



**The Diaspora of Iraqi Identity in
Western Exile: A Cultural Study of
Batoul Al- Khudairi's A Sky So Close**

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أصبح موضوع أزمة الهوية اليوم من أكثر المشاكل الخلافية التي تواجه المجتمعات العربية، وخاصة العراقية التي تعاني من حروب داخلية وإرهاب وقضايا طائفية ساهمت في تهجيرها وفقدانها للهوية، حيث يهاجر معظم الشعب العراقي إلى الغرب طوعاً أو قسراً لكي يتمكنوا من عيش حياة طبيعية وآمنة. يناقش هذا البحث موضوع الشتات وفقدان الهوية العراقية في المنفى الغربي، كما يشير إلى الصراع الفردي الداخلي بين الحفاظ على الهوية الأصلية أو الانسجام مع الهوية الجديدة. بتول الخضيرى، الكاتبة العراقية، تتسج من خلال روايتها كم بدت السماء قريبة (١٩٩٩) الصدام الثقافي والفكري بين الغرب والشرق. يهدف البحث إلى توضيح تبعيات الأفعال اليومية العادية من وجهة نظر الكاتب، ومن وجهة نظر الثقافة الغربية والشرقية. يوضح كيف أن السعادة والحزن والمرض وجميع ردود الفعل والعواطف البشرية قد تختلف عندما تختلط ثقافتان مختلفتان. تنقسم هذه الدراسة إلى قسمين وخاتمة. يقدم القسم الأول نبذة عن الهوية العراقية المتشعبة في المنفى الغربي، وكما يقدم نبذة عن حياة بتول الخضيرى وأعمالها الرئيسية. يتناول القسم الثاني تحليل الرواية وفقاً للاختلافات الثقافية بين الشرق والغرب والهوية الهجينة للبطلة التي تتأرجح بين الانتماء إلى ثقافة والدها أو والدتها.

ABSTRACT

Today, the issue of identity crisis has become one of the most controversial problems facing the Arab societies, especially the Iraqi ones who are suffering from internal wars, terrorism and sectarian issues that have contributed to their displacement and loss of identity. To be able to lead a normal and safe life, most of Iraqi people migrate to the West willingly or forcefully. This research argues the diaspora and loss of Iraqi identity in Western exile paying a big attribute to the internal conflict between keeping the original identity or harmonizing with the new one. Batool Al-Khudairi, the Iraqi writer, weaves through her novel *A Sky So Close* (1999) the cultural and intellectual clash between the West and the East. The research aims to illustrate through the writer's perspective, the echo of ordinary daily actions from the Western and the Eastern cultural point of views; showing how happiness, sadness, ailment and all human reactions and emotions may vary when two different cultures are intermingled.

This study is divided into two sections and a conclusion. Section one introduces the diasporic Iraqi identity in Western exile, and Batool Al-Khudairi's life and main works. Section two deals with the novel's analysis according to the cultural differences between the East and West and the protagonist's hybrid identity that swings 'in between' belonging to her father's or mother's culture.

Key Words: Diaspora literature, Identity, Culture, Exile, in-between.

1.1. The Diasporic Iraqi Identity in Western Exile

Exile literature represents a distinct phenomenon whose presence is growing in the literatures of nations that have undergone the colonial experience. Narrative writing is its core. Exile literature is characterized by longing, nostalgia, anxiety, and is haunted by the idea of re-discovering the individual's position both in the homeland and in the exile. Because exile results an inability to belong to any of the two mentioned worlds, it leads to a kind of monasticism and nihilism where the importance of things fades and the image of the world collapses in the depths of the exile. Exile literature is a mixture of alienation and compound aversion; being a product of the illusion of dual belonging to two identities. It relies on the idea of sabotaging the identity; a literature that crosses cultural, geographical, and historical borders. It hides within it is a controversial problem, because it is formed through a wide vision and a sharp perspective that transcends superficiality and includes a high severity of direct anatomy of the conditions of the exile. Edward W. Said comments on the condition of exile:

"I think that if one is an intellectual, one has to exile oneself from what has been given to you, what is customary, and to see it from a point of view that looks at it as if it were something that is provisional and foreign to oneself. That allows for independence—commitment—but independence and a certain kind of detachment" (Said: 13).

