

A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF HYBRIDITY IN THE ARSONISTS' CITY BY HALA ALYAN

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ABSTRACT

The Arsonists' City by Hala Alyan depicts the story of displaced immigrants who face the issues of hybridity and identity. The story's hybridity and identity are problematic since the colonial past impacts the protagonists' personal and social identities. The current article examines the novel's main protagonists' complicated self-discovery as they struggle with their culture and colonialism. Alyan uses many characters to show identity development in a postcolonial milieu where people struggle with their origin, culture, and history. Hybridity, an essential concept in postcolonial discourse, shows how cultures interact. The novel masterfully portrays postcolonial themes. In *The Arsonists' City*, the characters develop hybrid identities to adapt to a new society, crossing various civilizations, overcoming geographical and cultural challenges, and meeting individuals from diverse backgrounds. Alyan's work challenges literary norms about cultural and national identity through blended identities. The study analyses postcolonial power relations and illuminates displaced people's struggle for agency and acknowledgement, adding to the knowledge of historically silenced people fighting for historical justice. Power and colonizer-colonized relations are quiet but emphasized throughout the novel. This postcolonial analysis explains how *The Arsonists' City* reflects and actively participates in postcolonial identity creation.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Identity, Hybridity, Palestinian Diaspora

INTRODUCTION

Literature explores social and cultural identity. Literature shows how identities are formed by society's beliefs, attitudes, and difficulties. Study of identity in literature offers a sophisticated view of humanity. Characters struggle with self-discovery and identity. Readers discover the complexities of self-development through these excursions. By exploring identity's numerous sides, literature helps characters overcome cultural expectations, societal conventions, and historical contexts on personal growth. The study improves understanding of race, gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic level. Identity in literature highlights power dynamics and social inequalities that affect individuals. Reading increases empathy and understanding. The many characters

and their identities offer distinct views. Identifying with fictional characters eliminates assumptions and broadens vision. Human uniqueness is enhanced by empathy. Literary identity matters in representation. Fiction may elevate marginalized voices in popular culture. Literary identity research becomes a cultural critique when authors question norms. It reveals racism, biases, and preconceptions to help readers combat injustice. Beyond character study, literature explores, questions, and appreciates human identity. Colonialism gave rise to the "Colonial Discourse," which encompasses discussions and narratives around the empire, the colonizer, and the colonized. Postcolonial literature explores identity and hybridity, reflecting colonialism's different effects

on people and cultures. After colonization, postcolonial literature examines how people negotiate and shape their identities. Colonialism can split identities as people balance their indigenous background with the colonizers' culture. The primary concern of postcolonial literature is to provide light on the diverse and intricate nature of postcolonial identities, promoting the process of decolonization. Postcolonialism is a multifaceted phenomenon that extends beyond physical colonization. Literature acknowledges and questions this process's political, social, cultural, and economic factors. Postcolonialism examines culture, nationality, gender, identity, ethnicity, subjectivity, race, language, and power. Famous works include Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), G. C. Spivak's *In Other Worlds* (1987), Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Bill Ashcroft et al.'s *The Empire Writes Back*, and Homi K. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994). Postcolonial criticism exposes Europeans' biased portrayal of indigenous people and highlights themes and figures that backed imperialism, colonialism, and Western dominance.

According to Loomba (2007), colonizers believed colonization had enlightened and civilized the illiterate and uncivilized masses, leading to postcolonialism. European concepts were needed to comprehend colonized civilizations; hence, postcolonial theory was created. This helped postcolonial writers defend their cultures (Ashcroft et al., 2002). Postcolonial theory explores how the colonial past shapes identity, culture, and politics across continents. Postcolonial literature has unique principles as a theoretical framework within the realm of literature. Postcolonial criticism examines literature produced by cultures that emerged as a response to colonial domination. As a theoretical framework, it aims to understand the functioning of Colonist and anti-Colonist ideologies in political, social, cultural, and psychological aspects.

