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**Cultural Identity and Self-Discovery in Diaspora Literature: A  
Comparative Study of Female Protagonists in Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does  
My Head Look Big in This?* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret***

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of English in Partial Requirement for the  
Degree of Doctorate in General and Comparative Literature

**Submitted by:**

Mrs. Nesrine ELKATEB

**Board of Examiners:**

Dr. Aissa HANIFI	MCA	President	University of Chlef
Dr. Naimi AMARA	MCA	Supervisor	University of Chlef
Dr. Imane HADJ HENNI	MCA	Internal Examiner	University of Chlef
Prof. Zohra LABED	Professor	External Examiner	ENS Oran
Dr. Wafaa FALI	MCA	External Examiner	University of Oran 2

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## *Statement of Originality*

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the doctoral thesis entitled “Cultural Identity and Self-Discovery in Diaspora Literature: A Comparative Study of Female Protagonists in Randa Abdel-Fattah’s *Does My Head Look Big in This?* and Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*”, supervised by Dr. Naimi AMARA is the product of my own research and composition. This latter abides by the fundamental rules and standards of responsible referencing.

Name: Nesrine ELKATEB

Date: 24/10/2024

Signature:

## Dedications

To the cherished memory of my beloved uncle Ahmed, whose unwavering support guided me throughout my educational journey. I wish he were here to witness this accomplishment.

To my dear father, whose words, “*Your PhD is my success before it is yours,*” have been a constant source of motivation and inspiration.

To my mother, who has always taken pride in my achievements and wished me continued success.

To my siblings, Ibtissem, Zineb and her husband Ibrahim, Hamza, Hamidou and his wife Khadidja, for their endless support and encouragement.

To my dear husband, whose continuous support and encouragement have been my strength throughout this journey.

To the beloved grandchildren of the family ELKATEB—my nieces Assil, Lina, and Meriem, my nephew Louay, and especially my coming baby Amir—whose joy and innocence bring light to our lives.

Finally, to all my friends and those who love me and have supported me along the way, this work is dedicated to you.

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the negotiation of cultural identity as it is represented in diaspora literature, with a particular emphasis on the novels *Minaret*, authored by Leila Aboulela, and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* penned by Randa Abdel-Fattah. Through a rigorous comparative analysis, the research delves into the multifaceted ways in which the protagonists, Najwa and Amal, adeptly manoeuvre through the complexities associated with identity formation, acculturation processes, and the phenomenon of assimilation within their distinctive diasporic societies. Drawing extensively on the theoretical frameworks established by Miriam Cooke's Muslim Feminism and Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory, this study critically examines the cultural hurdles encountered by Muslim women residing within the diaspora. Utilizing literary and comparative analytical approaches, this dissertation demonstrates that Najwa's individual path is marked by a crucial change from choosing to fit into the larger societal customs to a significant return to her spiritual foundations, whereas, in contrast, Amal's conscious decision to wear the hijab symbolizes her strong stand against the expectations of assimilation and represents a declaration of her cultural autonomy. The insights provided in this dissertation are pivotal in shaping the dialogue around diaspora literature and cultural identity, revealing essential strategies of acculturation that individuals within the diaspora adopt. The dissertation concludes by emphasizing the dynamic and fluid nature of cultural identity as it exists within the diaspora, while also advocating for future scholarly research that seeks to explore additional dimensions of diasporic identity across varied cultural contexts.

**Keywords:** Acculturation, Cultural identity, Diaspora literature, *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, *Minaret*.

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# **General Introduction**

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In an era marked by globalization and migration, the exploration of cultural identity within diasporic contexts has become increasingly significant. The exploration of cultural identity within diasporic contexts is a multifaceted endeavour, particularly when examining the lived experiences of female protagonists in literature. This dissertation aims to address the central research question:

- How do the female protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* negotiate their cultural identities within diasporic contexts?

The novels selected for this analysis provide rich narratives that illuminate the complex interplay of culture, religion, and identity for women navigating the challenges of living in diaspora. In seeking to answer this overarching question, several sub-questions emerge, each focusing on different dimensions of the protagonists' experiences:

- What role does religion play in shaping the cultural identity of the female protagonists?
- How do the protagonists navigate the tensions and conflicts of cultural acculturation within diasporic societies?
- What strategies do the protagonists employ to assert agency and resist societal expectations regarding gender roles and cultural norms?
- How do the novels depict the complexities of cultural hybridity and the fluid nature of identity within diaspora communities?

One significant aspect of the research sub-questions is the role of religion in shaping their cultural identities. Religion often serves as a cornerstone of personal and communal identity, offering both a sense of belonging and a framework for interpreting the world. For the female protagonists in these novels, their religious beliefs and practices are integral to their self-concept and their interactions with both their native and host cultures. Religion can provide comfort and stability, acting as a touchstone amidst the upheavals of displacement. However, it can also become a source of tension, especially when religious practices or symbols clash with the secular norms of the host society. Another critical area of exploration is how the protagonists navigate the tensions and conflicts of cultural acculturation. Acculturation refers to the process of adopting the cultural traits or social patterns of another group. For diasporic individuals, this often involves a delicate balancing act between integrating into the host

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culture and preserving connections to their heritage. The protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* encounter various forms of cultural discord as they strive to reconcile their identities. These tensions are manifested in their daily interactions, their internal struggles, and their efforts to forge a coherent sense of self amidst competing cultural demands. The process of acculturation is not linear or uniform; it involves ongoing negotiation and adaptation, reflecting the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural identity.

Furthermore, this dissertation investigates how the female protagonists assert agency and resist societal expectations. Within both their native and host cultures, these women face prescribed gender roles that seek to define and limit their behaviour and aspirations. The protagonists' resistance to these norms is a testament to their resilience and autonomy. They employ a variety of strategies to assert their agency, from small acts of defiance to more overt challenges to the *status quo*. Their journeys are marked by moments of empowerment as they navigate and contest the constraints imposed upon them by both their cultural heritage and the societal expectations of the host country. The novels also offer a nuanced depiction of the complexities of cultural hybridity and the fluid nature of identity within diaspora communities. Cultural hybridity refers to the blending of elements from different cultures, resulting in new, hybrid forms of identity.

For the protagonists, living in diaspora means constantly negotiating and renegotiating their identities, drawing from multiple cultural sources. This hybridity is not without its challenges; it can lead to feelings of fragmentation or alienation. However, it also provides a space for creativity and innovation, allowing the protagonists to construct identities that are uniquely their own. The fluidity of their identities reflects the broader experience of diasporic communities, where the interplay of various cultural influences produces rich, multifaceted identities. By examining these themes, this dissertation aims to contribute to the understanding of how cultural identity is negotiated within diasporic contexts, with a particular focus on the experiences of female protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*. The insights gained from this analysis will shed light on the broader dynamics of culture, gender, and identity in a globalized world, offering a deeper appreciation of the diverse and complex ways in which individuals navigate their cultural landscapes.

The high rate of migration that swept the globe over the two last centuries has profoundly influenced the cultural and social landscapes of many countries, leading to the emergence of diaspora communities and the development of diasporic studies as a significant field of

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academic inquiry. This historical context is crucial for understanding the contemporary novels analysed in this dissertation, *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, as they reflect the complex experiences of individuals navigating their cultural identities within these diasporic settings. This widespread phenomenon of mass migration has facilitated the development of new forms of cultural identity and communal affiliations and has also sparked the interest of scholars seeking to explore the complex ways in which individuals and societies uphold connections to their countries of origin while adapting to unfamiliar cultural environments. Against this expansive historical canvas, the cultural milieu of Muslim women residing in non-Muslim societies within the diaspora holds particular relevance. These women frequently encounter distinctive hurdles as they navigate their cultural and religious identities in settings that might be unfamiliar or even antagonistic towards their beliefs and customs.

The main characters in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* illustrate these challenges faced when attempting to harmonize their Islamic beliefs with the societal norms and expectations prevalent in the predominantly non-Muslim environments they inhabit. The presence of this cultural backdrop introduces additional layers of intricacy to their personal journeys, shedding light on themes such as belonging, assimilation and selfhood. The theoretical framework underpinning this study is founded on a variety of essential concepts and models that offer a perspective for analysing the female protagonists' experiences. Homi Bhabha's theory of hybridity holds a central position in this examination, as it delves into the formation of new, blended identities that arise from the confluence of diverse cultural influences. Bhabha's notion of the "third space," where these hybrid identities are negotiated, proves to be especially pertinent in comprehending the malleable and dynamic essence of cultural identity within diasporic settings. By employing different theoretical lenses, the researcher can delve deeper into the complicated interconnection between individual agency and societal structures, unravelling the complexities inherent in the characters' navigation of their dual identities and the societal expectations placed upon them. This research underscores the significance of theoretical frameworks in illuminating the knotted web of cultural dynamics and personal negotiations that underlie the protagonists' quests for self-realization and acceptance.

Gloria Anzaldúa's theory on Borderlands presents valuable insights, particularly focusing on her concept of the borderland as a realm characterized by both oppressive forces and creative potential. Anzaldúa's scholarship sheds light on the problematic ways in which individuals situated at the fringes of society negotiate and reshape their cultural identities, a

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concept that strongly resonates with the journeys of the female protagonists depicted in the literary works being examined. Central to her theory is the notion of cultural identity being fluid and subject to constant contestation, a central motif frequently explored in diasporic literature. In addition to that, Miriam Cooke's scholarly framework on Muslim feminism serves as a robust tool for scrutinizing the complex relationship between gender dynamics and religious beliefs within the lives of these protagonists. Cooke's analysis underscores how Muslim women actively exercise their agency and challenge patriarchal conventions within the contexts of their cultural and religious environments. This analytical lens is indispensable for gaining insights into how the protagonists navigate the complexities of their cultural identities as Muslim women existing in societies where Islam is not the predominant faith.

Stuart Hall's conceptualization of cultural identity significantly enhances the theoretical underpinnings of this research. Hall's exploration of cultural identity as a continuous process of becoming rather than being, coupled with his emphasis on the pivotal roles played by history, culture and power dynamics in shaping cultural identities, offers invaluable analytical tools for delving into the experiences of the main characters. His proposition that cultural identity is a product of ongoing construction and reconstruction resonates with the ever-evolving and flexible essence of cultural identity scrutinized within the context of this scholarly work. Furthermore, essential notions like the significance of a homeland, the complexities of multiculturalism, and the exploration of diaspora literature are seamlessly interwoven into the core of this investigation. The theme of homeland and the profound sense of attachment to one's place of origin emerge as recurrent motifs in diaspora literature, exerting a profound influence on how individuals perceive and navigate their own sense of self. Moreover, multiculturalism, functioning as a conceptual framework for comprehending the cohabitation of diverse cultural elements within a unified societal framework, serves as a foundational backdrop against which the interactions between the main characters and their respective environments are dissected and understood.

The research's significance is found in its valuable contribution to the advancement of theoretical frameworks, particularly within the realms of diaspora literature, cultural studies, feminist theory, and borderlands theory. This research intertwines Muslim feminism and borderlands theory, presenting innovative perspectives on the intricacies of cultural identity, gender dynamics, and diasporic experiences as depicted in literature. This interdisciplinary approach bridges the gap between literary analysis, feminist theory and cultural studies, offering a holistic understanding of the intersectional dimensions of cultural identity in

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diaspora literature. Furthermore, emphasis is placed on the vital significance of inclusive representation and cultural authenticity in literary works, especially in narratives centred on diaspora and migration experiences. The examination of the representation of Muslim women in literature within this research contributes to ongoing discussions about representation, diversity and inclusion in literary and cultural production. It brings into focus matters of agency, empowerment, and resistance within diasporic communities, particularly among Muslim women, thus amplifying voices that have been marginalized and challenging stereotypical representations. Beyond its academic merits, this research holds social and political relevance in contemporary settings characterized by processes such as globalization, migration, and cultural pluralism. By delving into the exploration of cultural identity within diaspora literature, this study sheds light on the pressing issues of cultural identity, belonging, and cultural negotiation within multicultural societies. Lastly, this research brings educational and pedagogical value for educators, students, and practitioners interested in diaspora literature, feminist theory, and cultural studies. By providing critical insights and analytical tools for interpreting literary texts, this study makes a significant contribution to the enhancement of curricular content, teaching resources, and scholarly materials in these specific fields of study.

The scrutiny of cultural identity and hybridity within the framework of diaspora is a convoluted and diverse area of research that has been extensively examined by scholars in various fields. Bhabha defines cultural identity as being formed within the ambivalent Third Space, where the idea of pure and fixed cultures becomes unachievable. This ambivalent space plays a crucial role in challenging exoticism in a global context characterized by cultural diversity and difference. The amalgamation of cultures resulting from the intersection of hybridity and diaspora highlights how individuals, when displaced, bring along their original culture while encountering a new and distinct one, leading to a state of identity crisis and cultural hybridity. The notions of home and homeland hold significant importance in diaspora literature, directly intertwined with the concepts of belonging and cultural identity. "Homes" typically denote physical spaces where individuals reside, whereas "homelands" encompass broader emotional and cultural connections to a specific place, origin, or nation. In reaction to the obstacles encountered in diasporic settings, individuals frequently create idealized versions of their residences and homelands, perhaps because of emotions of loss and displacement. Through imagining these idealistic depictions, individuals aim to discover comfort, safety and a feeling of acceptance that might be lacking in their real-life encounters.

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These visionary creations provide a stage for developing stories about cultural identity, belonging and the diasporic adventure, empowering individuals to express and understand their multifaceted identities in a globalized world.

Diaspora literature frequently contemplates sentiments of estrangement and yearning for the homeland, highlighting the importance of maintaining connections to one's place of origin and ancestral origins. The detailed nature of cultural identity encompasses a vast array of elements such as language, cuisine, art, music, attire, ceremonies, beliefs, principles, customs, history and spirituality. According to Stuart Hall, the construction of cultural identity involves a dual process involving self-subjectivity "Being" and the act of identification "Becoming." Hall's initial perspective regards cultural identity as a cohesive, unchanging characteristic shared by a particular cultural community, rooted in collective history and cultural legacy, offering stability and a sense of belonging as a framework for engaging with the world. However, Hall's subsequent viewpoint suggests that cultural identity is moulded by both commonalities and notable distinctions among individuals with shared historical or ancestral backgrounds. Within the diasporic context, cultural identity is depicted as a continuous progression rather than a static condition, emerging and developing through ongoing changes. Essentially, Hall elucidates that within the diaspora, cultural identity is fluid and never fixed or singular, but rather influenced by diverse discourses, positions and actions that intersect and sometimes clash. The notion of cultural identity is susceptible to profound historical contextualization, shaped by historical events and socio-cultural dynamics, rendering it in a perpetual state of transition.

In the era characterized by migration and multiculturalism, the blending of various cultures is an inevitable occurrence, particularly evident in diaspora literature. Thus, acculturation plays a central role in this context, referring to the convoluted process through which individuals or societies embrace components of a new culture. This multifaceted process encompasses the absorption of knowledge, values, norms, skills, habits, techniques, beliefs, actions and language from the adopted culture. Acculturation is a dynamic and enduring interaction that emerges from continuous, direct engagement between distinct cultural groups, resulting in gradual shifts in cultural dynamics over an extended period. Notable scholars such as Тарасюк make significant contributions to the realm of cultural studies by emphasizing that acculturation entails contact and transformation, characterized by the interplay between diverse cultural entities and the reshaping of social, cultural and psychological aspects within a community. Similarly, scholars like Sam and Berry underscore the importance of



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comprehending the complexities of acculturation by examining the compatibility of cultural elements, the nature of contact relationships, and the cultural alterations experienced by both groups involved in the acculturation process. This transition can vary in its smoothness or difficulty depending on the alignment or clashes between cultural characteristics. Through a thorough examination of these theoretical frameworks and existing scholarly works, this dissertation positions its analysis within a robust academic tradition, while also aiming to offer fresh insights into the experiences of female protagonists depicted in diaspora literature. The incorporation of concepts such as hybridity, cultural identity and acculturation offers a comprehensive framework for delving into the dynamic processes of negotiating cultural identity and adapting to new cultures as portrayed in literary works such as *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*.

This study utilizes an analytical-comparative methodology that combines literary analysis with a comparative framework to explore the research questions and achieve the study's goals. The analytical component entails a thorough examination of the selected novels, *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, in order to reveal the dynamics of how the female protagonists navigate their cultural identities in diasporic settings. This analysis is firmly rooted in the theoretical underpinnings of Miriam Cooke's Muslim Feminism and Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory, which offer insightful perspectives on gender, cultural hybridity and the experiences of diasporic individuals. The comparative aspect is crucial for juxtaposing the diverse ways in which these theoretical frameworks shed light on the protagonists' experiences and cultural negotiations. Through the comparison of the two novels, this research seeks to underscore both the commonalities and differences in the strategies employed by the protagonists as they manoeuvre through their cultural identities. This method enables a more profound grasp of how these figures struggle with problems of self, membership and cultural adjustment in the framework of dispersion. Thus, this methodological approach enhances the investigation by delivering a thorough examination of the intricacies inherent in the protagonists' experiences and illuminates the importance of cultural bargaining in shaping cultural identities within diasporic communities.

This comparative analysis aims to explore the impact of various settings and literary portrayals on the depiction of cultural hybridity, gender norms and resistance to societal norms. To achieve these goals, the research depends on a thorough analysis of the primary materials, supplemented by additional sources that offer deeper insights into the theoretical frameworks and literary backgrounds. The research delves deeply into how the themes of

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Muslim feminism and Borderlands theory intersect with the experiences of the main characters, emphasizing elements such as cultural identity, empowerment and defiance within the diasporic setting. The research's scope is delimited by its concentration on the specified novels and the utilization of the chosen theoretical frameworks. The study enriches the existing scholarly discourse in the fields of literature and cultural studies by providing a nuanced comprehension of how female leads navigate their sense of self within diasporic environments through the perspectives of Muslim feminism and Borderlands theory.

The dissertation comprises four primary chapters, each meticulously crafted to explore distinct facets of the research question and enhance a holistic comprehension of the negotiation of cultural identities in diasporic settings. The initial chapter, denoted as “Diaspora Literature and Contextualization of Cultural Identity,” establishes a solid groundwork for the investigation. This chapter is bifurcated into two segments. The first section explores diaspora literature by examining the etymology of the term “diaspora,” its historical evolution and the criteria for considering literary works as diasporic. Furthermore, this segment delineates the predominant themes found in diaspora literature and showcases contemporary diasporic works to provide tangible illustrations. The subsequent segment delves deeply into the notion of cultural identity within diaspora literature. It meticulously disentangles the concepts of “culture” and “identity” individually prior to scrutinizing their convergence within the diasporic realm. Additionally, this segment examines the idea of Homeland and the fundamental elements of cultural identity—such as cuisine, language, faith and attire—culminating in an exploration of cultural identity metamorphosis through the lens of cultural acculturation. This exploration encompasses various strategies including assimilation, integration, separation and marginalization, highlighting the multifaceted nature of cultural identity evolution in diasporic environments.

The second chapter of the research manuscript, titled “Research Methodology: Theoretical and Analytical Approaches,” extensively elucidates the methodological framework utilized in the investigation. This section examines the nuances of the research process by clarifying the methodologies and techniques utilized to handle the research queries. Within this chapter, a thorough exploration is undertaken to expound upon the application of various literary theories, notably Miriam Cooke’s Muslim Feminism and Gloria Anzaldúa’s Borderlands theory, in the analysis of the chosen literary works. Furthermore, it provides a robust rationale for adopting a comparative analysis approach, meticulously examining the pertinence of these theories in relation to the research questions and their interconnectedness within the realm of

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diaspora studies. Moreover, the chapter meticulously delineates the reasoning behind the selection of specific novels and female protagonists for this research. It elucidates the significance of these choices and their alignment with the overarching objectives of the study.

The third chapter, entitled "Exploring Cultural Identity Through the Protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*," provides a comprehensive and in-depth evaluation of the cultural identities of the main characters featured in the two literary works. Within this chapter, there is a clear division into two distinct segments, each delving into the exploration of cultural identity within the context of the respective novels. The initial section is dedicated to the examination of *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela, encompassing a concise overview of the narrative as well as a meticulous dissection of Najwa's cultural identity by employing various established literary theories. Following this, the subsequent section undertakes a parallel investigation concerning *Does My Head Look Big in This?* authored by Randa Abdel-Fattah, focusing on the protagonist's cultural identity through a comparative analysis utilizing the same theoretical frameworks as in the prior section. Both parts of the chapter meticulously scrutinize various facets of cultural identity such as religious beliefs, culinary traditions, linguistic nuances, sartorial choices, cultural emblems, and customary rituals. The analytical approach adopted in both sections aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how cultural identities are portrayed and shaped within the narratives of the novels. By exploring these elements, the chapter sheds light on the intricate interplay between cultural background and individual identity construction, offering valuable insights into the complexities of cultural representation in literature.

The fourth chapter entitled "Comparative Analysis of Cultural Identity in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*" conducts a comprehensive comparative investigation into the cultural identities of the protagonists depicted in the two novels. This chapter is meticulously structured into three distinct sections, each serving a unique purpose in the comparative analysis. The initial section meticulously juxtaposes the protagonists' navigation of cultural identity, placing a particular emphasis on the various conflicts they encounter and how they respond to these challenges. Moreover, it delves into an in-depth examination of the role of language in shaping their identity negotiations, as well as the profound significance of cultural practices and culinary traditions in this process. Additionally, this section undertakes a comparative study of the impact of attire and cultural symbols, notably focusing on the veil and hijab, employing the lens of Muslim Feminism to dissect their function as pivotal cultural signifiers. This section also delves into an exploration of acculturation strategies, meticulously

## General Introduction

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comparing and contrasting how each protagonist either assimilates or integrates into their diasporic community. Furthermore, it applies Borderlands theory to scrutinize their distinct strategies of cultural negotiation within their respective contexts. The subsequent section of this chapter introduces a profound exploration of themes revolving around identity crisis, hybridity, belonging, agency and resistance, meticulously drawing comparisons between how each protagonist asserts their agency and challenges societal and cultural norms. Notably, this section utilizes Muslim Feminism to underscore the empowerment and resilience displayed by the protagonists, while also employing the framework of Borderlands theory to dissect their defiance of cultural binaries and stereotypes. The final section of this chapter presents the similarities and differences between the two female protagonists in terms of what has been already mentioned in the previous sections of this chapter.

This methodically structured approach adopted in this chapter guarantees a comprehensive and in-depth examination of the research inquiries at hand, ultimately providing an enriched analysis of the cultural identities of the female protagonists within their respective diasporic settings. The meticulous breakdown into three sections not only aids in a systematic analysis but also ensures that each aspect of the protagonists' cultural identities is thoroughly explored and understood within the broader context of the novels and their cultural backgrounds. The utilization of theoretical frameworks such as Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory adds a layer of complexity and depth to the analysis, allowing for a more profound understanding of the complex dynamics at play in the protagonists' negotiation of their cultural identities amidst the complexities of diasporic living.

### **Limitations of the Study:**

- The study focuses on only two novels, *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, which, while rich in content, represent only a small segment of the vast and diverse field of diasporic literature. Both novels centre on Muslim female protagonists, which limit the scope of analysis to gender and religious experiences, without offering broader comparative insights into other marginalized groups or cultural identities in the diaspora.
- The research also focuses primarily on cultural identity and acculturation, leaving other important themes, such as class, race, or economic factors, underexplored.

# **Chapter One**

Diaspora Literature and Contextualization of  
Cultural Identity

### **Chapter 1: Diaspora Literature and Contextualization of Cultural Identity**

#### **1.1. Introduction**

In this inaugural chapter, a rich exploration unfolds as it delves into the multifaceted realm of diaspora literature. It commences with a detailed dissection of the term, tracing its evolution through historical perspectives, accompanied by a comprehensive examination of the prevalent themes that weave through this literary genre. The complex web of cultural identity is meticulously unravelled, as scholars' distinct lenses scrutinize the individual components of culture and identity in the context of diaspora, setting the stage for a nuanced understanding. Venturing further, the spotlight shifts to the poignant concept of homeland, intimately interwoven with the narratives of diaspora literature and cultural identity. The exploration gains granularity as the pivotal elements of cultural identity within diaspora literature come to the forefront, guiding the reader through the labyrinth of emotions and experiences that define this literary genre. Through this multifaceted exploration, the foundational framework is laid, paving the way for a nuanced understanding of diaspora literature and cultural identity.

#### **1.2. Exploration of Diaspora Literature**

Within the expansive and multifaceted domain of diaspora literature, the current research seeks to dissect and critically analyse the term itself, going deeply into its different layers and nuances in order to acquire not just a superficial understanding, but a comprehensive and profoundly insightful grasp of its significance and implications. The primary aspect that is being thoroughly scrutinized in this scholarly study is the concept of diaspora, which is diligently examined in a standalone manner that aims to uncover and illuminate its multifaceted and complex dynamics, allowing for a deeper appreciation of the term's diverse interpretations and meanings.

By engaging in a comprehensive and analytic study of the diaspora phenomenon, a multitude of elements and complexities surface, ultimately causing the fragmentation of a community that spans far outside the typical geographical perimeters of its ancestral homeland, thus enriching the grasp of transnational identities. This thorough and exhaustive investigation serves as the solid and indispensable foundation upon which all subsequent explorations and analyses are meticulously constructed and developed, ensuring a solid

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framework for further inquiry. Subsequently, the focus of the research shifts towards the second pivotal component of this study, which is literature itself, wherein a succinct yet illuminating definition is crafted and presented, encapsulating the very essence and the core principles and thematic concerns that underpin the expansive field of diaspora literature.

### 1.2.1. Diachronic Lexicology of Diaspora

The experience of diaspora is a key aspect of cultural studies. The meaning of diaspora has changed over time. Certainly, the significance of the term has been neologized from traditional to modern usage. Traditionally, the term diaspora was attributed to the Jewish people, as the New Shorter Oxford Dictionary defines it as “the dispersion of Jews among the Gentile nations” (qtd. in Kenny 24). In a similar manner, Chaliand and Rageau claim that “dispersion seems to be the hallmark of the Jewish people” (4). Etymologically speaking, the origin of the word *diaspora* is a Greek noun that means scattering. Baumann continues that it comes from the verb “dia” and “speirein” that means to disperse, spread, scatter, or be separated (Knott and McLoughlin 20). It is, by and large, associated with the Jews who were exiled far from the “Promised Land” (Knott and McLoughlin 21).

According to Baumann, “diaspora” and “exile” are interrelated terms. Hence, to gain an insight on diaspora, it has not been possible to avoid trenching upon the term exile. The coinage of the word exile is primarily ascribed to the Jews as well. In the first millennium BCE, specifically in the late eighth century BCE, the Jewish people were exiled from Palestine as a divine punishment for disobeying the “Law” i.e. the 613 Jewish commandments and prohibitions in the Torah (Knott and McLoughlin 20). Reflecting upon Baumann, exile is the state of making people immigrate forcefully into another country for certain reasons, generally political ones. Those emigrants became refugees in the host land. However, though establishing a new life there, their sense of belonging to their homeland did not change. As a consequence, the refugees tended to identify with their own culture, and hope for repatriation one day (Knott and McLoughlin 19).

In addition to the above understanding, Ashcroft et al. claim that exile can be a physical or moral (cultural or ethnic group) detachment of an individual or group of people (85). Nevertheless, Andrew Gurr distinguishes between exile, which is a forced separation or displacement of a person, and expatriation that is endowed with the power of voluntarism (qtd. in Ashcroft et al. 86). The set diaspora definition could be joined to Ashcroft et al.’s as

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they argue that diaspora is a voluntary or forcible departure of a group of people from their homeland toward a hostland (61). They add that in some occasions, colonialism is considered as a diaspora occurrence as it entails a voluntary movement. However, the term diaspora can also relate to other instances like immigration, exile, slave trade and labour among others.