The issue of detachment, imagining homelands, first places, and utopias is the central focus of the literature of exile. The exile person is defined as being divided between a state of obsessive nostalgia for the first place, and the inability to make the decision to return to it. They are overwhelmed by the scourge of alienation, and the horrible feeling of the tragic sense of their personal destinies.

Diasporas, on the other hand, can be defined as those people who have withdrawn from their homes to stabilize in other countries. The main aim behind their migration is to strive for gaining sanctuary and protection while projecting their culture and communicating in a positive way to the host culture. Diaspora

can be seen as a quest to discover the individual's identity and thereby to achieve the self-recognition, realization, knowledge, and definition. "Much of the debate around identity derives from the tensions between these two aspects. I may struggle to "be myself" or to "find my true self," (Buckingham:1). According to Josselson (1987), identity can be illustrated as a way to "preserving the continuity of the self, linking the past, and the present" (19). Identity construction or formation, also recognized as individuation, is formed by the experience and awareness of the world surrounding the individual. It results from a variety of norms related to religious convictions, culture, race, rank, financial, and social status of family. Diasporic people are always in struggle whether to preserve their heritage or to be intermingled with the host culture. Moreover, migration may cause isolation, longing for the past, and rootlessness as they still adhere to the cultural values, traditions, and customs of the homeland. Unconsciously, they show resistance in clinging to food, clothes, and language. This confusion and tension generate a state of in between, double consciousness and unhomeliness. Double consciousness or unstable sense of the self is the result of forced migration. In the diaspora, the feeling of being caught between two cultures and belonging to none, comes from the cultural displacement within which one lives is referred to by Homi Bhabha and others as unhomeliness. To be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home. The cultural identity has made one a psychological refugee. This cultural diversity, as Homi Bhabha identifies, is "an attempt both to respond to and to control the dynamic process of the articulation of cultural difference, administering a consensus based on a norm that propagates cultural diversity" (Bhabha: 209). Iraqi diasporic literature exposes the construction of Iraqi identity throughout the literary works of Iraqi novelists as Sinan Anton, Ali Badir, In'am Kachachchī, and others whose writings reflect the belonging to two identities or more at once, and at the same time the impression of not belonging to any identity (Abdullah:9). As a consequence to identity fragmentation and forceful migration, the Iraqi diasporic authors deconstruct the properties ordinarily associated with ethno-religious identities in Iraq. Moreover, most of their writings in diasporas, return to backgrounds, storylines, and characters in the homeland, creating a conversational connection between the home and the worldwide, the public and the private, and the personal and the communal.

1.2. Batool Al-Khudairi's Life and Main Works

Batool Al-Khudairi, the Iraqi novelist, is born in Baghdad in 1965. She is a daughter of an Iraqi father and Scottish Mother. She grew up at the time when 'the Iraqi Ba'athist Party' was established in 1963, consequently presaging varied political occurrences taking root in Iraq. After briefly being overthrown in 1963, the Ba'athist party resumed its activeness in 1968 and continues control until the US invaded Iraq in 2003. She receives a BA in French literature from Al-Mustansiriya University and then after settles in Amman, Jordan. She Publishes many literary works including her first novel, *A Sky So Close* (1999) that is written in Arabic and translated into English, Italian, French and Dutch, and is adopted as a field of study and analysis in literary criticism in many worldwide universities. Al-Khudairi is unique, with her writings, in depicting the cultural differences between East and West, especially when having hybrid identity that arise from intermingled cultures. Her second novel is entitled as *Ghayeb* (2004) that depicts a tragic phase in the Iraqi life "The Siege" that leads to the collapse of middle class. She sets the events of her novel in a residential building in central Baghdad. The stories of the residents of 'Al-Amarah' reveal the Iraqi character that is exposed and comes out to its abstract reality that is fragile, penetrating, isolated and governed by a context of oppression, ignorance, misinformation, and fear. <https://www.wikipediawiki/wiki/ar/Batool/Al-Khudairi>.