Postcolonial theory is a theory of literature that deals with literature produced by citizens of countries that were once colonized. It deals with the themes of identity, power, politics, culture, racism, religion, migration, otherness, and all those aspects related to colonization. It also studies the outcomes of colonization on people and their responses. One of the main characters of postcolonial theory is Homi K. Bhabha, who studied and worked on various

perspectives of the theory and presented the notions that are pertinent to most of the postcolonial literature like hybridity, ambivalence, third space, mimicry, enunciation and cultural difference. Hybridity is a new cultural appearance resulting from mixing two cultures. Ambivalence regards a state of ambiguity that maintains approval and disfavor for a foreign culture at the same time. Mimicry is when a person of a colonized state tries to adopt the lifestyle of a colonizer. The utterance of a word or expression of a language in the contact zone of two cultures is called enunciation. His terms apply to today's post-colonized world, where colonization has ended. However, the previous thinking of colonized and colonizer still exists in some new forms that are so complex and interlinked because of the globalized world.

This study uses postcolonial philosophy to investigate the issues of identity and hybridity in *The Arsonists' City*. Under colonisation, cultural fusion brought people from different backgrounds together, and this continued postwar. Postcolonial cultures compete rather than unite to improve. Postcolonial subjects have unmistakable colonial cultural legacies. They have members from throughout the world. This research examines how cultures affect individuality. This research is based on the idea that no civilization can remain innocent after colonisation. Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* states that cultures cannot coexist in harmony. "It is not possible to simply combine different cultural traditions to form a new and exciting cultural entity" (Bhabha, 1994). Culturalization will continue as long as cultures vary. He claims that combining cultures creates a "Third Space of enunciation" (Bhabha, 1994). This paradoxical, contested, and contentious area forms cultural identities and reinforces boundaries, he believes. Characters from several civilizations populate *The Arsonists' City's* universe. Culture belongs in the discussion and debate of distinct cultural ideas. These people are always moving across cultures and nations. This study examines how different characters developed their identities.

Research Questions

How does hybridity affect the lives of characters in the novel *The Arsonists' City*?

How does the author portray identity crisis in the novel *The Arsonists' City*?

Significance of the study

The Arsonists' City by Hala Alyan is notable due to its adoption of a postcolonial perspective in analyzing the themes and characters of the book. The understanding of identity and hybridity is enhanced when examined from the perspective of postcolonial consequences, as facilitated by this approach. The historical and cultural impacts of colonialism influence the formation of individuals' identities and contribute to the complex character of their experiences. *The Arsonists' City* by Hala Alyan exhibits a multitude of diverse cultural nuances and intricacies. Through a deeper analysis of how the story constructs, destroys, and changes many layers of identity, a postcolonial interpretation reveals the intricate nature of the characters' identities within a postcolonial society. Postcolonialism critically analyses the power dynamics between those colonizing and those colonized. Postcolonial research can reveal how characters react to colonialism and hierarchical power structures. Power dynamics affect their identity and hybridity, according to this research. The study's unique perspective on *The Arsonists' City* boosts literature. Postcolonial theory improves literary discourse, helping academics and readers understand the novel's themes. The study gives readers, scholars, and students a postcolonial framework to examine *The Arsonists' City*, improving its educational and intellectual value.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hypotheses Development

Giddens (2003) believes that we live in a rapidly globalized world, and political and social boundaries are starting to fade. All around the world, many populations move for different causes and run into the outcomes of migration, displacement, cultural differences, and cultural amalgamation. Though the number of immigrants is limited, their mobility is causing a demand for change in the societal order of the world and giving rise to new perceptions about transnational, transcultural and global modernity. This situation promotes a change and produces transnational, transcultural, multilingual writers with plural identities.

The literature produced by Arabian diaspora writers typically portrays profound distress, resistance, and yearning for a unique identity. Their works have

pioneered a unique realm in literature, characterized by their rebellious nature, romantic methodology, and progressive articulation. These works are concise, akin to a memoir that recounts insights into various aspects of native and foreign cultures. Hence, the aspiration for a distinct culture is the primary element in expressing their identity and dignity. These characters act as spokespersons, relaying information to the public about the imminent and destructive political upheaval that might occur at any time, potentially affecting the entire world.