For Biswas, diaspora can be defined as the condition of individuals who have been either forcibly or voluntarily relocated to a foreign territory, experiencing a deep yearning for their homeland while retaining a strong connection to their native culture. It signifies an awareness of ethnic estrangement within a specific community (qtd. in Nath 164). Diaspora is also a platform of multiculturalism; the diaspora subjects feel their rootlessness on various levels in the foreign country. Hence, they develop a profound sense of rupture as they contend with issues regarding their self-perception and cultural heritage. More than that, they foster a deep longing and nostalgia to their mother land, culinary traditions, customs and all cultural practices (qtd. in Nath 164).

In the 1980s and onwards, the term diaspora has been most commonly used to describe other African, Armenian, Irish, and Palestinian diaspora. In addition to that, William Safran suggests that the term has another figurative significance that represents sundry types of people as “expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants and ethnic and racial minorities tout court” (qtd. in Cohen 1). He, along with Baumann, posits that diaspora people continue having a certain sacred nostalgia to their fatherland and culture, and have the desire to return to their homeland (qtd. in Cohen 4). The usage of the term diaspora has gone beyond its old and modern meanings to denote other issues, such as nationalism, identity, race, and to understand migration. Adding to that, it bears relevance to social and cultural contexts in which it indicates a state of a lasting consciousness of homelessness and sojourn (Knott and McLoughlin 23). In the same regard, Safran argues that

The label [of diaspora] has been stretched to cover almost any ethnic or religious minority that is dispersed physically from its original homeland, regardless of the conditions leading to the dispersion, and irrespective of whether, and to what extent, physical, cultural, or emotional links exist between the community and the home country. (9)



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Moreover, diaspora refers to any person or group of people living outside their country of origin seeking better opportunities and circumstances in terms of education, work and lifestyle in general. Kasasa, however, presents a differing perspective regarding the concept of diaspora, wherein he posits that it encompasses the voluntary migration of an ethnic community, who migrate of their own volition, for purposes that may include educational pursuits, professional goals, or the desire to reunite with family members residing in foreign nations (29).

As a matter of fact, identity and belonging tend to be thorny issues in the diaspora. Cohen affirms that owning a diasporic identity is remarkably virtuous. He claims that the anxiety, discomfort and tension that result from the interplay of ethnic, national and transnational identities often give rise to creativity, innovation and advancement (7). He suggests this while reflecting on the Jews who, when dispersed, had realized numerous advancements in various fields as science, medicine, music, commerce, art, philosophy and literature. Similarly, Ashcroft et al. confirm that the phenomenon of dislocation serves as a catalyst for the emergence of a unique form of cultural vitality and dynamism (65).

### **1.2.2. Features of Diasporic People**

In accordance with the aforementioned definition, Nath claims that people should have certain features in order to be considered as a diaspora subject (person), amongst: relationship with the homeland: the relationship between people and their fatherland can be strong or weak, it does not necessitate the return to their country of origin, but they should maintain a certain attachment to it (165). Besides, a desire of gaincoming and reunion: diaspora people feel nostalgic for their homeland. As a result, they tend to have the will to go back in another time. The expatriates try to build a home in a new home, i.e. they seem to export their cultural aspects and language to the host country, leaving their descendants and scions a cultural heritage to learn about, cherish, and preserve. Furthermore, emigrant people appear to experience a certain feeling of alienation and detachment, both physically and morally. This is quite natural as they do not share the same historical background with the natives. So, they possess a different cultural identity. Also, diaspora people are always subjected to discrimination and hatred. The natives have certain prejudices and stereotypes towards the diasporic people as they consider them inferior and intruders (Nath 165).

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Nath, notwithstanding, explains that having these features changes from one country to another, from one society to another and from one person to another. Yet, the feeling of diaspora results from a shared memory, historical narratives, cultural traditions and other components of ethno-political heritage (165). Similarly, William Safran has identified some other characteristics that should be taken into consideration so as to call an ethnic group a diaspora. Furthermore, he believes that it is not mandatory to apply all of the following criteria on the diaspora subject: the displacement of people from an original “centre” to more than one foreign destination. Also, they should retain a collective memory, vision about their original homeland including its location, history, and achievements (qtd. in Reis 43; Clifford 304; Van Hear 5).

Moreover, individuals belonging to diasporic communities are often of the conviction that they are not fully embraced by their host societies, and perhaps they contemplate that such acceptance may never be attained. This consequently leads them to perpetually exist in a state of partial separation from the mainstream culture and social fabric of their current environments. They tend to exalt and romanticize their ancestral homeland, frequently engaging in contemplative discussions regarding the possibility of returning to their places of origin once the prevailing conditions become more conducive and favourable for such a desire. Furthermore, these individuals strongly advocate for the notion that all members of the diasporic community should exhibit a steadfast commitment towards the restoration and revitalization of their original homeland, as there exists a shared co-responsibility among them in relation to this objective, and ultimately, they possess a profound sense of ethnic group consciousness that has been meticulously nurtured over an extended period, which is fundamentally rooted in a shared sense of distinctiveness, a common history and an underlying belief in a collective fate that binds them together (Nath 165).

Contrary to Safran, Robin Cohen, in his book *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* avers that, in some other conditions, diaspora is not necessarily meant to be territorial. He asserts this while reflecting upon the term “Deterritorialized diaspora” to claim that diaspora can also “describe transnational bonds of co-responsibility even where historically exclusive territorial claims are not strongly articulated” (7, 8). By this quote, he means that in the contemporary world, where globalization has influenced and re-negotiated space by the digital realm, traditional notion of physical distance is less significant because of the world’s digital

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interconnectedness through different digital means, such as internet and social media platforms.

Cohen affirms that co-responsibility can still exist and be shared across borders, and diasporic people can create virtual communities where the phenomenon of diaspora can be sustained and reinforced through different means, like the mind, artefacts and popular culture and a shared imagination (8). In this context, even when physically separated, diasporic communities can preserve a sense of union and harmony through mental connections. Indeed, the power of shared experiences and imaginations among diaspora people can create a solid sense of identity and connection, where they preserve their cultural heritage using the memories and thoughts they partake.

In addition to that, diaspora can be revived via artefacts and popular culture, like music, visual arts, clothing, literature, language and other cultural forms that are linked to a certain diasporic community. These shared symbols, objects and artistic expressions reinforce a sense of belonging and connection among dispersed people. Eventually, Cohen assures that, in a global era, territories are not the only factor of describing a diaspora, as there are other determining factors that help individuals establish a diasporic identity regardless of their geographical place. To elaborate a little further on what has been said so far, diaspora experiences are often rich sources of literary expression and exploration. Yet, before moving any further, there is a certain need to explore what diaspora literature is.

### **1.2.3. Historical Evolution: Milestones in Diaspora Literature**

In defining literature, Nabila Naimi has provided an aesthetic metaphor in which she illustrates literature as an ocean that needs to be discovered. According to her, just as an ocean is filled with an array of life and natural wonders, literature offers an endless expanse of stories, emotions, experiences and ideas. She emphasizes the greatness and depth of the world literature as it invites and attracts readers to explore its richness, similar to how the ocean captivates with its diverse colours, enthralling images and alluring odours (Naimi 31). For Naimi, literature provides revelation, solace and guidance in the face of life's challenges and hardships. As a result, by submerging oneself in literature, readers can find cure and beauty that offer relief from the complexities and difficulties of daily life.

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In another way, Terry Eagleton emphasizes the relationship between literature and language in which he claims that literature arises from people's innate ability to manipulate and shape language. This perspective positions literature as an artistic endeavour that harnesses the raw material of language to craft works of profound intellectual, emotional and aesthetic resonance (qtd. in Naimi 32). In fact, literature has the capacity to elevate and intensify language, departing from the conventions of everyday speech in a purposeful and systematic manner. Eventually, Eagleton highlights how literature has become a realm where language is reshaped to evoke and elucidate in ways that transcend the ordinary function of mere communication. In this perspective, literature is considered as a potent vehicle that explores the boundless possibilities inherent in language, enabling writers to convey deep truths, profound insights and intricate emotions that resonate with readers on a deep level.

According to Nath, the concept of diaspora literature is a new term in the field of cultural studies even though the notion of diaspora dates back to the Bible, referring to the dispersal of the Jewish people from the Promised Land. However, the field of diaspora literature has emerged recently due to several factors and phenomena like colonialism, post-colonialism, exile, multiculturalism, globalization and immigration (165). Indeed, from the 19th century onwards, the rate of immigration has risen globally. As a consequence, a new literary genre emerged, called diaspora literature. Emphatically, Ning confirms that many writers from various foreign countries have employed literature as a means to articulate their sense of displacement and their experiences as part of the diaspora. Through their way of writings, they have contributed to a distinct and innovative perspective in today's global literary landscape (111). With the fact of living in a foreign country, writers found in literature solace, as it gives voice to the voiceless. Hence, they used it as a tool to reflect their experiences and feelings while living in the diaspora.

Diaspora literature is the literature devoted to those who are displaced from their homelands. It narrates the characters' experiences and journeys in a non-native multicultural society where issues of space, belonging and identity are predominantly addressed. Shai clarifies, "diaspora literature involves an idea of a homeland, a place from where the displacement occurs and narratives of harsh journeys undertaken" (34). The journeys, that the immigrant characters embark, tell the hardships they encounter while living in a foreign country. In a similar way, Joshi argues that when the immigrants' culture collides with the culture of the host land, it leads to issues like identity and belonging. Consequently, this has

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inspired immigrant writers to produce diaspora literature that explores and mirrors these experiences (ix).

According to Parameswaran, so as to consider a work a diasporic literature, it has to fall under, at least some of, these characteristics: sense of expatriate, social and cultural loss, rootlessness, expatriate dilemma, quest for identity, split of norms, values and way of life, inner solitude, a failure to repatriate and impatriate oneself, the use of colloquialism and regionalism, the lack of knowledge of economic, political and social changes, tensions of impartation, and compromise and coexistence (20, 35). In light of the above mentioned, diaspora literature is any piece of literature produced by a migrant person who has moved from homeland to a host country where he/she develops a sense of homelessness and dislocation. Being displaced, the diaspora subject is caught between two countries, two societies, hence, two cultures. As a consequence, the feeling of rootlessness can be traced on different levels, the physical and the psychological.

In diaspora literature, the characters may develop a state of detachment to either society, where norms, values and lifestyles differ from their own. And that in turn causes some conflicts and tensions in the new community. Eventually, the diaspora subject faces a clash that results in inner- alienation searching, thus, for an identity or building a home in a new home. Yet, having this new home built entails, generally, the condition of compromising to coexist within the new society sometimes, or to assimilate in other occasions. As for the language used in diaspora literature, the state of in-between-ness that the diaspora subject may face makes the diasporic writers use slang language and tackles issues that are relevant to their roots of origin. By doing so, writers try to recover some aspects of their own cultures.

In addition to the features highlighted above, Swamy confirms that diaspora literature tackles the issues and problems that immigrant people face while living abroad (1). As a matter of fact, diaspora and literature intersect in many ways. As diaspora results in a feeling of displacement, disorientation and unhomeliness to the emigrant people, literature serves as the best medium for transmitting and expressing those feelings and emotions. Certainly, most writers have found in literature solace as it helps them connect to their homeland and culture in a way or another. In this regard, Hanif Kureishi says: “*the only way I could make sense to my confused work was to write*” (qtd. in Knott and McLoughlin 145). Indeed, literature is the cradle of many issues and quests that are relevant to both colonial and post-colonial

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movements of people, i.e. traumatic experiences in diaspora are remembered and reflected through literature, as literature gives voice to the voiceless.

Since the phenomenon of diaspora can manifest as a movement that is occasionally, though not invariably, undertaken with volition, it may consequently yield a spectrum of both joyous and traumatic experiences and emotional responses, which can include, but are not limited to, attributes such as: a high level of education, a profound sense of pride, favourable economic circumstances, feelings of unhomeliness, deep-seated nostalgia, a state of in-betweenness, and so forth. This diverse array of experiences and sentiments is fundamentally what contributes to the multifaceted nature of diaspora literature, thereby enriching its thematic depth and complexity, as Neusner says “if life is too comfortable, creativity may dry up” (qtd. in Cohen 7).

Diasporic authors most often experience a profound connection to their cultural heritage while simultaneously feeling estranged from the nation in which they reside. Consequently, they exhibit a pronounced inclination to seek out a discernible space that facilitates their connection to their ancestral origins. In this regard, Barkan and Shelton assert that diaspora communities often experience a yearning for a distinct geographical home. Thus, their cultural identity serves as a sanctuary that upholds their cohesion and aids them in establishing a link to their ancestral heritage (5). This phenomenon significantly shapes the perspectives and literary outputs of diasporic writers, who explore a multitude of themes, including nostalgia, displacement, and the quest for identity, among others. Eventually, they incorporate specific settings and symbols that signify particular locales in order to enhance their cultural identity and forge a connection with their ancestral roots.

### **1.2.4. Some Notable Examples of Diaspora Literature works**

As immigration has surfaced as a complicated reality transcending geographical boundaries and proliferating across the globe, it is becoming clearer that numerous writers from a mix of backgrounds and nationalities have significantly influenced the creation and continual evolution of diaspora literature, reflecting the diverse experiences of those who have faced displacement. This circumstance can be linked back to the unique and far-reaching movements of diaspora that have moved around the world throughout the last few centuries and in modern times, bringing attention to essential migrations like the African diaspora, the Indian diaspora, the Arab diaspora, in tandem with numerous others that have built the

cultural and social frameworks of several groups. In the scholarly perspective presented by Tololyan, it is posited that the contemporary diasporas represent predominant communities that are currently undergoing a significant period of transition, characterized by dynamic changes and adaptations (5). Consequently, diaspora literature serves as a profound reflection of the diverse and multifarious experiences encountered by individuals in such transitional phases, as it addresses a wide array of topics and themes that resonate with the challenges and realities of diasporic existence. In the subsequent discussion, a selection of notable contemporary works of diaspora literature will be highlighted to illustrate the richness and complexity inherent in this literary genre.

### **1.2.4.1. Randa Abdel-Fattah and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* (2005)**

The Australian-born-Muslim-Palestinian-Egyptian author Randa Abdel-Fattah (1979) is known by her first novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* which talks of Amal, a teenager, who decides to wear the hijab full-time. The story takes place in Australia where Amal, the protagonist who is sixteen years old, narrates her experience of wearing the veil in a non-Muslim society. Abdel-Fattah's novel is composed of forty-five chapters, each chapter deals with a certain event or incident with a reflection on Amal's reactions and attitudes towards these incidents and stereotypes. Throughout the events of the story, Amal faces many conflicts, both internally and externally, especially with her classmates and even some members of family. Abdel-Fattah wrote the story to reflect the average Muslim teenage girl who struggles to cope with the same dramas and challenges of adolescence just as her non-Muslim peers. Being written in 2005, the novel is considered to be one of the greatest books in contemporary literature and Arab diaspora literature. (More discussions and analyses of the novel will be given in Chapter Three and Four).

### **1.2.4.2. Leila Aboulela and *Minaret* (2005)**

Leila Fuad Aboulela (1964) is a Sudanese author who is considered to be a feminist writer due to her novels that depict the experiences of female protagonists who are Muslim women living in the United Kingdom. Her second novel *Minaret* was longlisted for the Orange Prize for fiction in 2006. The novel is sectioned into thirty-six chapters that tell the story of Najwa, a Sudanese-Muslim young woman, who alongside her mother and brother, were exiled to the United Kingdom because of the military coup in Sudan. While living in London, Najwa faces many challenges and conflicts, and ends up losing everything. She feels that she does not

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belong to any culture (both her own and host culture), and that she is detached from both cultures. Eventually, she resorts to her religion and decides to wear the Hijab. Through the course of the events, Najwa struggles to build a home in a non-Muslim society, both physical and figurative home. Her figurative home is her journey to find a home or an identity in a cross-cultural space. (More discussions and analyses of the novel will be tackled in Chapter Three and Four).

### 1.2.4.3. Zadie Smith and *White Teeth* (2000)

Zadie Smith was born multiculturalist of an English father and a Jamaican mother. Her first novel *White Teeth*, which includes some autobiographical aspects, takes place in North London, where Smith portrays London as a multicultural city that encompasses various nationalities and ethnicities, including Bengali, Jamaican and English. The story is a saga that revolves around multiple generations of three different families: that of Samad Iqbal (Muslim), Archie Jones (Christian), and Marcus Chalfen (Jewish) throughout the twentieth century. Through the events of the narrative, the immigrants who settled in London tend to face some issues regarding culture and belonging. Their identity crisis impacts heavily their descendants and results in a feeling of alienation among them. Definitely, the host culture affects Samad's own identity. He loses his devotion to Islam, as he deviates from the Islamic values drinking beer and having an affair with his children's music teacher. Eventually, he kidnaps one of his twin children, Magid, and sends him to Bangladesh so as to preserve his traditional beliefs and having him raised under the doctrine of Islam.

As revenge to his father's decision, Magid becomes an atheist who devotes himself to science. From the other side, his twin brother, Millat, becomes a trouble-maker, pot-smoker rebellious against his people's marginalization in society. Soon after, however, he commits himself to a Muslim fundamentalist brotherhood called "Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation." As the events passed by, Magid returns to London and joins Marcus Chalfen scientific experiments, in which they develop cancer to mice at a certain time, the thing that Magid admires because his own life was controlled by his father and imposed on him. The lives of the children of the three families intersect and influence one another. Joshua Chalfen (Marcus son) falls in love with Irie Jones (Archie's daughter), whereas she and Millat Iqbal are caught smoking marijuana at school. Later on, Irie has a sexual relationship with both Magid and Millat, and delivers a baby daughter whose father is



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unknown; as the twin brothers have the same DNA. As a matter of fact, having the three ethnicities living together in the diaspora, the children's lives are altered in various ways, where they assimilate in one another's culture in different occasions.

### 1.2.4.4. Monika Ali and *Brick Lane* (2003)

*Brick Lane* is Monika Ali's first novel. It was awarded with many prizes since its publication. Monika Ali is a feminist author who presents two different characters that are caught between different cultures. The novel narrates the story of Nazneen Ahmed while living in the diaspora. Nazneen's sister Hasina eloped with her love and married him against her father's will. Consequently, her father arranges for Nazneen's marriage to Chanu Ahmed, who is forty years old while she was only nineteen. Nazneen embarks on a diasporic journey from rural Bangladesh to London where her life totally changes, and she struggles for identity and purpose in life. In London, she faces many issues and challenges like language and culture, for she cannot speak English, and also the Bangladeshi severe standards as she was not allowed to leave home alone.

Despite the fact they live in the UK, her husband still has the Bangladeshi mindset, where women are always under the patriarchal control. Thus, she develops a sense of alienation and nostalgia to her homeland, especially her village. Her depression grows even more when Hasina tells her that she has to run away from her abusive husband, and is struggling alone in Dhaka. Things go even worse when she loses her baby boy Naqib. Afterwards, she gives birth to two girls Shahana and Bibi. Eventually, she learns English through their daily conversations. By the passing of the events, she falls in love and has an affair with Karim, a British-born Bangladeshi, who fills her with tenderness and care, unlike her husband.

However, her joy does not last so long as soon as she realizes that she is committing a sin. Over time, Nazneen accepts her new diasporic status and is determined to find her identity in the third space. She decides to work and be financially independent, an advantage that London provides for women. Thus, she becomes a tailor. At the end of the day, rejecting the Bangladeshi patriarchal values, she leaves her husband, and develops a new modern identity. Nazneen's friend Razia helps her a lot in forming this new globalized identity, as she teaches her how to cope within her new society, how to behave with English people, and ignores the traditional values of the Bangladeshi community. Yet, this identity transformation influences Nazneen's daughter Shahana, as she is stuck between two cultures and two identities. With

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the fact of admiring both English and Bangladeshi cultures, she develops an identity conflict. Ultimately, when he fears to lose his native cultural identity, Chanu leaves London and goes back to his homeland. However, Nazneen becomes attached to her new society, where she finds her new identity.

### 1.2.4.5. Ocean Vuong and *On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* (2019)

*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous* is Ocean Vuong's first novel. This Epistolary novel was based on one of his poems of the same title. The Vietnamese American author tackles very important issues that immigrants and refugees face in the diaspora. The novel is a semi-autobiographical story that is written in a form of letter to his illiterate mother. The narrative tells the story of a young Vietnamese American boy nicknamed Little Dog, his mother Hong (more often called Rose) and his Grandma Lan. As the novel has a nonlinear narrative style, the story articulates difficult memories back to Grandma Lan's life during the American-Vietnamese war, when she escaped an arranged marriage to become a prostitute. Later on, when she was four-months pregnant, she got married to a white American soldier and gave birth to her lone daughter Rose. Because of an American napalm raid, Rose's school in Vietnam collapsed ending her educational career before it even started, and leaving her barely literate. Eventually, Rose suffers from posttraumatic stress disorder because of the traumatic events she had experienced during the war. Besides, her marriage and separation from an abusive man made thing even worse. After having Little Dog and moving to America with her mother Lan as refugees, she had to work in a nail salon in Hartford, Connecticut where they cannot speak the English language.

By the passing of events, during his childhood, Little Dog was tormented by his schoolmates, and abused by his mother as she displaces her trauma toward her son; the thing that led him to get involved in a tragic affair with a young white man called Trevor, thus, becoming a gay. However, Trevor's addiction to drugs ended him overdose and die. Though Grandma Lan was schizophrenic, she used to protect Little Dog from his mother's violence, and reassure him that she loves him, but suffers from a mental illness just like her. The story highlights issues like traumatic memory and diasporic identity that are relevant to refugees as they are forced to leave their homelands. These refugees tend to be lost in a new society, where everything seems to be available, but important thing are not such as language and

cultural ethics. Indeed, the absence of one's cultural codes of ethics leads to cultural assimilation and moral degeneracy.

### **1.2.5. Prominent Themes of Diaspora Literature**

From the aforementioned illustrative examples presented above, it becomes readily apparent that the multifaceted experience of diaspora significantly catalyses and opens up a comprehensive discourse concerning a myriad of complex issues and formidable challenges that individuals face. Indubitably, the plight of being separated or isolated in a strange country, regardless of the root causes that could have instigated this condition, inherently drives the diaspora to engage with and perceive a varied range of experiences, and it is specifically this diversity of experiences that characterizes diaspora literature as a broad and all-encompassing term, which effectively includes a vast array of various themes, such as dislocation, alienation, nostalgia, identity challenges, and cultural fusion, to highlight merely a few crucial dimensions.

#### **1.2.5.1. Theme of Displacement**

Displacement is, in its broader sense, the movement from one place to another. It is the condition of being out of one's original place and re-stabilized in another foreign one. According to the Cambridge Dictionary, displacement is "the situation in which people are forced to leave the place where they normally live" ("Displacement"). When being displaced, in most cases, people lose their religion, native language and culture. As a result, displacement and disconnection are intertwined. As a result of the slave trade and colonial movement that swept the globe during the last centuries, displacement has become a worldwide phenomenon. According to William Safran, "millions of people do not live in the countries in which they were born and raised" (qtd. in Rai 25). This activity has both positive and negative effects. On the one hand, displacement of ideologies and technologies brought economic and social development to certain areas in the world. On the other hand, however, it obliged people to abandon their home lands and families so as to establish new comfortable life, or escape colonial hegemony.

In diaspora literature, the characters are displaced from their home land to a host country, where everything seems to be different. This appears to be a unique narration technique that diasporic authors imply when tackling the theme of displacement, where they swing between

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two worlds. Eventually, the setting of the story is always divided into two or more countries. In the diasporic narrative, therefore, the characters tend to travel from their country of origin to a foreign land or vice versa. In other occasions, also, the author tries to picture his/her native country as an unfavourable place that led to the characters' displacement (Rani 253).

Despite enjoying better life conditions, most of the time, in the host land, the characters most commonly feel culturally dislocated. Certainly, displacement can be either geographical or cultural, as Bammer claims; it is the detachment of individuals from their original culture, whether through physical relocation or the compulsion of an alien culture through colonization (xi). To elaborate further on this, individuals, sometimes, engage in the physical act of relocating from one geographical location to another, typically transitioning from a nation of origin to a foreign territory. Conversely, there are instances in which displacement manifests at the cultural level, wherein individuals remain within their native country yet experience a transition from one cultural paradigm to another. Such cultural displacement may arise either as a consequence of an imposed culture imposed by a colonial authority or as a voluntary cultural transformation occurring within the same geographical domain.

The majority of authors belonging to the diasporic community themselves experience the profound and often tumultuous journey of displacement, which consequently leads to the portrayal of their characters enduring a similar sense of dislocation; whether that be from one geographical location to another or even within the confines of the same nation. In both of his celebrated novels, *A House for Mr. Biswas* and *The Mystic Masseur*, the esteemed author V. S. Naipaul presents protagonists Mohun Biswas and Ganesh Ramsumair who find themselves uprooted from their ancestral homeland of India. They mirror the author's own life journey, as V. S. Naipaul was born in a modest town situated on the island of Trinidad before ultimately relocating to reside in England. Therefore, the characters' relentless quest for a new sense of home and belonging intricately reflects the author's own childhood experiences and deep-seated feelings of alienation and not fully belonging anywhere.

In the context of cultural displacement, as explored in the literary works of Jhumpa Lahiri titled *The Namesake* and Meera Syal's *Anita and Me*, it becomes evident that the central characters, Gogol and Meena, were born in a nation that is distinctly foreign to their ancestral roots, yet they carry with them Indian heritage through their familial lineage, which their parents diligently strive to instill in them by imposing various aspects of Indian cultural

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heritage, including but not limited to traditional food, language, customs, rituals, deeply held beliefs, traditional attire, and a multitude of other cultural elements that define their identity. It is vital to point out that Gogol and Meena favor integrating into the cultural context of their childhood, chiefly due to the unrelenting racial discrimination they encounter linked to their skin color, which alienates them from the prevailing societal conventions. Consequently, this complexity of cultural influences leads them to experience a profound sense of ambivalence as they oscillate between the two cultures, ultimately rendering them unable to definitively establish which of the two, India or the foreign nation of their birth and upbringing constitutes their true home.

In Postcolonial context, displacement is confined to culture. Bammer points out that when people move from their homeland, it can be evident that displacement leads to some changes in their lifestyle and culture accordingly. In this respect, he recalls “how one’s ancestral culture or the culture of the birthplace has been replaced, transformed, rejected, or replaced by a new one, one of cross-connections, not roots” (Bammer xv). However, in contemporary diaspora literature, displacement can be classified under four main types: spatial displacement, cultural displacement, psychological displacement and intellectual displacement of the diaspora subject (Anderson 11). Focusing on the cultural displacement, nevertheless, Lavie and Swedenburg assume that the degree of displacement is personal and changeable as it “is not experienced in precisely the same way across time and space, and does not unfold in a uniform fashion” (4). They continue that the positions of the Other are highly related to the dominant force, i.e. the feeling of estrangement and displacement can be sensed according to the dominant power physically and culturally, and its interpretation varies in relation to each one’s experience (Lavie and Swedenburg 4).

### **1.2.5.2. Theme of Alienation**

Being a main result of displacement and expatriation, alienation is another central theme in diaspora literature. A dictionary of literary terms defines alienation as “the state of being alienated or estranged from something or somebody; it is a condition of the mind” (qtd. in Mittal 2). It is, by and large, a psychological state of isolation, separation and a feeling of loss that immigrants experience after being displaced from their country of origin. Theorists like Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin often associate alienation with displacement.

