of Faraj's disfigured body serve as a visceral reminder of the physical and psychological toll exacted by the regime's brutal tactics, shattering the illusion of the family's security and forcing them to confront the harsh realities of life under oppression.

After witnessing his battered father's return, one might expect Suleiman to find solace in a joyful family reunion. However, the intimacy that arises in the aftermath seems to exclude Suleiman, as the balance between the public and private spheres shifts heavily towards the private. This shift underscores Faraj's inability to engage with the public, political realm. Suleiman grows weary of his parents' "new life together, where Baba never went away and Mama was never ill" (*ITCOM* 221), feeling stifled and deprived of the "presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear, which assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves" (Arendt 50). Suleiman's life becomes increasingly confined to the domestic sphere, taking on a "shadowy" quality. In a desperate attempt to reclaim his connection to the public world, he longs "for the summer to end and for school to begin" (*ITCOM* 221), which would force him to venture beyond the confines of his home. While Suleiman may have missed the private intimacy of family life, the

absence of Faraj's political books and ideas leaves this newfound privacy feeling unfulfilling. Suleiman recognizes that the private sphere must ultimately segue into the public sphere, as the two are inextricably linked. The family's withdrawal into the domestic realm underscores the deleterious impact of authoritarian control, which has not only disrupted their public lives but also threatened the sanctity of their private spaces. Suleiman's yearning for the public sphere reflects a universal human need for connection, validation, and a sense of purpose that cannot be wholly satisfied within the confines of the home.

Suleiman is not the one who suffers most from being forced into domestic life; it is Faraj who bears the brunt of it. As the story unfolds, he finds himself trapped in a home devoid of books, facing a slow decline until his death. Faraj can only watch as the Libyan government systematically dismantles everything that makes his quiet life manageable and his home comfortable. Suleiman notes that "in 1979, a few days after I was sent to Cairo, the entire Libyan population was given three days to deposit liquid assets into the National Bank" (*ITCOM* 234). Following this, the government-imposed withdrawal limits on all accounts, making it impossible for his parents to maintain their affluent lifestyle. As a result, Faraj is forced to take a job at a nationalized pasta factory. This state-imposed banking system exemplifies how the government brings "household and housekeeping activities" including financial matters into the public sphere. Traditionally, the private realm of the household has been where essential life needs and individual survival are managed. By controlling their finances and property, Qaddafi's regime strips away the "chief condition for admission to the public realm and full-fledged citizenship" (Arendt 45). Furthermore, Qaddafi undermines Faraj's independence. Once an international businessman with ideas that reached beyond Libya, he is now reduced to working for the state in a local pasta factory. Faraj's world contracts, reflecting the harsh realities of life under an oppressive regime.

Kamal from *Anatomy of a Disappearance* helps clarify how Faraj's new budget and schedule impact his political engagement. Kamal illustrates how having access to private space without being trapped in it can create political power. The narrator, Nuri, understands that his "Father did not have a job; that he did not need to work for money; that he had inherited a good amount from his father... the last in a long line of silk merchants" (*AOD* 98). This financial security allows Kamal to focus on "the military dictatorship that ruled our country," against which he "committed himself to fighting a war" (*AOD* 99). Much like Edward Said and other wealthy Arabs, Kamal's privilege enables him to think critically about politics and drive change more effectively.

Kamal does not actually spend more time in private space than Faraj does; in fact, he spends "little time... at home" (*AOD* 98). While Faraj has an open schedule, Kamal uses his home primarily as a place to quickly recharge before heading back to the public sphere. He spends his time "resting, reading in [his] studies, before returning to the secret obsession to which... [he was] devoted" (*AOD* 98). Instead of using his free time for personal enjoyment, Kamal focuses on political matters. His privilege allows him to maintain a powerful private space with minimal effort, where he can briefly rest and read before pursuing his political goals.

Faraj starts the novel in a similar way. At the beginning, readers learn that he is not truly away on business; instead, he is involved in organizing political dissenters. He is wealthy enough and likely has enough business connections to avoid working full-time, allowing him plenty of time to focus on political protests away from both his job and family. However, by the end of the novel, Faraj's only public role is at a local pasta factory, working under the conditions set by the Libyan government. He returns home to translate Machiavelli, partly to "help keep the Italian alive" (*ITCOM* 235) and partly to regain the economic and intellectual resources that once supported his political activities, hoping to restore his library through this translation.

Unfortunately, his attempts are in vain. Unlike Kamal, Faraj loses the resources necessary to maintain and rebuild his personal library.

Suleiman's forced exile in Egypt, arranged by his parents for his safety, transforms his relationships with his family and his country. After learning about his father's arrest for reading *Democracy Now* to his factory colleagues, he realizes that "influence in this world might not be as insignificant as [he] had thought" (*ITCOM* 221). In a time when Qaddafi's regime was abducting dissenters or "Strayed Dogs" (*ITCOM* 231), much like what happened to Matar's father, Suleiman decides to take responsibility for the controversial book. Knowing that Libyan intelligence is monitoring his phone calls with his mother, he feels the urge to inform them, saying, "it was best to say nothing, but the temptation to inform our eavesdropper was too great," he confesses "I saved it." "It's my book, I am to blame, Baba never believed in such ideas" (*ITCOM* 237). This moment of confession marks a turning point in the narrative. By the end, Suleiman's acknowledgment of his father's commitment to activism not only redeems his earlier betrayal of his friend Rashid but also restores his own sense of masculinity. Reconciled with his father, Suleiman admires his father's bold actions and the "element of intrigue and madness in the way Father had behaved" (*ITCOM* 237). This shift symbolically reestablishes the power dynamic, positioning his father as a figure to rival Qaddafi, referred to as "the Father of the Great el-Fateh of September Revolution" (*ITCOM* 183). It also emphasizes his earlier rejection of relying solely on divine intervention for change.

In *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Edward Said expresses that "the pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidity and the satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of the question" (179). The final discussion on post-exile nationalism and belonging in Matar's novels reveal a changing relationship with Libya, as Suleiman admits it "grew distant in the background

and began to mean little” (230). His exile and “unchosen loss” weaken his connection to home, making “nationalism... as thin as a thread” (232). Critics have noted that Suleiman’s reflections exhibit “emotional numbing or dissociation” and a “‘coping mechanism’ whereby one cuts oneself from feelings that are too painful or frightening to handle” (Kearney 135).

Despite his strong desire “to be free of the past,” his time in Egypt reinforces Suleiman’s earlier belief that activism and courage are tied to masculinity. He admits to feeling “somehow impotent” because he can’t effect change in Libya. He grapples with a sense of “void” and “emptiness,” feeling fearful like Bahloul and lacking the “peculiar sort of strength” that Adnan possesses. His disconnection from his nation is further highlighted by his sense of inferiority to Kareem, who is now married to Suleiman’s childhood crush, Nasser’s sister, reflecting the contrasting traits of their fathers, Faraj and Rashid, as traitor and loyalist. This discussion underscores how social and cultural pressures in a patriarchal society compel oppressed individuals to yearn for personal independence and agency.

Matar illustrates the fate of the now-embarrassed Faraj as he attempts to reclaim his former power. Remember that Suleiman saved just one book from the fire: *Democracy Now*. In 1994, Faraj is arrested for reading this very book to his coworkers at the factory. This act confuses Suleiman, as his father has lost the ideas that once made him a threat to the Libyan regime so “there was indeed an element of intrigue and madness in the way Father [Faraj] had behaved” (*AOD* 236). Suleiman perceives an “element of intrigue and madness” (*AOD* 236) in Faraj’s actions, questioning why he chooses to resist at this point. In a context where Faraj lacks other means of legitimization, such as wealth, property, and privacy, *Democracy Now* becomes more of a liability than a catalyst for rebellion.

Suleiman poses an important question: "Had he come to prefer death over slavery, unlike my Scheherazade, refusing to live under the sword?" (*ITCOM* 236). By referencing Scheherazade one last time, Matar prompts us to consider whether there are alternatives to storytelling as a means to achieve Arab freedom. Should Arabs be expected to endure living under constant threat while sharing their narratives? Although Matar's stories illustrate how storytelling enhances the lives of Arabs, he still questions its effectiveness. Despite the hardships in Faraj's life, his rejection of Scheherazade supports his wife Najwa's critique. If it appears that storytelling primarily benefits Arab men while neglecting women, Faraj demonstrates that "singing under the sword" is not a viable option for Arab men struggling in the aftermath of their shattered homes. However, Matar does not completely dismiss the value of storytelling. His novels allow English-speaking audiences to grasp the tragedy of Arabs' loss of private space. By addressing Western media with complex narratives, Matar's work suggests that literature can serve as a corrective to the misrepresentation of Arabs in English-speaking societies. Yet, scholars have not fully explored how Matar's novels specifically respond to Western policymakers and media.

In The Country of Men, Suleiman's surroundings are filled with images and symbols that reflect a bourgeois reinterpretation of cultural identity, which is disconnected from the broader social and political context. This system of signs legitimizes a dependency that arises when, as Fanon describes, "the national bourgeoisie discovers its historical mission as intermediary" (101). Here, mimicry does not create a space for contestation that challenges the purity of origins, nor does it expose the contradictions of colonial discourse as Homi Bhabha suggests. Instead, in a decolonized political setting, it transforms a class-driven cultural desire rooted in economic interests into a system of signs that replaces reality. This aligns with Ashis Nandy's observation that colonialism: "helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and

temporal entity to a psychological category” (xi). Within the narrative, this psychological framework significantly influences Suleiman as he navigates a sociopolitical landscape filled with contradictory symbols. He moves between a familial environment that provides him with markers of identity associated with a Westernized bourgeois culture and a sociopolitical world dominated by the symbols of socialist revolutionary ideology. In the novel, Gaddafi’s revolutionary ideology is visibly present in society through posters, slogans, chants from supporters, activities of Revolutionary Committees, and military parades. Suleiman expresses ambivalence as he adapts to this highly performative reality.

The rise of radical politics within the family introduces the protagonist to a different aspect of a “regime of simulacrum,” where the regime’s authority is expressed through a network of fetishized signs, such as the colors, names, and slogans of the revolution. In totalitarian postcolonial settings, political power is socialized by saturating everyday life with symbols and signifiers that create a theatrical political reality. In the postcolonial, social meaning is continuously shaped by a dominant political narrative that has a strong material presence through various symbols and images. For Suleiman, living in this environment means navigating a world where signs hold a fetishistic power as representations of the postcolonial authority, which Achille Mbembe refers to as the *commandment*. Mbembe explains that the post-colony is a “regime of simulacrum” because “the signs, vocabulary, and narratives produced by the commandment are not just symbols; they carry a surplus of meanings that are non-negotiable and from which one cannot deviate” (103). While all power structures are expressed through signs, what sets the postcolony apart as a “regime of simulacrum” is that these signs are imbued with an excess of power that serves as the sole means to “institutionalize [a] world of meaning” (*ITCOM* 19). This

surplus of power and meaning found in fetishized signs encapsulates the essence of the “banality of power” in the postcolony.

In the novel, the depiction of Colonel Gaddafi along with his title, the Guide; the revolution's name, al-Fateh; the Green Book as the revolution's constitution; the color green; and the televised images of interrogations, executions, and military parades forms a network of political signs and language that facilitates a performative and theatrical political existence. Despite its tight control over power, the commandment requires constant affirmation of its authority through public displays and rituals that emphasize the fetishization of these signs. Political submission becomes more than just a status; it transforms into a ritual that demands ongoing repetition. These ritualized displays of loyalty indicate that the commandment's socialization occurs mainly through enforced performance rather than just ideological indoctrination. By repeating these acts, the commandment tries to obscure its performative nature, yet this only reinforces that characteristic as social life becomes dominated by a “regime of simulacrum”. Alison Pargeter, a political analyst describes Tripoli, noting, “The Brother Leader was everywhere, in one form or another something that added to the city's somewhat surreal quality” (7).

The performative nature of political discourse in the novel blurs the lines between social and political spheres, making it impossible for depoliticized social spaces to exist. The commandment's influence through signs and images fills the subject's social life with political significance. As depicted in the story, encountering these fetishized symbols requires the subject to engage in specific forms of political interaction and to perform rituals imposed upon them. In this social context, leading an apolitical life or expressing political neutrality is seen as a form of opposition, because the theatricalized reality relies on continuous engagement with performative

acts to endure. Later in the narrative, the adult narrator reflects on this overwhelming state, noting, “Nationalism is as thin as a thread, which may explain why many feel it needs to be anxiously protected” (*ITCOM* 231).

Such events portrayed in the narrative occur in the late seventies of the previous century, which highlighted the height of an initial revolutionary period of the regime in which Gaddafi “was at his most experimental” (Pargeter 9). As far as cultural legitimization for political experiments is concerned, the anti-imperialist, pan-Arab ideology of Gaddafi’s regime supplied the ideological tools for a discourse of permanent revolution. Lying in his bed, listening to the radio after the release of his father, the narrator hears the voice of the Guide announcing, “Now we can truly end the old Libyan society and build the new one, where the revolutionary elements help each other in fighting antirevolutionary movements in the universities, in the factories and in the streets” (*ITCOM* 216). As far as logistic enforcement is concerned, the authoritarian control of society by a “multilayered security apparatus” (Pargeter 8). The availability of oil revenues that were channeled through a “distributive rentier state” model ensured the social compliance (Martinez 3).

Gaddafi’s master political experiment is the Jamahiriya regime itself, which he based on his “Third Universal Theory” introduced as an alternative to capitalism and communism (Vandewalle 97). It is predicated on the self-governance of the population through local councils ensuring the bottom-up implementation of political rule and reconstructing the state as “the state of the masses” (Pargeter 97). However, the political apathy of a population still largely illiterate, the hostile international context, and especially the persistent authoritarian nature of a highly centralized regime, proved detrimental to this experiment. The General People’s Congress, formed as an embodiment of the People’s Authority, was, however, kept in check and controlled by a

separate political structure over which Gaddafi presided, i.e., the Revolutionary Authority. The Revolutionary Committees portrayed in the narrative represent the security apparatus of the Revolutionary Authority which controlled all sectors of a society that was purported to be sovereign. Alison Pargeter's *Libya the Rise and Fall of Qaddafi*, asserts, "Within a year of the establishment of his Jamahiriya, Gaddafi had effectively rendered its formal political institutions impotent, turning them into little more than a façade" (96). The experiment however persisted as a political discourse and a performative political reality while the state was increasingly consolidated around an authoritarian centralized regime.

In the final passage of *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, Nuri tries on his father's old suits and is taken aback by how much they seem to have shrunk from disuse. He reflects that the suit "might have fit the fourteen-year-old boy I was when I last saw my father" (223). This suggests that, in Nuri's eyes, his father has diminished, representing a memory he has outgrown. The novel concludes with Nuri's life in disarray, embodying an adult-child. Now back at the starting point, he finds himself abandoning his mother, mirroring his father's earlier actions. While some may see this as a necessary step toward independence, others might criticize it as a surrender to patriarchal values.