Riaz et al. (2017) discuss that the literature on post-colonialism focuses much on diasporic disruption and its outcomes. Diaspora writers have faced issues of alien culture through firsthand experience and know very well how native and foreign culture contributes to dividing their personalities, and they question their own identity. Mohi Ud Din Chan, T. (2022) notes that in *Salt and Saffron* and *Burnt Shadows*, Kamila Shamsie's characters possess hybrid identities. Hybrid identities do not have a strong base in society, and such identities face difficulties. The identities of the characters of Kamila Shamsie are hybrid; they struggle to accept their identity during different phases of their lives. This study focuses on the struggle for identity and its effects in the novels by applying the concept of hybridity of Homi. k. baba.

Pandey and Limba (2023) state that Hala Alyan's works explore numerous people and places. She thoroughly describes the plight of Palestinians, refugees, displaced people, and migrants in the diaspora. Alyan masterfully creates a story where inhabitants and non-residents cohabit as "outsiders" in a dynamic network of cultural norms, conventions, traditions, lifestyles, and ceremonies. The relationship between native-born and newcomers creates cultural ambiguity, as neither group is totally indigenous or fully assimilated. The subtle mixing of beliefs and cultures during this transitory period creates cultural hybridity. In Alyan's novels, protagonists face adaptation and self-definition. Second-generation migrant Alyan is inspired by his ancestor's and grandparents' memories of migration, conflict, and the Naksa and Nakba. She skillfully illustrates the actual obstacles experienced by these threshold persons in her poetry and fiction, weaving their lives into engaging accounts of cultural melting.

Dlol (2015) investigate the complex process of character identity building in the selected book and the effects of homelessness on generations. Dlol (2015) states that a complex depiction of the protagonist's unshakable commitment to the Palestinian national struggle shapes the identity of the characters. Dlol (2015) commend Alyan's depiction of border-crossing, national displacement, and statelessness in the Palestinian diaspora. The bildungsroman carefully creates a transnational and international identity, connecting people to their country through cultural memory. A zigzagging tangle of historical and geopolitical hurdles challenges the characters' identities. The piece eventually reflects the Palestinian identity crisis, highlighting worldwide interaction. The study emphasizes the UN's crucial role in restoring Palestinian identity, reducing innocent deaths in the conflict, and promoting a balanced approach to international relations, especially the Israeli-Palestinian dynamic. Alyan's work is a wake-up call to the UN and the global Muslim community to confront the Palestinian identity issue. The study uses the novel's engaging storyline to encourage readers to consider the urgent need for a just and sustainable solution to the enduring issue.

According to Amrieh (2022), Alyan's works beautifully capture Ava's journey of self-discovery and family revelation. Amrieh (2022) used Roland Barthes's "stadium" and "punctum" to decipher the layered significance of Ava's photographic investigation. As a result of Palestinian relocation and poverty, Ava's story is enhanced. The summer of 2010 in Beirut altered Ava's perception of herself. Careful examination of ancient photographs in an album in Ava's grandparents' Beirut flat leads her to her real identity. The images guide her through the maze of her identity-forming feelings and experiences. As Amrieh (2022) points out, Alyan deftly follows the Arab novel tradition of setting Ava's self-perception as a complicated confluence of economic, cultural, and global variables. From Ava's point of view, the book explores the concept of identity by revealing how her social and cultural milieu shape her present and future. In Alyan's story, we see themes of isolation, self-discovery, and Ava's complex family secret.