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According to the Cambridge dictionary, alienation is “the feeling that you have no connection with the people around you or that you are not part of a group” (“Alienation”).

In diaspora literature, the state of alienation is most commonly relevant to rootlessness, exile, solitude, detachment and despair. Being alienated, the diaspora subject is disconnected from the surroundings as he/she feels lonely even if surrounded by other people, thus, he/she develops a sense of exclusion in the host society. Certainly, as they belong to neither place, the diaspora people feel as an outsider that cannot decide which place to consider as home. This state of in-between-ness impacts people psychologically as they become desperate in the foreign country. In this regard, Wright posits that alienation is residing in a system set up by someone else and undergoing isolation from the communities, be it the country of origin or the host society (57).

It is crucial to recognize that even those who decide to emigrate willingly may often feel a significant disconnect from the cultural and social structures of their new country, resulting in a lingering state marked by disorientation and separation from their surroundings. McLeod articulates this phenomenon by asserting that immigrants frequently find themselves perceived as individuals who do not seamlessly integrate into their new surroundings, resulting in a denial of their capacity to view their newly adopted land as a genuine and authentic home (212). Consequently, it becomes evident that diasporic authors poignantly encapsulate this sentiment within their literary works, irrespective of the underlying motivations that precipitated their migration; they evoke and convey an inherent desire and nostalgic longing for their state prior to displacement, which serves as a mechanism to mitigate the overwhelming feelings of alienation that they experience in their current context. In this concern, Salman Rushdie claims that

It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we look back, we must also do so in the knowledge-which gives rise to profound uncertainties-that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short,

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create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (11)

In diasporic literary works, alienation is a recurring theme as it goes hand in hand with displacement. Bharati Mukherjee's novel *Jasmine* portrays the theme of alienation, where Jasmine, the protagonist, embarks on a journey from her birth village Hasnapur in India to America; during the process, Jasmine swings between two lands (homeland and host land), and two cultures and also between her past and present. This dilemma leads Jasmine to alienation and disharmony. As a matter of fact, Jasmine's complex displacement from the Punjab to Florida, New York, Iowa and finally to California contributed more in her feeling on dissociation and solitude. As a consequence, she tried to set a new cultural identity in the diaspora, where she changed her name.

While living in India, Jasmine was the most beautiful and intelligent girl within the family; consequently, she had a different mindset unlike her family. Because her family was patriarchal, girls were not allowed to be independent like men, the reason that pushed Jasmine to escape to the institution of marriage in an early age, where she decided to marry an educated, civilized man. Thus, she married an Indian-American man named Prakash who did not believe in the dowry habit. Conclusively, she travelled to America with her husband who changed her name from Jhoti to Jasmine, where he supported her to learn English. However, good things do not last forever, Prakash was murdered and Jasmine returned to India, where she faced a dilemma whether to perform the Sati ritual or to conduct her new course in America.

The Sati ritual represents a deeply entrenched and historically significant religious practice within the cultural framework of India, which necessitates the widow's self-immolation by voluntarily positioning herself atop the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, thus symbolically demonstrating her devotion and fidelity. In a subsequent series of events, Jasmine found herself navigating the complexities of life as an undocumented immigrant within the United States, leading to her emotional and physical estrangement from her familial connections, a situation that arose primarily as a consequence of her refusal to conform to the prevailing cultural traditions that dictated her previous existence. Moreover, it is significant that even her group of friends reduced greatly, as they created distance from her owing to the social biases related to her South Asian roots, thus worsening her feelings of

solitude. Despite Jasmine's conscious decision to reinvent herself by adopting a new identity that aligned more closely with her current environment, she was compelled to endure an overwhelming and traumatic experience characterized by profound separation and a pervasive sense of alienation from both her roots and her community.

### 1.2.5.3. Theme of Nostalgia

Before being ascribed as a literary term, the concept of nostalgia has its roots in the medical context. The term was initially coined by a doctoral Swiss student named Johannes Hofer, in his dissertation, which is an equivalent term to the German word "Heimweh", that means home-ache or home-pain, during the diagnosis of an illness among displaced Swiss soldiers and students. Ultimately, nostalgia was connected to homesickness. Similarly, Karl Jasper posits that nostalgia is a mental disorder that results in an identity crisis, acts of violence and, sometimes, suicidal behaviour. According to him, this nervous condition is the consequence of a pressing desire to return to an idealized home (Pawelek 8, 10)

Etymologically speaking, nostalgia is a Greek term that is combined of two words (no'stos) which means homecoming and (àlgos) meaning ache or pain. Nevertheless, the term's traditional connotation was overcome and had moved from the medical to the social and literary contexts when it stepped inside the American popular culture in 1950 and 1960's (Pawelek 15). Nostalgia, generally, means a feeling of longing to the past, especially to instances or individuals that bear pleasant references. However, the term's definitions are various and relevant to a sense of melancholy and alienation as well.

Accordingly, the Cambridge dictionary defines nostalgia as "a feeling of pleasure and also slight sadness when you think about things that happened in the past" ("Nostalgia") certainly, nostalgia is a primary result of human alienation as it evokes past memories. Furthermore, in accordance with Turner, nostalgia has four psychological dimensions, a sense of deterioration and loss: spatial and temporal loss, a melancholic perception of the contemporary world rooted in the current civilization, leading to the loss of references and values, a sense of loss of personal freedom and autonomy; and finally, a sense of complexity, and loss of originality and spontaneity within a culture driven by mass consumption.

Moreover, in the scholarly discourse presented by Kessous and Roux, it is articulated that nostalgia encompasses not merely psychological aspects, but also entails two contrasting



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temporal dimensions, which are identified as continuity and discontinuity (193). According to their analysis, these two fundamental characteristics are essential for a comprehensive understanding of nostalgia, with continuity encompassing the notion of enduring nostalgia that persists over time, while discontinuity is characterized by the experience of nostalgia for the first time, representing a novel encounter with the past. These two distinct features serve to delineate four specific nostalgic situations, namely the everyday past, uniqueness, tradition, and transition, each of which holds significance in relation to particular contexts and circumstances in which individuals may find themselves reminiscing.

According to the scholarly insights presented by Anderson, nostalgia can be comprehensively understood as a complex psychological phenomenon that encompasses the reminiscence of vividly recalled memories, which subsequently evoke a myriad of convoluted emotional responses and, at times, contribute positively to an individual's overall emotional state (qtd. in Elias 101). Examining diaspora literature reveals that nostalgia is a prominent theme, reflecting the intricate emotions that arise for individuals who have been displaced from their homeland as they navigate life in an unfamiliar setting. It is true that members of the diaspora harbour a significant nostalgia for their home country, especially in view of the major societal shifts and modifications they observe in the cultural backdrop of their adopted nation.

Evidently, the findings articulated by Swamy provide confirmation that the sentiment of nostalgia is not only prevalent but is also prominently depicted within the realm of diaspora literature, as it is a phenomenon that is frequently observed among individuals who have experienced disconnection and uprooting from their ancestral territories (qtd. in Elias 101). Furthermore, the emotional yearning that individuals feel towards their homeland often catalyses a profound desire for identity reconstruction, which serves as a coping mechanism to navigate the complexities of their new societal environments. In this regard, Hoffman asserts that immigrant populations frequently feel a compelling urge to explore and understand their motherland's historical narratives and cultural heritage as a means to alleviate their persistent feelings of homesickness (3). In this matter, D'Costa affirms that displaced or exiled folks incubate a nostalgic state to "re/centre their identity about their homeland" (3).

The Ethiopian American poet Mahtem Shiferraw, through her remarkable debut literary work entitled *Fuchsia*, published in the year 2016, skilfully encapsulates and conveys the

complex and multifaceted theme of nostalgia within her thoughtfully curated collection of poems; in her writing, she employs a rich palette of colours, various elements, and a wide array of emotions to craft and evoke nostalgic as well as traumatic memories that resonate deeply with individuals in relation to their experiences of time and place. The poems within this collection function as a meaningful bridge that effectively links her cherished childhood memories to her current lived experiences in adulthood, thereby juxtaposing her present existence in America with her formative home in Africa. Also, her rich experience of looking back fondly has been instrumental in the journey of reshaping her identity while she traverses and adapts to her new and culturally rich environment.

### **1.2.5.4. Theme of Identity Crisis**

The phenomenon of identity crisis emerges as a particularly critical and salient theme within the realm of diaspora literature, which serves to underscore the profound sense of confusion and disorientation experienced by individuals or a group of people regarding their own self-concept and identity. This complex experience elucidates the pivotal juncture at which these individuals or groups embark upon a process of self-discovery and identity construction (Erikson 17). Therefore, when interpreted in the context of the wider diaspora discourse, the identity dilemma embodies the nuanced and varied confusion that persons or groups may face as they traverse and redefine their cultural identities within the parameters of the receiving society, frequently causing a reassessment of their individual cultural constructs. It is undoubtedly evident that the pervasive sensation of feeling alienated or "out of the box," which is frequently reported by immigrants, culminates in a tumultuous and chaotic state of being, wherein they find themselves rigorously questioning the authenticity and true nature of their cultural affiliations and belonging.

The nature of diaspora identity is complex and multidimensional, since it captures a vast range of distinct experiences that individuals face in both their native land and in the welcoming nation that gives them asylum or chances. Consequently, this complexity complicates the process of identity formation that the distinguished psychologist Erik Erikson has aptly described as both perplexing and convoluted. The experience of confronting an identity dilemma, or the bewilderment and ambivalence that individuals from the diaspora commonly endure while reconciling the friction between two separate cultural realms, urges them to delve into a significant examination of the core of their cultural identity; ultimately

resulting in the developing concept of hybridity, which can be perceived as a mode of being that dwells in an ongoing in-betweenness, connecting the lines of diverse cultural identities.

### 1.2.5.5. Theme of Hybridity

One of the rich notions and theories in cultural studies is Hybridity. It is a wide topic that covers endless discussions. At the outset, “hybrid” is a biological term that was originally coined in the 1600’s with a Latin origin ‘hybrida’ that means “the offspring of plants or animals of different variety or species” (Harper). Then, in 1850, it was used to connote “anything a product of two heterogeneous things” (Harper). Later, however, in 2002, it was utilized as a noun that denotes an “automobile powered by an engine that uses both electricity and gasoline” (Harper). In the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the term entered the postcolonial sphere in relation to culture, identity, and colonizer and colonized.

The colonial movement that swept the world during the last two centuries gave birth to the binary opposition of the “Self” meaning the Western world and the “Other” meaning the Eastern world. This racism that the West colonizers have created resulted in a rift among races considering, thus, the Whites as superior and special over all other races, especially the Black one. However, it is a fact that during the colonial process, the amalgamation of races is something inevitable as colonizers settled in the colonized’ territories and vice versa. Therefore, the term hybridity has been attributed to the racial mixture. Yet, the hybrids were considered as detrimental as they were impure racially and culturally (“Hybridity”).

In Hall and Paul Du Gay’s book *Questions of Cultural Identity*, Homi Bhabha suggests, in his chapter entitled “Culture’s In-between,” that he has formulated the notion of hybridity to elucidate how cultural authority is formed and processed under conditions of power dynamics, including political conflict and inequality (58). He clarifies that hybridization’ strategies challenge and undermine the existing and stereotyped forms of cultural authority and representation, where authoritarian precepts solidify themselves as inclusively dominant in a situation of power struggles; subsequently, hybrid discourses create a negotiation zone in which power can be strangely manifested in various ways and by any party.

The linguist and cultural theorist Mikhail Bakhtin had an initial use of the term when he articulated in his theory of the Carnavalesque the idea of polyphony of voices in society, i.e. multivoiced language situations and multivoiced narratives, which appeared in the Middle

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Ages when “a boundless world of humorous forms and manifestations opposed the official and serious tone of medieval ecclesiastical and feudal culture” (Holquist 4). Recently, the term hybridity has been most commonly associated with Homi Bhabha’s theory of mimicry and ambivalence, in which he presses the interdependency and the mutual relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. This point of mutuality is called, according to Bhabha, in his book *The Location of Culture*, the Third Space of enunciation (37).

Bhabha explains that cultural identity is constituted within the ambivalent Third Space, rendering, thus, the purity and fixity of cultures unattainable. Instead, he claims that perceiving that ambivalent or the in-between space of cultural identity is advantageous, as it helps overcome exoticism in a world of cultural difference. Bhabha says

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory...may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity. (38)

However, a cohort of postcolonial scholars, including Benita Parry, Talpade Mohanty, and Aijaz Ahmad, stand in opposition to the theoretical framework proposed by Homi K. Bhabha, asserting that the theoretical constructs which laud the concept of mutuality, paradoxically serve to undermine the very notion of oppositionality, ultimately leading to a state of perpetual post-colonial dependency. Ultimately, the concept of hybridity may be exhaustively characterized as the intricate amalgamation of two distinct cultural paradigms, which subsequently engenders the formation of a novel hybrid transcultural domain that encompasses and intertwines linguistic, cultural, political, or racial dimensions.

The intersection that exists between the concepts of hybridity and diaspora can be aptly described as a profound cultural amalgamation that occurs when diverse cultural elements converge and interact in a shared space. It is a clear fact that when individuals are forced to leave their native territories, they consistently hold onto the diverse strands of their cultural background, which is a vital element of their personal identity. Upon stepping into a locale that showcases a starkly different cultural atmosphere, individuals inevitably encounter the

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challenges of adjusting to this unknown landscape; as a result of this engagement with cultural variation, an intricate blend of identities surfaces, often resulting in a notable identity conflict and the advent of cultural synthesis. In this particular context, Ning compellingly posits that when writers belonging to the diaspora articulate their thoughts or express their creativity within the framework of multiple national cultures, it becomes increasingly apparent that their sense of national and cultural identity cannot be neatly encapsulated or characterized as a singular entity, as evidenced by her insightful observations (111). While this emerging cultural identity experiences a phase of mixing, those who belong to the diaspora encounter a risky predicament, facing twofold vulnerability that could either push them toward assimilation into the host community or drive them to actively safeguard their foundational identity in the face of cultural shifts.

However, the scholarly analysis presented by Papastergiadis transcends the conventional understanding of the assimilation process, proposing the notion that individuals within the diaspora are engaged in a continual advancement that evolves from the simplistic notion of mere assimilation to the active promotion of novel and innovative frameworks for comprehending the intricacies of cultural interaction. He extends his argument with examples drawn from diverse geographical contexts such as Europe, Australia, and the Americas, where a segment of diasporic individuals fervently advocates for the establishment of new modalities through which cultural interaction can be represented, particularly upon their integration into the political and cultural structures of their host countries. Notwithstanding the significant contributions they make in this regard, their goals are not confined solely to the advocacy for new representations, as they also critically highlight the inherent drawbacks and adverse consequences associated with the denial and neglect of the emergence and recognition of new cultural identities within the broader societal discourse (3).

The new conceptualization of cultural identity, which the esteemed scholar Papastergiadis has previously articulated, is aptly encapsulated in the notion of hybridity, as this particular framework of understanding possesses a profound and intrinsic relationship with the complexities of difference alongside the multifaceted nature of diasporic cultural identity. In different terms, no matter how the host society classifies and reviews the cultures it faces—whether it sees them as fundamentally alike or significantly different from its own established standards and values—it is vital to fully grasp the complicated ways in which these varied cultures merge, cooperate, and eventually impact one another in various respects. A salient

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illustration of hybrid manifestations can be found in the emergence of novel linguistic forms, which include but are not limited to languages such as Patois, Pidgin, and Creole, as extensively examined by the influential thinker Frantz Fanon in the inaugural chapter titled “The Negro and Language” from his seminal work, *Black Skin White Masks*.

In the realm of diaspora literature, it is evident that numerous authors strategically embrace the concept of hybridity as a fundamental and central theme that permeates their intricate literary narratives. Chambers articulates the notion that diasporic authors employ the idea of hybridity to vividly illustrate the complex intermingling and fusion of diverse cultures, specifically those associated with the homeland and the hostland, thereby acquiring distinct characteristics and elements from the host culture that are then meticulously reconstructed in the process of forming entirely new and unique hybrid cultural identities (50). The individuals depicted in such narratives are engaged in a profound struggle within a liminal state, wherein, subsequent to their displacement from their original homes, they are invariably confronted with the challenges and intricacies of adapting to a new culture and lifestyle; nevertheless, they remain steadfast in maintaining their own cultural heritage and identity. Consequently, these characters find themselves inhabiting what can be conceptualized as the Third Space, a conceptual arena wherein the necessity for a hybrid identity is acknowledged and is also actively cultivated and shaped in accordance with their multifaceted experiences.

Emine Sevgi Ozdamar, in her book *Mother Tongue Collection*, which is a collection of four short stories, writes of various themes as diaspora, memory and Turkish-German identity. The author has dedicated her book to her mother, Fatma Hanim, in which she portrays the interrelated cultural aspects that identify people as similar or different, like language, gender, ethnicity, class and nationality. The first story *Mutterzunge* or *Mother Tongue* is an example of the hybridity process. The author is of Turkish origins, she has been displaced to Germany and lived there for years, where she developed an identity crisis because of mixing cultures. The title of her story *Mutterzunge* is a hybrid form that is a result of the literal translation to Mother tongue, which is an English, French and Turkish phrase that does not exist in German syntax. Eventually, blending aspects of two different languages gives birth to a hybrid word that exists neither in her mother language nor in her host language; but in the Third Space. Ozdamar’s story is not written in pure German, she does not respect its grammatical standards as she inserts some Turkish-Arabic words and syntax.

### **1.3. The Representation of Cultural Identity in Literature**

Cultural identity represents a complex and multifaceted construct that encompasses a multitude of dimensions, particularly two predominant topics that are of paramount significance within the realms of sociology and cultural studies. Furthermore, cultural identity is frequently regarded as a prominent and illuminating theme that permeates the vast landscape of diaspora literature, which explores the experiences and narratives of individuals who navigate the challenges of living away from their homeland. Consequently, the researcher deems it both appropriate and necessary to examine this intricate concept by dividing it into distinct and separate units for a more comprehensive analysis. In light of this, this dissertation intends to meticulously deconstruct the term 'cultural identity' into two principal concepts, thereby allowing for a detailed and focused investigation of each individual component in isolation from the other.

#### **1.3.1. The Concept of Culture**

The elaborate definition of the term 'culture' can be thoroughly sorted into many different groups, as this layered term comprises a host of meanings, each specifically crafted for a distinct academic sector or field of exploration. Nevertheless, it is imperative to recognize that one cannot presumptively assert that any single definition is superior or more accurate than another, given that scholars invariably select the particular perspective or definition that aligns most appropriately with their specific research context and objectives.

In anthropology, the conceptualization of the term 'culture' represents an extensive and multifarious expression that encompasses a wide array of disciplines and domains, extending far beyond its conventional interpretations found within the contexts of history and literature. As articulated by the esteemed anthropologist Kluckhohn, culture can be defined as the comprehensive and total way of life that characterizes a particular group of people, encapsulating the intricate social legacy that is imparted to the individual by his or her respective community, while simultaneously signifying an integral component of the broader human desire of creation and existence (17). This perspective points out the acknowledgment that culture works as a sophisticated, multifaceted, and perpetually transforming entity that impacts the intricacies of human experience and serves a fundamental purpose in crafting the overall framework of society.

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Kluckhohn articulates the notion that culture comprehensively encompasses every conceivable aspect of human existence, which includes but is not limited to beliefs, behaviours, artistic expressions, established traditions, intrinsic values, familial frameworks, social customs, linguistic attributes, and material possessions, all of which fundamentally shape and delineate how individuals perceive, interpret, and navigate the complexities of the world that surrounds them. In addition, one must acknowledge that culture acts as a form of social heritage, a gift that is diligently handed down from one age to the next within a defined community framework, rather than being an intrinsic quality; hence, individuals are certainly influenced and shaped by the communal and collective customs, lived stories, usual practices, and behaviours of their corresponding societies.

Consequently, this indicates that the intricate cultural values and practices which play a pivotal role in shaping individuals' identities and subsequently guide their behaviours are profoundly expressed through the myriad interactions that occur within one's immediate group, familial units, and the broader societal context. Additionally, one must appreciate that culture is fundamentally connected to the true nature of human existence, rather than being regarded solely as a resource that people can own. Therefore, it bears a major effect on the development of human responses and the complex systems of personal advancement.

On the other hand, Kluckhohn claims also that "culture is a way of thinking, feeling, believing. It is the group's knowledge stored up (in memories of men; in books and objects) for future use" (23). According to this quote, culture encompasses not only people's behaviours and practices, but also the shared thoughts, emotions, beliefs and knowledge within a particular group. This knowledge is reserved in people's memories together with concrete artefacts like art, books and objects.

Thus, Kluckhohn is positing the notion that culture transcends the limitations imposed by the present temporal framework; instead, it exists as a repository of experiences and knowledge accumulated in the annals of human history, which individuals carry with them and utilize in shaping their future endeavours. Accordingly, the inherent flexibility and innovative characteristics of culture function as a vast repository or warehouse of collective wisdom and insightful understanding, thereby equipping a specific group or community with the necessary tools to navigate and interpret the complexities of the world around them,



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effectively address the myriad issues they encounter, and strategically plan for forthcoming challenges, all while drawing upon the invaluable lessons imparted by their past experiences.

In light of the myriad and distinct cultural beliefs or practices that a particular society may proudly possess and uphold, it is crucial to recognize that all human societies, despite their differences, inevitably encounter a range of common challenges and difficulties, particularly when it comes to navigating the biological realities and various other fundamental aspects inherent to the human condition. In his scholarly work, Kluckhohn elucidates an example of the types of problems and challenges that societies universally confront, which is the phenomenon of death, a subject that evokes profound contemplation across cultures. According to his comprehensive and logical analysis, the fundamental elements that are observable in all cultures, including norms, values, beliefs, language, and aesthetics surrounding the concept of death, are indeed universal in nature, primarily due to the fact that they collectively engage with and address these shared and existential dilemmas that transcend cultural boundaries (24).

Also, it is essential to recognize that both aesthetic delight and the manifestation of aesthetic expression are not merely supplementary but rather fundamental components that are woven into the very fabric of all cultural frameworks across the globe. Aesthetic phenomena, which encompass various forms such as visual arts, musical compositions, and additional cultural artefacts, serve as vital vehicles for cultural expression that provide individuals with profound sources of inspiration and facilitate deep emotional connections among members of society. Consequently, the overarching objective that every culture strives to achieve can be articulated as the preservation of human existence while simultaneously fostering and maintaining social cohesion and harmony within the community. In fact, the role of culture is undeniably significant as it systematically addresses the diverse and multifaceted demands of both the individual and the collective group within the societal context by offering an organized framework for living and ensuring that the fundamental biological and physiological needs of all individuals are effectively met and upheld.

The dynamics of power, the nuanced layers of ideology, the diverse expressions of culture, and the shifting paradigms of identity form the core of the field recognized as cultural studies. To elaborate, the intricate interplay between ideology and power presents a convoluted relationship that can be thoroughly examined through the lens of cultural representations,

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various forms of media, and the profound implications that dominant ideologies impose upon the existing social hierarchy (Lewis 74). In the perspective of scholar Alex Schmid, ideology is conceptualized as a significant apparatus through which influential groups or entities systematically impose their own concerns and belief systems upon the populace, thereby shaping individuals' economic, social, and political viewpoints, while simultaneously influencing their comprehension and interpretation of the world in which they exist (qtd. in Lewis 366).

According to Althusser, individuals do not have a direct vision or perception of reality; rather, their comprehensions and perceptions are represented through ideology (Lewis 73) i.e. through the representation of symbols, narratives and meanings that assist people situate themselves within their community. In this concern, in his chapter "The Work of Representation," Stuart Hall attains that social actors or people of a certain society employ aspects of their culture and society, like linguistic and other representational systems with the purpose of endowing the world with meaning and transmitting this meaningful world to others via communication (25).

Moreover, Althusser affirms that ideology is not fixed, as it situates and resituates individuals within a symbolic system. This idea signifies that people's behaviours, thoughts and identities are unconsciously controlled by a set of influential beliefs and values generated by the ideological system. Individuals, eventually, do not have absolute autonomy concerning their way of thinking and behaviours. As a result, ideology influences also social institutions in which individuals are a significant part. In this matter, according to Althusser, ideology is nothing but an organized form of persecution and repression which is exercised by specific agendas that have power and control over society and economy (Lewis 73).

To move further in the discussion, Lewis posits a compelling argument suggesting that the constructs of culture and power are not just deeply interconnected but also actively influence and modify one another in profound ways. In the pursuit of a thorough analysis of culture, one must inevitably engage with a series of complex inquiries that revolve around the themes of power dynamics, the concept of freedom, and the notion of resistance against prevailing systems. This statement is expressed in conjunction with the theoretical lens framed by Michel Foucault, who elucidates the view that power is an all-pervasive force; it pervades

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every realm of existence and governs the processes of meaning formulation, linguistic representation, and the intricacies of communication in totality (31).

Lewis maintains that culture can be understood as a detailed tapestry created from a multitude of meanings that are intricately associated with the particular interests, ethical viewpoints, inherent values, and leading ideologies of a certain social group, implying that the comprehensive structure of ideology is significant in controlling and forming the aspects of culture. In summary, if one acknowledges the concept that power shapes ideological frameworks, and that such frameworks, in turn, mould cultural phenomena, it follows naturally that power, by extension, holds significant sway over the fundamental nature of culture itself. This transitive relationship aligns seamlessly with the theoretical perspectives that have been previously articulated by the eminent philosopher Michel Foucault.

In alignment with the scholarly perspectives put forth by Jeff Lewis, it is crucial to acknowledge that culture represents a continuously evolving developmental phenomenon that is inexorably intertwined with all dimensions of human actions, as well as the perceptions individuals hold regarding the surrounding world and their place within it (35). This observation underscores the notion that culture is in a perpetual state of transformation and expansion, propelled by the complexities of human behaviour and cognitive reasoning. In conclusion, culture should never be perceived as a rigid structure; rather, it needs to be seen as a vibrant and intricate web that includes a broad spectrum of components and practices central to human existence, covering literature, belief systems, artistic representations, social habits, language variations, and core principles, among other things. Rephrased, culture inherently moulds the way people grasp and decode their environment, thus significantly affecting their decisions, behaviours, and overall perspectives on various life matters.

Karl Marx suggests the base-superstructure model to interpret how the economic foundations of a given society, which he calls the base, influences the institutions and behaviours, which are called the superstructure, that are derived from those economic structures (Lewis 62). For him, the base refers to all means of economical production like materials, technology, labourer's proficiency and the class mechanism that is interrelated with those means of production; whereas, the superstructure is associated with political, educational, legal institutions and their consciousness, or in other words, their ethics, values and ideologies.

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Through this model, Marx and Engel portray that culture essentially reflects and serves economy. However, Engels later developed this idea and concluded that the bond between the economic base and the cultural superstructure is not one-sided relationship (63). Rather, the economic base, which signifies the materialistic conditions and manufacturing relations, acts as the infrastructure upon which the cultural superstructure is fabricated. In a different manner, the superstructure covers multiple components like symbols, institutions and culture. The latter plays a crucial role in constructing historical, political and social relationships.

Engels' innovative and transformative perspective underscores the crucial assertion that the superstructure should not be perceived as an entity that is either entirely ineffective or solely determined by the economic base, but rather as a complex system that interacts dynamically with economic forces. Conversely, one must understand that these two spheres – the monetary and the superstructure – possess a substantial extent of reciprocity and teamwork, where each one affects and forms the other in a perpetual and elaborate relationship. Eventually, this newly articulated vision fundamentally transcends the oversimplified and reductionist understanding of culture as merely a passive instrument or subordinate servant of economic interests, thereby inviting a more nuanced exploration of cultural dynamics. One must recognize that the interpretation of culture is fluid, not rigid, and reveals an astonishing capacity for modification and growth, having transformed significantly over the years, illustrating the diverse nature of human interaction.