In his analysis of literature stemming from the Lebanese civil war, Norman Saadi Nikro highlights the postmodern blending of styles and the resistance to closure that characterizes such works. These traits are evident in Matar's novels. Nikro states that "the significance of what is remembered can never be fixed; it depends on how others recall and relate to the past... or how past experiences are shared as stories" (30). He focuses on the interplay between public and private memory, particularly in his analysis of Lebanese collective forgetfulness regarding the civil war's horrors and transforming identity.

In this chapter, it is argued that Matar accurately addresses the issue of space for Arabs in *In the Country of Men*. He does not delve into a supposed cultural clash between exiled Arabs and the West; as Merritt points out in "Tidy and Untidy Novels: The Booker Prizes 2006-2007," after Suleiman is sent to Egypt, the narrative seems to lose momentum, making it less of a study on exile. Instead, Matar navigates the emotional collapse of a fictional family's private life due to interference from the Libyan state in both discussed novels. It is argued that his novels evoke empathy for real Arabs, despite his reservations about the role of storytelling. He constructs "this [Libyan domestic] space so artfully that readers scarcely notice its strangeness, for it is the only world its nine-year-old narrator knows" (*ITCOM* 67). Matar's work challenges the Western media's attempts to justify American intrusions into Arab lives, making those narratives less convincing. By leveraging his and his characters' privilege, he makes Arab spaces feel immediate and relatable.

So, does Matar provide Arabs with a true sense of home? Or at least a home for his protagonists? Not exactly. But does it really matter? *In the Country of Men* concludes with Suleiman reuniting with his mother at twenty-four in Alexandria, where he can once again call out "Mama!" after a long absence. *Anatomy of a Disappearance* ends with Nuri reclaiming his father's apartment and belongings, realizing that he can fit into his father's clothes "albeit stiffly." Matar offers a flawed sense of hope by the end of his novels. Perhaps, above all, this is the complex impact his stories have on readers. He empowers Arabs to endure and to maintain hope that, after struggling for their domestic space and political power amid loss, they might eventually find a safe place to call home.

Hisham Matar's works have received acclaim throughout the Arab literary community, including in his home country. However, Libya currently lacks the institutions and frameworks needed to promote its rich cultural heritage, which was suppressed by Qaddafi's regime for over

forty years in favor of a harshly dogmatic approach. Matar's acclaimed novels are primarily known among the country's intellectual elite, but few book lovers can afford to buy his books from local stores. These shops are hesitant to invest in imported literature due to high costs and a limited customer base. In an interview, Matar noted that some people refer to his novels as "the Sheikhs' novels" because of their steep prices. Several international and national online publications, such as Africa Gate, Marefa, Aljazeera, Net Culture and Art, and Libya Almostaqbal, have featured translated reviews of his works. Additionally, Matar has contributed articles and participated in interviews for media outlets worldwide.

Matar offers a perspective on how individuals can navigate tragedies, loss, and injustice, creating vivid images that reflect mental states. His works not only possess significant literary merit but also illuminate Libya's history. For 42 years, until his death in October 2011, Qaddafi ruled Libya and its people without accountability. The 1970s saw widespread nationalization and confiscation of private property without compensation, along with the assassination and execution of political activists in Libya and abroad during the 1980s. The massacre of over 1,000 prisoners at Abu Salim in the 1990s received little attention and went unpunished, just like the wrongful imprisonment of hundreds of Libyans, many of whom endured torture and spent decades in horrific conditions without trial. Matar emphasizes that beyond these dark historical events, another side of Libya exists. This other Libya is filled with art, music, and lively cafes. It is home to people who value family, remember and recite poetry, and aspire to a peaceful and prosperous civil society.

Matar aims to enrich historical narratives in the new Libya while also raising awareness among the young, whether they are uninformed or simply fearful and apathetic, about the events that have shaped modern Libya, including the colonial period. By writing in English and

employing clear, straightforward language to express his views and insights, Matar seeks to engage English-speaking and international audiences, many of whom have limited understanding of Libya's history of political oppression. He also presents Libyan characters as human beings interacting with issues of identity and belonging.

Chapter Three

Unveiling Diaspora in Leila Aboulela's Narratives: *The Translator* and *Minaret*

The chapter will provide a detailed analysis of Leila Aboulela's novel *The Translator* (1999) in terms of its representation of diaspora and related themes. It will also explore Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005), and its engagement with diasporic experiences, identity, and cultural displacement. It will examine the literary devices, character development, and narrative strategies employed by Aboulela to convey the diasporic condition. Leila Aboulela is a Sudanese writer who was born in Cairo and raised in Khartoum and moved to Aberdeen, Scotland in 1990. She graduated from Khartoum University in 1985 and got her MPhil degree in Statistics from the London School of Economics. She is the winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing for her short story *The Museum*, which was included in the collection entitled *Coloured Lights* (2001). Aboulela is the author of many novels: *The Translator* (1999), which was listed as one of the best 100 novels of the year, *Minaret* (2005), and *Lyrics Alley* (2010), which won the Scottish Book Award, and her latest one is *River Spirit* (2023). Aboulela's novels have been listed for the Orange Prize and have been translated into twelve languages. Aboulela's *The Translator* "presents a cross-stitching of contrary cultural setups. In describing the life of the young Sudanese widow Sammar, who works as an Arabic translator at a British university, the novelist presents a god-fearing Muslim undergoing culture-shock in the Western world" (Butt 168).

The Translator, set in the late 20th century, explores the diasporic experience of its protagonist, Sammar, within the socio-cultural context of Sudan and Scotland. The novel highlights the influence of these contexts on Sammar's identity, relationships, and sense of belonging. In the novel, Sudan serves as Sammar's place of origin and is deeply ingrained in her

identity. Sudanese socio-cultural values and traditions heavily influence her worldview and interactions. Aboulela portrays aspects of Sudanese society such as Islamic faith, communal ties, traditional gender roles, and social expectations. These elements shape Sammar's experiences and mindset, even as she lives in Scotland. As an immigrant in Scotland, Sammar is exposed to a different socio-cultural landscape. The novel explores the impact of Scottish society on her sense of self and diasporic experience. Aboulela examines themes of cultural assimilation, language barriers, multiculturalism, and the clash of values between Sammar's Sudanese background and the Western environment. Scottish societal norms, individualism, and diverse cultural influences shape Sammar's relationships and her struggle to find belonging.

The socio-cultural contexts of Sudan and Scotland play a significant role in shaping Sammar's identity and her diasporic experience. The clash of cultural values and norms creates a tension within her, leading to a sense of displacement and a search for a sense of belonging. Sammar grapples with reconciling her Sudanese heritage and Islamic faith with the Western values she encounters, which influences her choices, perspectives, and relationships. The socio-cultural context affects language and communication dynamics in the novel. Sammar's job as a translator reflects the importance of language as a bridge between cultures. The novel explores the challenges of language barriers, translation, and the nuances of cultural expression. The linguistic and cultural differences between Sudanese Arabic and English contribute to Sammar's sense of otherness and the difficulties she faces in fully expressing herself in her new environment. While not explicitly explored in the novel, the socio-cultural context of Sudan is influenced by its political and historical backdrop. Sudan's history of colonialism, post-colonial struggles, and political instability may indirectly shape the experiences and perspectives of characters like Sammar. The presence of

political events, such as the Sudanese civil war, may contribute to the sense of displacement and longing for stability experienced by the characters.

In *The Translator*, Aboulela examines the concept of cultural hybridity and its effects on the main character, Sammar. A Sudanese widow residing in Scotland, Sammar struggles with her mixed cultural identity, torn between her Sudanese heritage and the Western culture surrounding her. The narrative addresses the intricacies of juggling multiple identities and the difficulties in reconciling traditional values with the experiences of living abroad. Language and translation are pivotal in the story, serving as tools for connecting different cultures and navigating diasporic life. Sammar's role as a translator symbolizes the challenges of communication and mutual understanding across cultures. Through translation, she not only seeks to maintain her cultural roots but also to manage the complexities of her existence in a new environment. The novel also conveys themes of nostalgia and a deep yearning for her homeland. Sammar often feels a profound desire for Sudan, reminiscing about its culture and her previous life there. Her memories and aspirations for home are intertwined with feelings of loss and displacement, highlighting the emotional struggles of diaspora and the quest for belonging and stability.

The Translator explores the connection between religion and the diaspora experience. Sammar's Islamic faith acts as a source of comfort and continuity, linking her to her Sudanese roots. The narrative examines the difficulties of practicing religion in an unfamiliar environment and how spirituality can foster a sense of identity and belonging amidst the challenges of diaspora.

Aboulela also tackles the theme of gender in relation to the diaspora. Sammar confronts the expectations and cultural norms tied to her identity as a Sudanese woman, both in Sudan and in Western contexts. The novel highlights the struggles women face in diaspora, the conflicts between traditional gender expectations and emerging independence, and the negotiation of

cultural norms within a transforming society. Additionally, *The Translator* raises important questions about assimilation and the potential loss of cultural heritage that can accompany the diaspora experience. Sammar's adjustment to life in Scotland and her interactions with people from diverse backgrounds underscore the complexities of assimilation and the risks of losing one's original cultural identity.

A sense of place that is rooted in emotions aligns with the understanding of place and identity as fluid and constructed. This perspective is reflected in Sammar's journey, where her identity, subjectivity, and sense of belonging are portrayed as dynamic elements that shape her experiences and differentiate her from others. Postcolonial theory emphasizes the nonessentialist nature of both place and subjectivity, highlighting how they are interdependent and constantly evolving. In this context, Sammar navigates her identity against the backdrop of cultural dislocation and the complexities of her bicultural existence. Her emotional connections to different places inform her understanding of self, illustrating that identity is not fixed but rather shaped by personal experiences and societal influences. This fluidity allows for a richer exploration of Sammar's character, as she grapples with her sense of belonging in various contexts—whether in her homeland or in the diaspora. The emotional resonance of place becomes a crucial factor in her identity formation, suggesting that the interplay between place and subjectivity is essential to understanding the multifaceted nature of human experience in a postcolonial world. According to Ashcroft:

Place therefore, the 'place' of the 'subject', throws light upon subjectivity itself, because whereas we might conceive subjectivity as a process, as Lacan has done, so the discourse of place is a process of continual dialect

between subject and object . . . This was not a place which was simply there but a place which is in a continual process of being written (346).

In the early chapters of *Translator*, Sammar's sense of place is depicted as a "process of continual dialect between subject and object," shaped by her social interactions and the language of love. The novel opens with a poignant dream that captures her anxiety about meeting Rae Isles, her Scottish employer, four years after her relocation from Sudan following her husband Tarig's death. The dream reflects her emotional turmoil: "She dreamt that it rained and she could not go out to meet him as planned. She could not walk through the hostile water, risk blurring the ink on the pages he had asked her to translate. And the anxiety that she was keeping him waiting pervaded the dream, gave it urgency that was astringent to grief" (*Trans* 3). This dream encapsulates Sammar's deep-seated fears and the weight of her grief, revealing the complexity of her emotional landscape. The rain symbolizes external obstacles and her internal struggles, emphasizing the interplay between her longing for connection and her feelings of isolation. Following the dream, Sammar reflects on her apprehension about the winter in Aberdeen, a place that holds a complicated significance for her. She was born and raised there until the age of seven, later returning with Tarig for their studies, and now, after his death, she finds herself back in this familiar yet alienating environment. This layered history with Aberdeen underscores her ambivalence towards the place once a site of childhood comfort, it has now become a symbol of loss and sorrow. Through Sammar's reflections, Aboulela skillfully illustrates how her identity and sense of belonging are intricately tied to her emotional experiences in different places. The novel thus invites readers to consider how personal histories and social contexts shape one's relationship with place, making it a dynamic and evolving aspect of identity. Aboulela narrates:

She was afraid of the rain, afraid of the fog and the snow which came to this country, afraid of the wind even. At such times she would stay indoors and wait, watching from her window people doing what she couldn't do: children walking to school through the swirling leaves, the elderly smashing ice on the pavement with their walking sticks . . . Last year when the city had been dark with fog, she hid indoors for four days, eating her way through the last packet of pasta in the cupboard, drinking tea without milk. On the fifth day, when the fog lifted, she went out famished, rummaging the shops for food, dizzy with the effort (3).

The passage highlights how Sammar's alienation is a significant barrier to her relationship with place, but it does not suggest that this alienation is an inherent aspect of either her identity or the environment itself. Instead, it points to her inability to engage in communal activities, which keeps her from achieving a sense of belonging. Practices such as walking and casual daily encounters are crucial for fostering what Tovi Fenster refers to as "everyday belonging" (243). This sense of belonging develops through individuals' spatial knowledge and their interactions within their environments. By remaining indoors and not participating in the winter activities around her, Sammar misses opportunities to territorialize her space, thereby hindering her ability to experience this "daily belonging". Sammar's earlier life with Tarig illustrates that her understanding of real belonging is deeply rooted in relationships characterized by acceptance and love. In the context of Aberdeen, however, following Tarig's death, she finds herself isolated. Her Muslim identity further exacerbates her sense of ostracism, rendering love and acceptance elusive. This dynamic underscores the complexities of Sammar's emotional state and identity formation. Her alienation is not merely a personal failing but is intricately linked to broader societal attitudes towards her cultural and religious background. As she navigates her grief and longing for

connection, the novel emphasizes the importance of community and acceptance in constructing a sense of place and identity. Ultimately, Sammar's journey reflects the challenges faced by individuals seeking to belong in environments where they feel marginalized.

In contrast to her experience in Aberdeen, Sammar's childhood and early adulthood in Sudan are deeply intertwined with meaningful relationships, particularly her romantic bond with Tarig. This relationship challenges the prevalent Western stereotype that depicts Arab and Muslim women as victims of an oppressive Islam. As Mohja Kahf asserts, while narratives about Muslim women vary in Western contexts, the dominant portrayal often centers on victimhood. Sammar's love for Tarig becomes central to her sense of home and belonging, framing her identity in a way that suggests her arrival in Sudan at age seven marks the true beginning of her life story. When recounting her past to Rae, she emphasizes her connection to Tarig, relegating her earlier years in Aberdeen to a mere backdrop: "when Rae asked her about Tarig. 'My aunt's son,' she replied, 'but it was not until I was seven that I met him. I was born here as you know and my parents and I did not go back home not until I was seven' These were her words, the word 'until' as if she still could not reconcile herself to those first seven years of life without him" (*Trans* 4–5). This choice of words indicates her struggle to integrate those early years without Tarig into her narrative. Sammar's love story embodies a sense of primordially, a concept borrowed from Rosemary Sayigh, which "displaces more usual beginnings such as birth or first memories" (45). This suggests that her relationship with Tarig redefines her life's beginnings, overshadowing conventional markers like birth or early memories. Sammar even indulges in fantasies about her origins, imagining a life where she had always lived in Sudan to feel a closer connection to Tarig: "In better times she used to reinvent the beginning of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan, Africa's largest land, in the Sisters' Maternity hospital, delivered by a nun dressed

in white. She liked to imagine that Tarig was waiting for her outside the delivery room, holding his mother's hand, impatient for her" (5). This imaginative reconstruction highlights Sammar's longing for belonging and connection, illustrating how her love for Tarig shapes her identity. Aboulela's portrayal of Sammar challenges reductive stereotypes, presenting a richer narrative that emphasizes the agency and depth of Muslim women's experiences, underscoring that love and connection can transcend cultural barriers.