METHODOLOGY

The current research is based on Bhabha's notions of hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha, a postcolonial academic, established the concept of cultural hybridity in his book "The Location of Culture", published in 1994. The concept challenged the notion of fixed identities and highlighted the dynamic nature of culture, particularly in the postcolonial context. Bhabha researched cultural hybridity, which refers to the intricate mechanisms through which civilizations merge and give rise to novel manifestations that elude classification. Bhabha examines the concept of the "third space." Cultures engage in mutual interaction within this conceptual realm, which does not pertain exclusively to the colonizer or the colonized. The ambiguity and dynamism of this particular region foster the emergence of novel cultural manifestations. According to Bhabha, colonized individuals emulate the cultural practices of their colonizers. Mimicry undermines the power of the colonizer, going beyond mere replication. Cultural hybridity refers to the dynamic connection between imitation and resistance. Bhabha emphasizes the presence of conflicting feelings or attitudes. According to him, the colonized individual has preferences and is averse to the colonizer. Cultural hybridity arises from the disintegration of ambivalence's identity and the intricate interplay of emotions. Bhabha questions the conventional portrayal of culture. According to him, cross-cultural experiences interfere with the manifestation and sense of self. This issue gives rise to cultural representations of postcolonial hybridity. Bhabha argues that cultural hybridity necessitates the process of translation. Cultural exchanges can modify and transform meanings and practices. Bhabha's theory is substantiated by globalization. The interaction of many cultures on a global scale gives rise to unique combinations that cannot be easily categorized.

ANALYSIS

The novel *The Arsonists' City* uses a hybrid identity to symbolize rebellion. In indigenous resistance against European dominance, indigenous hybridization hybridization is portrayed as a purposeful and proactive strategy rather than a claim of European supremacy. It has been proven that the possibility of hybridization, the intensity and influence of the native population, and the

significance of tradition are all crucial determinants. The story of European superiority is challenged by portraying the power dynamics among the individuals. Furthermore, *The Arsonists' City* depicts a hybrid identity as a process of reconstructing one's indigenous identity that stems from the colonial peoples. Major characters symbolize the indigenous reconstruction process.

The Arsonists' City by Hala Alyan exhibits a multitude of diverse cultural nuances and intricacies. The story starts with Mazna and Idris's return to the Beirut residence where Idris resided throughout his childhood. Ava, Mimi, and Najla, the children currently residing in different locations, prompted them to invite all of them to join. Subsequently, once the opportune moment has passed, they want to sell the house and organize a commemorative ceremony for the head of the family. The primary source of conflict is Idris's unwavering determination to sell the property despite opposition from his children and even his wife, who strongly dislikes the mansion and the city. However, beyond the superficial appearance of this seemingly uncomplicated family dispute are the numerous intricacies and strains that constitute the foundation of familial connections. Alyan diligently and scrupulously shows the issues of a postcolonial society. The novel adeptly depicts the themes of migration, displacement, and identity within the context of an immigrant family's struggles. Notable elements in the story include the parents' persistent arguments, the mother's undisclosed secret that generates her bitterness and remorse over many years, the youngest daughter's strong attachment to the family's history and possessions upon her arrival in Beirut, the musician brother's envy of his sister's achievements, and the oldest daughter's unsettling feeling of detachment from the family. As the narrative shifts chronologically, the family members embark on a quest to find their own identities. The narrative is presented from the viewpoint of many individuals throughout the book.

The book *The Arsonists' City* explores experimental, personal, and political topics. Alyan tackles complex subjects like subjectivity and context in his art. The novel *The Arsonists' City* has five portions that cover thirty years of events. Alyan uses "camera eyes" to show her characters' awareness and relationships. The limited third-person narrator uses present, past, and future tenses. The novel *The Arsonists' City*

brilliantly weaves together stories from Syria, Beirut, Brooklyn, Austin, and the California desert without diminishing them. Sometimes, the plot moves around and delivers unrelated stories. The four main characters are a Syrian mother, a Lebanese father, and three American children. Each travelled and dispersed. Alyan's report references the Palestinian diaspora, Lebanon's civil war, and Arab immigration worldwide. Idris and his family had many exciting adventures during *The Arsonists' City*. Mazna, the mother, is from Syria, and Idris, the father, is from Lebanon. Since all three of the couple's children were raised in the US, they quickly adjusted to various environments and embraced diverse cultures. We immerse ourselves in 1960s Damascus in a diaspora story. Mazna, the protagonist, wants to be a famous actress. Her fantasies represent her goals and wishes. Her desire to see the US and Europe reflects her deep thoughts about life and intelligence. In Alyan's novel *The Arsonists' City*, Mazna, a resolute and self-aware lady, loves the performing arts and embraces it in 1965. However, Idris is a medical student who wants to finish his residency in the US.