Raymond Williams, in his book *Culture and Society*, provides a progressing definition of culture, written in bold as follows

Before this period, it had meant, primarily, the 'tending of natural growth', and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture of something, was changed, in the nineteenth century, to culture as such, a thing in itself. It came to mean, first, 'a general state or habit of mind', having close relations with the idea of human perfection. Second, it came to mean 'the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole'. Third, it came to mean the general body of the arts'. Fourth, later in the

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century, it came to mean 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual'. (xvi)

Based on the quote provided above, the scholar Williams engages in a profound reflection on the multifaceted implications of the term "culture" and its associated conceptual frameworks through a contemporary perspective, specifically during the historical epoch known as the late 18th century and early 19th century, a transformative era predominantly characterized by the onset of the industrial revolution, which encapsulates a diverse spectrum of concurrent ideologies and interpretations relating to artistry, the quest for emancipation, industrial advancements, and the stratifications of social class. In accordance with his reasoning and analytical framework, it becomes evident that from the onset of the 19th century and continuing into subsequent eras, the interpretation and significance of culture have undergone a remarkable and radical evolution, reflecting shifts in societal values and philosophical understandings.

Initially, the term was used to describe a mental state; a tendency of mind that is akin to culture began to embrace not merely an individual's progress but also to the mass intellectual cultivation and evolution of a certain society. More than that, culture started to cover other artistic features and expressions like theatre, literature, music and many others. It, generally, included the accomplishments achieved in a particular nation. Lastly, however, the meaning of culture took another different dimension, in which it suggested a spiritual and intellectual comprehension of a human's life experience. In short, culture, for Williams, is everywhere, and covers and influences every aspect of life in a way or another.

In addition to the aforementioned conceptions, the British anthropologist Edward Burnett Tylor has given a modern definition to the term culture, in which he comments that as people become integrated members of their communities, they acquire a set of aspects that shape and define human societies. These aspects encompass but are not limited to knowledge, artistic expressions, belief systems, customs, moral and ethical codes and others. And that what shapes culture or civilization within the framework of ethnographic analysis (2). As a matter of fact, Tylor's definition has been considered as the standard definition of the word culture in twentieth-century sociology and anthropology though other thinkers have something to say in this matter.

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One must understand that the idea of culture cannot be restricted to an economic viewpoint or interpreted solely through industrial progress; it includes a significant spiritual element that surpasses mere physical aspects. According to the esteemed scholar Matthew Arnold, culture should be more accurately characterized as a fundamentally spiritual phenomenon that constitutes the essential foundation for the realization of human potential and achievement. He posits that the divine realm, often referred to as the kingdom of God, resides within the individual self, and it is through the cultivation of culture that the attainment of human perfection is transformed into a deeply internalized state of being (47).

Consequently, this implies that the concept of spiritual or self-realization is profoundly ingrained and firmly established within the intrinsic essence of every individual, suggesting that each person possesses an inherent capacity for such growth and enlightenment. In a similar manner, he posits that the overarching framework of culture inherently facilitates and bolsters the notion of internal development, which transitions from a more instinctual and animalistic nature toward a distinctly human inclination characterized by self-awareness and cognitive evolution. Yet, in order to attain this profound inner spiritual fulfilment that one seeks, it is imperative for an individual to acquire the requisite depth of knowledge and wisdom, which are essential for discerning and identifying what is genuinely virtuous and commendable in the complex tapestry of human existence.

In addition to this, culture implies applying this knowledge and wisdom on a spiritual and mental level, surpassing mere intellectual endeavours. Accordingly, the pursuit of excellence requires self-growth that leads to the development of the individual and the society as well. In short, Arnold suggests that culture serves as the bridge that links the individual with full human perfection. In this concern, Arnold argues, in his book *Culture and Anarchy*, that

Now, the use of culture is that it helps us, by means of its spiritual standard of perfection, to regard wealth as but machinery, and not only to say as a matter of words that we regard wealth as but machinery, but really to perceive and feel it is so. If it were not for this purging effect wrought upon our minds by culture, the whole world, the future as well as the present, would inevitably belong to the Philistines. (51, 52)

### 1.3.2. The Concept of Identity

Identity is one of the most intricate and debatable concepts, as it merges into different fields of study, such as Mathematics, Politics, Psychology, arts, social sciences and humanities. In cultural studies, for instance, the concept of identity is the core of numerous theories and endless debates, for it bears a direct relation to culture. Before all else, when seeking a precise clarification, it is typical to consult dictionaries as the primary source. Hence, according to the Cambridge dictionary, identity is “a person’s name and other facts about who they are” (“Identity”) or “the fact of being, or feeling that you are a particular type of person, organization, etc.; the qualities that make a person, organization, etc. different from others” (“Identity”).

These definitions can be classified as what Fearson calls “personal identity” which is, according to him, a “distinguishing characteristic (or characteristics) that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential” (2). In addition to personal identity, Fearson introduces the second sense of identity, which is social identity, and argues that the two senses are interrelated (2). In other words, personal identity is the particular unique qualities that identify the individual. Indeed, people take pride in their personal identity because it shapes their self-conceptualization and sense of existence, and it impacts how they are recognized and dealt with in their society.

Certainly, identity represents the complex transaction between individual self-concept and social context, shaping, therefore, how people understand themselves and the world around them. As reported by Hogg and Abrams, identity is the individuals' perceptions of their own traits, what distinguishes them from each other, and their relationships with others (2). In addition to that, identity is shaped through a complicated interaction of different aspects, containing personal encounters, social relationships and cultural impact. Venn claims that identity is a person’s essence that comes to light and operates on a social scale, i.e. an individual shapes his/her identity only in relation with other people (2). In addition to Hogg and Abrams and Venn, Woodward emphasizes that “Identity gives us a location in the world and presents the link between us and the society in which we live . . . it gives us an idea who we are and how we relate to others and to the world in which we live” (1).

Identity takes into consideration the wide-ranging sociocultural context along with the impact of social aspects, like gender, socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity among others,

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as these aspects form and shape individuals' self-perception. Similarly, Berger and Luckmann maintain that the construction of an individual's identity is influenced by the surrounding environment wherein they dwell, and their own comprehension and attachment to that environment (132). A comprehensive and well-developed identity is not limited to a singular persona; rather, it encompasses a myriad of diverse roles and perspectives that an individual consciously or unconsciously assimilates and internalizes from their surroundings and lived experiences. This explains how identity is constructed on the individual and collective level.

In the same respect, the Oxford dictionary defines identity as “the characteristics, feelings or beliefs that make people different from others” (“Identity”), so these characteristics can be national, ethnic, or cultural. Furthermore, according to Erikson's perspective, identity is not just an individual's internal essence, but it also encompasses the cultural aspects that shape a person's sense of self and perception (qtd.in Wong 2). Notwithstanding, Wong further extends this idea in which she portrays identity as a dynamic ongoing process featured by continuous self-reflection and reinterpretation within the context of one's community and culture (ibid).

Moreover, Fiona Douglass asserts, in her book *Scottish Newspapers, Language and Identity*, that fundamentally, identity revolves around people's individual and collective sense of self and the things or groups with which they associate themselves with (11). The author, here, refers to the principal aspects that construct one's sense of self, including personal characteristics, values, beliefs and the groups that an individual feels connected to, ergo identity is formed through several components like one's experiences, relationships, culture and upbringing.

In fact, upbringing tends to be the first factor that shapes one's identity, for a person's identity is influenced initially by his/her parents, as they represent his/her first encounter. In this vein, Lichtenstein argues that specific influences from one's parents impact the unique individuality that each person exhibits. This process narrows down the infinite potential of the human individual to have a certain identity (qtd. in Gardiner 350). For Lichtenstein, people's 'primary identity' is what carves their personality, social attitudes and their treatment with others around them.

However, Douglass stresses that identity is a state of mind that covers both interior and exterior measures and extents as it goes beyond mere self-perception. It is, instead, about how



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people hope to be and what image they aim to present to others. Thus, identity is both a mirror of one's internal understanding and an external representation shaped by social norms, perceptions and expectations. In the same manner, Bhikhu Parekh comments that

Our identity refers to who we are, how we are constituted, what makes us the kind of persons we are. It includes the central organizing principles of our being, our deepest tendencies, dominant passions, characteristic ways of thought, deeply held values, ideals, attachments, commitments . . . the way we define and understand ourselves, etc. (267)

Conversely, the notable intellectual Charles Taylor asserts that the idea of identity fundamentally arises from a person's core personal nature, which is intricately connected to their roots and the myriad factors that have shaped their experiences throughout life. This multifaceted notion of identity serves as a comprehensive framework or backdrop within which individuals' preferences, aspirations, goals, and opinions can be situated and subsequently derive their profound meaning and significance (30). A person's identity is profoundly affected by their singular background and the wide range of experiences that have been essential in influencing their view of the world and their own identity. As a result, identity encompasses more than just the individual choices or likes that one has; it is intricately linked with the wider historical, social, and cultural backdrops that define and guide their life.

For Taylor, people's tastes, desires, opinions and aspirations emerge within the broader core of who they truly are and where they originate. Their background also serves as the suitable context for understanding and interpreting their thoughts and values, for it shapes their worldview and impacts the way they engage with the world around them. Moreover, for Taylor, identity is not isolated from authenticity as he emphasizes that each person has a particular essence and purpose in life, which entails the personal growth and realization. He confirms, "There is a certain way of being human that is my way, I am called upon to live my life in this way and not in imitation of anyone else's life" (30).

Certainly, being true to one's own difference avoids the trap of a sense of emptiness and a lack of fulfilment, because when individuals conform to societal expectation or imitate

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someone else's life, they risk losing touch with their own values and passions. According to Taylor's logic, the ultimate goal of identity is to live a life that lines up with one's essence and authenticity through embracing one's own differences from the others. He comments that "the aim is to cherish distinctness, not just now but forever. After all, if we are concerned with identity, then what is more legitimate than one's aspiration that it never be lost?" (Taylor 40).

Similarly, Stuart Hall confirms, in his book *Questions of Cultural Identity*, that "identities are constructed through, not outside, difference" (4). People should recognize and appreciate their unique aspects and perspectives so as to preserve their identity. By this, he is referring to the understanding of oneself as a distinct individual and to the identification with a particular social group based on shared characteristics, affiliations or culture. In the same vein, Barker argues that self-identity is constructed by the beliefs that people hold about themselves and their self-perception, while social identity is the result of the interaction between the person and the society, i.e. it is shaped by the anticipations and perspectives of others (165).

In another context, Chris Barker reflects upon Giddens's notion of identity in which he claims that identity is a project or something that people actively create and shape throughout their lives (222). He stresses that a person's identity is his/her essence (221). It is not a fixed state that they reach and then maintain indefinitely, but rather, as Hall describes it, an ongoing process of self-construction. Giddens adds that the formation of identity project is influenced by various factors, encompassing people's past and present conditions. This includes considering how their personal history, social environment and cultural background have shaped their identity thus far.

Moreover, the concept of an identity project fundamentally looks towards the future, as it encompasses the intricate process of envisioning the various possibilities of what individuals aspire to become, alongside the specific direction in which they hope to progress and advance in their lives. This envisioned future trajectory significantly and profoundly impacts their choices, personal development, and subsequent actions, as they diligently strive to align their evolving identity with their desired aspirational self, creating a complex interplay between their current state and their future goals. Therefore, Giddens puts forth that identity is to be understood as a mental framework, which signifies that it is fundamentally more of a cognitive paradigm than a material, concrete entity that can be easily articulated or assessed. It is, indeed, not merely an external entity that people can easily hold or identify with

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assurance; instead, it represents a shifting and adaptable idea that transforms and progresses over time, shaped by different contexts, experiences and social engagements.

Stuart Hall claims, in his book *The Polity Reader in Cultural Theory*, that identity is neither predestined nor constant from childbirth. Instead, it is something shaped and refined over time by means of unconscious processes (122). In other words, identity is not something innate or natural in people's consciousness, but rather is constructed via a sophisticated and complicated amalgamation of cultural, social and historical aspects. Furthermore, Hall posits that people's imaginary aspect plays a vital role in shaping their identity, as their perception of who they are is not merely conditional to objective reality or concrete actual facts; rather, it also concerns subjective fantasy, approaches and idealizations (Hall 122). Thus, people may establish a unique sense of identity that does not relate to their real experiences or societal positions. Consequently, identity is an incomplete process that is in a regular development through continuous interactions and negotiations with the social world, including discourse, language, representations and power dynamics that people encounter in their lives.

In addition to that, Ien Ang opposes the notion of a fixed and singular identity by suggesting that all identities are inherently fallible and subject to misinterpretation. She further emphasizes that the very idea of a correct identity is misleading; and instead advocating for an appreciation of the fluid and adaptable nature of identity (qtd. in Wong 2). According to Ang's logic, to portray identity as unequivocally correct is to overlook its inherently dynamic and everlasting negotiated character. This perspective calls for a re-evaluation of traditional views on identity, in which it calls for a more different understanding that covers the complex interaction of influences and experiences that shape people's sense of self and belonging.

In the same way, Hall reflects upon the notion of identity in which he considers diaspora as a form of identity that is not restricted to a fixed singular definition; rather, it develops by accepting difference and constantly accommodating the changing conditions and turn of events. He emphasizes that identifying and accepting heterogeneity, divergence and hybridity are of paramount significance in the comprehension and appreciation of the copious intricacy of diasporic identities. Hall comments that diaspora experience

is defined, not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity, by a conception of 'identity' which lives through,

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not despite, difference; by *hybridity*. Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. (qtd. in Widjanarko 59)

The previously outlined quotation argues that when we consider the diaspora phenomenon, identity is not simply about fitting into one consistent representation of the self; it demands the acknowledgment, acceptance, and skill to traverse the complex and varied spectrum of identities found within diasporic settings, formed from the lively interactions and connections of diverse cultural and social influences that ultimately result in hybridity. As per Hall's insights, it is posited that identities found in diasporic frameworks are always in flux, affected by the ongoing dynamics that characterize hybridity; this serves to illustrate why these identities are not fixed but rather showcase a vibrant quality, continually altering as a consequence of the mixing of varied influences and experiences that form them.

### 1.3.3. Cultural Identity and Homeland

Home and homeland are two important concepts in the sphere of diaspora literature that bear direct relationship to issues of belonging and cultural identity. In this context, Sherman argues that diasporic people construct homes and homelands in their minds to atone for the hardships and hindrances of reality (133). Homes, here, refer to physical locations where people live, while homelands involve a broader sense of cultural and emotional attachment to a particular place, origin or country. For Sherman, individuals often resort to constructing imaginary versions of their homes and homelands as a response to the hurdles they face in the diaspora, which may include feelings of loss and displacement. Indeed, by envisioning idealized homes and homelands in their imagination, individuals seek solace, comfort and a sense of belonging that might be lacking in their actual circumstances. These imagined constructs act as a form of escapism from the frustrations and limitations of reality. They provide a space where individuals can create narratives of cultural identity, belonging and diaspora.

McLeod addresses the complex dynamics of belonging and identity that migrants often encounter. He points to the pervasive issue of how migrants are perceived and treated in their new environment. Certainly, despite physically residing in a new foreign place, they may face social and cultural exclusion and be made to feel as though they do not truly belong (qtd. in

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Timalsina 149). This presents a harsh reality where migrants are denied the opportunity to integrate fully into their new community and have their new land recognized as their home. Furthermore, McLeod underscores a profound disconnection between the lived experiences and the perceptions of migrants. The general sentiment that their true home exists elsewhere, often across the border, serves to reinforce a sense of separation and frustration from the present reality.

Nudrat Kamal's assertion profoundly emphasizes the immense importance and multifaceted nature of the concept of home, particularly as it is articulated within the complex and often nuanced narratives that arise from diasporic experiences. By drawing a direct equivalence between the notion of home and the tangible, physical land, she brings to the forefront its profound representation as the individual's native country or homeland, a term that is not only evocative but also laden with the significant emotional and cultural weight of one's place of birth. This articulation further reinforces the compelling idea that home, in its essence, is intrinsically linked to the original and foundational place of belonging, thereby serving as the primary and most significant locus for the construction of an individual's cultural identity (216).

Within the expansive realm of diaspora literature, the multifaceted concept of home extends far beyond merely a tangible physical space; it also intricately weaves together an extensive emotional and cultural connection that profoundly influences and shapes the lived experiences of characters who grapple with themes of displacement, a yearning for belonging, and the persistent impact of their origins, all of which remain significant even when they find themselves residing in a foreign land. This particular interpretation serves to amplify the intricate depth and emotional resonance of the concept of home within the context of diaspora literature, thereby illuminating its critical role as an essential anchor for both personal and collective cultural identity, particularly in the face of the complex realities of multiculturalism and the often disorienting experience of cultural dislocation.

In diaspora literature, individuals often reflect on their feeling of alienation and nostalgia to their homeland, and how they retain a strong relationship to it despite being geographically and physically separated. This often involves a deep contemplation of their original country and a strong emphasis on the physical land, highlighting the significance of remaining tied to the place of one's birth and ancestral roots. Throughout diaspora literature, authors frequently

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delve into the complexities of identity, belonging, and nostalgia for the homeland, showcasing the enduring impact that a person's origins can have on their thoughts and emotions, even when living elsewhere (Kamal 215).

Jennifer Wong refers to the concept of diaspora, in which she highlights the complex nature of belonging and home for individuals who have experienced migration or relocation. She suggests the need to establish a sense of belonging in a new or foreign place (16). This may involve creating different layers of home, blending various cultural influences, memories, and connections to multiple places. Wong also claims that individuals may feel at home in more than one location and develop a sense of belonging even in unfamiliar or foreign environments. Furthermore, Wong stresses the significance of language in enunciating one's cultural identity within the realm of diaspora literature. The “creative, hybrid use of language” (16) reflects the dynamic and adaptive way in which individuals in diaspora navigate and express their identities, incorporating various linguistic influences into their self-expression.

Moreover, Wong reflects upon Agnes Heller's description of home as a place where “no footnotes are needed,” (5) she pictures the idea of home as a space where individuals do not have to explain or justify themselves. It signifies a shared understanding and common language, whether literal or metaphorical, where people can connect without the need for additional explanations or translations. This concept emphasizes the comfort and familiarity that home provides, where individuals can feel rooted and at ease.

Additionally, Wong's reference to “going home” (5) as returning to a familiar and secure position reflects the desire to revisit a place where one feels grounded and where their emotional connections are strongest. It signifies a sense of safety and belonging, where relationships and experiences hold the most significance and intensity. The concept of home has evolved to demonstrate more than mere territory. The traditional idea of home has been closely tied to a specific physical location rooted in the land. However, Nudrat Kamal suggests that there is a shift towards a more transcultural and temporal understanding of home. This means that the notion of home is becoming more fluid and inclusive, incorporating diverse cultural influences and evolving over time (211, 212).

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Furthermore, Kamal's assertion of fragmentation, ambivalence, and plurality in the conceptualization of home underscores the complexities and layers that now define the idea of home (211). This implies that home is not a singular, fixed concept, but rather a dynamic and multifaceted one that may encompass conflicting feelings and multiple identities. Additionally, Kamal's mention of the increasing awareness of the porous boundaries between home and the world suggests a blurring of the traditional distinctions between inside and outside, local and global (Kamal 211). This could be reflective of the interconnectedness of people and places in a world of diaspora and globalization.

Likewise, Wong emphasizes that the concept of home extends beyond just a physical place of residence (4). According to her, it encompasses a broader scope of affiliations, a sense of belonging and a collection of personal experiences and memories that significantly shape one's cultural identity. This definition recognizes that home is not solely defined by its geographical or territorial attributes, but by the emotional and psychological associations tied to it. The notion of home as a convergence of personal experiences and memories underscores its impact on shaping an individual's sense of self. It is a repository of significant life events, cultural interactions and emotional bonds that contribute to the formation of one's cultural identity.

Sherman, in another context, suggests that, in diaspora literature, the concept of home and homeland is not just a physical place, but rather is a mental and emotional construct. This imaginative construction serves as a way to cope with and alleviate the sense of loss, and dislocation experienced in their actual lives. It implies that the idea of home is not solely tied to a geographical place, but also exists within the feeling of longing and the desire for belonging (133). In addition to Sherman, Avtah Brah claims that "home is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination" (qtd. in Wong 4). From this standpoint, the construction of an idealized version of home in diasporic people's mind acts as a gate to emotional support in the face of the hardships and challenges while living in the diaspora (qtd. in Wong 4). This concept highlights the complex and deeply emotional relationship that diasporic individuals have with the idea of home and the ways in which they navigate the tensions between reality and their imagined constructs.

Ahmed Gamal refers to homeland, in diaspora literature, as a coin with two faces. On one hand, it represents the starting point of their existence, their ancestral roots and the source and

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the pillar of their cultural identity, as it holds emotional significance and nostalgia for the diaspora community. On the other hand, homeland also serves as a site of departure that symbolizes the need to leave behind what people are familiar with, and seek new opportunities or escape conflicts and hardships in their country of origin (qtd. in Kamal 217). Additionally, Gamal suggests that the concept of homeland in diaspora literature is not solely confined to a physical location, but rather it encompasses a temporal and cultural process (qtd. in Kamal 217). This holds that homeland is not merely a static place; rather, it is a dynamic reality that evolves over time, and is shaped and reshaped by the experiences and memories of the diaspora subjects. It becomes a cultural resource that is constantly redefined and renegotiated as individuals adapt to their new environments and amalgamate elements of their heritage with their present circumstances and conditions.

Diasporic individuals often express their longing for their homeland. Kamal suggests that in diaspora literature, the inaccessibility of people to their home is articulated in terms of time rather than physical space. The author emphasizes that diasporic people's irrevocable past is unattainable (217). Consequently, their diasporic experience has temporal and emotional dimension. This concept reflects a deep yearning for a history, a way of life and a set of memories that are no longer within reach, emphasizing the profound loss and nostalgia that permeate diaspora literature. By focusing on time as the primary lens through which this inaccessibility is expressed, Nudrat Kamal sheds light on the deeply rooted sense of disconnection and longing that characterizes the diasporic condition, transcending physical distance to underscore the emotional and psychological facets of displacement and alienation (ibid). Ultimately, her assertion highlights the complicated and various ways in which diaspora literature deals with the complex relationship between individuals and their distant, yet deeply cherished, homelands.

In the same context, Ghosh explores the idea of home as an abstract and ephemeral concept (qtd. in Kamal 218). He points that home is not solely bound to a physical location or tangible space. Instead, Ghosh delves into the intricate ways in which individuals construct their own sense of belonging and attachment, emphasizing that home is equally a product of one's imagination and psyche. Ghosh's exploration underscores the idea that home encompasses the concrete structures and geographical coordinates, and also the intangible emotional, cultural and psychological elements that individuals imbue it with. This view encourages an



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understanding of home as a deeply personal and subjective construct, shaped by individual experiences, memories and aspirations. It offers a more expansive and nuanced perspective on the idea of home within the context of diaspora literature. Ghosh's exploration prompts readers to consider the multifaceted nature of home by acknowledging that it exists not merely as a physical reality, but rather as a prolific tapestry knitted from the fibres of personal narratives, emotional connections and imaginative reconstructions.

For Avtah Brah, the idea of home is a deep emotional longing that extends beyond a specific location. She emphasizes that the diasporic experience involves a continuous and shared process of re-enacting and reconstructing one's sense of home, where narratives intersect through both individual and collective memories (qtd. in Wong 4). By highlighting home as an emotional necessity that surpasses mere physical presence, Brah draws attention to the dynamic and ongoing nature of diasporic identity, which evolves through the interplay of personal and collective recollections, constantly shaped and reshaped by lived experiences and the act of remembering across time and space.

People in the diaspora often experience conflicting emotions because of their mixing feelings towards their homeland. On one hand, they develop a sense of attachment and nostalgia towards their homeland and culture whereto they are rooted, and a feeling of loneliness and rootlessness towards the host land because of the hardships they encounter in their new society. Thus, they consider returning to their homeland. On the other hand, however, this desire of gaincoming soon disappears as diasporic people often have fear from political instability or other challenging conditions in their home country (Kamal 216).

Jose Manual Mourino engages in an extensive exploration of the intricate and multifaceted emotional as well as psychological ramifications that emerge from the profound inability to revisit or re-establish a connection with one's place of origin, which can be a source of significant distress for many individuals. He elucidates the complex and deeply entrenched yearning for belonging and attachment that numerous diasporic individuals experience towards their homeland, a longing that is intricately intertwined with their personal memories and the cultural heritage that shapes their identity. Furthermore, he accentuates the notion that the lack of opportunity to return to one's homeland engenders a pervasive sense of confinement and emotional captivity, which can be interpreted as a condition that is arguably

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more restrictive and debilitating than the experience of physical imprisonment itself (qtd. in Timalsina 149).

This particular perspective holds immense significance in the comprehensive analysis and understanding of the intricate and multifaceted experiences that individuals who have chosen to emigrate undergo, as well as the long-lasting emotional ramifications that often accompany the act of migration itself. Mourino's profound insight encourages a more profound and nuanced contemplation of the complex and dynamic interplay that exists between the physical act of mobility, which allows individuals to relocate, and the emotional sense of rootedness that they may possess, thereby illuminating the persistent and deeply felt yearning that emigrants frequently endure when they find themselves unable to re-establish connections with their homeland, a place that holds profound significance in their personal history and identity. Furthermore, the idea, that the homeland has changed drastically and is no longer recognizable, adds another layer to this ambivalence. The longing to return is countered by the realization that the place they once knew has transformed, making the prospect of going back seem impossible or disheartening.

Nudrat Kamal, throughout the extensive discourse presented within the various pages of her meticulously written chapter, continues to delineate and emphasize the persistent and recurring sentiment of scepticism and caution that individuals often harbour toward the conceptualization of home as a stable, immutable, and unchanging entity. This particular sentiment not only resonates deeply with but also effectively reflects the lived experiences of a considerable number of individuals within the diaspora community, whose perceptions and understandings of their homeland have been intricately constructed and shaped by the dual forces of dislocation and transformative societal changes (218).

In diaspora literature, characters frequently articulate a sense of unease about considering their place of origin as a fixed and reliable physical environment. This mistrust is rooted in the profound changes and uncertainties that have affected their homelands; leading to a questioning of whether the concept of home can truly provide the stability and security they yearn for (Kamal 218). The literature often captures the internal struggle and the conflicted emotions that arise from this lack of trust in the idea of home as an unwavering and constant presence. In fact, the way people perceive notions of home, homeland and nation is being transformed and challenged due to the shifting dynamics of physical movement and

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immigration as well as the influence of modern communication technologies (Wong 3). Traditional ideas of belonging and national identity have been disrupted as people relocate and communicate across borders, and as technology enable the crossing of symbolic boundaries. The stability and fixed nature of these concepts have been undermined by the fluidity and interconnectedness brought about by mobility and technological advancements

The concept of cultural identity is a rich and an intricate issue in cultural and diaspora studies, for it covers a wide range of elements, such as language, food, art, music, clothing, rituals, beliefs, values, traditions, history, religion and others. In this matter, Chen confirms that cultural identity is the feeling of attachment and belonging to a particular group or community that individuals experience based on certain cultural aspects, like nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion (n.p). The conceptualization of cultural identity is divergent. This diversity is made clear in 1990 by Stuart Hall in his chapter; “Cultural Identity and Diaspora” in which he claims that cultural identity is constructed through both self-subjectivity “Being” and the process of identification “Becoming.” In the same concern, Ning confirms that cultural identity is a fusion of inherent traits and features that are developed and shaped throughout life (113).