Sammar's narrative sharply contrasts with the Western stereotype of the "escapee" Muslim woman (Kahf 149), who is often depicted as yearning to break free from a cruel culture and oppressive relationships with Arab men. Instead, Sammar's imaginary life envisions her beginnings in Sudan, deeply rooted within its Arab-Islamic culture. This perspective highlights her connection to her homeland rather than a desire to escape from it. After Tarig's tragic death in a car accident while studying in Aberdeen, Sammar's thoughts of home are inextricably linked to her memories of him. Her longing for Sudan becomes intertwined with her grief, as she reflects on their shared experiences and the life they built together. When considering a return to Sudan four years after his death, Sammar's memories flood back, evoking a profound sense of nostalgia and loss: "To see home again. It was a chandelier on the ceiling of her life, circles of lights. To see again the streets where Tarig had ridden his bike . . . To go to where everything happened, her aunt's house; laughter on their wedding, fire when she brought Tarig's body home" (*Trans* 33). This passage illustrates how her memories of Tarig are inextricable from her sense of home. The imagery of the chandelier symbolizes the illumination of her past, showing how these memories shape her identity and emotional landscape. The streets, laughter, and the poignant recollection of bringing Tarig's body home encapsulate the complexities of her attachment to Sudan, revealing that her sense of belonging is deeply connected to both love and loss. Through Sammar's

experience, Aboulela challenges simplistic narratives about Muslim women, offering a nuanced portrayal that emphasizes the significance of personal relationships and cultural roots in shaping identity and belonging.

Sammar's dream at the beginning of the novel can be seen as a profound manifestation of her unconscious fears and anxieties regarding new relationships, especially with someone like Rae, who is a non-Muslim. This dream encapsulates her internal conflict, rooted in her enduring love for her deceased husband, Tarig, and her identity as a Muslim woman. In Islamic culture, marrying a non-Muslim is often considered taboo, which adds another layer of complexity to her feelings. The rain in her dream serves as a powerful symbol of this taboo—an organic barrier that prevents her from meeting Rae. It reflects not only external obstacles but also her internal struggle with cultural and religious norms that dictate her choices. The image of rain can be interpreted as a natural sign, highlighting the weight of societal expectations that loom over her. Moreover, the dream underscores Sammar's anxiety about the potential brevity of her relationship with Rae. Her apprehension about keeping him waiting indicates her fear of inadequacy and the possibility of disappointing him. This anxiety points to her deep-seated worries about engaging in a new love, suggesting that her past experiences and cultural context heavily influence her current emotional landscape. Ultimately, Sammar's dream reveals the tension between her desires and the constraints imposed by her identity and cultural background. Aboulela uses this dream to illustrate the complexities of Sammar's journey as she navigates love, loss, and the challenges of forging new connections in a landscape shaped by her past. After the death of Taig, she dreamed of rain that hinders her from meeting him as planned. She felt anxious and very sad. Such strong emotions are considered multiple anxieties that have been revealed throughout first- and third-person narration. Ghadir K Zannoun states, "Right after this description of her dream, Sammar ponders her fear of

the winter in Aberdeen, where she had been born and raised until the age of seven, to which she had returned with Tarig to study, and finally to which she has returned after his death” (3).

Tarig's death profoundly shapes Sammar's subjectivity, sense of place, and even her physical being, leaving an indelible mark that symbolizes her difference rooted in the experience of romantic love and its abrupt loss. The trauma she endures transforms into a tangible physical pain, taking on the form of a diamond shape that signifies her grief. This diamond, with its four corners representing specific areas of pain, highlights how deeply intertwined her emotional and physical experiences have become. Sammar describes this pain as something that has crystallized over time, becoming a part of her identity: “Her invisible mark shifted, breathed its existence. It was hidden from Rae, like her hair and the skin on her arms, it could only be imagined. Four years ago, this mark had crystallized. Grief had formed, taken shape, a diamond shape, its four angles stapled on to her forehead, each shoulder, the top of her stomach” (*Trans* 4). This passage illustrates how her grief is not just an emotional state but a physical presence that reshapes her identity. The diamond shape serves as a powerful metaphor for the complexity of her loss, embedding itself in her body and consciousness. Interestingly, Sammar's head covering, a marker of her Muslim identity, is mentioned almost casually and exists primarily in her thoughts. This suggests that her relationship with Tarig and the pain of his loss takes precedence over the societal implications of her identity as a Muslim woman. By depicting her head covering in this unobtrusive manner, Aboulela sidesteps the fixation on the veil that Mohja Kahf critiques, which often oversimplifies Muslim women's identities to the presence or absence of such symbols. Through this nuanced portrayal, Aboulela emphasizes that Sammar's identity is far more complex and is deeply influenced by her love for Tarig. The physical manifestation of her grief reveals how love and loss can shape a woman's experience in profound ways, transcending cultural stereotypes and

focusing instead on the emotional depths of her journey. Through this unobtrusive depiction, Aboulela gets away from what Mohja Kahf describes as “our era’s obsession over the presence or absence of a veil” (40).

Aboulela skillfully uses personal names and other tropes to highlight how place influences individuals through socioeconomic realities, emotions, and social interactions. Sammar reflects on her identity, noting that had she been born in Sudan instead of Scotland, she would have carried a different, more culturally resonant name suggested by her aunt, who had strong opinions about such matters: “a more common one. A name suggested by her aunt, for she was a woman who had an opinion on all things” (*Trans* 5). This statement underscores the significance of naming within cultural contexts, indicating how names can carry deep meanings and connections to heritage. In contrast, Rae’s last name, Isles, evokes images of the British Isles and hints at the colonial history of the country, emphasizing the differences in their backgrounds and experiences. Sammar’s name, “which means conversations with friends, late at night” (*Trans* 5). This definition reflects not only a cultural connection but also the intimacy and community that Sammar longs for, further illustrating how her identity is intertwined with her experiences in Sudan. Additionally, the poor condition of the political manifesto from the Egyptian Islamist radical group Al-Nidaa, which Sammar translates for Rae, serves as a tangible representation of place and socioeconomic struggle: “The document was hand written, badly photocopied and full of spelling mistakes. It was stained with tea and what she guessed to be beans mashed with oil” (*Trans* 5–6). This description highlights the harsh realities faced by the authors, encapsulating the socioeconomic challenges that inform their political expressions. The physical imperfections of the document serve as a metaphor for the broader struggles within the society from which it originates. Through these elements, Aboulela illustrates how place shapes identity and emotional landscapes. The interplay between

Sammar's and Rae's names, along with the condition of the manifesto, reflects the broader socio-cultural dynamics at play, illustrating the profound impact of environment on personal narratives and relationships.

Aboulela's portrayal of Sammar's life in post-Tarig Sudan reveals the complexities of the country's patriarchal culture while simultaneously challenging the notion that Arab-Islamic culture is static or devoid of change. Sammar's experiences illustrate how cultural elements can act as forces for both traditionalism and transformation, enabling agency amidst societal constraints. Sammar's evolving desire to remarry reflects her struggle to navigate her identity after Tarig's death. She sees a new marriage as a means to regain focus and secure financial stability. However, her aunt and mother-in-law, Mahasen, challenges this perspective. Mahasen emphasizes that the historical reasons for a widow's reliance on marriage have shifted, asserting: "In the past, widows needed protection, life is different now" (*Trans* 13). She further argues that Sammar, being an educated woman who speaks English, possesses the skills necessary for self-sufficiency: "An educated girl like you, you know English . . . you can support yourself and your son, you don't need marriage. What do you need it for?" (*Trans* 13). Mahasen's comments highlight the growing economic independence of Arab women, positioning them as active agents within their historical context. This perspective contrasts sharply with Western representations that often portray Muslim women solely as victims of oppressive structures. As noted by Amireh, the acknowledgment of Arab women as subjects of history is frequently overlooked in these narratives: "This fact is seldom acknowledged in Western representations of them" (187). Through Mahasen's insights, Aboulela emphasizes that women in Sudan are navigating a landscape of change, where traditional roles are being redefined. This dialogue captures the dynamic interplay between cultural expectations and individual agency, illustrating that Sammar's quest for identity and belonging is both a personal

journey and a reflection of broader societal transformations. The narrative thus underscores the complexities of female experience in a modern Arab-Islamic context, challenging simplistic stereotypes and highlighting the multifaceted nature of cultural identity.

Sammar's reclamation of her subjectivity and sense of belonging through her newfound love and emotional language enables her to inhabit two worlds: Sudan and Aberdeen. This duality facilitates her ongoing journey of self-discovery, allowing her to navigate the in-between spaces she has explored through storytelling. As Iain Chambers notes, these transitional places offer opportunities for self-exploration, where experiences and emotions from one location intersect with the histories and cultures of others: "Sustained across encounters and clashes with other histories, other places, other people" (4). By achieving this middle ground, Sammar can critically examine her Arab culture, juxtaposing it with both her Islamic identity and Rae's cultural background. This comparative exploration allows her to develop a more nuanced understanding of her identity without being limited by rigid definitions of cultural authenticity, as exemplified by Yasmin's perspectives. When Rae spends the holidays with his ex-in-laws, Sammar reflects on her position and cultural identity: "Culture-shock for Sammar. An old man in Edinburgh was allowing his daughter's ex-husband under his roof. This must be civilized behavior, an "amicable divorce". Where she comes from, the divorced spouse was one who "turned out to be a son of dog" or "she turned out to be mad" and were treated as such. No one stayed friends, no one stayed on talking terms. (*Trans* 38). This moment becomes significant as she contemplates her duality and the complexities of her relationships. Instead of feeling alienated or constrained by her status as an "Other," she embraces the space between cultures, which gives her the freedom to explore her feelings and beliefs more deeply. Through this process, Aboulela illustrates how Sammar's emotional journey is not merely about navigating cultural differences but also about finding

empowerment in her fluid identity. The interplay between her experiences in Sudan and Aberdeen enriches her understanding of herself, enabling her to craft a more holistic narrative that honors both aspects of her life. This narrative shift reflects the dynamic nature of identity, shaped by love, loss, and the ongoing negotiation of cultural belonging.

Sammar's introspection enables her to occasionally adopt what Casey Blanton refers to as a "nomad position." This position involves, "Unfixing oneself so that the place cannot equal truth which allows one to embark upon a two-directional journey examining the realities of both sides of cultural differences so that they mutually may question each other" (111). This approach to identity allows Sammar to navigate the complexities of her experiences in both Sudan and Aberdeen without being confined to a single narrative or cultural truth. By embracing a nomadic mindset, she can critically engage with the nuances of her dual identity, facilitating a deeper understanding of the cultural differences that shape her life. This process can also be understood as cultural translation, which emphasizes that cross-cultural and transnational experiences do not necessarily result in cultural hybrids. Instead, Sammar's journey often reflects a translation process that allows for two distinct worldviews to coexist without necessarily merging. This coexistence highlights the richness of her experiences, as she learns to appreciate and articulate the unique aspects of both cultures. In this way, Sammar's narrative exemplifies how cultural translation can foster dialogue and understanding between different identities. Rather than blending into a singular culture, she maintains her distinct ties to both her Sudanese heritage and her life in Scotland. Tina Steiner states:

Aboulela asserts that the foreign culture becomes intelligible when Sammar recognizes herself in it, or rather she recognizes her own cultural norms that are inscribed in it through a particular discursive strategy. In this case Islam functions

as such a discursive strategy, which provides her with a place she can claim as her own within the foreign culture. It is this discourse that provides the matrix for her understanding of Scottish Culture (21).

This dynamic interplay enriches her self-discovery, allowing her to embrace the complexities of her identity while fostering connections that transcend cultural boundaries. Through this lens, Aboulela illustrates the power of introspection and cultural engagement in shaping a multifaceted sense of belonging.

Through the construction of new transnational spaces, the Muslim characters in Aboulela's novels work to discover their true identities and essence. Sammar, the protagonist of *The Translator*, embodies a profound sense of duality and two-foldness regarding her identity and belonging. She finds herself caught between two worlds, struggling to navigate her place in a foreign land. To cope with the emotional and geographical exile she experiences in Scotland, Sammar frequently turns to her memories as a means of accessing her distant home. This recollection serves as a lifeline, helping her endure the feelings of alienation and the disconnection from her roots. She actively seeks to relive her childhood memories, which transport her back to her place of origin the only space where she feels she truly belongs. In reflecting on her past, Sammar engages in a process of reinvention: "In better times she used to reinvent the beginning of her life. Make believe that she was born at home in Sudan, Africa's largest land, in the Sister's Maternity Hospital, delivered by a nun dressed in white" (*Trans*3). This imaginative reconstruction of her origin highlights her longing for connection to her homeland and the comfort it provides. Through these memories, Sammar attempts to reclaim her identity and find a sense of belonging amidst her displacement. Aboulela's portrayal of Sammar's internal struggle illustrates

how memory can serve as a powerful tool for immigrants, allowing them to navigate the complexities of their identities while fostering a connection to their cultural heritage.

Aboulela's *The Translator* explores profound themes of religious and cultural identity, emphasizing the intricate connections between Islam, nostalgic memory, and cultural translation. The protagonist, Sammar, navigates the challenges of practicing her faith in a society that often shows intolerance toward Islam. To protect her cultural and religious heritage from erasure, Sammar strives to maintain the principles of Islam within her home, creating a sanctuary that reflects her identity. Following her husband's death, Sammar finds solace in her faith, which becomes her primary source of emotional strength. The narrative highlights her reliance on prayer as a means of coping with life's unpredictability: "The only stability in life, unreliable life, taking turns the mind could not imagine. When she finished praying, she sat for the tasbeeh, [...] Astaghfir Allah ... I seek forgiveness from Allah" (*Trans* 37). This passage underscores how prayer serves as an anchor for Sammar, offering her a sense of peace in the chaos that surrounds her. As a typical Muslim woman, Sammar derives safety and stability from her faith. It is portrayed as the only solid element in her life, providing her with the resilience needed to move forward despite the tumultuous circumstances she faces. Through Sammar's journey, Aboulela illustrates the profound impact of faith in shaping identity and offering refuge amidst cultural dislocation.