The issues of hybridity are depicted vividly by Hala Alyan in her novel *The Arsonists' City*. For example, Zina, Eva's daughter, prefers to speak English. Zina's choice to primarily speak English, especially about "toy stores and beaches" (p.21), shows her cultural integration. Her language changes indicate the growth of her cultural identity, raising questions about whether she intended to assimilate into a dominant culture like Western or English-speaking society. English is used in this talk, indicating a willingness to share culture. The plot becomes more complex when Ava's anguish reveals her internal battle and dissatisfaction with her culture. Zina's English and discussion of toy stores and beaches contradict Ava's Arab ancestry, causing conflict.

On the other hand, the grandmother Mazna's determination to speak Arabic with Ava's children highlights her apparent status as a "fake Arab" (p.21). Mastering the language and following cultural customs is thought to ensure Arab identity authenticity. Mazna is conservative, opposes cultural mixing and favours identity purity. Zina's decision to represent her culture in English shows her varied identity and is more significant. It shows the inherent complexity of being multicultural or postcolonial, meaning a deliberate fusion of several cultures' traits.

The protagonists struggle with authenticity, adapting to different cultures, and integrating diverse cultural influences. Ava and Nate's decision to take their children to visit Ava's parents in California shows how cultural history intertwines in families. The family's purposeful cultural mixing reflects the issues of hybridity. The story delves into the difficulties and conflicts of navigating a hybrid identity.

The issues of hybridity also prevail in the second generation as Ava's mother shows her concern to her daughter that she may marry an "ajjabi" (p. 22), a foreigner or outsider. The term "ajjabi" suggests cross-cultural marriage. Postcolonial people and communities, especially those still recuperating from colonial rule, face identity challenges as they try to make sense of their vast cultural diversity. Ava's mother emphasizes how difficult it is to maintain one's ethnic and cultural roots when marrying into a new group. This relationship puts the individual's and any offspring's identities at stake. The postcolonial theory defines "hybridity" as combining elements of multiple civilizations. The phrase about marriage uses "ajjabi" to suggest combining many cultural customs. Marriage to a person from a foreign culture will undoubtedly lead to a complex web of identities for the protagonists. Ava's mother begins the debate by saying that taking away the children's ancestry is terrible, even though being married and living in an "ajjabi" atmosphere is one thing. Hybrid identities ignore one's cultural origins, making them difficult to accept. It may be challenging. She is worried because the kids will be isolated from their culture. Postcolonial theorists see this tragedy as a metaphor for the dilution or extinction of cultural identity due to cross-cultural relationships in a colonial environment. The notion highlights the emotional consequences of heredity and identity. The statement shows postcolonial identity and hybridity in a cross-cultural relationship. A multicultural, hybrid life makes it hard for the characters to maintain their cultural identities. These issues are central to the postcolonial narrative.

The phrase "I will always be an immigrant" (p. 66) also signifies postcolonial issues such as hybridity and identity. The statement suggests that Mazna refuses to acknowledge her identification as a student in this context. The enduring consequences of colonialism may have resulted in the predilection for particular identities over others. Postcolonial

characters may struggle to preserve migratory, national, and cultural identities. Accepting one's migrant status may lead to alienation, loneliness, and seclusion, illustrating colonialism's consequences on human identities. Migration causes cultural hybridity. Migrants reveal their native and adopted cultures. Postcolonial cultural convergence and synthesis may mitigate colonialism. Mazna is complex despite her criticism. It displays a complex and ambiguous self-image. This supports Bhabha's hybridity, which says people create changeable identities that defy societal norms. In any culture, multiple identities can cause confusion and discrimination. Identity is central to postcolonial literature, as Mazna extensively thinks about her identity. This shows the lasting impact of colonialism on identity building and the intricate interaction of cultural assimilation.