2.2. The Diasporic Iraqi Identity in *A Sky So Close*

A Sky So Close is told from a perspective of a middle-class Iraqi-English girl who begins her narration with an accurate description of the innocent and meek childhood she experienced under the cultural and intellectual clash between her parents. This cultural and intellectual diversity finds a common ground through the unnamed narrator (their daughter) who combines these different poles. Her childhood deteriorates after the death of her close friend, khadoja. Then the narrator moves to the stage of adolescence and her father's illness. Here the reunion occurred between her and her father where she lives a stage that she describes as one of the most wonderful stages, where she acquires a wide imagination and careful contemplation through perfumes. This relatively calm stage of the girl's life collided with the Iran-Iraq war, a catastrophic stage in the history of the Iraqi people and in the writer's real life. The writer succeeds in depicting the atrocity of the war in a way that calls for contemplation and sadness. The novel

presents an accurate description of the reality of the war and psychological crises that bet these circumstances. As usual, the stages of grief proceed fast in the novel, leaving behind the past and anticipating a mysterious future with her mother who struggles with cancer. Then, she travels to Britain to live another war with a suffering mother, and a bleeding country. Then the groans of the homeland and the pain of the sick mother stop. The accurate and inspiring description of the events, using a flexible language, indicates the horizon of the writer's imagination. Moreover, the events and wars added to the narration an important aspect, as it is a cultural, historical, social, and intellectual novel.

The novel's title has a great symbolic significance where it can be seen as a crucial image in the novel. It is taken from an event that happened at the beginning of the novel where the protagonist was living in a small farm in the village of Za'fania outside Baghdad. This village represents the protagonist's early peaceful, innocent, and lovely phase in life in the countryside. One of the protagonist's pleasant moments in the countryside is to set up a swing with her best friend Khadouja in the middle of palm trees.

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

The swing image may serve as an allusion to the narrator's swinging (unstable) identity and swaying between Eastern and Western cultures. It denotes the 'in-betweenness' or identity hybridization of the protagonist. Bhabha confirms that "the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity is the 'third space' which enables other positions to emerge. The third space displaces the histories that constitute it and set up new structures" (Bhabha: 211). *A Sky So Close* exposes the protagonist's desire to reach the dream of bridging the gap between her father and mother (between East and West) and finding a peaceful ground that puts an end for her suffering.

The novel discusses and presents the suffering of the immigrant from loss, vacillation, and lack of sense of belonging to the original homeland nor to the country of refuge which creates inner struggle between preserving the original identity and culture and between openness and acceptance of the other identity. "A *Sky So Close* is an interesting and timely look at the life of one woman in a country oppressed by the ideologies of hegemonic nations." (Abo Rached: 23).

The loss and fragmentation of identity in the novel lies in the writer's portrayal of the story of a child who suffered from the loss of original identity and its volatility; resulted from the two different cultures of her parents. Ghazoul (2008) discusses the initial part of the novel as "the personal face of the confrontation" (198), demonstrating the clash between East and West worlds. The unnamed narrator's Iraqi father desires his daughter to integrate with people in the rustic village where they dwell, "Oh, madam, let her mix with the customs of the people and the countryside...let it relate to the land and humans as we were brought up." (Al-Khudairi: 5), while her English mother insists on teaching her dance and language, and she forbids "the daughter of the gypsies, Khadouja and the lunatics her mixing with illiterate people who run all day on the disgusting farm" (ibid: 7). As the novel progresses, the protagonist confesses that she experiences both: "Your disagreement allowed me to mingle with both worlds. Just like our house, which was two worlds" (Al-Khudairi: 11). The father is keen to teach the child the authentic Iraqi customs, and not to be away from them, while the mother is grumbling from those habits and reject those primitive schools. The child is aware of the difference between the two cultures of her parents and how each one of them is trying to demolish the culture of the other. The parent's argument on this key issue exposes the cultural gap between them:

"- The girl will be spoiled!