The physical and emotional exile imposed on Sammar in Aberdeen takes a significant toll on her, particularly following the loss of her husband. Her situation is further exacerbated by the distance from her family and her perception of herself as a "different other." This sense of alienation is palpable as Sammar often contrasts the landscapes of Europe and Africa, seeking to compensate for her feelings of loss. In moments of distress, she frequently retreats into her visual memory, finding shelter in her recollections. This experience of "psychic exile" fosters a profound

sense of detachment, which is starkly contrasted by her idealized memories of her homeland. Re-living her childhood experiences while in exile allows her to reconnect with her origins and the place where she truly feels she belongs. Eiman El-Nour succinctly encapsulates Sammar's exilic experience by referencing Eva Hoffman's concept of the "effect of exile". This effect limits Sammar's ability to engage with her radically different surroundings, draining her world of significance and vibrancy: "the subject of access to the radically different surroundings" (Hoffman 107) is hindered, leading to a landscape devoid of "colors, striations, nuances, its very existence" (El-Nour 334).

Sammar, as a displaced character, maintains a profound connection to her former home, which serves as a vital anchor in her struggle against the erasure of her identity. Her allegiance to the ties that link her to Sudan underscores the geographical contrasts between her homeland and her current residence. For Sammar, Sudan represents a familiar, nurturing space where she fully belongs—a place she yearns to return to since her childhood. Her experiences of hallucination and memory reflect what can be termed "spiritual memory". This longing, particularly for the *isha* prayer, illustrates the deep intertwining of religion and nostalgia in her life. Through moments of epiphany, Sammar embodies what Jahan Ramazani refers to as "connective dissonance" (22) where "The here becomes inseparable from the not here" (Chambers 21). Sammar "dives into the past," but her engagement with memory is not merely an act of lamentation; rather, it becomes a strategic means of survival. This active relationship with her memories helps her navigate her present, preventing the obliteration of her identity. The past does not exist as a distant echo; instead, it lives with her, shaping her current reality and informing her future. By engaging in a constructive dialogue with her past, Sammar reconfigures her understanding of both her present circumstances and her aspirations for the future. This process of memory and reflection allows her

to reclaim her identity and assert her place in a world that often feels alien, highlighting the resilience of the human spirit in the face of exile. Through Sammar's journey, Aboulela poignantly illustrates the challenges faced by immigrants in reconciling their past with their present, highlighting how exile can strip away not only a sense of belonging but also the richness of lived experiences. Sammar's reliance on memory becomes a vital means of preserving her identity amidst the stark realities of her new life.

Sammar experiences a vivid hallucination that blurs the lines between her present reality in Scotland and her memories of home in Sudan. As she steps outside, the world transforms around her, creating a space where her familiar surroundings resurface. The streets, the sky, and the sensations of home converge, providing her with a momentary escape from her current dislocation. The imagery evokes a warm, starry night, rich with sensory details: the smell of dust, the sounds of stray dogs, and the distant calls to prayer. These elements serve to anchor her in a nostalgic remembrance of her homeland "the night warm, warmer than indoors" (*Trans* 21). The invocation of familiar sounds, such as the bicycle bell and the muezzin's voice, further deepens her connection to the past, illustrating how her memories can manifest in her present experiences. However, this hallucination is tinged with an underlying sense of uncertainty. Sammar grapples with the stark contrast between her idealized memories and the reality of her surroundings in Scotland. The mention of power cuts and mistaken sounds highlights her struggle to reconcile her past with her current life, as she navigates feelings of alienation and longing. The passage captures the complexity of Sammar's emotional landscape, where the shadows of her memories occasionally intrude upon her present. Yet, the fact that she has "never stepped into a vision before" signifies a profound moment of connection with her heritage, suggesting that despite her displacement, her memories remain a powerful source of identity and solace. According to Said: "In memory, the

exile finds not just solace but a way to reclaim and re-inhabit the self' (55). Thus, she takes in the "perfect neatness" of her new environment, she is reminded of the dichotomy between the polished exterior of her current life and the chaotic beauty of her home, emphasizing the enduring impact of her cultural roots on her sense of self.

Sammar's metamorphosis, which manifests as a vivid hallucination transforming Aberdeen into Khartoum, exists solely within her mind. This internal vision reflects her deep yearning for home and her struggle to reconcile her past with her present. Through a rich sensory language, Sammar engages her senses smells, sounds, and sights to evoke the warmth and vibrancy of life in Sudan. This process allows her to linguistically and metaphorically translate her Islamic world into the Western context she inhabits. The contrasting cultures of Scotland and Sudan serve as a backdrop to Sammar's character, who grapples with her contradictory desires and beliefs. This internal conflict is central to the narrative, forming the essence of what can be described as a finely crafted, tender cross-cultural love story. This notion echoes Du Bois's notion of "double consciousness" which is "a complex process that inescapably shapes the diasporic self that constantly strives to reconcile between the two worlds" (Guebla 306). As Sammar navigates her experiences, the stark contrasts of culture, history, and climate between the two cities are intimately connected through her journey. Al-Bashir notes that Sammar's character embodies these tensions, illustrating how her identity is shaped by the interplay of her memories and the realities of her life in Scotland. Al-Bashir states that these two countries have been connected "as she experiences the stark contrasts of culture, history and climate" (33). This duality highlights the complexities of cultural displacement and the challenge of maintaining one's identity in the face of contrasting environments. Ultimately, Sammar's experiences reflect a broader exploration

of how individuals negotiate their cultural heritage in a globalized world, emphasizing the resilience of the human spirit in the search for belonging.

In Scotland, the cold weather contributes to Sammar's feelings of sluggishness, emptiness, and a sense of being "dead inside." In stark contrast, the warmth of Sudan revitalizes her, serving as a source of life and energy. The colors and smells of her native country provide her with a vital connection to her past, offering solace and endurance amidst the challenges of her new environment. In *The Translator*, Aboulela uses vivid imagery of colors and smells to highlight Sammar's connection to Sudan and the stark contrast with her life in Scotland. Sammar often reflects on the vibrant colors of her homeland, describing the rich, warm hues of the landscape. For instance, she might recall "the golden sands of the desert" or "the bright fabrics worn by women in the market," which evoke feelings of warmth and vitality. The scents of her native land play a significant role in her memories. Sammar reminisces about "the smell of spices in the air" or "the aroma of fresh bread being baked," which transport her back to her childhood and invigorate her spirit. In contrast, the cold, damp air of Scotland is often described as oppressive, contributing to her feelings of "sluggishness" and emptiness. She might describe the "chill of the rain-soaked streets" or the "grey skies" that weigh heavily on her mood. These sensory details not only enhance the reader's understanding of Sammar's internal struggles but also emphasize the deep emotional ties she has to her homeland, highlighting the challenges of adapting to a new environment.

Through Sammar's character, Aboulela effectively contrasts European culture, language, and landscape with those of the African continent. Sammar becomes acutely aware of the significant differences between her homeland and her host country, noting divergences in "the weather, the culture, modernity, the language, the silence of the muezzin" (*Trans* 44). This awareness emphasizes her struggle to reconcile her identity in a foreign land. Yet, there are

moments when these two worlds blend, allowing Sammar to feel a sense of familiarity with Aberdeen. Over time, her prolonged stay in Scotland begins to naturalize her double existence, suggesting that she is becoming part of both worlds. This fusion highlights her evolving identity as she navigates the complexities of belonging and cultural integration. Sammar embodies a unique intersection of her Arab and Anglophone identities, reflecting a new, hybrid identity shaped by her experiences in both worlds. This hyphenated existence illustrates the richness of her character as she learns to embrace the complexities of her dual heritage. Ultimately, Sammar's journey underscores the notion that identity is not fixed but rather a fluid construct that can incorporate diverse cultural influences, allowing her to forge a path that honors both her past and present.

The idea that Sammar can be viewed solely as Arab is incomplete without recognizing the significant influence of her Anglophone identity. This hyphen is crucial; it reflects her need to navigate between her African roots and her life in Europe, ensuring her survival in a complex landscape of cultural contrasts. She remains tethered to both worlds simultaneously, embodying a duality that enriches her experience. Sammar's unwavering commitment to her Islamic faith, Arabic culture, and language coexists with the new dimensions introduced into her life through her relationship with a Western man. This love not only represents a personal connection to the West but also serves as a bridge between her two worlds. By embracing these facets of her identity, she reconciles the East and the West, illustrating how she transcends geographical boundaries and overcomes obstacles of distance. Ultimately, Sammar's character embodies a transnational identity that defies conventional categorizations. She forges a unique existence that integrates diverse cultural influences, stepping beyond temporal and spatial barriers. This blend of identities allows her to navigate her complexities and find a sense of belonging in a world that often seeks to compartmentalize individuals. Sammar's journey highlights the resilience of the human spirit and

the possibility of creating a cohesive identity that honors multiple heritages while fostering a sense of continuity and connection.

Language is a crucial tool for Sammar, serving to bridge the gap between her motherland and her new home in the West. Through translation, Sammar maintains her daily connection with Islam, a lifeline in a world where she feels emotionally, culturally, and religiously displaced. Words like "Inshaallah" (if Allah wills it) and "Astaghfir Allah" (I seek forgiveness from Allah) underscore her commitment to her faith, reinforcing her link to her religious identity even in unfamiliar surroundings. In her experience, Islam remains a constant presence, allowing her to navigate the spiritual emptiness brought on by her emotional exile. Sammar actively carries information from one language to another, ensuring that her cultural and religious roots are not lost. This act of translation becomes a means of survival, enabling her to communicate her identity in a context that often feels alien.

The concept of translation in *The Translator* is both rhetorical and manipulative. As De Araujo notes, it involves "the dominated who translates its own culture for the dominating to comprehend it" (165). In this dynamic, Sammar subverts traditional power relations; she is not merely a passive recipient of Western narratives but an active participant who reshapes the text through her perspective. By translating her experiences and beliefs, Sammar challenges the dominant narrative, seeking to rectify misconceptions about the East. In doing so, she builds a new understanding of her culture and identity, empowering herself to confront and dismantle the stereotypical perceptions that often arise from a dichotomous view of East and West. Through language, she asserts her voice and agency, illustrating that translation is not just a means of communication but a powerful act of cultural resistance and self-definition.

Sammar assumes the pivotal role of the translator of the Quran, originally written in Arabic, for Rae Isles, a Western scholar of Islam. Through her translation, Sammar provides Rae with a deeper understanding of Islamic teachings, allowing her to access a more authentic perspective of the “other.” This act of translation not only conveys the content of the Quran but also serves to subvert the hegemonic East/West dichotomy, challenging simplified narratives and stereotypes. In her role, Sammar’s task involves not just interpreting the Quran but also re-decoding it into English. This process inevitably entails a manipulation of meaning, as translation is rarely a straightforward transfer of ideas. Sammar cannot approach the text from a detached perspective; her interpretations are colored by her own experiences, beliefs, and cultural context. This nuance adds depth to her translations, enriching Rae's understanding of Islam and fostering a more complex view of Eastern culture.

By engaging in this translation, Sammar subverts the notion of “westernization,” resisting a complete assimilation into Western culture. As De Araujo notes, Rae undergoes a “reverse translation” or “Easternization process,” surrendering to a Third World culture through Sammar’s mediation (187). This dynamic positions Sammar not just as a translator but as a cultural mediator who reshapes the dialogue between East and West. Spivak’s assertion that translation is “one of the ways to get around the confines of one’s identity” (17) resonates here. Sammar’s act of translating the Quran allows her to navigate her dual identity, using language as a tool to bridge cultural divides while asserting her own perspective. Through this process, she challenges preconceived notions of both her culture and that of the West, ultimately contributing to a richer, more nuanced understanding of identity and belonging in a globalized world.

Aboulela presents complex visions of women navigating their own subjugation while dramatizing what she frames as an ideal Muslim marriage. This narrative echoes the Qur’anic

declaration that places men in authority over women, suggesting that Sammar's relationship with Rae embodies these traditional roles. Sammar learns from Rae, which positions her in a subordinate role; she looks up to him and expresses a willingness to accept the possibility of being a second wife in a polygamous marriage. This acceptance can be interpreted as a reflection of the values she internalizes from her culture and religion. Aboulela's portrayal of Sammar's subordination can be seen as an allegory for a broader acceptance of traditional gender roles, intertwined with a romanticization of these dynamics. The narrative suggests an apologetic stance, where the seemingly happy defeat of progressive ideals is celebrated. Rae's character serves as a crucial element in this framework; his conversion to Islam symbolizes a reconciliation of his previously leftist beliefs with a newfound respect for Islamic values. This transformation is significant, as it positions Rae not only as a character within the story but also as a proxy for the novel's intended audience leftist readers who are encouraged to embrace Islamic principles. Rae's journey implies that the left should recognize Islam as a valid and beneficial framework for anti-colonial resistance, challenging the notion that leftist ideologies alone can address such historical injustices. In this way, Aboulela crafts a narrative that invites readers to reconsider their perceptions of Islam and its relationship to gender, power, and cultural identity. By framing Rae's conversion as the culmination of his anti-imperialist sympathies, the novel suggests that there exists a superior form of redress within Islamic teachings, thus bridging the gap between Eastern and Western ideologies in a manner that seeks to cultivate understanding and acceptance. This idea is confirmed by Tamar Steinitz who considers Rae's transformation "is linked with the untranslatability of Islam itself, creating what seems to be a paradox: a novel that appears to put translation at its centre, but at the same time to reject the possibility of translation" (4).

For the metropolitan leftist those familiar with texts like *The Wretched of the Earth* and *Culture and Imperialism*, are on the Rae's shelves Aboulela's novel presents a nuanced critique through Rae's character. Rae engages in a lecture to Sammar, expressing his admiration for Islam by suggesting that capitalism did not "ultimately" develop within it (109). The use of "ultimately" indicates a cautious stance, hinting at a complex relationship between Islam and capitalism that Rae attempts to navigate. Rae posits that Muslim inheritance laws, which fragment wealth, played a role in preventing the accumulation of capital. This theory serves as a counterargument to leftist historians who assert that Islamic authority was leveraged by the emerging Sudanese middle class against older elites. Historians such as Talal Assad and Muddathir Abdel Rahim suggest that Muslim traders were instrumental in integrating Sudan into the global economy, often through exploitative practices, including the enslavement of non-Muslim groups during the Turki-Egyptian colonization of southern Sudan in the nineteenth century. This historical context underscores the tensions between different societal groups and the role of religion in legitimizing such actions. Through Rae's lecture, Aboulela aims to contest this dominant narrative, positioning her perspective as a corrective to the historical account that often paints Islam as complicit in capitalist exploitation. By advocating for the book to be taught in postcolonial courses, she invites a reevaluation of these themes and encourages readers to consider the complexities of Islam's relationship with capitalism and colonialism. In doing so, the novel not only critiques leftist interpretations but also seeks to expand the discourse around Islam, capital, and historical dynamics in Sudan. Rae's character embodies this intellectual engagement, challenging readers to reconsider their preconceived notions of Islamic society and its historical trajectory in the context of global capitalism. This approach fosters a deeper understanding of the interplay between

religion, culture, and economic systems, inviting a more nuanced exploration of postcolonial identities.