Mimi, another character, also tries to maintain his identity. The line "Mimi still wears the eyeliner" (p. 34) shows his identity. Accepting one's individuality is symbolized by Mimi's eyeliner choice. Eyeliner symbolizes several subcultures, countercultures, and genders. It might represent a subculture or culture beyond fashion or resistance. In postcolonial studies, Mimi's eyeliner shows the longevity of identity markers and an intentional attempt to keep a connection to a part of oneself despite changing external circumstances. According to postcolonial studies, identity can be changed by cultural adaptation. This shows an intentional effort to maintain identity despite external changes. This shows that some aspects of identity can survive cultural changes. "Discarding tattered trousers, a leather wrap bracelet, and shaggy Cobain hair" (p. 34) shows Mimi's identity. Mimi consciously abandons these traits as his personal and social circumstances change. The line shows postcolonial identity and hybridity's complexity. Mimi's identity discussion centres on her attire and appearance. Mimi's eyeliner and dress show her hybridity and resiliency over cultural norms.

Cultural hybridity comes from Mimi's "suckled on Buffy and Dawson's" (p. 44) heritage. Western references like "Buffy," potentially referring to Buffy the Vampire Slayer, and "Dawson's," possibly referring to Dawson's Creek, imply cultural blending. Mixed cultures result from globalization and local identity. Mimi's generation is "a generation that

mocks commitment but secretly believes in soulmates and thinks that love is difficult to find but easy to keep" (p. 44). Western culture influences this generation, as shown by references to popular Western TV shows and traditional love and commitment. Mocking commitment and secretly believing in soulmates may show how people are caught between cultural standards and expectations. Mimi embodies a hybrid identity as Arab origin, Western popular culture, and global media shape Mimi's identity. By examining Mimi's complicated identity, postcolonial literary theory can help us comprehend cultural mixing. Postcolonial literature examines the turbulent mixing of different cultures, notably the colonizer and colonized narratives. Mimi indirectly recalls "Bufy" and "Dawson's." His culture mixes with Western traditions. This blend shows how historical and cultural factors shape postcolonial situations. Western culture in Mimi's narrative shows postcolonial cultural merging. This narrative goes beyond living together to illustrate a vivid fusion that symbolizes the complicated exchanges between colonizer and colonized. Colonialism mixed Western and indigenous customs. According to Mimi, postcolonial philosophy investigates dual consciousness, which is widespread in his generation. Soulmates are deeply valued, reflecting a sentimental relationship to pre-colonial societies, despite a negative attitude of commitment due to Western influences. Complex existential anxieties plagued individuals after colonialism. In postcolonial discourse, globalization and its effects on many civilizations are equivocal, complicating the tale. Western television shows demonstrate the worldwide effect of media, which blends cultures and depicts the complex connection between colonial influences and global dynamics in postcolonial literature. Mimi is a complex mix of Western and Arab popular culture impacted by worldwide media.

CONCLUSION

Postcolonial writing explores complex topics. The analysis emphasizes the characters' hybridization and resistance to their identity and culture. The novel shows how the characters are shaped by various influences and experiences that make them neither entirely Western nor non-Western, wholly colonial or colonial. The novel also shows how the characters defy certain norms and expectations imposed by the

colonial or postcolonial setting. The Arsonists' City characters are torn between their dreams and colonial past in different societies. The characters of The Arsonists' City experience so many issues and hate that they cannot sustain a single identity. Some characters have adopted the dominant culture, but most struggle with assimilation. Failure of assimilation and rejection has profound emotional and psychological ramifications on different characters. Alyan has highlighted the tensions and conflicts that may cause immigrants emotional dissonance, loss, suffering, and bewilderment. She also illuminates prejudice, reductive negative stereotypes, colonial emotions, and discriminatory practices that shape characters. The postcolonial reading of The Arsonists' City shows how structural, social, political, and religious factors affect migrants' ability to keep their identities intact in a foreign society. The Arsonists' City highlights the negative social, cultural, political, religious, and ethnic stereotypes about Arabs and Muslims worldwide.

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