According to Hall’s first view, cultural identity is seen as a unified, unchanging trait that is common to one cultural group based on a shared history and cultural heritage (223). In other words, individuals define themselves through a dominant culture that is considered as their true self. This oneness of cultural identities is shaped by shared historical experiences and common cultural codes. Certainly, people who belong to a certain cultural group share a set of cultural aspects that provide stability and rootedness. Thus, cultural identities serve as references through which people navigate the world around them. Nonetheless, Hall’s second view shows that cultural identity or people’s true selves are shaped not only by points of similarity among individuals with common history or ancestry but also by significant differences (225). In diaspora context, cultural identity is considered as a process of becoming rather than a fixed state of being. It is not something that already exists independently of time, place and history, but rather emerges and evolves through constant transformation.

Later in 1996, in his chapter “Introduction: Who Needs ‘Identity’?” Hall asserts that in the diaspora, cultural identity is changeable and can never be unified or singular. Instead, it is shaped through various discourses, positions and practices that intersect and conflict with

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each other. According to him, cultural identity is subject to radical historicization, in which it is highly influenced by historical and socio-cultural factors. And this is the reason that makes it in constant flux, changing and transforming regularly (4). Hall also emphasizes that cultural identity is not solely determined by a person's internal sense of self or origins, but is also influenced by external factors, like power dynamics, societal norms and cultural impacts. It is shaped by language, media, institutions, social interactions and how people have been represented and how those representations impact their self-perception. While living in the diaspora, cultural identity is not constructed in isolation but is inherently bound up with representation.

Diaspora people constantly negotiate and form their cultural identities in relation to how they are represented by others and how they choose to represent themselves (Hall 4). This recognition shows that cultural identities are not fixed, but rather they are dynamic and evolving. For the diasporic subject, these constructions of cultural identity can be overlapping, contradictory or antagonistic, reflecting how social life can be so complex in the diaspora.

The identity of a cultural group is shaped through perceiving and embracing the group's shared convictions and principles within a certain culture, encompassing religious or spiritual beliefs, moral values and societal norms. Sysoyev indicates in his abstract that cultural identity is an individual's understanding of their position within various cultural groups and their deliberate actions aimed at aligning themselves with a specific group (1). It also encompasses characteristic features of a particular group that naturally indicate one's membership in that group.

According to Sysoyev, understanding one's position and role within various cultural contexts is of crucial importance (ibid). This involves recognizing and appreciating the diversity of cultures and acknowledging how one's beliefs, behaviours and values align with or differ from those of different groups. Moreover, the purposeful behaviour directed towards enrolment and acceptance into a certain group reflects the conscious efforts individuals make to join and be embraced by specific cultural group. It entails actively seeking to belong to a particular community by adapting one's actions, conforming to its norms, and demonstrating shared values.

### 1.3.3.1. Language as a Key Component of Cultural Identity

Language is one of the most important components of cultural identity. In his chapter “The Work of Representation,” Stuart Hall reflects upon Saussure’s idea that language is a social phenomenon rather than an individual one. It is not something people create individually or spontaneously. Rather, people are born into a language that already exists within society, emerging from social interactions and being shaped by shared cultural codes and meanings (34). Those rules and codes are not arbitrary or personal inventions; instead, they are structures and shapes formed by culture and the collective understanding of a particular linguistic community. They serve as the foundation for communication and understanding between individuals, enabling language to function as a shared means of communication.

The importance of language in cultural identity cannot be understated, as it helps people convey their thoughts and emotions, and perceive and interpret the world around them. More than being an effective tool of communication, it helps people, especially diaspora people, preserve their cultural values, symbols and expressions which shape their cultural identities. Consequently, diaspora people gain a strong connection to their cultural roots. In this matter, Sherman affirms that as language connects places and locations, it may hold more significance than the homeland itself (123). Indeed, language is significant in establishing connections and relationships among different places and individuals. By comparing language to a territory, Sherman shows how language serves as a medium that shares ideas, cultures and experiences, bridging the gaps between different geographical locations.

Additionally, it is vital to highlight that language carries an incredible potential to greatly influence and form individuals’ understanding and visualization of the world they inhabit, while concurrently developing a strong sense of belonging and link to a particular cultural identity that speaks to them. Just as a geographical territory meticulously delineates the physical boundaries and extents of a given space, so too does language serve the crucial function of establishing and defining the parameters of communication and interpersonal connection among individuals. By engaging in this, it identifies the parameters and possibilities of social interactions and greatly influences the numerous ways that individuals discern, interpret, and understand the intricate aspects of the environment they live in.

Diaspora people often tend to face a challenge about the daily practice of their native language in a new country. Sherman claims that immigrants frequently relinquish their regular

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use of their mother tongue in the host land; nevertheless, they employ strategies to uphold it, exerting efforts to guarantee that their perspectives are acknowledged, thereby fostering their self-interest as well as that of their communities (122). Certainly, immigrants find themselves immersed in a new linguistic and cultural environment wherein their native language may not be widely spoken, valued or even recognized. Consequently, diaspora people may gradually lose regular opportunities to communicate in their native mother tongue. However, Sherman also clarifies that immigrants find ways to continue speaking and making themselves heard in the diaspora. This is, of course, driven by their desire to maintain their cultural identity and pass down their linguistic heritage to their future generations.

In the same context, Cassin highlights the importance of language as a key component of cultural identity in the diaspora. He claims that “when the land is lost, only the language remains”<sup>1</sup> (qtd. in Sherman 92). He points that in moments of displacement, when people are isolated from their homelands; their language is the one and only linking line with their cultural identity and history. For Cassin, language serves as a reservoir of shared memories and cultural practices of a certain group or community. It shapes their cultural heritage, as it carries the accumulated wisdom, traditions, values and narratives inserted over generations. Eventually, he clarifies that the loss of physical territory or homeland cannot erase the cultural legacy embedded within language.

In a parallel fashion, Carron posits the notion that despite the undeniable fact that language lacks the capacity to turn back the hands of time or to reconstruct historical events, it nonetheless serves as an immensely influential instrument and reliable ally in the continuous evolution and redefinition of both individual and collective cultural identities. This linguistic capability empowers individuals to embark on their unique personal odysseys, thereby allowing them to actively engage in the intricate process of shaping their own comprehension and articulation of self within the context of the diaspora (qtd. in Sherman 124).

### **1.3.3.2. Food as a Key Element of Cultural Identity**

Just like language, food carries symbols, meanings and narratives over generations. It has a profound significance and value as an enduring cultural heritage and a symbol of people’s

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<sup>1</sup> Translated by the researcher herself. Original quote: “Quand la terre est perdue il n’en reste que la langue” (qtd. in Sherman 92)

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cultural identity. The food that people eat can serve as a form of communication that reflects aspects of their cultural identity that may have been neglected or forgotten over time in the diaspora. In this matter, Claude Lévi-Strauss claims that “cuisine itself is a language articulating a lost identity” (qtd in. Sherman 120). Indeed, traditional dishes and cooking techniques encapsulate people’s ancestral cultural heritage. However, in the diaspora, a globalizing world, where food is constantly homogenized and commercialized, people have the risk to lose their rich culinary heritage. For Strauss, people may gradually erase their unique culinary traditions in favour of standardized produced meals (ibid). By doing so, they disconnect from their cultural heritage and end up in a sense of identity crisis.

In the realm of diaspora literature, it is observable that a number of authors exhibit a tendency to exalt and celebrate the rich culinary heritage of their ancestors, which often manifests in their frequent references to specific names or detailed recipes associated with their traditional foods; this deliberate act serves a dual purpose of enabling them to forge a meaningful reconnection with their historical past while simultaneously allowing the broader world to recognize and appreciate their unique culinary traditions, thereby reinforcing and fortifying their cultural identity in a contemporary context. In this regard, Sherman posits that the culinary traditions and specific recipes belonging to a diasporic community function as a distinctive conduit through which writers can access and engage with the profound and often distant memories of their ancestry, as well as the myriad experiences that have shaped their identities over time, thus enriching their narratives with deeper cultural significance (121).

For the diasporic writers, recipes are not just about the preparation of food, as it also carries profound cultural and historical significance. These recipes serve as repositories of traditions and memories, which hold with them the tastes and rituals related to a specific cultural heritage or homeland. As a consequence, diasporic writers have the ability to reconnect with their cultural heritage and identity, and also rectify their sense of belonging and rootedness. As a matter of fact, the process of writing about recipes can become a form of storytelling that allows diasporic writers to blend aspects of personal and shared history into their narratives. By delving into the culinary traditions of their ancestors, diasporic writers can handle questions of cultural identity and give voice to the intricacies of the experience of diaspora.

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According to the scholarly work of Sherman, the act of explicitly identifying particular ingredients, culinary techniques, and distinct dishes within the framework of recipes serves to safeguard not only the rich culinary traditions that have been passed down through generations but also the intricate linguistic and cultural nuances that are inherently woven into these practices and expressions (121). Consequently, in this context, food transcends its mere role as sustenance and instead emerges as a vital medium through which writers from the diaspora can vividly evoke memories and rejuvenate traditions that might otherwise become obscured or significantly altered due to the processes of migration and the resulting experiences of displacement.

Wong claims that whenever there is cultural hybridity and migration, there must be a conflict in terms of identity and belonging (2). This tension results from the intertwining of different cultural influences and the challenges of coping and adapting to new environments. Moreover, the hostland has become the “Other” of host society—a place of instability and danger where diasporic individuals are not welcome because of their cultural identity. The characterization of the hostland as the “Other” suggests that it has evolved into a place of potential peril and unpredictability for those in the diaspora. This transformation is often linked to factors such as religious affiliation, where individuals do not feel accepted or embraced.

This prevalent sensation of alienation, coupled with a profound deficiency in acceptance, significantly contributes to an overarching feeling of rootlessness and a profound estrangement from the society that serves as their host. Therefore, members of diasporic communities frequently encounter being classified as outsiders or even facing direct hostility, primarily due to their unique religious beliefs and practices that may stand in sharp contrast to the dominant culture they inhabit. Therefore, a principal aim of this comprehensive research endeavour is to meticulously investigate the intricate role that conflict plays in the complex process of reconstructing and redefining cultural identity for individuals living within the diaspora.

### **1.4. Cultural Identity Transformation: Acculturation in the Diaspora**

In the time of migration and multiculturalism, the amalgamation of cultures is inevitable, especially when revisiting narrative accounts in diaspora literature. Hence, it is not possible to



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avoid trenching upon the concept of acculturation. In a Ukrainian journal, Tapacıok I. B. has tackled the etymology of the concept of acculturation and its stages. According to her, acculturation entails the process by which individuals or societies adopt elements of a culture that was previously strange to them. This process includes various components such as knowledge, values, norms, skills, habits, techniques, beliefs, actions, and language (qtd. in Tapacıok 178). Tapacıok reflects upon Makarova who describes acculturation as a long-term process that involves an individual's adaptation resulting from their interaction with a new culture. According to the researcher, conquest, colonization, migration, tourism, trade, and scientific exchanges are among the factors that contribute to the phenomenon of acculturation. These traits and actions can lead to the integration of new cultural elements into the existing cultural system, which can shape and transform the identity and practices of the individuals or groups involved in the attempted process (Tapacıok 178).

The process of acculturation occurs on both cultural and psychological levels. Researchers have differentiated between acculturation of the individual and of the cultural group, i.e. personal identity and cultural identity (Tapacıok 183). To elaborate more on this, according to Berry and Schönplflug, when examining the transformation of an individual or personal identity, researchers focus on the person's behaviour, mental health and psyche. However, when studying the acculturation or change of people's cultural identity, the focus is on their political, socio-economic and cultural characteristics (qtd. in Tapacıok 183).

In fact, the phenomenon of psychological acculturation has experienced a significant surge in popularity and has attracted considerable scholarly attention within the expansive realm of psychology, primarily due to the substantial relevance and profound implications this particular field holds for the individual, who is regarded as an autonomous entity and is characterized as "an individual-level phenomenon," a notion that was compellingly articulated by the esteemed scholar Thurnwald in the year 1932. The term psychological acculturation, which has become a pivotal concept in contemporary discourse, was originally introduced by the notable researcher Graves in 1967; however, it is essential to acknowledge that, according to the comprehensive analysis provided by Redfield et al., the foundational idea of acculturation was first proposed by anthropologists, who framed it as a phenomenon that manifests primarily at the level of the group or community rather than focusing solely on individual experiences (qtd. in Sam and Berry 473).

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Eventually, as opposed to the concept of cultural acculturation, which is generally recognized as the engagement and effect of two unique cultures, psychological acculturation, as noted by Nauck, interestingly shows itself within the limits of one culture. This particular form of acculturation is fundamentally concerned with the examination of the behavioural transformations that transpire among individuals who coexist within the same societal framework, yet have not had any exposure to an external or foreign culture (qtd. in Sam and Berry 473). Hence, this partition serves to showcase how psychological and cultural acculturation can be perceived as particular sub-types within the extensive scope of the acculturation phenomenon. It is noteworthy to mention that this academic work chiefly underscores the investigation of cultural acculturation, situating it as the main focus of analysis rather than thoroughly addressing the elements of psychological acculturation.

When referring to cultural acculturation, it is conditional to mention that it is a dynamic and prolonged interaction that arises from sustained, direct contact between two distinct cultural groups (Тарасюк 176). This justifies the reason why “acculturation research has focused largely on refugees, asylum seekers, sojourners, immigrants, expatriates, and indigenous and so-called ethnic minorities” (Sam and Berry 473), as these acculturating groups tend to have direct access to a foreign culture in the diaspora.

It is worth mentioning that acculturation results, in turn, in transformations and changes to the cultural patterns and frameworks of one or both cultural groups over an extended period of time. Additionally, acculturation is not limited to passive coexistence but involves active, long engagement and adaptation in response to the influence of the other culture (Тарасюк 176). Thus, according to the anthropologists, this process is the driving force behind the evolution of cultures. Ultimately, Тарасюк concludes her research by suggesting that all definitions of acculturation share two fundamental components: contact and change. "Contact" refers to the interaction between members of different cultural groups during the acculturation process, while "change" refers to the transformation of social, cultural and psychological elements within a society (180). The researcher specifically highlights language, religion, and overall culture as particularly sensitive categories in acculturation within diaspora communities (ibid). This means that when cultures come into contact, there is an inevitable exchange and transformation, influencing multiple aspects of individuals' lives as well as broader societal and cultural dynamics.

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Some previous studies claim that assimilation and acculturation are synonymous. Parghi and Tripathi assume that “according to a conception, acculturation and cultural assimilation are similar processes” (1). Likewise, according to “The Century Dictionary” in 1909, acculturation is defined as the act of assimilating elements of the host society’s culture (qtd. in Tapacıođ 180). However, if acculturation is equated with assimilation, how can one justify the different stages of acculturation, such as those individuals who maintain their cultural identity in spite of living in the diaspora? These diasporic people undergo a process of acculturation where they get in touch with a foreign culture without fully assimilating into it. Accordingly, Tapacıođ confirms through her pages that the meaning of the concept of acculturation has evolved through time, stressing that acculturation is an unchangeable process that should not be confused with assimilation. Instead, the researcher views assimilation as the final phase of acculturation (180). Similarly, Sam and Berry, in their article “Acculturation: When Individuals and Groups of Different Cultural Backgrounds Meet,” claim that

The most widely used definition of acculturation is those phenomena which result when groups of individuals having different cultures come into continuous first-hand contact, with subsequent changes in the original culture patterns of either or both groups. . . . under this definition acculturation is to be distinguished from . . . assimilation, which is at times a phase of acculturation. (473)

### 1.4.1. Strategies to Cultural Acculturation

Sam and Berry highlight the significance of understanding the dynamics of acculturation through examining some points. First, the assessment of the compatibility or incompatibility of cultural elements helps to measure how these factors may influence the acculturation process. In other words, when values, attitudes and other cultural traits align, the acculturation process may be smoother and easy, while in cases of incompatibility, challenges and conflicts may arise (473). Second, the nature of the contact relationships between the groups should be examined whether it is characterized by domination, mutual respect or hostility, as it is crucial in assessing the potential impact on acculturation. Furthermore, cultural changes that occur in both groups during acculturation should be mentioned as they underscore the dynamic and

interactive nature of this process. This clarifies the idea how acculturation is a two-way interaction that results in actions and reactions from both groups involved in the process (Sam and Berry 473).

In addition to the aforementioned points, it is noteworthy that Gerskowitz, Linton, and Redfield have meticulously constructed a comprehensive model that delineates the intricate process of cultural acculturation, within which they have discerned three fundamental strategies that individuals typically adopt in scenarios where their recipient culture encounters the prevailing dominant culture within the context of a diaspora (qtd.in Тапасюк 181). Nonetheless, it is imperative to acknowledge that Berry has further contributed to this discourse by introducing a fourth strategy, which encompasses the distinct approaches of assimilation, integration, separation, and marginalization, thereby enriching the understanding of how individuals navigate the complexities of cultural interactions (qtd. in Sam and Berry 476).

### **1.4.1.1. Assimilation**

Тапасюк elaborates on the concept of assimilation, articulating it as the complete and irrevocable loss, as well as the subsequent obliteration, of an entire community's linguistic and cultural identity as a direct consequence of the pervasive influence exerted by a more powerful and dominant cultural entity (180). In contrast, Parghi and Tripathi posit that the phenomenon of cultural assimilation encompasses a comprehensive process by which a minority group or cultural community actively adopts, whether in its entirety or in part, the principles, behaviours, and belief systems of another societal group, with the explicit aim of achieving a degree of conformity and integration with the overarching cultural norms that are prevalent within the broader societal context (1).

Along with Тапасюк, Parghi and Tripathy argue that not only language, but also appearance and other cultural aspects are adopted by the minority group living in a multicultural society. They continue that the assimilated minority group either adopt aspects of the donor group through cultural diffusion, or assimilate completely into the dominant group's culture (ibid). Moreover, Park and Burgess highlight the concept of assimilation as a process of blending and integration, where individuals or groups adopt the memories, sentiments, and attitudes of others, thus sharing experiences and history. This sharing of

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traditions and participation in common experiences leads to a common cultural life. Assimilation, in this sense, signifies a deep integration and involvement in the cultural fabric of a society (qtd.in Laubenthal 86).

In another study, Park elaborates on the intricate manner in which smaller, distinct social groups undergo a process of assimilation into larger and more inclusive state structures, highlighting the complexities involved in such a transformation. This assimilation process frequently encompasses the smaller groups integrating and adopting various elements such as the language, methodologies, and social norms prevalent within the larger, more encompassing groups, thereby showcasing the multifaceted nature of this cultural exchange. Park posits that immigrants exhibit a remarkable propensity to embrace and incorporate the diverse cultural components of their newly adopted society, which includes not only the language but also the religious and social rituals, as well as outward expressions and symbols, all of which play a significant role in this intricate merging process. This instance demonstrates the lively and perpetually shifting quality of cultural engagement and adaptation that transpires within societies as they incessantly grow, extend, and evolve over periods (qtd.in Laubenthal 86).

Alba and Nee provide a comprehensive definition of assimilation as the gradual decrease, and ultimately the vanishing, of ethnic or racial distinctions and the cultural and social differences that manifest these distinctions. It encapsulates the idea that assimilation involves the diminishing prominence of ethnic and cultural dissimilarities, potentially resulting in their eventual disappearance within a society (qtd.in Laubenthal 87, 88). In accordance with Alba and Nee's definition, Park and Burgess delve into the potential downside of assimilation, shedding light on the risk of losing or being compelled to relinquish characteristics associated with one's home country. It brings forth the negative aspect, framing assimilation as a process that could lead to denationalization, hinting at the potential erasure of one's national identity or attributes (qtd.in Laubenthal 86).

When discussing assimilation, Sam and Berry refer to it as the process in which individuals choose to give up their cultural identity (476). This can happen when diasporic people see benefits in getting themselves close with the dominant culture or when they feel pressure to conform to societal expectations. Assimilation, thus, calls for a conscious effort to merge into the new cultural society, often at the cost of retaining aspects of one's original cultural

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identity. It is a complex and sometimes controversial phenomenon, as it can involve both voluntary adaptation and external pressures to conform. According to Tapacıođ, voluntary assimilation refers to the optional and unrestricted exchange of cultural elements between different cultures that come into contact (182). Accordingly, it is characterized by the absence of any form of hostility or oppressive dominance of one culture over another.

A minority community may choose to join the majority culture if they see it as superior or if it helps them improve their social status. In an article entitled “What Is Cultural Assimilation?” it is mentioned that voluntary assimilation can occur in schools, workplaces, and communities. Immigrants may assimilate to fit in and succeed in their new country. Minority cultures may also assimilate to access economic opportunities and social mobility. Masha Krsmanovic, in her research paper, states that immigrants who make a voluntary choice to amalgamate their cultural identity with that of their fresh surroundings provide rationale for their decision by asserting that such an assimilation would bolster their prospects of attaining triumph in their novel milieu, particularly with regard to education as an example (963). With regard to Bookman, the degree of assimilation into the dominant culture plays a pivotal role in people’s success in the host land (108).

In the instance of voluntary assimilation, diasporic individuals belonging to less powerful groups recognize the importance and necessity of adjusting to the novel society to seek satisfaction, and consciously elect to partake in this process. As highlighted by Franz Fanon, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which he describes how the Negro withdraws his language so as to assimilate willingly in the French society. He claims that “an attitude of rupture has never saved anyone” (28).

Conversely, in the context of involuntary assimilation, this decision-making pattern is understood as being enforced by the more dominant group. Indeed, the act of imposing a particular culture onto individuals who represent a different culture is a manifestation of forced cultural assimilation. This phenomenon typically takes place when the dominant group exercises its influence on a minority group (Tapacıođ 182). Involuntary or forced assimilation is most often associated with acts of colonialism, as colonizers seek to maintain their power dynamics by expanding their culture over large territories, and decreasing the political capabilities of other ethnic groups. Consequently, they seek to erase any hint of the natives’

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cultural identity and insert a new modern cultural framework on that land. Bookman calls this process internal colonialism (106).

As a matter of fact, Milica Bookman suggests, in her book *The Demographic Struggle for Power*, some strategies adopted by the dominant culture to foster the process of involuntary assimilation (108). She states that among the various methods of linguistic conversions employed worldwide, two overarching categories can be identified: the complete prohibition of a minority language and the active discouragement of non-official language usage. The author cites several countries, including France, England, Italy, Bulgaria, and Macedonia, as examples of nations that have implemented language bans within their territories and educational institutions, thereby mandating the use of their official languages.

Religion is also another aspect that contends to forced assimilation. Bookman claims that some religions like Christianity and Islam, though at times have persuaded non-believers to assimilate voluntarily through proselytizing, at other times, however, they have converted people forcefully through crusades and Jihad. According to Gurr, “Militant Christianity and Islam used the sword to subjugate heretics and infidels who were reluctant to adopt the true faith or to acknowledge the rightful heir of the prophet” (qtd. in Bookman 114). In addition, Bookman takes some examples of coercive conversions, like the Roman Catholics, the Anglicans, the Protestants, the Orthodox, the Baptists, Iran, Afghanistan and Bosnia (ibid). Researchers as Nordlinger and McGarry and O’Leary emphasize that forced assimilation contributes more in the creation and development of ethnic and inter-ethnic conflicts, as minority groups may often resort to violent resistance to safeguard their cultural identity (qtd. in Bookman 110).

### 1.4.1.2. Integration

The phase characterized by the process of integration is predominantly utilized by individuals who possess a profound and unwavering commitment to the preservation and promotion of their unique cultural identity, all the while engaging in frequent and meaningful interactions with a diverse array of other social groups and communities. This particular methodological approach not only guarantees that a significant degree of cultural integrity and coherence is maintained, but it also aspires to facilitate active participation and meaningful contribution to the broader societal framework, in their role as integral members of a multifaceted ethno-cultural collective (Sam and Berry 476).

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As a result of many researches done concerning the process of acculturation in different countries in 2003 and 2006, Berry estimates that most acculturating groups tend to prefer integration over other strategies (qtd. in Sam and Berry 477). Indeed, due to integration, immigrant people have the ability to cope and coexist in the diaspora seamlessly without threatening or diminishing their cultural identity. Bookman confirms “at present integration of separate cultures seems to be the preferable option” (106). Furthermore, Bookman notes that integration is broader than assimilation. Certainly, assimilation limits the acculturating group to embrace one culture over another. However, integration gives the chance to several cultures to exist side-by-side in one society. In this matter, Birch has distinguished different degrees of integration among which is “cultural pluralism, in which different cultures retains their distinctiveness while becoming part of the larger society” (Bookman 106).

In a parallel scholarly context, Gerskowitz, Linton, and Redfield have posited that the phenomenon of integration can be aptly characterized as a form of adaptation, wherein groups that are undergoing the process of acculturation encounter only a minimal degree of alteration in their original cultural practices and values amidst the pervasive influence exerted by the dominant cultural paradigm (qtd. in Тапацюк 181). Furthermore, Laubenthal asserts that both the concepts of assimilation and integration provide researchers and scholars with a robust conceptual framework, which is particularly advantageous for facilitating a practical operationalization that allows for the systematic tracking and analysis of the intricate progression through which immigrants navigate and acclimatize to cultural transitions within the context of the diaspora (84).

### **1.4.1.3. Separation**

Sam and Berry engage in an analytical discussion regarding the concept of the separation strategy, particularly within the framework of acculturation as it pertains to individuals living in a diaspora, which they elucidate by describing a specific circumstance in which individuals place a significant emphasis on the preservation of their original cultural identity while simultaneously making a conscious effort to restrict their interactions with the cultural elements of the new society that they have found themselves inhabiting (476). Undoubtedly, individuals belonging to diasporic communities actively seek to eschew the adoption or integration of various components of the new culture, focusing instead on the vital importance



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of maintaining and upholding the rich traditions, unique customs, deeply held values, and other significant aspects that comprise their original cultural heritage.

The strategy of separation epitomizes a profound and unwavering dedication to preserving and honouring one's cultural heritage, accompanied by an earnest aspiration to resist the pressures of assimilation into the prevailing societal framework of the new environment. This pledge can be shown in many ways, like purposefully avoiding social encounters and connections with those from the new cultural setting, actively seeking out public areas that highlight and appreciate the traditions of the original culture, or choosing to resist learning the dominant language and adapting to the cultural standards of the new society. This viewpoint is frequently based in a powerful urge to support and protect individual cultural identity and heritage, particularly given the strong and widespread influence of the prevailing culture on people working to uphold their distinctiveness.

Equivalently, Gerskowitz, Linton and Redfield refer to separation as reaction, where they are describing a stance where individuals or groups outright reject the cultural norms and values of the incoming society, and instead strive to maintain their traditional cultural models without any alteration (qtd. in Тапацюк 181). Accordingly, they resist any form of assimilation, adaptation or integration with the new culture, and intentionally distance themselves from its influence. As a matter of fact, the emphasis is on preserving and perpetuating their original cultural identity without compromise or adjustment. This approach can be rooted in a deep desire to safeguard the integrity of their heritage and resist external pressures to conform to unfamiliar cultural paradigms. By rejecting the cultural models of the dominant group, individuals who employ the separation or reaction strategy seek to uphold the authenticity of their traditional ways of life and ensure their continuity across generations.

### **1.4.1.4. Marginalization**

According to the scholarly contributions of Sam and Berry, within the intricate and multifaceted context of diaspora communities, the strategy of marginalization can be distinctly characterized by a notable deficiency in the enthusiasm or desire to sustain and preserve one's original cultural identity, which is often attributable to the enforced and pervasive phenomenon of cultural wastage; furthermore, this lack of interest is frequently compounded by a minimal inclination to engage or interact with others within the community,

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a situation that is often exacerbated by their lived experiences of exclusion or segregation from the broader societal framework (476).