Aboulela's second novel, *Minaret*, focuses on the rising voices of female Muslims within Western migrant communities (Nash 35). It examines the interplay between Islam, migration, and Western society, portraying the journey of a young Sudanese migrant who feels disconnected from her traditional Muslim roots. The narrative is shaped by the dialogue between Islamic values and Western secularism (Nash 143). *Minaret* tackles themes of displacement and the difficulties of cultural adaptation faced by its main character, Najwa. The story follows her transition from a life of privilege in Sudan to her exile in London after a political coup. It explores the complexities of adjusting to a new cultural landscape, dealing with feelings of isolation, and seeking a sense of belonging in an unfamiliar environment. The novel also delves into Najwa's struggle with her identity as a Muslim woman from Sudan, as she navigates her religious and cultural identity in London's diasporic context. It highlights her efforts to reconcile her Sudanese heritage, Islamic faith, and the influences of Western culture in shaping her self-perception. This struggle underscores the tensions among various facets of her identity and her quest for a cohesive sense of belonging. Religion, particularly Islam, plays a crucial role in *Minaret*. The narrative explores how Islam serves as a source of comfort, guidance, and identity for Najwa. Aboulela examines how faith and spirituality can offer continuity and stability amid the challenges of displacement. The portrayal of religious beliefs and practices within the diasporic experience illustrates the intricate relationship between religious and cultural identities.

Nostalgia and loss are central themes in *Minaret*, as Najwa grapples with a profound longing for her homeland, Sudan, and the life she left behind. The novel explores the emotional intricacies of diaspora, highlighting the desire for a sense of belonging and the effects of loss and

displacement on both individual and collective memory. This exploration of nostalgia emphasizes the difficulties of reconciling past experiences with present realities in the context of diaspora. Aboulela also addresses gender and power dynamics within this setting, focusing on the challenges Najwa faces as a Muslim woman navigating her cultural identity alongside Western societal expectations. The narrative delves into the nuances of gender roles, the influence of patriarchal structures, and how Najwa asserts her agency and autonomy within these frameworks. Additionally, the theme of love and relationships plays a significant role in *Minaret*. Najwa's romantic involvement with Tamer, a wealthy and politically powerful figure, is explored in depth. The novel examines the complexities of love that transcends cultural and social boundaries, the power dynamics at play in their relationship, and the tension between societal expectations and personal desires.

Both *Minaret* and *The Translator* deeply engage with the theme of displacement and its effects on the protagonists' identities. In *Minaret*, Najwa faces forced exile from Sudan to London, while in *The Translator*, Sammar relocates from Sudan to Scotland. These narratives examine the difficulties of adapting to new cultural settings, dealing with feelings of alienation, and the pursuit of belonging in unfamiliar environments.

Aboulela also addresses the concept of cultural hybridity in both works. Najwa and Sammar navigate their Sudanese heritage and Islamic faith alongside the influences of Western cultures. The novels highlight the challenges of balancing multiple identities and the tensions that arise from conflicting cultural values and expectations, reflecting the complexities of living between different cultural worlds.

Religion, particularly Islam, serves as a recurring theme in both *Minaret* and *The Translator*. The narratives explore how Islam acts as a source of comfort, guidance, and identity

for the protagonists. Aboulela examines how faith and spirituality can offer continuity and stability amidst the challenges of displacement, illustrating the intricate relationship between religious and cultural identities.

Language and translation are also crucial elements in both novels. In *The Translator*, Sammar's work as a translator underscores the challenges of communication and understanding between different cultures. In *Minaret*, Najwa's bilingualism and her ability to navigate various linguistic and cultural contexts shape her experiences. Both novels explore the power and limitations of language in expressing one's true self and the challenges of achieving linguistic and cultural equivalence in translation.

Both *Minaret* and *The Translator* explore themes of nostalgia and the longing for one's homeland. The protagonists, Najwa and Sammar, often feel a profound yearning for Sudan and the memories tied to their past lives. These narratives delve into the emotional complexities of the diaspora, highlighting the desire for rootedness and the quest for belonging amid displacement and homesickness. Aboulela also addresses gender and power dynamics within the diasporic context in both novels. Najwa and Sammar navigate societal expectations and patriarchal structures unique to their environments. The stories examine the intricacies of gender roles, the challenges posed by cultural and social norms, and how the characters assert their agency and autonomy within these constraints.

Aboulela's *Minaret* is regarded a significant contribution to English-language Arab literature. The story follows Najwa as she embarks on a spiritual quest, adjusting to a life that is vastly different from her past in Sudan. She transitions from a privileged, secular young girl to a devoted Muslim woman who finds comfort in her faith. Najwa's journey begins in 1984 in Khartoum, where she comes from an affluent, westernized family. Her father holds a government

position. As a young woman, Najwa is modern and carefree, heavily influenced by Western culture as she wears revealing clothing, attends parties, and listens to Western music. Although she studies business at Khartoum University, she does not take her education seriously, believing she has a bright future ahead. At university, her interactions with local Sudanese girls make Najwa feel uneasy, as she realizes how different she is from them; they practice their faith, while she does not. Despite being Muslim, she rarely prays or wears a hijab, a reflection of her secular upbringing. Eventually, she meets Anwar, a politically active student, and falls for him, despite his criticisms of her father. Everything changes when a military coup takes place in 1985. Najwa's father is arrested and later executed, forcing her and her family to flee Sudan and start a new chapter of their life in London.

After arriving in London, Najwa faces a series of tragic events: her father is executed, her mother passes away, and her brother Omar is sentenced to 15 years in prison for a drug-related crime. Left alone without money, a degree, or family support, she takes a job as a maid to survive. While working for Aunt Eva, a friend of her mother's, Najwa encounters Anwar, who has come to London after a different military coup. They begin a close relationship, despite his negative opinions about her father.

However, Najwa soon realizes that Anwar is exploiting her and has no plans to marry her. This disillusionment leads her to seek comfort in religion. She finds peace in Islam and becomes a devoted Muslim, ultimately ending her relationship with Anwar. Later, Najwa takes a job as a housemaid for Lamya, a wealthy Arab woman. In this new environment, she meets Lamya's brother, Tamer, a young man with strong religious beliefs, and they begin a romantic relationship. Tamer wants to marry Najwa, despite the age difference, but his family disapproves of her. Tamer's mother, Doctora Zeineb, offers Najwa a substantial amount of money to end the

relationship. To everyone's surprise, Najwa accepts the money, complies with Doctora Zeineb's wishes, and decides to go on a pilgrimage to Hajj.

Identity is a central and often contentious theme in postcolonial studies and literature. Throughout the twentieth century, numerous critics and theorists have explored how colonization disrupts identity and emphasizes the challenges of identity formation. Enas Subhi Amar defines identity as "the set of personal and behavioral characteristics which identify an individual as a member of a certain group" (165). The question of "who am I?" becomes crucial, especially when one's identity is at risk of being lost. Many novelists have addressed the struggles individuals face in preserving their identities in postcolonial contexts. Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* exemplifies this theme, showcasing her protagonist's ongoing quest for self-discovery and feelings of alienation both in her native Sudan and later in London.

The novel explores the theme of "in-betweenness", a concept widely discussed by writers and critics worldwide. This state reflects the experiences of diasporic or migrant individuals who find themselves caught between two cultures: their homeland and their host country. In *Minaret*, the protagonist, Najwa, clearly feels this sense of in-betweenness and cultural alienation. Her unstable environment and the shifting aspects of her identity in both Sudan and London significantly impact her journey of self-discovery. In the twentieth century, colonization affected many countries, including Sudan, which suffered severe consequences such as violence and turmoil before gaining independence. While colonization brought some advancements in technology, medicine, and education, it also had detrimental effects. A significant consequence for the Sudanese people was the loss of cultural unity, as the country became fragmented. This fragmentation leaves individuals in a state of in-betweenness, struggling to define themselves because their culture, beliefs, and values have been diluted. In *Minaret*, Aboulela highlights the

cultural and political repercussions of post colonialism on Sudan. Culture is a key element that distinguishes one group from another, making it essential for identity formation. The loss of culture, therefore, equates to a loss of identity.

The novel vividly portrays the fragmented postcolonial culture of Sudan, illustrating the distressing situation of the nation and its people, as well as the sense of unhomeliness that colonialism has instilled in the native Sudanese. Homi Bhabha, in his book *Location of Culture*, defines "unhomeliness" as follows: "to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres" (9). The sense of belonging is a vital aspect of identity, and lacking this feeling can destabilize one's sense of self. This is evident in Najwa, who feels disconnected from the socio-cultural environment of Sudan. Though she resides in her homeland, she struggles to identify with Sudanese society, which deeply impacts her identity. As a result, Najwa experiences a cultural identity crisis, feeling like a psychological refugee. L. Tayson notes, "to be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself; your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee" (qtd. in Alireza Farahbakhsh and Rezvaneh Ranjbar 107).

Colonization has impacted cultures in various ways. In this regard, Sara A. Al-Asmakh, in her article "Politics of Identity in Multicultural Settings: A Literary Analysis of Leila Aboulela's Novels, *The Translator* and *Minaret*," states, "The clash between the colonizer and the native culture reflecting the clash between modernity and traditionalism has led to two clashing responses: segregation or assimilation" (5). After decolonization, some individuals choose to preserve their own cultures, traditions, and values while rejecting Western influences. In contrast, others embrace modernity and assimilate into the new culture, letting go of their homeland's heritage. Al-Asmakh further explains, "The postcolonial culture of Sudan as revealed in *Minaret*

(2005) is characterized by admiration for the West, fragmentation of native culture, the emergence of a Western elite and sub-culture, and political instability. All of these factors contributed to the struggle that the heroine faced in her journey of identity formation” (6).

Najwa’s lifestyle is heavily influenced by her family's wealth, characterized by a westernized way of life that admires and imitates Western culture. She does not adhere to the norms of Sudanese society; instead, she embraces a fashionable image, wearing short skirts and tight blouses and frequenting nightclubs. This behavior reflects the hybrid culture in Sudan, where some individuals adopt Western lifestyles while others remain devoted to their traditional roots. Najwa's detachment from her native culture results in identity confusion and self-instability. As Tina Chan notes, “the national identity that’s formed in postcolonial states is believed to be never fixed and is very changing according to environment and culture because of transfer and sovereignty, which leads to a confusion in identity” (qtd. in Saman Abdulqadir Hussein Dizayi 1000). This highlights the complexities that Najwa faces as she navigates her conflicting identities in a postcolonial context.

In *Minaret*, the female protagonist, Najwa, embodies the effects of an English education and belongs to the upper class of Sudanese society. Her father, a prominent bureaucrat and advisor to the president, provides her with a luxurious lifestyle that distances her from self-reflection. This privilege leads to her ignorance about the emptiness within her soul. Najwa is depicted as dependent, relying on her family to define her identity, which results in low self-esteem and a lack of belief in her own abilities. As Al-Asmakh points out, “Anwar tells Najwa that she is not intellectual; as a result, she believed him. This shows that Najwa does not have enough confidence to believe in her own abilities” (11). Her brother Omar further complicates her identity. A staunch supporter of colonialism, he believes that Sudan was better off under British rule, as Najwa

illustrates: “Omar believed we had been better off under the British and it was a shame that they left” (11-12). He has little connection to democratic ideals and instead glorifies Western influences, including music and fashion. This is evident in the descriptions of his lifestyle: “Omar did not have time for the likes of Anwar; he had his own friends. They lent each other videos of Top of the Pops, and they all intended to go to Britain one day” (11). Furthermore, the atmosphere at social gatherings reflects their fascination with Western culture, as illustrated when Najwa recounts, “the party at the American club was in full swing when Omar and I arrived. We walked into the tease of red and blue disco lights and the Gap Band’s *Say Oops Upside Your Head*” (23). These passages highlight the extent to which Najwa, Omar, and her friend Randa are captivated by Western culture, revealing their admiration for American music and their dreams of immigrating to Britain. This longing for Western ideals contributes to their identity struggles within a postcolonial context.

The cultural dichotomy between Najwa's native Sudanese culture and the Western influences surrounding her drives her quest for identity. Although her life appears perfect filled with luxury, cars, and a large house provided by her father she feels spiritually empty, which contributes to her sadness. She says:

I had a happy life. My father and mother loved me and were always generous. In the summer we went for holidays in Alexandria, Geneva and London. There was nothing that I didn't have, couldn't have, no dreams corroded in rust, no buried desires. And yet, sometimes, I would remember pain like a wound that had healed sadness like a forgetting dream (14-15).

In her article entitled “Veiling and Unveiling Fears in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*,” Agnieszka Stanecka notes that despite being a Muslim by tradition, Najwa “had never paid

attention to religion when in Khartoum. Hardly ever did she pray or visit a mosque” (77). This distance from the religious traditions of her homeland makes her feel like a foreigner in her own country. Najwa's disconnect from Islamic values leads to feelings of guilt, as highlighted in her conversation with her friend Randa: “what do we know? We don’t even pray. Sometimes I was struck with guilt” (29). This illustrates a significant gap in her life; despite not praying regularly, she yearns to observe one of the fundamental pillars of Islam—fasting. She expresses a desire for Allah to accept her fasting, stating, “when I fast in Ramadan, I pray. A girl in school told me that fasting doesn’t account unless you pray” (29). This longing for spiritual connection underscores Najwa's internal conflict and highlights her struggle to reconcile her cultural and religious identity in a postcolonial context.

Najwa admires Sudanese girls who wear the traditional *tobe*, feeling self-conscious about her own clothing choices whenever she encounters them at the university. She recalls: “Two girls of my class leaving the library and we smiled to each other. I was not sure of their names. They both wore white tobés and one of them was very cute with deep dimples and sparkling eyes ... with them I felt, for the first time in my life, self-conscious of my clothes, my too short skirts and too tight blouses” (14). Najwa’s respect and admiration for these covered girls, along with her inclination to engage in charity and help the poor, illustrate her hybrid cultural identity. She blends Western habits with Islamic traditions, such as charity, fasting, and celebrating *Eid* and Ramadan. However, her Western lifestyle often categorizes her as a Western citizen within her own country, complicating her sense of belonging. This lack of alignment with any single cultural stance deeply impacts her identity formation. Najwa embodies a "betwixt" individual, torn between two cultures to which she does not fully belong. She feels distant from her native culture while also not being entirely Western. Even after her move to London, she continues to experience this sense of in-

betweenness, feeling disconnected from both Western culture and her homeland. This duality leads to a profound sense of alienation. As Esmail Zohdi suggests: “anybody who lives in-between spaces, between two different cultures, lives a dual life which doubles his/her identity” (147). This encapsulates Najwa's struggle as she navigates her fragmented identity amidst the complexities of cultural hybridity.