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

- Dancing and socializing, not asking for much! But one day, she may pay too high a price for your decision. - I won't let her go to a primitive school! - Don't you realize, woman, that we're now in the Arab, Islamic world, and she and I are Muslims? This education, which you are calling —arts, could damage her future prospects.

- It would be better than damaging her morale in your local girls' schools. She's showing promise and talent. Why do you want to keep her in isolation? Isn't it bad enough that she mixed with that Gypsy girl and those illiterate fools who spend the whole day running around in that disgusting farm?

- Woman, you're talking about a culture you don't understand. I've warned you about the differences we'd face in raising her. I know what I'm talking about, why don't you listen to me?

- I listened to you in the past, that's why we didn't send her to nursery school at the age of four like the other children, because we're so far away from civilization. But now I'm sick of this isolated village and primitive people...

- Woman, let her mingle with the peasants' traditions, there's no harm in that. Let her bond with the land, with the people and their animals, the way we are raised. For God's sake, let her see what you can't see!" (Al-Khudairi: 9-10)

The duality and fragmentation of identity is not exclusive to the girl child only, but this becomes evident to the parents as well. Their marriage is marked by failure, the mother comes to the east greedy with its fortunes, as she tells her friend Millie:

"I thought the farmer here is as he described it to me, eastern magic, it is confined between sunrise and sunset, an ethereal violet smoke whose temptation cannot be surpassed, it is suffocating heat climbing palm trees, flies in morning, mosquitoes in the evening...even if you want swimming, the mud of the river will poison my skin, and They may rape me anyway." (Al-Khudairi: 10).

The mother could not cope with the Iraqi society despite all her husband's attempts to integrate her with him and accept the culture of his society, but she remains closed on herself rejecting this society that is considered primitive, and backward. This anxiety and loss is even faced by the mother after her return to her homeland - England "I no longer belong here, when I left England, I decided to belong to the east but I didn't succeed in my belonging despite all my attempts now and may I'm back again, I find I can't integrate again...to my country of origin...we don't belong except for the shadow of our bodies that accompany us, as long as we are alive" (ibid: 13).

The main character (narrator) was a victim for the fruit of the intermarriage of two unequal cultures, each seeks to impose their cultural hegemony on the other, the quarrel and strife between the parents continued on the simplest things as a hairstyle "all I have is a braid hanging between my back waved, I repeatedly warned her not to cut it and style my hair the way she does, she likes it short and you [father] like to watch him grow long" (ibid: 15).

The child is usually merging the two languages together while talking to her parents, which leads to anger the father who wants her to speak only Arabic, and not mix English with it. "How I hate that today's quarrel because of me like when: I asked you to leave my room one evening - Daddy, don't close *the door* behind you, so you slap it hard" (ibid: 17). The father was angry because his daughter used an English word (the door) instead of Arabic. Her mother on the other hand, used hegemony and tried to impose western cultural and social rules especially when her daughter told her that she ate with Khadujan (the daughter of their neighbor farmers); "I asked her on one occasion Mami, do you know how to do yellow kibbeh? Like that I tasted with the family of Khaduja? Immediately, her face flushed. - Have you eaten yellow kibbeh at them? Didn't I warn you? your resentment reached its peak, and you struck the table with your fist" (Al-Khudairi: 17). The conditions of her upbringing and formation resulted a fragmented and fluctuating personality "I learned how to weave my words that suit me, and most importantly from this and that I learned when to use it, I must avoid mixing it up when your mood is confused with Mom, and I must deliberately mix the two languages when I intend to visit my friend in the farm" (ibid: 19).