They point out that these strategies are not fixed or final outcomes in themselves; instead, they can shift depending on various situational factors, i.e. diasporic people can move from one strategy to another because of the circumstances and experiences they undergo in the host land. The authors cite the events of the 9/11 attacks in the U.S, where Muslims had to rethink and reassess their cultural identities in response to the changing social and political landscape (Sam and Berry 476). This underscores the dynamic nature of acculturation process and the impact of external events on individuals and communities as they navigate their cultural identities within a new societal and cultural context.

### **1.5. Conclusion**

In conclusion, exploring diaspora literature has illuminated its distinctive essence as a genre that becomes a resonant voice for those navigating life away from their homelands. This literary form intricately captures the struggles and triumphs of individuals grappling with the complex structure of cultural identity, a central theme within diaspora literature. Through the lenses of displacement, alienation, nostalgia, identity crisis, and hybridity, diasporic authors articulate the various experiences of communities dispersed across different geographical boundaries. The dynamic nature of cultural identity undergoes a profound transformation within the multicultural fabric of diasporic existence. The narratives vividly depict the transformative journey, shedding light on the diverse strategies adopted by diasporic individuals in response to acculturation. Living in a multicultural society propels the diasporic community towards a kaleidoscope of identities, where different strategies become integral components. As this chapter draws to a close, it is important to acknowledge the substantial and meaningful nature of diaspora literature. This genre provides a poignant portrayal of the ever-evolving aspects of cultural identity, consequently enhancing our comprehension of the human experience within diasporic settings.

# **Chapter Two**

Research Methodology: Theoretical and Analytical  
Approaches

### **Chapter 2: Research Methodology: Theoretical and Analytical Approaches**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

This chapter outlines the research methodology utilized in this scrutiny. It includes a detailed explanation of the methods and approaches employed to analyse how female protagonists negotiate cultural identities in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* Furthermore, this chapter justifies the selection of Muslim Feminism and Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory as the guiding theoretical frameworks. The section intends to showcase how these theories provide valuable insights into the convoluted process of negotiating cultural identities within diaspora literature. In addition, this chapter seeks to clarify why literary analysis is used as the primary methodological approach in this study. Through exploring the principles and techniques of literary analysis, this chapter demonstrates how close reading and textual interpretation uncover detailed meanings and reveal layers of cultural identity representation in the selected novels. By presenting a clear methodology and theoretical framework, this chapter sets the foundation for the subsequent analysis, ensuring that the negotiation of cultural identity is carried out rigorously and systematically. Moreover, by explaining the role of literary analysis in revealing the complexities of cultural identity representation, this chapter directly addresses the research question by outlining the methodological tools employed to examine the experiences of the female protagonists in the chosen novels. In its entirety, this chapter holds a crucial position in influencing the analytical methodology of the research and makes a substantial impact on tackling the research inquiry by laying down a strong methodological foundation for the analysis to follow in the subsequent chapters.

#### **2.2. Purpose of the Chapter**

The primary focus of this study is centred on exploring how the female main characters in the novels *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* by Randa Abdel Fattah navigate their cultural identities within diasporic settings. This research inquiry acts as a tool to investigate the intricate nature of diaspora experiences, with particular emphasis on the viewpoints and empowerment of female characters when it comes to managing their cultural identities. The importance of delving into the negotiation of cultural identity in diaspora literature, especially through the lens of female protagonists, cannot be overstated. These stories provide valuable insights into the complexities of cultural belonging, adaptation

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and resistance within diaspora communities. By examining the manner in which these characters face the complexities of cultural identity, individuals may acquire a deeper comprehension of the diverse aspects of diasporic interactions and how individuals navigate their individual identity within various cultural environments.

As noted in the first chapter, the genre of diaspora literature provides a distinctive avenue for exploring concepts of cultural identity, dislocation and belonging. Thus, by spotlighting the female protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, this study makes a meaningful contribution to the wider discussion on diaspora literature by presenting nuanced analyses of cultural identity negotiation. These narratives portray the diverse array of experiences within diasporic communities and challenge fixed ideas of identity, highlighting the flexible and evolving nature of cultural connections. Furthermore, this specific study holds considerable significance in cultural identity research as it reveals the intersection of gender, culture and identity. By giving precedence to the perspectives of female main characters, this investigation amplifies the voices of individuals who are frequently marginalized in diasporic communities and establishes a platform for delving into themes such as empowerment, portrayal and cultural strength. Thus, having delved into these stories, both academics and audiences are presented with valuable viewpoints on the intricacies of navigating cultural identities in contemporary society.

### **2.3. Research Methods and Approaches**

This research is analytical-comparative. It blends literary analysis and the comparative approach to address the research inquiries and accomplish the objectives outlined by the researcher. Consequently, the study attempts to provide a deeper understanding of literary analysis in conjunction with the comparative approach, while also delving into the two literary frameworks employed in the examination of the chosen novels. This investigation seeks to expose the subtleties of the chosen literary works by merging literary analysis with comparative analysis, ultimately contributing to the existing body of knowledge in the field of literary and cultural studies. The utilization of these two analytical tools allows for a comprehensive exploration of the themes, characters and narrative structures present in the novels under investigation, facilitating a more detailed and insightful interpretation of the texts.

### 2.3.1. Literary Analysis

The primary method in conducting this research paper is literary analysis or close reading. According to Pividori, it is a two-step process which entails critical reading and written expression (5). Thus the two novels under scrutiny are going to be thoroughly analysed through close reading within the next chapters. The analysis of literary texts demands a thoughtful and conscientious approach, recognizing its value in fostering a shared understanding and appreciation of literary works. For Kusch, analysing literature entails responsibility, as literature plays a pivotal role in reflecting society and shaping communal meaning and knowledge (qtd. in Pividori 5). Certainly, literary analysis is not just a solitary work, it is meant to enrich the collective overall knowledge about literature as a whole and deepen insights into specific texts.

When examining and evaluating a literary text, the role of the researcher is more likely like a detective. He/she has to find evidence that justifies his/her conclusions (qtd. in Pividori 5). Pividori suggests that literary analysis is a process of decoding the literary text in which the focus is not only on scrutinizing words, phrases, ideas and details but also considering thematic, political and cultural aspects (6). In other words, the researcher has to examine in detail the structure of a given text, explaining how its elements work together such as themes, plot, characters, symbolism and style. Therefore, in the current research paper, a close examination of the literary aspects of the chosen novels Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* and characters is the suitable way to explore the dynamics of cultural identity in diaspora literature, as literary analysis allows for a deep understanding of the female protagonists through examining their thoughts, dialogues and actions; thus, unravelling the dynamics of their cultural identity in the selected narratives.

Moreover, literary analysis renders the examination of the narrative structure and recurring themes easy, as it is crucial for understanding how cultural identity is integrated and how it evolves throughout the two novels. Through the course of this scrutiny, the researcher is closely examining the portrayal of female protagonists, narrative structures and cultural symbols. Furthermore, this research method aligns with the nature of the current study which is the comparative approach, as it paves the way to compare and contrast the portrayal of cultural identity across the two case studies, helping to identify and examine patterns, similarities and differences between the two novels and their female protagonists. What is more important is that literary analysis is well-suited with the chosen theories (Muslim

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Feminism and Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands*), as they are applied through a literary lens to explore cultural identity in diaspora literature.

Literary analysis or close reading is a significant methodological tool that involves a precise examination of the text to uncover layers of symbolism and thematic resonance. Close reading enables scholars to unearth subtle nuances and interpretive possibilities that may not be immediately apparent upon casual reading, by immersing oneself in the textual details. Also, through close attention to language choices and writing techniques, scholars can uncover layers of meaning embedded within the text, revealing insights into themes, character motivations and cultural contexts. Close reading facilitates scholars in extracting nuances and intricacies from the narrative, resulting in more profound interpretations and enhanced insights into the significance of the text. This method proves especially beneficial for dissecting cultural subtleties present in diaspora literature, as it provides scholars with the opportunity to scrutinize the construction, portrayal, and negotiation of cultural identities within the text.

Through a comprehensive analysis of the interactions among characters, the representation of cultural traditions and the illustration of scattered communities, researchers may reveal the influence of language, religion, historical occurrences and various cultural and societal factors on the shaping of cultural identity. It also enables scholars to uncover the dynamics of cultural hybridity, acculturation pressures and identity negotiation within diaspora narratives, providing a detailed understanding of the complexities of cultural identity. In the context of a comparative study, close reading serves as a foundational method for analysing the selected novels and their respective female protagonists, as it facilitates a side-by-side comparison of narrative structures, characterizations and cultural representations, allowing the researcher to draw connections and contrasts between the novels and their treatment of cultural identity within diaspora contexts. Close reading is a vital methodological tool that allows researchers to extract nuanced meanings from literary texts, particularly within the context of diaspora literature.

### **2.3.2. Unveiling Muslim Feminism: Theoretical Perspectives**

Religion functions as a means of reconciling the ruptures and dislocations experienced in the world. Aamir R. Mufti refers to the idea that contemporary scholarship and theory often perceive religion as a way to address the fragmentation and disconnection that modern life can engender (qtd. in Abbas 432). According to his logic, religion is not simply a belief

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system or group of rituals. Rather, it is a force that aims to establish and restore a sense of cohesion and wholeness to individuals and societies within the realm of modernization. His perspective sees religion as a set of doctrines and traditions, and also as a response to the existential and emotional challenges posed and imposed by the complexities of modern world.

### **2.3.2.1. Societal norms and Religion**

Religious beliefs and societal norms influence and shape certain principles of the world that are applicable to all individuals, as they are derived from the fundamental makeup of human existence (qtd. in Hamilton 64). Certainly, religion plays a crucial role in shaping societies and nations, and keeping their harmony. Religious practices frequently include using the community's native language. Therefore diaspora members preserve their cultural heritage by maintaining the language during religious ceremonies and teachings. The connection between language, religion and identity becomes a crucial link to their homeland, enabling cultural continuity and passing down knowledge and traditions to future generations. In this vein, Comte employed concepts pertaining to the role of religion as a form of societal cohesion that unites communities. Similarly, language assumes this function, but in the absence of some variation of religion, governments would lack credibility, thus rendering society susceptible to fragmentation caused by factional conflicts (qtd.in Hamilton 54).

Miriam Cooke, in her article titled "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies," highlights the significant role of religion, particularly Islam, in transcending geographical boundaries. She suggests that Islam's origins in Arabia offer unique opportunities for creating a transcultural identity that is linked to a specific territory (96). Before the emergence of the contemporary nation-state, religion served as a vital factor in the self-recognition of indigenous groups, frequently linking civil liberties with religious membership. This highlights the intricate relationship among religion, territorial boundaries and cultural identification, particularly within pre-modern civilizations where religious affiliation was of utmost significance in moulding individuals' perception of community and self-awareness.

Cooke underscores the convoluted dynamics of Muslim cultural identity in the face of changing political landscapes and the diaspora. At the core of her argument is the notion that, despite new political borders potentially splitting Muslim communities, these communities remain culturally and symbolically connected ("Multiple Critique" 97). This enduring connection forms what she calls a "transnational imaginary," allowing Muslims to maintain a



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shared sense of cultural identity that transcends physical boundaries. She suggests that this phenomenon creates a geographically flexible cultural identity for Muslims living in border zones. Unlike migrants and refugees who constantly cross national borders and endure displacement, these communities manage to stay rooted in their locales while maintaining strong ties to a broader, transnational Muslim identity. This duality, oscillating between a sense of diaspora and a connection to their place of origin, characterizes their unique form of cultural identity.

Accordingly, border zones, often seen as areas of conflict and division, actually play a crucial role in ensuring both the physical and cultural survival of these communities. These zones become spaces where cultural richness and continuity are preserved, even amidst political fragmentation. By emphasizing this, Cooke highlights the resilience and adaptability of Muslim identity, which is maintained through cultural and symbolic ties rather than physical mobility. Eventually, Cooke's idea reveals the complexity of modern Muslim identity, shaped by historical continuity and cultural connections despite the disruptions of political borders. Her perspective invites a deeper exploration of how communities navigate and sustain their identities in a globalized world, offering a deep understanding of transnationalism and cultural resilience.

Some diasporic people embrace their native religious practices and beliefs to resist cultural assimilation and preserve their cultural identity, meanwhile religious connections often span national borders, creating transnational networks that link diaspora communities worldwide. Of course, religion finds its foundation in tangible social and collective actions or practices. As a result, those who engage in these rituals become part of a unified collective through a series of practices (Bocock 245). Thus, these rituals serve as a means to validate the values of the broader cultural community. Undoubtedly, religion continues to serve as a dynamic and prevailing cultural phenomenon that exerts its profound influence on various strata of societies, thereby exerting its indelible impact on the social, political and economic realm (Bocock 250).

Moreover, each culture is based upon what Weber calls a “world religion” (qtd. in Bocock 253). Indeed, religion and culture are interconnected, as they complete one another in various ways. Religion plays a vital role in defining cultural identity and offers individuals a distinct sense of solace and protection, despite occasionally serving as “a major source of conflict” (Bookman 113). The conflicts that may emerge in this context often stem from the intolerance

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exhibited by individuals toward those from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. This phenomenon is overwhelming in the diaspora, where different ethnicities, cultures and religions coexist within one single country. Consequently, the host society often perceives newcomers as outsiders and subjects them to challenges, tensions and conflicts.

Simultaneously, diasporic individuals grapple with the process of cultural acculturation, navigating between two possible trajectories. They may choose to steadfastly adhere to their religion in the face of imposed conflicts, or they may opt to conceal any indication of their cultural identity in an attempt to evade such challenges. Remarkably, women, particularly within the context of Islam, often confront these conflicts to a greater extent than men. This is owing to the fact that women commonly wear the hijab or veil, which constitutes a crucial symbol of their religious faith. Apart from that, women typically maintain stronger ties to other aspects of their cultural identity, such as cuisine, attire, language and other cultural elements, as conflicts stemming from religious differences exert a substantial impact on the reconstruction of cultural identity. Notably, insufficient scholarly attention has been dedicated to this phenomenon. Therefore, as it was mentioned in chapter one, this study aims to investigate how females reconstruct their cultural identities within contemporary diaspora literature, focusing on the role of conflict or tension and its influence on this transformative process.

Miriam Cooke, by illustrating Mai Ghossoub's quote, delves into the symbolism of women's privacy in the context of cultural identity. Ghossoub notes that women's privacy serves as a potent emblem of traditional values within Arab and Muslim communities ("Multiple Critique" 102). This privacy, she argues, stands as a sanctuary that both the old forces of colonialism and the newer forces of capitalism have been unable to penetrate or alter. Ghossoub's emphasis on the "rigidity of the status of women" suggests that the roles and expectations placed on women in these societies have remained steadfast and uncompromised, even in the face of external pressures. This rigidity is portrayed not merely as a social construct but as a core element of Arab-Muslim cultural identity, a protective bastion that preserves the community's cultural essence.

Cooke uses Ghossoub's insights to stress the idea that women's privacy and their traditional roles are deeply intertwined with the cultural identity and values of Arab and Muslim societies ("Multiple Critique" 102). This intimate realm of women's lives becomes a symbol of resistance against external influences and a means of maintaining a distinct cultural identity

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amidst global changes, especially in the diaspora. In essence, Cooke and Ghossoub point to the notion that women's roles and the sanctity of their private lives are central to the preservation of cultural identity. This perspective suggests that the status of women is not just a reflection of cultural values but a crucial stronghold that safeguards the community's heritage and continuity against the forces of both historical colonialism and contemporary capitalism.

To this extent, it is important to note that when referring to females, the advocacy for women's rights is encapsulated by the concept of feminism. Broadly speaking, feminism aims to uphold the rights of women and safeguard their societal standing. However, the predominant Western feminist discourse appears inadequate for Muslim women, given its inclination to assert that Islam, on the whole, is antagonistic towards women (Jawad 107). Mernissi contends that the perpetuation of negative depictions of Muslims and Arabs by Western imperialism serves as a tool to justify and endorse Western intervention in the Middle East (qtd. in Alqahtani 32). Consequently, as per Mernissi's perspective, Muslim women find themselves marginalized and oppressed due to the rhetoric advanced by Western feminists.

It is against this backdrop that Muslim Feminism, also known as Islamic Feminism, emerged in the 1970s, gaining traction as Muslim women, seeking societal change without compromising their Islamic identity, sought refuge in this alternative framework. Within this new category, Muslim women advocated for egalitarian policies designed to shape not only their societal milieu but also their domestic realm, recognizing the ethical and equitable underpinnings of Islam (Jawad 111). Sherin Saadallah defines Muslim Feminism as a third-wave movement of Feminism that is rooted in the Islamic faith, encompassing both a religious doctrine and a system of beliefs that are deeply rooted in history and culture (216).

According to Miriam Cooke, Islamic feminists are Muslim women who engage in critiquing various aspects of Islamic history or interpretations in a way that advocates for the rights of all Muslim women to have equal participation and opportunities within a just society ("Multiple Critique" 95). The term 'Islamic feminists' is not meant to confine individuals within a strict category; instead, it signifies a mindset and a commitment to striving for justice and equal rights for Muslim women. These individuals are committed to challenging traditional male-dominated standards and systems within their localities, aiming to create a more welcoming and fair environment that enable women to have equal access to rights and

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opportunities as men. Islamic feminists champion the rights and inclusion of Muslim women, striving to foster a more equitable and forward-thinking society that champions and safeguards gender equality.

In this respect, Miriam Cooke, in her article “Roundtable Discussion: Religion, Gender, and the Muslimwoman,” reflects upon Zainah Anwar’s idea that if religion is utilized to govern both the public and private spheres of individuals’ lives, then it becomes essential for everyone to have the space to discuss religion openly and express their viewpoints on how laws and policies influenced by Islam can affect them (qtd. in Cooke et al. 95). Anwar highlights the importance of a variety of voices engaging with Islam as it continues to exert a significant influence on societal structures and norms. This engagement is seen as essential to prevent any misrepresentation or misuse of the religion. She stresses the value of promoting open dialogue and critical reflection regarding the impact of Islamic principles on legislation and governance. This underscores the need of constructing a society where individuals can actively participate in shaping policies and regulations that cater to a wide range of beliefs and values. Ultimately, Anwar’s assertion affirms the necessity of fostering inclusive discussions and promoting a clear understanding of how religion intersects with various aspects of people’s lives to ensure that it is not distorted or misappropriated for narrow interests or agendas.

As a result, Kassab suggests that representations of Muslims in literature are often accepted as factual, prompting Muslim writers, particularly women, to counter these narratives (qtd. in Abdul Majid 45). In fact, early female writings by authors such as Amina Wudud and Fatima Mernissi involve the reinterpretation of the Koran by women, discussions of Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh), advocating for women’s rights, promoting gender equality, suggesting new roles for women in religious practices and calling for changes in penal, family, legal and political systems (qtd. in Abdul Majid 1). Consequently, this movement aims to achieve social justice and restore women’s true and elevated status within Islam, ultimately striving for gender equality. Similarly, Abdul Madjid suggests that there is a significant demand placed on Muslim women writers to provide narratives that offer an inside look into their lives, which are perceived as authentic and revealing (37). This demand seems to stem from a curiosity among the public for stories that provide a window into the realities of Muslim women’s lives behind closed doors.

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In reaction to such a need, authors might find themselves obliged to mix actual life encounters with aspects of fiction and imagination to satisfy the audience's craving for genuineness while simultaneously achieving commercial prosperity. This pressure to satisfy the audience's hunger for intimate and supposedly hidden insights into the domestic lives of Muslim women can lead to a blurring of boundaries between fact and fiction, as writers navigate the complexities of shaping narratives that both captivate and inform. The persistent interest in narratives that promise an authentic portrayal of Muslim society from a female perspective underscores the ongoing fascination with understanding cultures and lives that may be perceived as mysterious or inaccessible to non-Muslim audiences.

Cooke mentions that Muslim women authors are articulating new ways of being strong, religious and gendered persons; she refers to how these authors are redefining traditional notions of femininity and cultural identity in diaspora literature (Cooke et al. 94). These authors are creating characters that challenge stereotypes and push boundaries, especially in terms of sexuality and gender roles. The authors depict empowered women who skilfully navigate their sexuality, gender and religion in distinctive and surprising manners while residing in the diaspora.

Equivalently, Ambar Ahmad reflects upon Valentine Moghadam, in which she highlights the significance of the works and public statements of Islamic feminists, noting that the women's press and the Islamic feminists connected with it play a crucial role in widening the scope of discourse and increasing legal literacy and gender awareness among their audiences (7). By means of this depiction, the authors empower their characters and also prompt readers to reassess their beliefs and assumptions. The narratives crafted by these writers provide a stage for delving into the complexities of identity, agency and empowerment in the realm of religion and gender. Through the use of their narratives, these women are engaging in more than just storytelling; they are also starting discussions and cultivating a more profound comprehension of the various experiences and viewpoints of Muslim women living outside their homeland.

More than that, Sirri acknowledges that from the intersection of religion, gender and sexuality, scholars and researchers can better understand the complicated ways in which individuals navigate their social world and construct their sense of self (1). She highlights the significance of acknowledging and comprehending the complexities that emerge when various facets of identity overlap. Sirri's idea underscores the necessity of accounting for

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multiple grounds of identity because each of these facets influences and shapes a person's experiences, beliefs and opportunities within society. As a matter of fact, when examining the relationship among religion, gender and sexuality, it is evident that people may encounter distinctive obstacles or types of prejudice arising from the intersection of these elements. Thus, when examining the development of society, it is crucial to go beyond basic or one-dimensional perceptions of identity and embrace a more detailed and comprehensive method that considers the various ways individuals coexist and engage in society.

Furthermore, Talal Asad stresses the need to move away from viewing religion as a static and unchanging concept that is universally defined by faith that exists independently of cultural and practical traditions (qtd. in Sirri 2). He maintains that it is crucial for individuals to quit the belief that religion is universally consistent and unchanging, as this standpoint overlooks the fluid and diverse impacts of historical, social and cultural factors on religious beliefs and rituals. Asad highlights the danger of viewing religion as solely transcendent or divorced from the everyday practices and traditions of a community. By way of highlighting the significance of viewing religion as integrated within social and cultural contexts, he stresses the importance of acknowledging the varied and complicated nature of religious manifestations and explanations within diverse societies and historical eras. In fact, Asad's idea invites scholars to rethink their assumptions about religion and also to appreciate the multiplicity of meanings and forms that religious beliefs can take. This perspective encourages people to approach the study of religion with a more nuanced and critical lens, moving beyond essentialist interpretations and recognizing the dynamic interplay between faith, culture and practical traditions in shaping cultural identity and practice.

In addition, Lila Abu-Lughod underlines the significance of acknowledging and comprehending the various experiences and identities of women globally. She advocates for a detailed and profound recognition of the distinctions among women, emphasizing that these distinctions are not solely shaped by individual pasts but also by wider socio-cultural environments and frameworks, like religion (qtd. in Sirri 2). Abu-Lughod promotes a more intricate and intersectional comprehension of gender that considers the intricacies of women's encounters. Women's identities are unlikely to be simple and influenced by various factors such as historical context, socio-economic status, cultural standards and individual goals. The tangled interplay of these various elements results in a complex web of influences that mould the distinctive and intricate experiences of women within the societal framework.

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In fact, the cultural identity of women should not be considered in isolation but as a convoluted interaction of various elements that shape their distinct roles and experiences within society. Thus, Abu-Lughod's call to develop a serious appreciation of these differences challenges individuals to move beyond simplistic and essentialist views of women's experiences and to engage with the diversity and richness of women's lives globally, particularly in the diaspora. By acknowledging and accepting the diverse historical backgrounds, situations and aspirations that influence women's experiences, researchers develop a profound comprehension of the perplexing nature of gender interactions and the importance of addressing women's concerns with sensitivity and cultural proficiency. She calls for a shift towards intersectional and context-specific analyses that account for the complex interaction of factors shaping women's cultural identities and agency in different social and cultural settings.

For all that, Western Feminism has criticized Muslim Feminism with regards to the ownership of this doctrine. Yet, it is important to acknowledge the overarching influence of Western hegemony and stereotypes. This critique often stems from Western prejudice, questioning how a woman can be a feminist while still wearing the veil and accepting polygamy. In response, Kandiyoti argues that such discussions are often influenced by cultural bias, reducing the exploration of rights, citizenship and feminism to whether these concepts can resonate within a Middle Eastern context and culture (qtd. in Saadallah 216).

In fact, Muslim women are not seeking to establish a Western Feminism that requires complete assimilation. Instead, they are integrating and adapting Feminism to fit their own cultural, religious and societal contexts. Therefore, they have shaped Feminism within an Islamic framework. In the same vein, Jasmin Zine delves into the complex terrain that Muslim women navigate, shaped by conflicting narratives from Orientalist and fundamentalist perspectives. Within this intricate framework, Muslim women must navigate the often contradictory spaces in which their bodies and identities are interpreted, regulated and commodified (qtd. in Sirri 4). The portrayal and regulation of Muslim women's subjectivities are deeply entwined with historical legacies, political agendas, imperial interventions and religious interpretations that have left enduring imprints on how their identities are constructed and understood.

Zine's conception assures the multifaceted politics of identity that govern the representation and perception of Muslim women. These narratives are not static but are

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dynamic entities shaped by various power dynamics and historical legacies. The Orientalist gaze tends to exoticize Muslim women, reducing them to monolithic, stereotypical portrayals that fail to capture the diversity and agency within Muslim female experiences. Nevertheless, fundamentalist rhetoric frequently aims to regulate and limit the independence of women, strengthening established gender expectations and power structures (qtd. in Sirri 2). The convergence of these narratives results in a multifaceted situation where Muslim women are required to navigate their own identity and empowerment. Zine provides insight into the complex challenges encountered by Muslim women as they strive to assert their identities and regain control over their subjectivities. This detailed examination encourages a thoughtful consideration of the various factors that influence and limit the lived experiences of Muslim women in the diaspora, advocating for a more sophisticated and thorough comprehension of their cultural identities and hardships.

In addition to that, Marnia Lazreg's perspective on Islamic feminism challenges the notion that feminism has its origins exclusively in the West. By suggesting that Islamic feminism represents a "decentring" of the movement from its perceived Western centre, Lazreg critiques the assumption that feminism is a concept rooted solely in Western ideals and values (qtd. in Sirri 3). She contends that there is a common tendency among Western societies that view feminism as a concept exclusive to the West, disregarding, in turn, non-Western societies' contributions and influences, such as Islamic cultures and scholars. Lazreg's critique highlights the danger of dismissing or downplaying feminist movements outside the Western context, attributing this attitude to a mixture of arrogance and ignorance. She suggests that this mindset leads Westerners to assert a certain ownership over feminism, effectively erasing the long history of feminist thought and activism in non-Western cultures, including Islamic societies.

In emphasizing the importance of recognizing and valuing diverse feminist perspectives; Lazreg prompts a re-evaluation of the origins and nature of feminist movements. She questions the concept of a singular Euro-American feminism and instead promotes an intersectional approach that is more inclusive. This approach recognizes and embraces the diverse cultural, religious and historical backgrounds that have influenced the development and transformation of feminist ideologies. Essentially, Lazreg's notion of Islamic feminism as a decentring of feminism serves as a powerful reminder of the need to broaden our understanding of feminist thought and activism beyond Western boundaries, acknowledging



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and celebrating the rich diversity of feminist movements worldwide. It necessitates a more sophisticated and comprehensive deconstructionist strategy that recognizes the worldwide scope of feminism and the diverse range of perspectives and encounters that play a part in its continuous development.