After the coup of 1985, Najwa's previous life unravels, replaced by a new, humble existence in London. Her luxurious, privileged, and Westernized life in Sudan is now a distant memory, as she acknowledges: “I have come down in the world” (1). According to Marta Cariello “Aboulela's narrative marks the traumatic interruption of time – one life literally stops, replaced by a completely different one – and a physical and spatial dislocation – Sudan replaced by England” (340). Following traumatic events such as her father's execution, her mother's death, and her twin brother Omar's imprisonment, Najwa finds herself alone, struggling to adapt to her new life. This displacement leads her to experience a profound sense of in-betweenness. Victor Turner describes liminality as a state that “includes few or none of the attributes of the previous or future states, and that the features of liminality are ambiguous; that is, they are outside of all society's standard classification” (qtd. in Taha Al-Karawi and Bahar 259). Najwa's identity, previously rooted in material aspects her family, friends, social status, profession, and country becomes shattered and fractured due to her separation from these elements, leaving her feeling lost. Her journey toward self-discovery involves navigating different phases of liminality. Susan Taha Al-Karawi and Ida Baizura Bahar explain that “Najwa goes through stages and transitions characteristic of liminality in order to achieve a hybrid identity that is modern in Western terms, but firmly Muslim through the wearing of the veil” (255). Initially, Najwa is trapped in the pain of

her past, unable to overcome her loss and struggling to accept her new, unprivileged life. With no qualifications or family support, she resorts to working as a maid.

Working for Aunt Eva, her mother's friend, provides Najwa with a temporary refuge to reconnect with her past. This role allows her to confront her feelings of uprootedness and disillusionment. Her longing for a sense of belonging and "home" surpasses her pride. The emotional rewards of becoming a maid outweigh the financial ones, as it offers her a space to feel at home again. This need for connection is evident in her conversation with her uncle Salah: "What do you mean you're helping her? Help. Waiting upon. Servant's work. He didn't understand that I needed her company, needed to hear her gossip about Khartoum, needed to sit within range of her nostalgia" (143). Through this relationship, Najwa begins to navigate her complex identity in a new cultural landscape.

While working for Aunt Eva, Najwa encounters her past lover, Anwar, which symbolizes a reconnection with her history. Anwar provides her with a sense of belonging, as she reflects, "I belonged to him more now" (174). This connection prompts her to initiate a romantic relationship with him, despite their differences: "He gave me hope that I would not be in limbo for long, that I would not be without a family for long" (156). As a dependent individual, Najwa derives her self-worth from external sources, leading her identity to be shaped by how others perceive her rather than her own self-perception. Anwar sees her as a Westernized girl, and she internalizes this view, acting in accordance with it: "She has a longing to identify with Anwar's encouragement of the Western lifestyle and professing that he likes her because of her modernity and independence" (Taha Al-Karawi and Bahar 264).

With Anwar's support, Najwa strives to embody the Westernized identity he admires, hoping it will help her piece together her fragmented self. However, this external validation fails

to heal her wounded soul or fill the emptiness within her, as it is rooted in external perceptions rather than her internal reality. Consequently, she becomes increasingly confused and frustrated, grappling with the inconsistency between her true self and the persona she projects. By being with Anwar, she continues to ignore her inner voice, which calls for a return to her religious roots: “this prevents Najwa from seriously engaging her liminal status and striving to create a Muslim identity that tugs at her conscience” (Taha Al-Karawi and Bahar 264).

When Najwa ultimately realizes that Anwar is taking advantage of her love, naivety, and desire for freedom without any intention of marrying her, her disappointment becomes unbearable. This disillusionment acts as a catalyst for self-awareness. For the first time, she begins to listen to the inner voices she had long suppressed. This awakening allows her to confront the source of her emptiness, particularly when she hears the *azan*, the Islamic call to prayer, or the recitation of the Quran. These moments signify a pivotal turning point in Najwa's journey, where she starts to reconcile her fragmented identity with her cultural and spiritual roots.

Whenever I heard the azan in Khartoum, whenever I heard the Qur'an recited, I would feel a bleakness in me and a depth and space would open up, hollow and numb. I usually didn't notice it, wasn't aware that it existed. Then the Qur'an heard by chance on the radio of a taxi would tap at this inner sluggishness, nudge it like when my feet went to sleep and I touched them. They felt fat and for them to get back to normal, for me to be able to move my toes again, they would have to first crunch with pins and needles (134-135).

Najwa ultimately decides to end her relationship with Anwar and embrace Islam, marking a significant transformation in her identity. Through her interactions with the women at the Regent's Park Mosque, she begins to uncover the beauty of her faith, a facet of her life she was largely unaware of due to her Westernized upbringing. She reflects on her past, noting, “We

weren't brought up in a religious way, neither of us. We weren't even friends in Khartoum with people who were religious [...] our house was a house where only the servants prayed" (96). This realization highlights the disconnect between her heritage and her upbringing. At the mosque, Najwa discovers a sense of community that fills the void left by her departure from Sudan: "In the mosque I feel like I'm in Khartoum again" (*Minaret* 244). Here, she finds solidarity and connection with other women, which plays a crucial role in her journey of self-discovery.

In *Minaret*, Islam serves as a vital space for identity formation for immigrant Muslim women. Marxist David Harvey suggests that such spaces allow for a re-engagement with cultural roots, facilitating a reconnection to identity and community that is often lost in the process of migration. This newfound connection helps Najwa navigate her complexities, enabling her to embrace her faith and identity fully. Through this transformation, she begins to reconcile her past with her present, establishing a sense of belonging that had eluded her for so long. Harvey states that such spaces are:

constructed and experienced as material artifacts. Specifically, religion is – where possible – a non-fixed, 'displaced' place: in world progressively pervaded by a sense of global interconnectedness between economic, political, social, and cultural formations, the notion of 'place' is, somewhat surprisingly, becoming more important. Religion is, in this sense, dispersed, transnational, interconnected, and global, and yet constitutes a local, always rooted and specifically – if not individually – constructed and experienced place (qtd. in Cariello 341).

Islam becomes a crucial space for belonging, affiliation, and identity negotiation for Najwa. It provides Najwa with redemption from the pain of displacement, alienation, and loss, offering her consolation and comfort. As she spends more time in London, Najwa grows increasingly

attached to her faith, ultimately deciding to become a devoted Muslimah, a stark contrast to her barely practiced faith in Sudan. Aboulela presents a nuanced definition of freedom through Najwa, who chooses to embrace Islam in London as an expression of her autonomy, rather than an escape from it. This perspective challenges the prevailing Western narrative that often portrays Islam as an oppressive force that women seek to liberate themselves from. As Firouzeh Ameri notes, there is a common misconception that “Muslim identity is imposed on Muslim women and a Muslim life is one from which women from Muslim backgrounds wish to escape” (qtd. in Hasan 8). Najwa’s journey illustrates a counter-discourse, showcasing how her connection to Islam can be a source of empowerment and fulfillment. Through her commitment to her faith, she reclaims her identity and navigates her cultural complexities, ultimately finding strength and belonging in her spiritual community. This transformation challenges stereotypes and emphasizes the diverse experiences of Muslim women, highlighting that adherence to faith can be a choice rooted in personal conviction rather than oppression.

According to Samir El-Mouti, religion plays a critical role in examining culture and identity for immigrants in diasporas. For many immigrants, creating an Islamic identity involves adopting a performative identity, where religion is deeply embedded in their daily behaviors, appearances, and lifestyles (7). This means that, for Najwa, her Islamic faith manifests in every aspect of her life as she chooses to embrace her identity as a devoted Muslimah. One of the most significant decisions she makes is to wear the veil. This choice is thoughtful and well-considered, made without any pressure from male figures in her life. Leila Aboulela reflects a similar sentiment in her own journey, stating, “I took this step with no pressure from my parents or my husband. It came after years of hesitation, years during which I held back out of fear that I would look ugly in a head scarf and that my progressive friends would make fun of me” (qtd. in Sufian 401). Abu

Sufian notes that wearing the veil and engaging with Muslim women in the mosque serve as tools for self-healing, helping Najwa navigate the challenges related to gender and immigration in the diaspora (400). While the headscarf protects Najwa from the male gaze, allowing her to feel a sense of invisibility, it simultaneously exposes her to acts of Islamophobic hatred. Seda Canpolat highlights this duality in her article “Scopic Dilemmas: Gazing the Muslim Woman in Fadia Faqir’s *My Name Is Salma* and Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*,” noting that “Aboulela, like Faqir, produces a binarized model of gazing in which veiling affords Najwa protection from the sexist gaze but subjects her to the racist or, more precisely, Islamophobic gaze” (12). This complex interplay of visibility and invisibility illustrates the multifaceted nature of Najwa's identity as she navigates her new life in London. Her choice to wear the veil becomes a poignant symbol of her faith, autonomy, and the challenges she faces as a Muslim woman in a diasporic context.

Although Najwa has adopted a religious identity that is “transcendental and does not deny gender, nationality, class, and race” (Hasan 12), she grapples with what is often termed an “Islamic identity crisis”. A part of her remains nostalgic for her former, Westernized life, which she sees as a link to her homeland (El-Mouti 8). This nostalgia is vividly illustrated through her dreams, in which she recalls being a child in Sudan, surrounded by her family: “I close my eyes. I can smell the smells of the mosque, tired incense, carpet and coats. I doze and, in my dream, I am small and back in Khartoum, ill and fretful, wanting clean, crisp sheets, a quiet room to rest in, wanting my parents' room” (*Minaret* 74-75). These dreams reveal Najwa's sense of in-betweenness, caught between her current religious identity and the remnants of her past life. Neither lifestyle feels like a true choice anymore, yet she clings to anything that reminds her of Sudan. Such nostalgia serves as a central theme in diasporic literature produced by female immigrant writers like Leila Aboulela.

Mariam Cooke, an American academic specializing in Middle Eastern and Arab studies, notes that while male writers, such as Sudanese Tayib Salih, might express their alienation or anger—sometimes leading to vengeful actions female writers typically reflect on their places of birth with a sense of nostalgia: “women generally wrote nostalgically about their places of birth” (qtd. in El-Mouti 9). In this context, Samir El-Mouti asserts that the identities of immigrants in the diaspora are constructed and deconstructed based on nostalgic experiences, marked by a longing for a lost home and an emotional yearning for the past (9). For Najwa, this nostalgia complicates her efforts to fully embrace her new identity, illustrating the intricate interplay of memory, belonging, and the quest for self in the diaspora. As a devoted Muslimah, Najwa begins working as a maid and babysitter for Lamya, marking a significant point in her journey of self-discovery. This workplace becomes a crucial space for Najwa to negotiate her sense of “home” and reconnect with her past. In this sense, Lidia Curti assures:

The workplace offers a space for nostalgia, for what [migrant women] have left behind, a sort of involuntary substitution: the other woman’s child and home [. . .] become their own, they replace what was left behind. The new home becomes memory, in more than one sense, inscribing not only the past in the present and vice versa, but also that which is far away and that which is close by, the same and the different (qtd. in Cariello 344).

Working for Lamya offers more emotional rewards than financial ones, as it provides glimpses into her former life. Despite this, Najwa faces hostility from Lamya, who embodies a socio-cultural superiority that manifests in her treatment of Najwa. Lamya's perspective reduces Najwa to stereotypes shaped by her veil, career, and skin color, as she is unable to see Najwa beyond these

fixed identities: “Najwa is stereotyped and fixed by her veil, career and skin color, and Lamya cannot see her without these frames” (qtd. in Hasan 13).

In contrast, Tamer, Lamya’s brother, treats Najwa with friendliness, highlighting the shared bond of their religious identity. Their conversation underscores this connection, as they both identify as Muslims, allowing for a moment of understanding and camaraderie. This interaction provides Najwa with a sense of belonging that contrasts sharply with her experiences with Lamya, illustrating how shared faith can create ties that transcend socio-cultural barriers.

My education is Western and that makes me feel that I am Western. My English is stronger than my Arabic. So, I guess, no, I don’t feel very Sudanese, though I would like to be. I guess being a Muslim is my identity. What about you? I talk slowly. I feel that I am Sudanese but things changed for me when I left Khartoum. Then even while living here in London, I’ve changed. And now like you, I just think of myself as a Muslim (*Minaret* 110).

Thus, Najwa's experience in Lamya's household serves as a microcosm of her broader search for identity and belonging, where she must navigate the complexities of her faith, her past, and the societal perceptions that shape her present reality.

Both *Minaret* and *The Translator* serve as allegories for the left's defeat, illustrating how characters like Rae and Najwa's first lover are ultimately vanquished by Islam. Rae's conversion signifies a surrender to Islamic values, while Najwa's previous partner is portrayed as inferior, replaced by a younger Islamist figure. These narratives unfold within romance plots, where a community of women at the mosque offers a sense of comfort and belonging that is often lacking in the alienation of the West. The novels utilize familiar tropes of postcolonial literature, weaving in themes of immigrant trauma, culture shock, and the inadequacies of English in capturing

bicultural experiences. In both stories, Islam emerges as a source of solace, community, and a pathway to identity. Aboulela's vision refracts influences from Monica Ali and Syed Qutb, blending domestic multicultural romance with contemporary right-wing Islamism. The narratives address typical markers of domestic immigrant fiction, such as the complexities of female desire amid Western hostility and cultural expectations. They explore themes of allegiance and accusations of cultural treason, translating these challenges into a framework where belonging is primarily defined by Islam. This shift imagines resolutions to the dilemmas that Muslim women pose for left-liberal, anti-imperial discourse.

Aboulela presents nuanced depictions of Muslim women who seemingly desire their own subordination, complicating the narrative of resistance against imperialist notions of female rescue. This perspective suggests that, while figures like Laura Bush might use the suffering of women under regimes like the Taliban to justify military action, anti-imperialists could also highlight the agency of Islamist women who reject modern burdens. Their consent to subordination can be interpreted as a form of agency, challenging the simplistic dichotomy of victim and savior. Through these complex portrayals, Aboulela invites readers to reconsider the intersection of feminism, imperialism, and cultural identity, suggesting that the desires and choices of Muslim women are multifaceted and deserving of deeper examination beyond the binary frameworks often imposed by Western narratives.

The choice to accept or embrace subordination, as depicted in Aboulela's novels, is often denied by both the indigenous left and many Muslim feminists, who seek to assert their own agency and resist such narratives. The conflict that unfolds within these texts reflects the ongoing struggle between leftist ideals and right-wing Islamic militancy, a tension that resonates in various Muslim societies and on campuses around the world. This dynamic contributes to the novels'

apologetic function, as Aboulela attempts to portray gender in a way that highlights consensual self-subordination. To achieve this, she crafts narrowly focused stories that align closely with the protagonist's experiences, limiting the social canvas and avoiding broader representations. This approach allows her to sidestep the complexities of gender relations that might emerge when depicting characters who resist both religion and colonialism as nuanced individuals, rather than mere antagonists. In *Minaret*, for instance, the exiled indigenous Marxist character embodies a commitment to progress and change but is portrayed as overly hostile to the West. His actions, such as burning the American flag and opposing the IMF, position him as a foil to the heroine, who embodies a version of Islam that seeks to coexist peacefully with Western culture. This framing suggests that the leftist character's radicalism is incompatible with a more harmonious vision of Islam, effectively presenting the latter as a solution to the perceived failures of Western modernity.