The lack of sense of belonging and loss reached its highest peak when the narrator feels lost in England after leaving Iraq to treat her mother who is diagnosed with cancer. The narrator describes how her feelings are accompanied by lack of affiliation and integration with the western society as it is revealed through her perspective of the western people:

"They move among the dried trees... whose branches are like hands stuck her fingers up...city of accurate appointments, credit cards, publications global stock market, scandalous magazines, black man with white woman and black woman with white man ... the city of taxes, homeless, drinking water filtered from sewage, cafes swallow the layer classes, men and women exchanging beer from above wooden table and narcotic powders" (ibid: 21).

As she finds herself unable to integrate with the English society, the English society sees her as inferior and strange; "I lifted an Arab newspaper to follow the news of the East... one of the students commented...you read from right to left, is it not? (ibid: 25). This situation worsens her feelings of alienation and loss of identity. Another situation that proves her loss and confusion is her conversation with (Arno), one of the young men whom she met in London:

"_are you from here? _I am neither from here nor from there, this is the problem_ He laughs in a special way _I doubt you are of a French father or African like me. _You can say that I am also of a contradictory mixture _he shakes his shoulder: then, let us drink a toast named as confusion" (Al-Khudairi: 27).

In this novel, the relationship between East and West does not result the integration and harmony of the two civilizations; it resulted and produced a confused and lost character who couldn't determine her affiliation, but to continue living on margin everywhere she goes after missing her roots of belonging to the country of origin. Yet what constitutes her 'two worlds' becomes more ambivalent as different axes of political power intersect their lives before and after the onset of war.

War constitutes a significant role in the story that cope with the characters inner wars and identity struggles. Seeking for identity during political struggles is considerable because it conveys the journey of the individual's existence. Two violent wars are weaved with the narration; the Iraqi-Iranian war and The Gulf War by United States and Allied Forces against Iraq. Al-Khudairi condemns wars and political struggles through her novel and thereby she explains how war leads to inquire about the values that govern the world, as the protagonists asks, "What is the point of surviving?"(Al-Khudairi: 160). Certainly, there is core aim behind existence which is larger than keeping the self alive. Living as a normal human with normal peaceful life is more important than struggling to survive. State of war is not idealized at all in this novel. It is depicted as being dreadful experience that results destruction and displacement. The novel presents two different poles of life: the tranquil and peaceable life represented in the first three chapters and the suffering caused by war with the starting of chapter four. Two juxtaposed environments are depicted as standing against each other. The peaceful and tranquil environment is exemplified in Al-Zafraniya village, that represents the protagonist's early joyful childhood. This village is marked by farms where the apricot trees grew, and the huge trees' branches interwoven with each other.

On the other hand, because of the start out of war and the bad political and economic circumstances in Iraq, the protagonist leaves her country and go together with her sick mother to England. She suffers because of witnessing wars consequences in Iraq through media, and her mother's deteriorated condition that leads to death.

Conclusion

A Sky So Close discusses the failure of Iraqi immigrant to establish a stable cultural identity in the diaspora. The novel presents the suffering of the immigrant from loss, indecisiveness, and absence of feelings of belonging to the original homeland nor to the country of sanctuary which results inner struggle between persisting the original identity and culture and between acceptance of the other one. Moreover, having a hybrid identity is challenging experience where each parent practices hegemony and wants to impose his/ her own cultural and intellectual values on children. In this novel, the relationship between the parents (as between East and West) does not result the amalgamation and agreement of the two parents (nor civilizations); it results and shapes a confused and lost character who couldn't determine her affiliation, but to continue living on margin everywhere she goes after missing her roots of belonging to the country of origin.

The novel can be seen as a bildungsroman, following a girl of mixed cultural and ethnic heritage whose journey in life achieved her maturity. From her childhood, she is aware of the difference between the two cultures of her parents and how each one of them is trying to demolish the culture of the other. The father is keen to teach the child the original Iraqi behaviors and traditions, practicing his hegemonic power, while the mother is irritated from those traditions and reject primitive ways of upbringing the girl. As a result, the daughter becomes an epitome of a 'hybrid identity'. She becomes a confused girl who is not able to decide which culture is appropriate for her to belong or whom she must please and obey.

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