Indeed, Muslim feminists navigate a complex landscape where they assert their right to uphold feminist principles while remaining within the bounds of their religious tradition. By emphasizing the strength and agency of women within Islam, these feminists challenge the perception that feminism is solely a Western concept or Muslim Feminism is merely a form of mimicry. Instead, they are creating an environment in which they promote gender equality and justice while upholding a profound link to their respective religion and community (Cooke, *Women Claim Islam* 60). This nuanced approach allows them to reconcile their religious beliefs with their feminist ideals and forge solidarity with other Muslim women who share similar goals across diverse cultural and geographical contexts. It is about affirming a complex identity that incorporates religious beliefs and feminist ideologies, consequently establishing a more comprehensive and empowering environment for women in Islamic and diasporic societies.

All the same, Ziba Mir-Hosseini's perspective on Islamic feminism emphasizes the transformative nature of this movement and theory. By referring to it as the emergence of a new consciousness, she highlights the profound shift in thinking and discourse that Islamic feminism represents (qtd. in Sirri 4). This new wave of feminism, while deeply rooted in Islamic principles and language, also carries strong feminist aspirations and goals. Mir-Hosseini's point highlights the unique blend of feminist ideology and Islamic tradition within Muslim feminism. This blend allows for a reassessment and reinterpretation of traditional Islamic sources to support feminist principles and demands (qtd. in Sirri 4). Hence, Islamic feminism challenges the notion that feminism is solely a Western concept by demonstrating that feminist ideals can be embraced within an Islamic framework. It aims to restore and enhance discussions on gender within Islamic settings, leading to a more comprehensive and empowering stance on gender parity. In essence, Mir-Hosseini celebrates the richness of Islamic feminism, which draws from both Islamic heritage and feminist insights to create a nuanced and distinctive discourse on gender issues.

Furthermore, Miriam Cooke highlights a significant distinction between Muslim Feminism and Islamist Feminism. The former takes inspiration from Islamic sources such as the Quran

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and Hadith to support gender equality in parallel with international human rights standards, whereas the latter has a more conservative attitude. Islamist Feminism, according to Cooke, views women's equality as a form of oppression and injustice, opposing the idea of gender equality with men. In contrast, Muslim Feminists believe that Islam as a religion can progress and adapt over time as interpretations of its teachings expand. They argue that while the interpretations may evolve, the fundamental sources, the Quran and Hadith, remain unchanged and sacred. This perspective allows for a harmonious integration of Islamic principles with contemporary ideals of gender equality and human rights within the framework of the religion (Cooke, *Women Claim Islam* xxi).

As a matter of fact, Muslim Feminism has long been advocating for women's issues within society, including education, work, politics, clothing and many others. The Muslim Woman's physical appearance, especially the veil, seems to be a controversial question in the world. It is generally stereotyped with oppression, weakness, fragility and backwardness, while unveiling symbolises power, civilization, prosperity and modernity. However, Nasif affirms the belief that the veil is a distinctive aspect of Eastern identity and should not be supplanted or altered to conform to Western standards of modernity (qtd.in Alqahtani 70). Nasif rejects the idea that modernization for Eastern women necessitates adopting Western styles of dress, implying that embracing one's cultural heritage and traditional clothes does not prevent progress or modern ideals. In doing so, she advocates for the autonomy and agency of Eastern women to define modernization on their own terms, without succumbing to Western paradigms as the only benchmark of progress. Nasif's view reflects a stance of cultural confidence and challenges the imposition of external standards as the ultimate determinant of progress for Eastern societies.

However, it should be noted that this contentious issue is not limited to Western perspectives but is also a subject of debate among Muslim activists. Nawal El Saadawi, an Egyptian feminist writer, activist and psychiatrist, has explored various aspects related to the veil, the gender of God and Imams and the status of women in politics in her numerous writings. Her time at Columbia University in 1960 influenced her by exposing her to Western ideologies (Alqahtani 20). El Saadawi's stance on issues such as the veil and polygamy aligns with Qasim Amin, who also opposes these practices. Amin argues that the veil heightens men's sexual desires and hinders women's participation in various activities and jobs (Alqahtani 58). Both El Saadawi and Amin believe that empowering Muslim women to

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embrace science, technology and Western liberal ideals can lead to a more prosperous socioeconomic life and a redefined society.

Despite their advocacy for women's rights, El Saadawi has faced criticism from religious figures and Muslim feminists, like Shaykh al-Shaarawi and Zaynab al-Ghazali, for her radical thoughts. They have expelled El Saadawi's ideas and labelled her as stupid and heretic (Cooke, *Women Claim Islam* 135). This ongoing debate within Muslim feminism reflects the diversity of opinions and the impact of Western ideology when addressing issues related to women's rights and religious norms. Cooke describes Islamic feminism as not merely an identity but as an attitude and intention. For her, Islamic feminism is more than just a label or a category that one identifies with. It goes beyond a superficial association or affiliation and delves deeper into a mindset and a purposeful stance (*Women Claim Islam* 61).

Instead, Cooke asserts that Islamic feminism is a deliberate and proactive ideology focused on promoting justice and equal rights for Muslim women while operating within the parameters of Islamic teachings and principles. It reflects a commitment to challenging patriarchal interpretations and practices that have marginalized or oppressed women in Muslim communities worldwide. The focus on pursuing justice and citizenship highlights the overarching objectives of Islamic feminism, encompassing the advancement of gender parity, egalitarianism and the rights of women, alongside advocating for Muslim women's entitlement to complete engagement and acknowledgment as equivalent members of their communities. This ultimately implies that Islamic feminism is characterized by its dynamic and transformative nature, aiming to enhance the agency of women, confront injustices and foster positive transformations at the crossroads of Islam, feminism and social justice.

Abdul Madjid suggests that Nawal El Saadawi's popularity outside her native country may be attributed to her depiction of Muslim women in a specific manner (37). By consistently portraying Muslim women as constantly unhappy and oppressed by Arab Muslim men, El Saadawi may have tapped into prevalent stereotypes and preconceptions held by Western audiences about women in Islamic societies. This portrayal of victimhood and oppression can sometimes resonate with Western audiences who may already hold certain biases or expectations about Muslim women. It is important to take into account that the intricacy and variety of experiences within the demographic of Muslim women may not consistently correspond with this limited depiction, potentially leading to oversimplification or misinterpretation. It is essential to approach the depiction of any group with nuance and

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respect for their varied experiences and perspectives, rather than reinforcing stereotypes for the sake of popularity.

Nonetheless, Moghissi points out a perceived lack of cohesion and clarity within the concept of Islamic feminism. The criticism is directed at the notion that Islamic feminism does not have a well-defined, easily recognizable ideology or cohesive movement (qtd. in Cooke, *Women Claim Islam* 57). Moghissi suggests that those who promote the idea of Islamic feminism as a distinct form of feminism are often individuals from the diaspora, feminist academics and researchers with Muslim backgrounds residing and working predominantly in Western societies. This observation implies that the discourse and framing of Islamic feminism are more commonly shaped and articulated by individuals outside traditional Muslim-majority societies.

Moghissi's reasoning suggests that there is a detachment between the theoretical conceptualization of Islamic feminism by Western scholars and the lived experiences of Muslim women within their own societies (ibid 58). According to the Western logic, this perspective raises questions about the authenticity and applicability of Islamic feminism as a concept developed primarily by diasporic intellectuals and its resonance or relevance within Muslim communities globally. However, the concept proposed by Moghissi lacks logical coherence, as it is not a necessity for solely local writers to accurately portray their societies. Diasporic writers, who may have experienced exile or displacement from their homelands, are also capable of reflecting Muslim societies with a high degree of transparency and authenticity.

In this regard, Miriam Cooke, in her book *Women Claim Islam*, reflects upon what has been argued regarding the incompatibility between Islam and feminism and posits that this claim stems from the observation that Islam, as a religion, historically presents a gender hierarchy that contrasts with the core principles of feminism (57). Accordingly, the principal religious scripture of Islam which is the Qur'an, has been interpreted by some as not advocating for gender equality in a manner that is consistent with feminist ideas. Additionally, the Islamic law, known as Sharia, has often reflected gender roles and expectations that splay from the principles and norms of gender democracy and women's equality championed by feminism (Cooke, *Women Claim Islam* 57). However, Saadallah claims that "Muslim feminism, on the other hand, is a rights-based movement which promulgates Islamic connotations. In doing so, it reinterprets the religious discourses so as to integrate with global

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feminism(s)” (219). Therefore, the perceived conflict arises from the philosophical and practical differences between the teachings of Islam regarding gender and the goals of feminist movements in advocating for gender equality within society. Recognizing and engaging with these complexities is essential when exploring the intersection of Islam and feminism to foster understanding and dialogue between these overlapping but distinct belief systems.

Cooke further suggests that Islamic Feminism is complex and multifaceted. According to her, it is not a singular ideology. Rather, it is shaped by various social, political and cultural factors that heavily impact the way individuals define and interact with feminist principles and values within, and not outside, an Islamic context (*Women Claim Islam* 59). Moreover, Cooke underscores the deliberate and nuanced ways in which individuals navigate their cultural identities and commitments within both Islamic and feminist contexts. This strategic positioning entails actions, behaviours and writings that seek to bridge religious and gender issues in the pursuit of justice and freedom. However, the author suggests that these efforts do not result in a static or fixed cultural identity but rather a changeable and evolving one that meets and responds to the shifting realities and challenges faced by Muslim women.

She continues to highlight the dynamic and evolving nature of Islamic feminism as both a personal and political stance, i.e. by identifying as an Islamic feminist, individuals are not simply defining themselves within pre-existing categories or labels. Instead, they are actively shaping a unique position that is influenced by their religious beliefs, feminist principles and social contexts (Cooke, *Women Claim Islam* 59). This idea of creating a new, contingent subject position suggests that the identity of an Islamic feminist is not rigid or predetermined, but is a result of ongoing negotiation and adaptation to the changing circumstances and evolving understandings of the intersections between Islam and feminism. In this context, identifying as an Islamic feminist signifies a purposeful and intentional declaration of self-identity that demonstrates a dedication to questioning established conventions, promoting parity between genders and envisioning new prospects for Muslim women in their religious circles.

The author refers to a direct and explicit approach taken by certain individuals within the Islamic feminist movement. In fact, these feminists are firm in their position against cultural norms, traditions or interpretations of Islam which they perceive as contributing to the subjugation of women (Cooke, *Women Claim Islam* 61). Therefore, through distancing

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themselves from these symbols and practices, their purpose is to challenge and remove oppressive structures within Muslim communities. On the other hand, the author talks about other Islamic feminists utilizing negative representations for positive ends. They highlight a more strategic approach adopted by some activists. In other words, instead of outright rejection, these feminists engage with and reinterpret these symbols and practices to subvert oppressive narratives and foster empowerment. They seek inspiration from historical and scriptural sources to reclaim agency and articulate their demands for gender equality and justice within an Islamic framework. By doing so, they are able to construct alternative narratives and agendas that support their goal and vision of a fair and comprehensive society.

### **2.3.2.2. Reclaiming the Veil: Advocacy and Agency in Muslim Feminism**

The usage of the terms veil and hijab is another controversial issue, as the former is a westernized term, whereas the latter is an Islamic one. According to El Guindy, the concept of veil is multifaceted as he mentions that the meanings associated with the Western term veil encompass four dimensions, including the material, spatial, communicative and religious. The material dimension refers to the physical aspects of veiling, including clothing and ornamentation. Veil can represent a piece of apparel covering the head, shoulders and face, or it could be an embellishment worn with a hat that conceals part of the face (qtd. in Almila 6).

It is worth noting that the term veil here is not limited solely to face coverings but extends to other parts of the body like the head and shoulders. This breakdown underscores how the veil holds significance beyond just a piece of cloth covering the face; it carries broader implications tied to cultural, social and religious contexts. By acknowledging these different dimensions, people gain a more nuanced understanding of the various roles and meanings that veiling can encompass in Western societies. In her book entitled *Veiling in Fashion*, Almila emphasizes the importance of distinguishing between the terms veil and hijab due to the Islamic association of the latter term, she points out a specific cultural and religious significance linked to hijab that sets it apart from the more general term veil (6). While scholars may use these two terms interchangeably, it is important to make the difference between their connotations.

The distinction between these terms becomes notable because of the unique Islamic implications attached to the hijab, which differentiate it from the broader concept represented by the term veil. In Western contexts, there is often an association with the religious veil that suggests themes of invisibility, seclusion, or a barrier to communication. These interpretations

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contrast with Islamic perspectives, where the hijab holds distinct religious and cultural significance related to modesty, piety and identity (Almila 6). Concerning Muslim women's scarves, the author notes that they are recognizable for three primary reasons: visual, temporal and gendered/spatial. Visually, the way the scarf is draped, wrapped and fastened can distinguish it as a hijab. Temporally, the scarf is worn consistently in various situations, even in mixed-gender environments, reflecting its significance (Almila 7). Gendered and spatial considerations are also crucial, as the hijab and veil symbolize concepts of covering, concealing, and protecting. These terms are often used interchangeably because they carry connotations related to material aspects (such as clothing) and spatial implications. Therefore, the hijab and veil are not mere clothes, but rather symbols that represent cultural, social and religious meanings within the context of Muslim women's attire. Similarly, Cooke uses the terms veil and hijab interchangeably in her books (*Women Claim Islam* 107).

Cooke highlights the significant impact of cultural norms and diversity on the perception of veiling practices. As a matter of fact, in societies where veiling is the norm and expected of women, such as in Muslim-majority countries, women who choose to veil may blend in and become, in a way, invisible as they conform to prevailing social and religious expectations. Conversely, in multicultural contexts where various religious and cultural practices are accepted and tolerated, a veiled woman may stand out due to the visibility of her religious observance (*Women Claim Islam* 132). In such environments, the act of veiling can serve as a marker of religious identity and a visible symbol of personal or cultural beliefs, distinguishing the veiled woman from her surroundings and perhaps inviting attention or curiosity from others. This observation underscores the intricate interplay between individual desire, cultural norms and societal expectations in shaping how veiling is perceived and experienced.

Western feminists view the veil as a symbol that represents oppression among Muslim women, while on the contrary; Muslim women themselves interpret it as a significant emblem of pride and a sense of belonging within their community. In this matter, Margot Badran emphasizes the viewpoint of numerous Muslim women who argue that donning the hijab is not indicative of subjugation, but rather a decision made autonomously (Cooke et al. 104). These women assert that the head covering does not obstruct or confine them; rather, it empowers them and provides them with the freedom to openly articulate their religious faith and cultural background. This perspective challenges the common perception that the hijab is inherently oppressive, as it underscores the importance of acknowledging the diverse

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experiences and interpretations within Islam, particularly concerning gender roles and practices like veiling.

Eventually, the perception of Western feminists towards the veil should not lead them to dismiss or diminish its value simply because it does not align with their own understandings and the ever-evolving dynamics of their social and cultural context. It is crucial to acknowledge that the concept of unveiling, which is often associated with Western ideals, can also be considered a symbolic representation of Western civilization and religious beliefs. Therefore, the question arises whether it is justifiable for Muslim women to resist unveiling practices and argue that Western women are being compelled to unveil against their will. Within this discourse, Cooke asserts that even when women autonomously choose to wear or not wear the veil, their decisions may be manipulated by external forces to serve alternate agendas (*Women Claim Islam* 133). These agendas, as highlighted by the author, primarily aim to distort the perception of Islam and undermine the faith and beliefs held by Muslim women.

Cooke highlights the significance of the veil as a symbol that plays a pivotal role in shaping perceptions of Muslim women and their identities. By equating the veil to race, she suggests that it serves as a visible marker that sets Muslim women apart, emphasizing an inherent and essential difference that is often imposed upon them by external observers (Cooke et al. 91). This marker of difference, whether tangible or perceived, becomes a defining feature that influences how Muslim women are perceived and treated in society. The term "Muslimwoman" that Cooke introduces underscores the notion of a singular and unified cultural identity that encompasses both religious and gender dimensions. This concept of a singular identity glosses over the diverse range of national, ethnic, cultural, historical and philosophical variations that exist among Muslim women, implying homogenization of their experiences and identities. The introduction of this newly coined term indicates a shift towards simplification and condensation of the intricate and diverse identities of Muslim women, restricting them to a limited and singular classification focused mainly on their religious and gender associations.

Furthermore, Cooke suggests that in contemporary society, the Muslim woman has come to symbolize and represent the collective Muslim community globally, known as the umma. This represents a significant shift from traditional norms where men were typically the primary representation of the umma (Cooke et al. 92). With the evolving dynamics of cultural



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and social landscapes, the Muslim woman has taken on a central role in embodying the cultural identity of the broader Muslim community. Regardless of whether she chooses to wear a veil or not, the Muslim woman has emerged as a cultural standard that encapsulates the essence of the umma in the eyes of the world. This shift underscores the changing perceptions and significance attributed to gender roles within Muslim societies and the evolving symbolism attached to women within the context of representing and reflecting the collective cultural identity of the umma. Cooke's observation highlights the evolving nature of cultural symbols and the powerful role that women, veiled or unveiled, play in shaping and embodying the identity and representation of the Muslim community on a global scale, especially in the diaspora.

Cooke stresses the idea that as people connect and identify with one another across different groups in the diaspora, their identities become more diversified and hybrid (Cooke et al. 92). This concept suggests that individuals can belong to and act within various groups simultaneously, leading to a blending and splitting of cultural identities. In the context of Muslim women, the adoption of various identities and hybrid characteristics might be viewed as a challenge by individuals who favour stricter and more conventional classifications. Cooke points out that the veil, whether enforced or prohibited, can symbolize an attempt to confine or restrict these evolving and diverse identities. The act of using the veil to constrain individuals can be seen as a response to the perceived threat of hybridity, aiming to contain the proliferation of identities within a particular framework. Thus, Cooke's argument underscores the complexity of cultural identity formation within a cosmopolitan context, where the tension between unification and diversity plays a crucial role in shaping individual and collective cultural identities. Moreover, Cooke highlights the contentious nature of the politics surrounding veiling practices, particularly when the state bans or mandates the veil (Cooke et al. 92). She demonstrates that in different regions across the globe, including the diaspora, Muslim feminists advocate for the right of Muslim women to wear the veil publicly, even though facing persecution and opposition in their pursuits to express their cultural identity through veiling.

Cooke mentions that diasporic Muslim women are the contemporary cosmopolitans. She refers to their ability to transcend traditional borders and connect with one another across various boundaries (Cooke et al. 97). By doing so, these women can challenge the predefined roles often imposed on them and blur the lines that are meant to confine them within specific social or cultural limits. This fluidity in navigating borders enables them to not only erase

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existing boundaries but also to establish new ones that they can exist within comfortably. This complex and ambivalent position allows these women to be acutely conscious of their multiple identities and the cultural fusion that defines them, thus empowering them to assert their voices and perspectives in diverse spaces, especially in the third space. In essence, Cooke suggests that Muslim women, through their strategic negotiation of borders and their rejection of restrictive cultural roles, embody a form of cosmopolitanism that embraces hybridity, fosters connections, and amplifies their agency and influence.

Islah Jad asserts that the veil is a symbol of modernity that reflects the complex intersections of tradition, religion and contemporary identity within the context of female agency and expression. By suggesting that veiling can be perceived as a marker of modernity, Jad highlights the evolving nature of cultural practices and their interpretations in a changing world (qtd. in Cooke et al. 95). The veil typically associated with tradition and conservatism, can also, paradoxically, denote a form of empowerment and resistance when embraced as a conscious choice by women to assert their cultural identities and challenge prevailing norms and expectations in the diaspora. In Jad's view, the veil can serve as a potent political symbol that represents a break from traditional gender roles and signifies reclamation of agency and autonomy by women. Through donning the veil in specific social and cultural contexts, women can articulate their unique perspectives and assert their presence in public spheres traditionally dominated by men.

This act of veiling, therefore, carries symbolic weight beyond its religious connotations, embodying a fusion of tradition and modernity that challenges stereotypes and redefines the parameters of female participation and visibility in society. Moreover, Jad argues that veiling can be a transformative tool in reshaping narratives around women's roles and capabilities, offering new pathways for self-expression and empowerment (qtd. in Cooke et al. 95). By deciding to adopt the veil as a personal choice rather than a compulsory necessity, women can uncover new possibilities for self-exploration and engagement in their communities. This can cultivate feelings of belonging and unity amidst changing social environments. Ultimately, Jad's insights underscore the dynamic nature of veiling practices and their capacity to engender social change, cultural innovation, and the reimagining of gender norms in ways that transcend simplistic dichotomies of tradition and modernity.

### 2.3.3. In-Between Spaces: Understanding Borderlands Theory

When it comes to culture and cultural identity, both borderlands and diaspora involve experiences of cultural hybridity, displacement and negotiation of identity across multiple spaces. Geographically speaking, borderlands and diaspora differ, as borderlands focus more on the dynamic interactions and tensions that arise at the boundaries between cultures while diaspora emphasizes the dispersal and resettlement of communities in new locations. However, culturally speaking, the concept of borderlands can evoke a sense of cultural dispersal similar to diaspora, albeit within a distinct geographical and social context. In borderland regions, individuals often find themselves inhabiting spaces that exist in-between established cultural boundaries, where they may not fully belong to either side. This liminal space, as labelled by Homi Bhabha, can create a sense of displacement and dislocation akin to diaspora literature, where characters often inhabit liminal spaces between multiple cultural, social and geographical worlds.

Homi Bhabha, in his book *The Location of Culture*, emphasizes the significance of recognizing the liminal or third space as a theoretical concept that can pave the way for understanding international culture. He posits the belief that the basis of this society should not be centred around the appeal of multiculturalism or simple variety, but instead on the concept of cultural blending (38, 39). This hybridity reflects the blending and interaction of different cultures in a way that transcends traditional boundaries and categories. Bhabha suggests that the key to this understanding lies in the in-between space where cultures interact and influence one another. This space, which he refers to as the Third Space, holds the true meaning of culture as it encapsulates the processes of cultural translation and negotiation. It is within this space (borderlands and diaspora) that the complexities and hybridity of culture are articulated and understood. By exploring the Third Space, Bhabha believes diasporic people can move beyond polarized views and the binary politics of nationalism versus anti-nationalism. This exploration allows for the emergence of new, hybrid identities, what he describes as becoming "the others of ourselves." In a similar fashion, Bhabha conceptualizes a more sophisticated and interconnected comprehension of culture and history, which acknowledges the flexible and ever-changing nature of cultural identities, mirroring the perspective of Gloria Anzaldúa.

Certainly, in both borderlands and diaspora, individuals often confront challenges related to acculturating their cultural identity amidst interactions with different cultural influences.

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The dynamic of negotiating between the native culture and the dominant culture is indeed a common thread in both contexts. In border regions, people must navigate the intricacies of identity and sense of belonging at the crossroads of various cultural influences, where there might be a push to conform to the prevailing culture while also trying to uphold ties to their original culture. In diaspora literature, characters often experience ambivalence towards their cultural heritage, homeland and diasporic communities. They may grapple with conflicting desires to embrace their cultural roots while also seeking autonomy and belonging in new environments.

In the borderlands, people navigate a complex cultural landscape characterized by intersecting influences and hybrid identities. They may feel estranged from their native culture and the dominant culture across the border, leading to a sense of cultural dislocation and ambiguity. In diaspora literature, characters navigate borders of language, nationality, religion and ethnicity as they negotiate their sense of cultural identity. These borders can be sites of conflict, hybridity and transformation, where characters confront and challenge societal norms and expectations. They might utilize components of their original culture alongside integrating features of the prevailing culture, leading to the development of distinctive hybrid identities that mirror the intricacies of living in borderland regions. To this extent, the borderlands can be seen as a kind of cultural diaspora, where individuals navigate the challenges of preserving their cultural identity while existing in a space that exists at the margins of established cultural boundaries.

Bonnie Mitchell and Feagin describe a theory of oppositional culture or culture of resistance as the idea that subjugated groups facing oppression will resist by tapping into their own cultural strengths and beliefs. Mitchell and Feagin argue that marginalized groups will develop a culture of resistance that encompasses a cohesive framework of values, beliefs and behaviours (qtd. in Martinez 541). The culture of resistance observed in certain groups in the diaspora functions as a means to combat the effects of oppression and uphold the distinct characteristics of the marginalized group's cultural identity in opposition to the prevailing culture. Through the utilization of their cultural assets, marginalized groups can oppose oppressive influences and demonstrate their capacity to act in challenging circumstances. Mitchell and Feagin's theory suggests that within this culture of resistance, subjugated groups will cultivate a collective cultural identity rooted in their shared cultural heritage and experiences.

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Through this procedure, individuals can regain control of their stories, confront oppressive systems and unite in support of societal transformation. The principles and behaviours ingrained in this ethos of opposition function not only as a means of resistance against prevailing powers, but rather as a foundation of strength and empowerment for the disenfranchised community. Ultimately, Mitchell and Feagin argue that by leveraging their own cultural resources and cultivating a culture of resistance, subjugated groups can actively challenge systems of oppression, strengthen their sense of identity and community, and strive towards liberation and social justice. Borderlands theory underscores the importance of recognizing and honouring the cultural strengths and resilience of marginalized groups in their struggles for equity and empowerment in the diaspora.

The concept of the Borderlands is a place characterized by contradictions, conflicts and complexities. It embodies the experiences of individuals who exist on the margins, navigating multiple identities and grappling with the forces of oppression, discrimination and inequality. In her book *Borderlands*, Gloria Anzaldúa uses autobiography as a methodology where she speaks of her existence in relation to the Borderlands. She is highlighting her personal journey of self-discovery, resistance and survival within this liminal space. She argues that “[she] had to leave home so [she] could find [herself], find [her] own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on [her]” (16). Her preoccupations with the inner life of the Self reflect her introspective exploration of identity, belonging and autonomy in the face of external pressures and injustices (ix). The author acknowledges the struggles and adversities faced by individuals in the Borderlands, as she emphasizes the importance of resilience and self-expression as tools for understanding social and cultural phenomena.

Furthermore, Anzaldúa's engagement with primordial images and the positioning of consciousness at the confluence of diverse streams of experience underscores her deep connection to ancestral wisdom, cultural memory and spiritual traditions. Through her personal narrative and storytelling, she seeks to illuminate the complexities and richness of life on the borders, shedding light on the overlooked narratives, voices and realities that exist in the shadows of mainstream society. According to Connell, Anzaldúa's almost instinctive urge to speak and to write about life in the Borderlands is a profound act of resistance, empowerment and cultural preservation (qtd. in Martinez 543). By amplifying marginalized perspectives, challenging dominant discourses and advocating for social change, she invites

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readers to confront the harsh realities of hatred, anger and exploitation in order to envision a more inclusive and just world for all individuals living on the borders of society.

In the preface of her book, Anzaldúa introduces the notion of the Borderlands, in which she emphasizes that borderlands can be physical, sexual, psychological and spiritual. According to her, the notion of Borderlands pertains to the ambiguous physical, cultural and psychological regions that are present at the edges or points of contact of prevailing social structures (ix). She refers to the Borderlands as physically present wherever two or more cultures converge, she highlights the fluid and dynamic nature of these spaces where cultural, racial and socioeconomic boundaries intersect. In the border areas, a clear perception of interconnection and communication among various groups of individuals is noticed. However, Anzaldúa emphasizes that the Borderlands extend beyond just geographical locations; they represent liminal spaces where identities meld and boundaries blur. Through acknowledging the complexities and nuances of the Borderlands, the theorist invites individuals to embrace the richness and diversity that emerges from the meeting of different cultures, races and classes, emphasizing the potential for connection in these dynamic spaces of intersection and overlap.