Aboulela's narrative can be interpreted as a critique of contemporary conflicts, reminiscent of Thomas Friedman's binary perspective that contrasts the olive tree with the Lexus. The author suggests that the tension between Islam and the West could be resolved by portraying devout Muslims who comfortably engage with Western culture, thus displacing the problem onto the indigenous left. Rae, the Scottish leftist in *The Translator*, represents a character who recognizes the potential for resolution in Islam, viewing conversion as a logical conclusion for those disillusioned with Western modernity. As Sammar lists the differences between Britain and her homeland, the category of "modernity" emerges opportunistically, redefined to encompass social and cultural radicalism that must be eradicated while simultaneously rescuing capitalism and consumerism from the critiques often associated with it. This reimagining of modernity aligns with typical right-wing Islamist rhetoric, suggesting a fantasy reconciliation between Islam and the

West that ultimately marginalizes secular, working-class radicals in Sudan. In this way, Aboulela's narratives present a complex interplay between identity, agency, and ideological conflict, illustrating the challenges faced by those who resist simplistic categorizations and strive for a more nuanced understanding of their cultural and political realities.

Aboulela's work often reinforces the dichotomy between East and West, particularly in her portrayal of ideas surrounding women. In *Minaret*, Najwa grapples with guilt over her premarital sexual experiences, a moment that encapsulates the contrasting values attributed to each sphere. The "West" is depicted as a realm of loneliness and sexual freedom, while the "East" embodies discipline and a form of claustrophobia that is, paradoxically, framed as a happy collectivity.

Who would care if I became pregnant, who would be scandalized? Aunt

Eva, Anwar's flatmates. Omar would never know unless I wrote to him.

Uncle Saleh was across the world. A few years back, getting pregnant would have shocked Khartoum society, given my father a heart attack, dealt a blow to my mother's marriage, and mild, modern Omar, instead of beating me, would have called me a slut. And now nothing, no one.

This empty space was called freedom (*Minaret* 174-5).

This framing suggests that the East offers a structured social environment, but it also implies that such happiness is contingent upon conformity to communal norms. However, Najwa's discontent with both her experiences in the West and her connection to Sudanese sociality complicates this binary. Her search for fulfillment leads her to marriage, which emerges as a constrained alternative to the traditional collectivities of her culture. Through this lens, Aboulela critiques the simplistic notion that the East provides an unequivocally positive alternative to Western individualism. Instead, she presents a nuanced exploration of how both contexts can be fraught with challenges

for women. Najwa's journey reflects a struggle to find her identity in a world where neither option fully satisfies her desires or sense of belonging. In this way, Aboulela's narrative invites readers to reconsider the effects of cultural dichotomies and the complexities of female agency, highlighting that neither the romanticized East nor the liberated West offers a straightforward path to happiness for women like Najwa.

Minaret represents a significant departure from typical diaspora fiction by women writers, as it explores the complexities of identity and agency through the lens of its protagonist, Najwa. At first glance, Najwa's journey appears to be one of seeking unfettered agency; however, her adherence to the concept of placelessness complicates her quest. While she yearns for a sense of belonging, it is within the context of London that she ultimately finds a physical space the Central London Mosque where she begins to re-establish her personal equilibrium. Najwa's conversion to a devout practice of Islam sets the stage for two romances that, although significant, ultimately prove futile. The first romance unfolds in the late 1980s with Anwar, a Communist exiled from Sudan. Their relationship blooms amidst the backdrop of political journalism, suggesting a new transnational identity for Najwa. Anwar's provocative question about virginity in London challenges her perceptions of self, marking her transition into the identity of a "true Londoner". The second romance occurs a decade and a half later with Tamer, her employer's younger brother. This relationship, characterized by chastity but deep emotional connection, also faces insurmountable obstacles, primarily stemming from the opposition of Tamer's family to their age difference. Najwa's despair leads her to accept monetary compensation from Tamer's family as a substitute for their potential union, rationalizing her choice as an opportunity to fulfill her desire to travel to Mecca for hajj. Through these relationships, Aboulela illustrates the complexities of Najwa's search for identity and belonging. Both romances highlight her struggles with love,

societal expectations, and personal aspirations, revealing how her journey is intertwined with broader themes of cultural dislocation and the quest for spiritual fulfillment. Ultimately, Najwa's experiences reflect a nuanced exploration of the intersections between faith, love, and the challenges of negotiating one's place within disparate cultural landscapes.

In conclusion, Leila Aboulela's narratives in *The Translator* and *Minaret* intricately unveil the multifaceted experiences of diaspora, illuminating the complexities of identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation. Through the journeys of her protagonists, Sammar and other characters, Aboulela challenges monolithic representations of Muslim women, presenting them instead as dynamic individuals navigating the intersections of tradition and modernity. The hybrid spaces they inhabit serve as sites of self-discovery, where cultural translation occurs, allowing for the coexistence of diverse worldviews without necessitating their amalgamation.

Aboulela's nuanced exploration of emotional landscapes highlights the profound impact of love, loss, and memory on the diasporic experience. Her characters embody a resilience that transcends geographical boundaries, revealing the power of personal narratives in shaping one's identity in a globalized world. By engaging with themes of cultural dislocation and the search for belonging, Aboulela not only enriches the discourse on diaspora but also emphasizes the importance of introspection and dialogue in understanding the complexities of multicultural existence. Ultimately, her work invites readers to reflect on their own positionalities within the tapestry of global cultures, encouraging an appreciation for the diverse narratives that emerge from the diasporic experience. In doing so, Aboulela not only unveils the intricacies of her characters' lives but also offers a broader commentary on the universal quest for connection and understanding in an ever-evolving world.

Conclusion

In this dissertation, the researcher has explored the multifaceted concept of diaspora as depicted in Hisham Matar's *In the Country of Men* and *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, alongside Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* and *Minaret*. Through a detailed analysis of these texts, the researcher has illuminated how both authors navigate the complexities of identity, memory, belonging, and displacement within the diaspora experience. This concluding chapter synthesizes the key findings, reflects on their implications, and suggests avenues for further research. The comparative analysis of these authors reveals that diaspora is not a monolithic experience; rather, it is shaped by individual narratives and contextual realities. Both Matar and Aboulela depict characters who grapple with their pasts while striving to forge new identities in foreign landscapes. Both authors delineate characters' struggles employing place, culture, politics, religion and language to represent these diasporic experiences. Their works invite readers to consider the nuanced ways in which diasporic identities are constructed, negotiated, and redefined.

A central theme across both authors is the concept of identity, particularly how it is shaped and reshaped in the diaspora. Matar's protagonists often navigate their identities amidst the backdrop of political turmoil and personal loss. In *In the Country of Men*, the young narrator grapples with the realities of growing up in a repressive regime, which complicates his understanding of himself and his place within both his family and his nation. The interplay of fear and longing in his narrative underscores the difficulty of finding a sense of belonging when external circumstances threaten personal identity. Conversely, Aboulela's characters often experience a more introspective journey of self-discovery. In *The Translator*, the protagonist grapples with her dual identity as a Sudanese expatriate in a Western context. Her struggle to reconcile her cultural roots with the expectations of her new environment highlights the

complexities of assimilation and cultural preservation. This negotiation of identity is further complicated by her faith, which acts as both a foundation and a source of conflict in her interactions with the world around her. Matar's narratives present a poignant exploration of loss and the haunting nature of memory. In *In the Country of Men*, the protagonist's childhood is irrevocably shaped by the political turmoil of Libya, reflecting the broader implications of national identity and personal trauma. Similarly, *Anatomy of a Disappearance* delves into the psychological ramifications of exile, illustrating how the search for a lost father figure mirrors the search for a lost homeland. Matar's work encapsulates the struggle between the desire for connection and the painful reality of separation, emphasizing that the diaspora experience is often marked by an enduring sense of longing. Contrastingly, Aboulela's texts focus on the intersection of faith and cultural identity. In *The Translator*, the protagonist's journey of self-discovery and adaptation to life in a new country highlights the challenges and enrichments that come with navigating multiple identities. *Minaret* further explores themes of spirituality and belonging, showcasing how faith can serve as both a refuge and a source of conflict in the diaspora.

Both Matar and Aboulela delve deeply into the struggles of identity formation in the diaspora. Their characters often face the challenge of reconciling their cultural heritage with the pressures of assimilation in a new environment. This duality creates a rich tapestry of experiences that highlight the complexities of belonging. Matar's works particularly emphasize the role of memory in shaping identity. The characters grapple with their pasts, which are often marked by trauma and loss. This focus on memory serves to illustrate how the past continuously influences the present, making it a central theme in understanding the diaspora experience.

Memory serves as another crucial theme related to identity in both Matar's and Aboulela's works, particularly in how it shapes the characters' present realities. In *Anatomy of a*

Disappearance, the protagonist's reflections on his father's disappearance create a haunting narrative that intertwines loss with the search for identity. The persistent echoes of the past illustrate how memories of loved ones and homeland can both enrich and complicate one's current existence. Aboulela also engages with memory, but her approach is often tied to the notions of cultural heritage and spirituality. In *Minaret*, the protagonist's memories of her life in Sudan serve as a contrast to her current experiences in London. Her recollections foster a sense of nostalgia that informs her spiritual journey. The blending of memory and faith highlights how the past can provide comfort and guidance, even in the face of dislocation.

Aboulela's exploration of faith adds another layer to the discussion of diaspora. Her characters often find solace in spirituality, which helps them navigate their dislocation. This theme highlights how faith can be both a refuge and a source of tension, particularly in multicultural settings. Matar employs a more introspective narrative style, often focusing on internal conflicts and emotional landscapes. In contrast, Aboulela's prose frequently intertwines cultural elements and dialogues that reflect the diversity of the characters' experiences. The authors come from different backgrounds Matar's Libyan heritage and Aboulela's Sudanese roots—each informing their portrayal of diaspora. This cultural context enriches their narratives, providing readers with varied perspectives on displacement and identity. The dissertation highlights that there is no singular narrative for diaspora; rather, it encompasses a wide range of experiences influenced by factors such as history, politics, and personal background. This diversity is essential for a comprehensive understanding of the diasporic experience. Indeed, literature serves as a powerful medium to explore and articulate the complexities of diaspora. It allows for a deeper emotional connection to the characters' journeys, fostering empathy and understanding among readers.

Throughout, *In the Anatomy of Disappearance* and *In the Country of Men*, Matar reaches out to readers who are drawn to narratives exploring the intersections of personal and political upheaval. His intended audience includes those interested in the psychological impact of authoritarian regimes and the fragility of familial bonds in times of crisis. Matar's poignant prose delves into themes of loss, identity, and the haunting presence of the past, encouraging readers to confront the realities of exile and silence. Through his characters' struggles, he conveys a powerful message about the resilience required to navigate a world rife with conflict and the profound quest for understanding one's place within it.

The juxtaposition of Matar and Aboulela reveals a rich tapestry of diasporic narratives, each contributing distinct perspectives shaped by their cultural backgrounds. Matar's focus on political exile and trauma contrasts with Aboulela's exploration of personal and spiritual identity. While both authors address the challenges of displacement, their approaches highlight the diversity of experiences within the diaspora. Matar's introspective style often delves into the emotional turmoil of his characters, creating a sense of urgency and depth. In contrast, Aboulela employs a more reflective tone, inviting readers to engage with her characters' inner lives and spiritual journeys. This difference in narrative technique fosters a broader understanding of how diaspora can manifest in various forms, underscoring the importance of context in shaping individual experiences.

Matar's writing evolves from his earlier work *In the Country of Men* to his more polished novel *Anatomy of a Disappearance*, showcasing his growing ideas. He aims to humanize Arabs by letting non-Arab readers access the deep inner lives of his characters. By sharing these private stories, he restores a sense of privacy and agency to real Arabs. With both parents gone, he feels an intense longing to be with his father, highlighting the importance of home and family. Similarly,

in *In the Country of Men*, Suleiman's discomfort stems from the disruption caused by Faraj's unexpected presence in Tripoli. Both characters experience heightened sensitivity to their surroundings when their sense of home is threatened. These scenes illustrate how external, often political, forces can profoundly shake their domestic stability, and Matar's writing delves into the fragile balance between public and private lives and the consequences when that balance is disrupted. When the family lawyer suggests that Kamal may have had a secret life with his mistress, Béatrice Benameur, Nuri is disturbed. The idea of his father leading a "double life" shakes his perception and feelings about Kamal, highlighting the clash between public and private spheres as a central theme in Matar's writing. Nuri's struggle to cope with the disruption of his family life by external forces mirrors Suleiman's unease. Both boys confront the fragility of their domestic stability as public life intrudes on their private worlds. Although the specifics differ—one father unexpectedly appearing in public and the other vanishing—the emotional impact on Suleiman and Nuri is strikingly similar. Both characters feel unsettled and disoriented in cities they once knew well. The boundaries between their public and private lives blur, forcing them to face the fragility of the comfort they once took for granted. Matar's exploration centers on this conflict between public and private realms, showing how outside political forces disrupt their sense of security and belonging.

Loss and belonging are discussed differently in Aboulela's novels. Both *Minaret* and *The Translator* explore the theme of displacement and its effects on the protagonists' identities. Najwa faces forced exile from Sudan to London, while Sammar relocates from Sudan to Scotland. Both characters struggle to adapt to new cultural environments, grappling with feelings of alienation and seeking belonging in foreign lands. Aboulela highlights the concept of cultural hybridity as Najwa and Sammar navigate their Sudanese heritage and Islamic faith alongside Western

influences. Their experiences illustrate the challenges of managing multiple identities and the tensions that arise from conflicting cultural values. Religion, particularly Islam, serves as a significant source of solace and identity for both protagonists. Aboulela examines how faith provides continuity and stability amid displacement, reflecting the interplay between religious and cultural identities. Matar's portrayal of loss is not merely about absence; it is about how that absence reverberates throughout one's life, influencing decisions, relationships, and self-perception.

Aboulela presents complex visions of women navigating their own subjugation while dramatizing what she frames as an ideal Muslim marriage. This narrative echoes the Qur'anic declaration that places men in authority over women, suggesting that Sammar's relationship with Rae embodies these traditional roles. Sammar learns from Rae, which positions her in a subordinate role; she looks up to him and expresses a willingness to accept the possibility of being a second wife in a polygamous marriage. This acceptance can be interpreted as a reflection of the values she internalizes from her culture and religion. Aboulela's portrayal of Sammar's subordination can be seen as an allegory for a broader acceptance of traditional gender roles, intertwined with a romanticization of these dynamics. The narrative suggests an apologetic stance, where the seemingly happy defeat of progressive ideals is celebrated. Rae's character serves as a crucial element in this framework; his conversion to Islam symbolizes a reconciliation of his previously leftist beliefs with a newfound respect for Islamic values. This transformation is significant, as it positions Rae not only as a character within the story but also as a proxy for the novel's intended audience leftist readers who are encouraged to embrace Islamic principles. Rae's journey implies that the left should recognize Islam as a valid and beneficial framework for anti-colonial resistance, challenging the notion that leftist ideologies alone can address such historical

injustices. In this way, Aboulela crafts a narrative that invites readers to reconsider their perceptions of Islam and its relationship to gender, power, and cultural identity. By framing Rae's conversion as the culmination of his anti-imperialist sympathies, the novel suggests that there exists a superior form of redress within Islamic teachings, thus bridging the gap between Eastern and Western ideologies in a manner that seeks to cultivate understanding and acceptance.

Moreover, Aboulela presents a nuanced view of freedom through Najwa, who chooses to embrace Islam in London as an expression of her autonomy, rather than as an escape. This challenges the common Western narrative that portrays Islam as oppressive to women. As Firouzeh Ameri points out, there's a misconception that "Muslim identity is imposed on Muslim women" (qtd. in Hasan 8). Najwa's journey counters this narrative, showing that her connection to Islam can be empowering and fulfilling. Through her commitment to faith, she reclaims her identity and navigates her cultural complexities, ultimately finding strength and belonging within her spiritual community. This transformation challenges stereotypes and emphasizes that adherence to faith can stem from personal conviction, not oppression. Neither woman fits pre-cut shapes of the 'oppressed Muslim woman' or the 'liberated exile'. Their complexity resides in the quiet grit of daily survival, the messy intertwining of faith, cultural memory, loneliness, and a hard-won sense of self stitched together from fragments, often far from the gaze that expects spectacle. They are fully human, etched with contradictions, their inner landscapes vast and uncharted by easy labels. Aboulela shows them building meaning brick by brick or prayer by prayer on ground that constantly shifts.

Aboulela highlights the challenges immigrants face in reconciling their past with their present, illustrating how memory serves as a vital means of preserving identity amid the stark realities of exile. Viewing Sammar solely as Arab overlooks the significant impact of her

Anglophone identity. This hyphen is essential, as it reflects her need to navigate between her African roots and her life in Europe, helping her survive in a landscape of cultural contrasts. She embodies a duality that enriches her experience, remaining connected to both worlds. Sammar's dedication to her Islamic faith and Arabic culture coexists with the new dimensions introduced by her relationship with a Western man. This love serves as a bridge between her two worlds, allowing her to reconcile the East and the West. By embracing these facets of her identity, she transcends geographical boundaries and overcomes obstacles of distance, embodying a transnational identity that defies traditional categorizations. Her unique existence integrates diverse cultural influences, enabling her to navigate complexities and find belonging in a world that often seeks to compartmentalize individuals. Sammar's journey illustrates the resilience of the human spirit and the potential for creating a cohesive identity that honors multiple heritages.

Aboulela's characters experience transformation but it is the slow, painful knitting of a new self around the void, thread by fragile thread. Sammar in *The Translator* arrives in Aberdeen already hollowed by grief of widowhood and exile leave her feeling like a ghost haunting her own life. Her Sudanese identity clings, a familiar ache, but it is cracked open by loneliness. Faith becomes her spine, steadying her as she navigates the chilling distance to Rae, a connection that forces her to translate not just words, but the very core of her being across a cultural chasm. It reshapes her quietly, from the inside out. Najwa in *Minaret* sheds a more visible life. The glittering privilege of her Khartoum past, tainted by her father's execution, crumbles to dust. Plunged into London's anonymity as a cleaner, her old identity feels like discarded clothes, ill-fitting and shaming. Her shift is not about assimilation, but a deliberate turning "inward". Islam offers her not just solace, but a radical reordering. Prayer beads click a new rhythm into her days; fasting sharpens her focus; the mosque's hushed space becomes the crucible where the scattered pieces of

herself daughter, sister, exile begin to fuse under the weight of devotion. It is raw, sometimes awkward, this rebuilding. Faith is not a destination for either woman, but the scaffolding they erect, plank by weathered plank, against the winds of loss and displacement, allowing a transformed, sturdier self to slowly emerge within its shelter.

Matar carves nostalgia into something sharp and dangerous. In *In the Country of Men*, Suleiman's childhood memories are not soft-edged recollections; they are tainted honey, thick with the sour tang of betrayal and state terror. The scent of jasmine mixes with the metallic fear of his father's potential arrest. His nostalgia bleeds into a present poisoned by secrets and disappearances, a loss not just of innocence but of the very ground beneath his feet. *The Anatomy of Disappearance* deepens this wound: the narrator's longing for his vanished father is not wistful, it is a gnawing absence, a phantom limb where language itself fails. The past is not a refuge; it is a minefield littered with unanswered questions, a vanished life leaving only echoes that hollow out the present. Aboulela's women carry a different ache. Sammar in *The Translator* drowns in the sensory flood of Khartoum the heat, the spices, the familiar cadence of Arabic a vivid warmth that makes her grey Aberdeen existence feel like a poorly rendered sketch. Her nostalgia is a physical weight, a constant comparison that deepens her isolation. Yet, it is not frozen; her faith offers a fragile raft, a way to carry that inner Khartoum without being entirely crushed by its absence. Najwa in *Minaret* experiences loss as a brutal stripping away. The grand Khartoum house, her family's shattered reputation, the brittle identity of privilege all gone. Her nostalgia is laced with shame and dislocation. London offers cold anonymity, not belonging. Her turn to Islam is not an escape from memory, but a way to sift through the wreckage, finding in prayer and ritual a new kind of anchor, a way to rebuild meaning with the loss, not despite it. For Matar, loss is a political chasm

swallowing the past whole; for Aboulela, it is a raw material, heavy and painful, from which her characters must slowly, deliberately, weave a new kind of belonging.

For both authors, physical environments are not mere settings; they actively shape identity, becoming tangible manifestations of loss, political terror, spiritual yearning, or the profound ache of existing between worlds. The architecture of exile, confinement, and belonging is meticulously etched onto the page. In Matar's worlds, space contracts violently around his characters the interrogation room's stifling air in *In the Country of Men* presses down on Suleiman's childhood, while the maddening, unseen confines of a Libyan prison suffocate the narrator's father in *The Anatomy of Disappearance*. Rooms become traps, streets whisper threats, and the vast Libyan landscape offers no refuge, only echoing absence. Aboulela's protagonists navigate different, yet equally defining, spatial dislocations. Najwa in *Minaret* drifts through London's indifferent sprawl, finding momentary sanctuary only within the mosque's hushed walls, a space simultaneously grounding and isolating. Sammar in *Translator* inhabits the chilly, alienating spaces of Aberdeen, her Khartoum memories clinging like warmth to her skin, making her present surroundings feel thin and unreal. Matar effectively addresses the issue of space for Arabs in *In the Country of Men*, avoiding a typical cultural clash narrative between exiled Arabs and the West. Instead, as Merritt notes, the focus shifts after Suleiman is sent to Egypt, moving away from exile to the emotional breakdown of a family's private life due to the Libyan state's interference. Matar evokes empathy for real Arabs while skillfully crafting a domestic space that feels familiar to his young narrator. His work challenges Western media narratives that justify American interventions in Arab lives, making those stories less compelling.

Integral to the exploration of physical spaces is the representation of home. Aboulela's characters carry their sense of home like a fragile, necessary weight, one that does not always fit

the ground beneath their feet. For Sammar in *The Translator*, home is Khartoum's heat pressed into memory the scent of khumra spice, the rhythm of Arabic, the solid presence of family a warmth that makes Aberdeen's grey streets feel like walking through a chilled, thin replica of life. Her flat there is merely a shell; home exists vividly elsewhere, a place felt in the nerves, prickling with absence. Najwa in *Minaret* experiences a different fracture. The grand Khartoum house of her childhood, filled with political privilege and eventual shame, shrivels into something unreachable, tainted. London, initially a place of exile and menial work, offers no easy replacement. Instead, home becomes something she builds internally, stone by stone, found in the quiet rhythm of prayer within the mosque's walls, in the deliberate choice of faith and ritual that roots her in the present. It is less about geography, more about the space she carves within herself through devotion, a sanctuary stitched together from belief rather than bricks. Both women sift through fragments of the past and present, discovering that home isn't a fixed point on a map, but a shifting landscape defined by longing, loss, and sometimes painful act of rebuilding one's inner world amidst alien streets. Home, for Aboulela, is ultimately a prayer whispered against the cold, an anchor dropped in fragrant, imagined places.

Language and silence are used by the authors to reflect on their character's diasporic experiences. In Matar's stark landscapes, language often bleeds thin under tyranny. Suleiman in *In the Country of Men* grapples with words twisted by fear, adult whispers laced with treason, slogans barked on state radio, the terrifying silence where his father should be. Language is not a tool for connection; it is a minefield, a thing pared down to evasion or choked by unspeakable loss. The father's absence in *The Anatomy of Disappearance* carves a deeper silence, an emptiness where language fails utterly. Religion flickers at the edges of the murmured prayers, the half-remembered rituals but offers little solid ground against the grinding machinery of the state; faith

feels like a ghost limb, sensed but powerless. Aboulela, conversely, weaves language and faith into lifelines. For Sammar in *The Translator*, Arabic is not just speech; it is the scent of home, the weight of memory, the intimate bridge she tries to build towards Rae across a cold cultural gulf. Her faith is the quiet pulse beneath her displacement, a constant hum steadying her fractured world. Najwa in *Minaret* actively seeks the language of devotion. The rhythmic Arabic of the Quran becomes her anchor, its sounds and meanings a refuge from the shattering of her old, privileged life. London's English buzzes around her, alien, while the deliberate words of prayer carve out a sacred space within. For Aboulela, religious language is not abstract; it is the very texture of survival and transformation, a room rebuilt daily with fragrant verses and whispered supplications against the cold tile of exile. Matar shows language shattered by power; Aboulela shows it meticulously gathered, syllable by sacred syllable, as an act of defiant reclamation. Both language and religion play a crucial role for Sammar, bridging the gap between her homeland and her new home in the West. Through translation, she maintains a daily connection to Islam, which serves as a lifeline amidst her emotional and cultural displacement. Phrases like "Inshaallah" and "Astaghfir Allah" reinforce her commitment to her faith, linking her to her religious identity even in unfamiliar surroundings. Islam remains a constant presence in her life, helping her navigate the spiritual emptiness caused by her exile. By actively translating her experiences, Sammar ensures that her cultural and religious roots are preserved. This act of translation becomes a means of survival, enabling her to express her identity in a context that often feels alien.

Language and translation are also crucial elements in both Aboulela's novels. Sammar's work as a translator underscores the challenges of cross-cultural communication, while Najwa's bilingualism helps her navigate different linguistic and cultural contexts. The novels highlight the power and limitations of language in expressing one's identity and the difficulties in achieving

cultural equivalence through translation. Nostalgia and longing for home are prominent themes, with both protagonists yearning for their native Sudan and the memories tied to it. This longing underscores the emotional complexities of the diaspora experience, as they seek rootedness and belonging amid their dislocation. Aboulela also addresses gender and power dynamics in both narratives. Najwa and Sammar confront societal expectations and patriarchal structures, examining the complexities of gender roles and the challenges posed by cultural norms. Both characters negotiate their agency and autonomy within these dynamics, reflecting the multifaceted nature of their experiences in a diasporic context.

The findings of this dissertation underscore the significance of literature in understanding the complexities of diaspora. Both Matar and Aboulela illustrate that the diasporic experience is not monolithic; rather, it encompasses a vast array of emotions, struggles, and triumphs. Their narratives challenge simplistic notions of belonging and identity, inviting readers to consider the profound impacts of history, culture, and personal circumstance. By engaging with these texts, readers gain insight into the lived experiences of those in diaspora, fostering empathy and awareness of the challenges they face. This understanding is particularly relevant in today's global context, where migration and displacement are increasingly prevalent.

In conclusion, this dissertation underscores the significance of literature as a lens through which to examine the complexities of diaspora. Matar and Aboulela offer rich, diverse perspectives that challenge simplistic understandings of displacement and identity. By engaging with their narratives, readers gain insight into the emotional and psychological landscapes of those who inhabit the diaspora, ultimately enriching our understanding of what it means to belong in a world marked by migration and change. It is essential to continue exploring these themes, recognizing that the stories of the diaspora are integral to the broader human experience. In summary, this

dissertation not only analyzes the specific works of Matar and Aboulela but also situates their narratives within broader discussions about diaspora, enriching the academic discourse surrounding migration, identity, and cultural studies. Finally, this dissertation has highlighted the rich, diverse representations of diaspora in the works of Hisham Matar and Leila Aboulela. Their narratives not only reflect individual experiences of displacement but also contribute to a broader understanding of what it means to belong in an increasingly interconnected world. By continuing to engage with these themes, researchers can deepen their appreciation for the complexities of identity and the enduring power of storytelling in the face of change.

The conclusion suggests that ongoing research into diasporic literature is crucial. As global migration patterns evolve, new narratives will emerge, necessitating continued engagement with themes of identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation. As the landscape of migration continues to evolve, further research on diasporic literature will be essential. Future studies could explore the intersections of gender, class, and race within diaspora narratives, examining how these factors influence identity formation and cultural negotiation. Additionally, the impact of globalization on diasporic identities warrants further investigation, particularly in how technology and social media shape connections between individuals and their homelands.

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المخلص

تُقدّم هذه الدراسة استكشافاً شاملاً لمفهوم الشتات كما يتجلى في أعمال اثنين من أبرز الكتّاب العرب الذين يكتبون بالإنجليزية، وهما هشام مطر ولبلى أبو العلا. وتركز الدراسة على روايتي مطر في *بلد الرجال* و*تشریح حالة اختفاء*، إلى جانب روايتي أبو العلا *المترجم والمُنذنة*، حيث تتعمق في التصورات المعقّدة للهوية والافتلاع والتفاوض الثقافي التي تميّز تجربة الشتات العربي. ومن خلال تحليل أدبي مقارن، تبحث الدراسة في الكيفية التي يعبر بها الكاتبان عن التعقيدات النفسية والاجتماعية التي تواجه الأفراد والمجتمعات أثناء تنقلهم بين أوطانهم الأصلية والمجتمعات المستضيفة. وتدرج هذه الروايات ضمن أطر نظرية أوسع، تشمل دراسات ما بعد الاستعمار ودراسات الشتات، من أجل الكشف عن الطرق التي تُستخدم بها التقنيات السردية، وتطوير الشخصيات، والوسائل الأدبية للتعبير عن موضوعات الحنين، والهوية الهجينة، واختلاف الأجيال، والتفاوض المستمر حول الانتماء. ومن خلال التفاعل مع السياقات الثقافية والتاريخية التي تُغذي هذه السرديات، تُسلط الدراسة الضوء ليس فقط على الإسهامات الفريدة التي يقدّمها مطر وأبو العلا للأدب العربي المكتوب بالإنجليزية، بل تُعمّق أيضاً الفهم الأكاديمي لكيفية قدرة الأدب على إظهار الواقع المعاش للشتات. وتسهم هذه الدراسة، في نهاية المطاف، في إثراء مجال دراسات الشتات من خلال إبراز أصوات الكتّاب العرب ووجهات نظرهم، مقدّمة رؤية دقيقة حول تشكيل الهوية، واستمرارية الذاكرة، والبحث عن الوطن في عالم عابر للحدود الوطن.



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