However, Neimneh et al. discuss Anzaldúa's concept of borderlands, emphasizing that these are not merely defined by physical borders, but more profoundly by the invisible spiritual and psychological boundaries people encounter when they leave their homeland (79). They argue that in the borderlands, individuals find themselves unable to neither fully retain their own traditions nor completely adopt the traditions of their new land. This creates a gap between the individuals and the new society they must integrate into. These borderlands, both mental and physical, become spaces of ongoing struggle for identity and national affiliation.

According to Anzaldúa, the border exerts a dual pull on individuals: it urges them to become something new and original while simultaneously pulling them back to their traditional roots. This dynamic can be both destructive and constructive, tearing apart aspects of one's cultural identity while fostering the growth of new ones (Neimneh et al. 79). The borderland is thus depicted as an ambivalent space where two worlds intersect to create a unique border culture. This space is characterized by its fluidity and the constant negotiation of identities, highlighting the complexities and contradictions inherent in living between different cultural realities. Anzaldúa's perspective on borderlands underscores the perpetual tension and creativity involved in forming a hybrid identity in these intersecting spaces.

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While living in these liminal spaces, border people experience pain and trauma. Anzaldúa reflects upon this, describing the borderlands as “*una herida abierta*” (3) or an open wound. It is a place where the “Other” is oppressed and marginalized by the “Self.” She claims that

The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. *Los atravesados* live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half-dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the “normal.” (3)

The Borderlands also symbolize the intersection of cultures, languages and identities. Anzaldúa describes the Borderlands as a place of contradictions because it is where various cultural, social, economic and political elements clash and coexist. Anzaldúa claims that the Borderlands are “not a comfortable territory to live in” (ix); she highlights the challenges and struggles faced by individuals living in these liminal spaces. The border individuals are always underestimated (Anzaldúa 37), estranged or killed by those who belong to the Western “Self”, or the white man. The author provides instances where the inhabitants of the borderlands are subjected to various forms of oppression and injustice, like the dominance of patriarchy over matriarchy (5), the superiority of the white man wherein he seizes all political and economic power (7), separating border people from their identity and history through exile and banishment (8), depriving them of their ancestral lands (9) and imposing taxes and loans with huge benefits (9). Consequently, hatred, anger and exploitation are prevalent in the Borderlands because of the power dynamics and injustices that exist there. These negative emotions and actions stem from historical, social and economic factors that create tension and conflict in these areas. Anzaldúa's description of the Borderlands as a place of contradictions underscores the complex nature of identity and belonging in these spaces. Residents of the Borderlands frequently encounter the challenge of manoeuvring through various cultures, languages and perspectives, which can result in feelings of dislocation and estrangement.

The borderlands, being the birthplace of various cultures and ethnicities, exhibit a distinct trait known as cultural hybridity. Anzaldúa underlines the significance of cultural hybridity and the mixture of different elements, which she refers to as “*mestiza*,” playing a pivotal role in shaping identities within borderland spaces. She argues that this blending results in the convergence of two worlds' essence, giving rise to a unique entity, a border culture that

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embodies the amalgamation of diverse cultural influences (3). In diaspora literature, characters often inhabit hybrid cultural spaces where multiple cultural influences intersect and interact. In these spaces of cultural hybridity characters forge new identities and modes of belonging that transcend traditional cultural boundaries. According to Anzaldúa, culture can be dangerous, as it shapes and controls people's way of thinking. The interpretation of reality that individuals perceive is extensively influenced by the cultural norms, values and traditions that are deeply ingrained within them from a young age (16). These predefined concepts, deeply rooted in the fabric of their culture, are continuously transmitted to them through various means such as language, media, education and social institutions.

The term *la mestiza* refers to a person of mixed cultural heritage, someone who embodies multiple cultural influences. In this state, individuals like *la mestiza* experience a continuous negotiation and blending of cultural and spiritual values from various groups. This constant interchange of values and identities leads to a sense of being tricultural, having influences from at least three different cultures (Anzaldúa 78). For *la mestiza*, the experience can include being monolingual, bilingual, or even multilingual, speaking a mix of languages. This linguistic complexity reflects the diverse cultural influences that shape Anzaldúa's identity. In addition, she might communicate in a patois, which is a blend of languages or a dialect used in specific communities. This linguistic diversity mirrors the broader experience of navigating multiple cultural contexts and identities. *La mestiza's* existence in a perpetual state of transition highlights the ongoing process of negotiating and reconciling different aspects of her identity. This state of perpetual transition creates a sense of being in limbo, neither fully belonging to one cultural group nor another. The *mestiza* constantly grapples with the dilemma of the mixed breed, trying to find a sense of belonging and authenticity within the complexity of her cultural heritage and identity.

In a similar way, Martinez discusses the concept of *la mestiza* employed by Gloria Anzaldúa. According to her, the term *la mestiza* refers to someone of mixed heritage or background, navigating the intricate intersections of various cultures, languages and traditions. This individual exists at the crossroads of different worlds, constantly negotiating the contrasting aspects of his cultural identity (559). The struggle that Anzaldúa describes involves the clash and fusion of diverse frames of reference that the *mestiza* embodies. This clash arises from the collision of different cultural norms, belief systems and ways of



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understanding the world. The mestiza is torn between these contrasting elements, leading to an internal conflict and a sense of being pulled in multiple directions simultaneously.

The concept of cultural collision pertains to the discord and strain that emerge when varying cultural structures intersect, frequently resulting in feelings of friction, perplexity, or disorientation. This collision is not only external, manifesting in interactions with others and societal expectations, but also internal, as the mestiza grapples with the complexity of their own identity and the merging of disparate aspects of self. Actually, Anzaldúa's exploration of the struggle faced by la mestiza sheds light on the challenges and richness inherent in embodying multiple, often discordant identities. It notes the need to embrace this complexity, navigate the borders between cultures and forge a sense of wholeness and empowerment from the synthesis of diverse experiences and perspectives.

Moreover, Emma Pérez highlights the importance of moving beyond colonialist history by reclaiming feminist narratives in her work, drawing on the concept of Borderlands. She suggests that by engaging in a process of recovering feminist history, one can transcend colonial perspectives and embrace a decolonial imaginary that incorporates a third space feminist critique (qtd. in Cantú 113). Pérez believes that this procedure is doubtful to produce post-colonial identities that transcend national borders. Pérez's notion of a third space Chicana feminist perspective resonates with Gloria Anzaldúa's idea of the Borderlands or *Nepantla*, which signifies a space of in-betweenness and hybridity. Additionally, Chela Sandoval's concept of differential consciousness contributes to this framework, adding further dimensions to Anzaldúan thought and enriching the Chicana feminist critique (qtd. in Cantú 113). Scholars like Pérez and Sandoval expand the horizons of women's studies and demonstrate the transformative power of Anzaldúan ideas in shaping contemporary feminist discourse. The convergence of these viewpoints provides a detailed comprehension of identity, resistance, and emancipation in the framework of postcolonial circumstances.

Furthermore, Anzaldúa reflects a feminist analysis of power dynamics within culture, particularly in relation to gender. Just as some Muslim feminists think, she asserts that culture is shaped by men in power (16, 22), where she highlights the systemic inequalities that privilege men in establishing societal norms and expectations. She underscores the traditional roles assigned to them, reinforcing the idea of women as caretakers and preservers of cultural traditions. The author further illustrates the restrictive and often oppressive structures imposed upon women within patriarchal societies. For her, these roles confine women to narrow paths

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dictated by societal expectations, denying them agency and autonomy (17). Anzaldúa calls for a shift towards greater gender equality and empowerment (23). This expansion of opportunities allows women to challenge traditional roles and pursue self-autonomy, marking progress towards dismantling oppressive patriarchal cultural norms.

Anzaldúa sheds light on the hard challenges encountered by individuals in the diaspora, as they grapple with their cultural identity amidst societal expectations to adhere to the prevailing cultural standards, all the while experiencing a sense of detachment from their own heritage. This conflict often leads to a sense of alienation and many other disadvantages. Failure to completely integrate into the prevailing culture might result in difficulties regarding social and economic progress (Anzaldúa 63). The author highlights the internal struggle of inhabiting this liminal space between two cultures, where neither fully embraces them.

This dual identity can create a sense of not belonging fully to either culture, leading to feelings of being insignificant or invisible. The pressure to navigate between these cultural values can be overwhelming and emotionally taxing, as one wrestles with the tension of balancing conflicting aspects of their cultural identity. The internalization of this borderland conflict can result in a feeling of emptiness or non-existence, as the sense of self becomes intertwined with contradictory cultural expectations. Despite these challenges, Anzaldúa also hints at moments of clarity and empowerment when the diasporic individual asserts their existence and agency. This ongoing negotiation of identity is a central theme in the lived experiences of individuals in diaspora literature, reflecting the dynamics and nuances of cultural belonging and disconnection.

Anzaldúa delves into the complex experience of women who feel estranged from both their mother culture and the dominant culture. The woman experiences a deep feeling of disconnection and solitude, perceiving herself as a stranger in both realms. This alienation extends to her inner self, where she struggles to find a sense of belonging and security (20). The term "alien" in the dominant culture emphasizes the feeling of being perceived as foreign or other, further deepening the woman's sense of displacement and vulnerability. This alienation affects her external interactions and permeates her innermost thoughts and feelings, leaving her feeling paralyzed and unable to respond. Anzaldúa vividly portrays the liminal space that the woman occupies, she exists in a state of in-betweenness, neither fully belonging to her mother culture nor accepted into the dominant culture. This ambiguous position leaves her trapped and unable to fully engage with any single identity or cultural framework. This

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negotiation reflects the complexities of cultural identity formation in contexts characterized by cultural hybridity and displacement.

In addition to the aforementioned, Anzaldúa's theoretical framework highlights the value of participating in decolonial acts of resistance aimed at challenging prevailing power structures and oppressive ideologies that perpetuate inequality and marginalization within society. Within diasporic literature, characters partake in processes of decolonization and cultural resistance through the reclaiming and appreciation of marginalized traditions, languages, histories and other elements of their cultural heritage. Through their narratives, they challenge colonial discourses and assert their agency in shaping their own cultural identities and futures. Through her work, Anzaldúa emphasizes the significance of individuals living in borderland spaces to actively reclaim, preserve and honour their unique cultural heritage and epistemologies, which have often been marginalized or suppressed by dominant forces (16).

She also highlights the importance of recognizing and supporting various forms of knowledge and existence to promote a more inclusive and fair societal setting, promoting the refusal of assimilation and the protection against cultural extinction. She describes a profound self-awareness and determination from a young age. She emphasizes her sense of identity, beliefs and sense of fairness, which informed her strong will and resistance to conforming to external expectations (Anzaldúa 16). Anzaldúa's stubbornness, as she describes it, indicates a persistent drive to assert her individual agency and to shape her life in alignment with her own principles, values and convictions, regardless of societal norms or pressures. This early defiance suggests a deep-rooted commitment to living authentically and with integrity, even in the face of challenges or opposition from others.

Moreover, the author of *Borderlands* speaks of the "rebel" or "Shadow-beast" within her, as she delves into the concept of an untamed, defiant aspect of her personality (Anzaldúa 16). This inner rebel symbolizes a primal force within her that resists external commands, and challenges the authority of her conscious self. It operates beyond her rational control, posing a threat to the established order she seeks to maintain over her thoughts and actions. This Shadow-beast embodies a deep-seated aversion to all forms of limitation, including those imposed by societal norms or her own self-imposed boundaries. It represents a raw, instinctual defiance against any form of confinement or restriction.

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Through this depiction, Anzaldúa captures the complexity of the diasporic individual's nature, where there exists a perpetual struggle between compliance and rebellion. This inner conflict reflects a universal theme of the push-and-pull dynamics that shape cultural identity and the constant negotiation between personal freedom and societal constraints. Ultimately, Anzaldúa's exploration of the Shadow-beast serves as a potent metaphor for the internal forces that drive diasporic people to assert their individuality, challenge authority and resist limitations in their ongoing quest for self-expression, sovereignty and cultural identity.

Furthermore, in diaspora literature, characters may navigate multiple languages, dialects and linguistic registers as they negotiate their cultural identity across borders. Anzaldúa emphasizes the power of language to shape identity and consciousness. By incorporating a blend of different languages and dialects, she reflects on the creation of a new language for those who do not neatly fit into the constraints of existing linguistic frameworks, while speaking on the complexities of authenticity and the quest for cultural identity within the context of the Borderlands. This linguistic mixture or the "new language" as she refers to functions as a method of regaining control and affirming a feeling of inclusion in a society that frequently ignores or underplays the experiences of individuals who are marginalized (Anzaldúa x, 55).

Her creation of a language that is a fusion of existing linguistic elements but is distinct and authentic to the diasporic experience represents a form of resistance against cultural erasure and a declaration of cultural pride. Instead of seeking validation or approval from dominant groups, she calls for mutual respect and understanding. Thus, she advocates for a shift in the dynamics of communication, where diasporic ethnicities no longer feel the need to constantly apologize or explain themselves, but rather assert their presence and seek reciprocal engagement. Actually, Anzaldúa's invitation to embrace this new *mestiza* language extends beyond the linguistic realm; it encompasses a broader invitation to acknowledge and celebrate the richness of diversity, hybridity and complexity that characterizes the Borderlands and the diasporic people who inhabit them. It is a plea for inclusivity, understanding and a willingness to engage with difference without imposing norms or demanding conformity.

Anzaldúa posits that a profound correlation exists between language and cultural identity. She claims that to truly wound her, one must attack her language, as it is intricately tied to who she is. The ability to take pride in her language is paramount, as it directly influences her sense of self-worth (59). Anzaldúa challenges the notion that certain languages are more

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legitimate than others, highlighting the importance of accepting and embracing linguistic diversity. By asserting her right to express herself bilingually and switch between languages without the constant need for translation, she advocates for linguistic freedom, autonomy and what Simon Gikandi calls it “creative schizophrenia”. He argues that

The writer who operates in the space between cultural traditions draws inventive energies from ‘creative schizophrenia’: speaking in an androgynous idiom, this writer does not have to choose between self and community, between private discourse and a national language, or even between the subjective experience and historical traditions. (qtd. in Islam 52)

Gikandi's concept resonates with Anzaldúa's writing style, as she embodies the idea of embracing multiple identities and cultural influences without adhering to binary categorizations. Anzaldúa's work reflects a fluidity and interconnectedness that transcends rigid boundaries, allowing her to authentically express the diverse aspects of her cultural identity as a Chicana woman. At the hand of incorporating various languages, genres and perspectives into her writing, Anzaldúa celebrates the richness and complexity of her heritage, while also challenging traditional notions of fixed identity.

In doing so, Anzaldúa's writing exemplifies the idea of embracing the plurality of experiences and voices within diaspora literature, showcasing how diverse influences can coexist harmoniously to create a more inclusive narrative. She rejects the expectation to conform to a single language for the sake of convenience or societal norms. She expresses her resolve to no longer experience shame for her presence, affirming her entitlement to speak up and liberate herself from the stifling conventions of silence. Anzaldúa's message resonates with the struggle for cultural acceptance faced by many individuals who exist in the intersection of different cultural identities, especially when living in the diaspora. Her call for embracing diversity, reclaiming language and asserting one's voice serves as a powerful assertion of agency and authenticity.

Furthermore, Anzaldúa asserts how deeply rooted people's sense of identity can be. She proposes that the cultural identity of diasporic individuals is influenced not solely by apparent elements like music or language but also by sensory encounters like food and aromas. In her

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case, the aroma of the spices used by her mother in cooking triggers a strong connection to her homeland and evokes memories of shared meals with loved ones (Anzaldúa 61). These sensory encounters have the capacity to act as potent triggers of an individual's cultural background and can elicit feelings of yearning or wistfulness for their origins, regardless of their physical distance. Through utilizing these sensory stimuli, individuals from diasporic communities are unlikely to access a profound reservoir of feelings and recollections that contribute to the formation of their cultural identity and attachment to their cultural heritage.

In her book, Anzaldúa delves into the concept of the "new mestiza," a term that encapsulates a person, typically a woman, of mixed heritage or background (Martinez 559). The essence of the new mestiza lies in her ability for navigating the complexities of living within multiple cultures simultaneously, in the diaspora. Anzaldúa emphasizes that the new mestiza copes by embracing contradictions and ambiguity, developing a capacity to hold opposing truths without feeling the need to reject any part of her cultural identity (79). The new mestiza embodies a pluralistic personality, one that is comfortable operating in diverse cultural contexts without the need to conform to singular definitions of identity. Through this process of juggling cultures, the new mestiza maintains a state of ambivalence without being overwhelmed by it. This ability to hold space for contradictions and ambivalence is seen as strength, enabling the new mestiza to transcend traditional notions of identity and embrace a new consciousness, a mestiza consciousness.

This mestiza consciousness is not just about merging disparate elements but about transcending them to create something entirely new and greater than the sum of its parts. It requires a constant effort to deconstruct current paradigms and establish a fresh narrative, a new manner of existing and acting that embodies the complex and profound nature of the mestiza encounter. In this respect, Martinez explains Gloria Anzaldúa's concept of a mestiza consciousness, which involves simultaneously rejecting and embracing elements in order to avoid excluding anything that it critically evaluates. This consciousness allows for the perception of multiple realities at the same time, reflecting Anzaldúa's oppositional stance while also contributing significantly to the development of a Chicana feminist standpoint (558, 559).

This standpoint encompasses a critical awareness aimed at unravelling dominant ideologies, as well as a framework for interpreting and creating knowledge that equips individuals with the tools to resist oppression. Anzaldúa highlights the significance of the

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mestiza consciousness in challenging hegemonic norms and offering resources for empowerment. Moreover, Anzaldúa suggests that the future belongs to individuals who can straddle multiple cultures and paradigms, embodying a mestiza consciousness that thrives on creative motion and the continual evolution of identity and culture (80). This consciousness, while intense and sometimes painful, is a source of energy that propels the new mestiza forward into a future where unity, diversity and synthesis reign supreme. In essence, the new mestiza represents a powerful symbol of the potential for growth and transformation inherent in embracing the contradictions and complexities of the multicultural diaspora.

In the same vein, Anzaldúa compares the mestiza to corn, in which she emphasizes the resilience and adaptability of individuals shaped by the blending of different cultures. Just as corn is a product of crossbreeding that thrives under diverse conditions, the mestiza embodies a similar ability to navigate complexities and contradictions. The imagery of the ear of corn, symbolizing femininity and fertility, highlights the mestiza's strength and determination in preserving her cultural identity while existing in between different worlds (Anzaldúa 81). The reference to the husks and kernels of corn signifies the mestiza's deep connection to her cultural roots and traditions, much like how corn clings to its cob. The description of the mestiza as having thick stalks and strong brace roots conveys her groundedness and resilience in the face of challenges at the crossroads of cultures.

Despite encountering ambiguity and conflicting forces, the mestiza is portrayed as capable of enduring and thriving in such liminal spaces. Thus, Anzaldúa underscores the mestiza's capacity to survive and flourish through embracing diversity and complexity. This metaphorical language suggests that the mestiza has the strength and adaptability to withstand the pressures of cultural intersections and forge a new consciousness, a cultural identity that transcends traditional paradigms and embraces the fluidity of multiple cultural influences. Ultimately, Anzaldúa's imagery of the mestiza as corn conveys a powerful message about the transformative potential of embracing one's hybrid cultural identity and navigating the complexities of a diverse world.

Anzaldúa discusses the importance of both individuals and racial communities articulating their needs and affirming their identities. She highlights the importance of voicing opposition to the injustices and marginalization endured by these communities from dominant groups, particularly within the structure of white society (85). By calling for acknowledgment and acceptance from the majority culture, she is advocating for a transformation in power

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dynamics and recognition of historical wrongs. Anzaldúa's statements implore the white community to acknowledge and assume accountability for the injuries suffered by diasporic individuals, such as the refusal to recognize their humanity and the erosion of their sense of worth. Anzaldúa stresses the value of admitting these prior wrongdoings as a method to assist in the process of healing, reconciliation and the establishment of a fairer future for all members of society. She is promoting a shift in the prevailing mindset that questions the existing state of affairs and requires responsibility from those who have profited from systemic inequities. Her statements convey a sense of immediacy and a call to action, encouraging both individuals and broader social systems to address and remedy the historical and persistent cycles of oppression and bias experienced by marginalized communities.

Gloria Anzaldúa uses powerful imagery and metaphors to convey the complex experience of living in the borderlands. By stating that living in the Borderlands involves fighting against various forces like the temptation of wealth, violence and oppression, she highlights the constant struggle and resistance faced by individuals in these liminal spaces. Anzaldúa expresses how individuals in the Borderlands embody a multitude of contradictions - being both at home and a stranger, where even familial ties can become sources of conflict. The reference to being wounded in action or fighting back while being considered dead alludes to the harsh realities and challenges faced by those navigating these in-between spaces. The vivid description of the mill with razor teeth symbolizes the relentless and oppressive nature of societal norms and expectations that seek to eradicate one's cultural identity and autonomy. By virtue of emphasizing the necessity of living without borders and embracing the role of a crossroads, Anzaldúa advocates for a fluid and hybrid identity that transcends conventional boundaries and binaries. Actually, her words call for a deep reflection on the complexities of cultural identity, resistance and survival in the Borderlands, where she urges individuals to confront and navigate the intersecting forces that seek to confine and oppress them (194, 195).

Moreover, Collins states that Anzaldúa's writing is an act of opposition within the structural, hegemonic, and interpersonal domains of power as she constructs new knowledge. Here, Anzaldúa challenges and resists existing power structures through her writing. Her work speaks to and confronts dominant cultural norms, societal hierarchies and power dynamics, offering alternative perspectives and generating new understandings of the world (qtd. in Martinez 540). As a result of critically examining and reshaping these power dynamics, Anzaldúa's written work emerges as a mode of opposition and a mechanism for



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promoting transformation and empowerment. Through her examination of individual encounters, cultural identities and past events within the dispersed community, Anzaldúa dismantles oppressive frameworks and establishes platforms for underrepresented voices to gain recognition and significance. This procedure of forming fresh insights challenges prevailing power hierarchies while also nurturing the emergence of alternative perspectives, understandings, and ways of existence in society.

Martinez draws attention to Anzaldúa's efforts to confront and dismantle widespread stereotypes that pervade society and perpetuate unequal power dynamics. Anzaldúa challenges these stereotypes that are rooted in what Collins characterizes as the dominating sphere of power, which influences people's thoughts and beliefs through the control of concepts, visuals, representations and belief systems (Martinez 547). This mechanism of creating ideologies is particularly visible in Western societies, where common beliefs depict marginalized groups as outsiders, as foreign invaders disrupting a supposedly superior Western lifestyle.

Martinez's analysis underscores the significance of Anzaldúa's work in resisting and overturning these damaging stereotypes that have been ingrained in societal structures. By questioning and deconstructing these harmful beliefs about the "Other," Anzaldúa aims to shed light on the manufactured nature of these ideologies and the ways in which they uphold existing power structures. This critical examination serves to challenge the current situation and encourage a more inclusive and equitable understanding of different identities and lived experiences.

Furthermore, Martinez highlights Anzaldúa's portrayal of a disturbing pattern of colonization, enslavement and exploitation directed towards various marginalized groups such as indigenous women, mestizas, Mexicanas and Chicanas. By describing these systematic and bureaucratic processes, Anzaldúa sheds light on the enduring legacy of oppression and subjugation faced by these communities. Moreover, Martinez's reference to Mitchell and Feagin's discussion emphasizes the agency and resilience of individuals belonging to these oppressed subordinate groups (Martinez 555). It is emphasized that individuals within these communities display autonomy, innovation, and tenacity in the presence of oppressive circumstances and power dynamics attempting to marginalize and disempower them. Through shaping their own narratives and creating alternative realities, they challenge the prevailing oppressive structures.

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This acknowledgement of agency and resistance among marginalized groups acts as a refutation to the storyline of helplessness and passivity frequently enforced on them by individuals in positions of authority. It emphasizes the significance of acknowledging the proactive involvement of individuals in moulding their own identities, cultures, and methods of resistance when confronted with systematic oppression and discrimination. In virtue of acknowledging the agency and creative defiance of these communities, Martinez underscores the potential for transformative change and the emergence of counter-narratives that defy and disrupt oppressive norms and structures.

### 2.3.4. Comparative Analysis

De Zepetnek emphasizes that in the study and research of culture; it is not the "what" but the "how" that is of importance, the author aligns with constructivist principles, which focus on the processes and methods by which knowledge is constructed and understood (1). This constructivist tenet prioritizes the ways in which cultural phenomena are explored and analysed, rather than the specific cultural artefacts themselves, and this pertains to the main research question posed by the researcher. Furthermore, the author argues that comparative analysis in cultural studies should avoid establishing hierarchies. To "compare" does not mean to rank or judge one cultural product as better as or worse than another. Instead, the comparative approach should aim to understand and appreciate the differences and similarities without imposing value judgments.

Methodology, therefore, becomes crucial in ensuring that comparisons are conducted equitably and rigorously. In the field of literature and cultural studies, it is imperative for scholars to be diligent in their approaches, ensuring that they acknowledge and honour the intricate and distinct nature of the cultural objects under examination. By focusing on the "how," researchers can avoid biases and provide more nuanced and comprehensive analyses. This approach underscores the importance of process-oriented and methodologically sound research in the field of comparative cultural studies.

Consequently, the comparative approach can be considered as a reliable and powerful analytical instrument in the exploration of cultural identity in diaspora literature, especially in relation to female protagonists. When placing the experience, perspective and cultural context of the protagonists of *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* next to one another, the paper shows similarities, differences and repeating patterns not immediately noticeable when reading novels separately. Thus, comparison and contrast allow for a more in-depth

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investigation of the themes, character construction and overall narrative, which helps to develop a comprehensive understanding of cultural identity identification in diasporic areas. Comparison of two female protagonists in two fundamentally different novels is instrumental in the exploration of the difference in cultural background, character encounters and perceived self.

Both narratives of *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* present contrasted depictions of diasporic encounters, indicating diverse cultural and communal milieus. These opposites enable the research to identify several specific challenges, dilemmas and coping strategies employed by the protagonists to negotiate their cultural identities. In relation to increasing complexity and depth, this juxtapositional setup further develops a finely nuanced perspective of the interconnectedness of gender, culture and identity in diaspora literature. Additionally, by analysing the characters' journeys in parallel, the report identifies topic-based patterns in cultural identity gaming, religious positioning, gender dimorphism and societal-condemnation.

These commonalities unveil broader trends within diaspora literature, contributing to a richer comprehension of the knotted dynamism of cultural identity within diasporic communities. Additionally, a comparative analysis aids in situating and generalizing findings beyond individual novels. By way of examining multiple texts within a comparative framework, this study can draw parallels between specific literary representations and broader sociocultural occurrences. This contextualization enables the recognition of overarching trends, obstacles and prospects within diaspora literature, shaping conversations about diversity, portrayal and cultural identity in both literary works and society. In essence, selecting a comparative approach is justified by its capacity to intensify the analysis, illuminate differences and parallels, contextualize discoveries, and foster a more holistic understanding of cultural identity in diaspora literature.

### **2.4. The Intersection of Muslim Feminism and Borderlands Theory in Diaspora Studies**

This research presents a unique approach to examining cultural identity in diaspora literature by combining Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory. While feminist literary criticism has traditionally been utilized to analyse gender dynamics in literature, the inclusion of Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory broadens the analytical scope to encompass intersections of religion, culture, language and identity. This integration offers a more

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inclusive understanding of the experiences of female protagonists in diaspora literature, particularly within diverse cultural and linguistic contexts. As a result of merging these two frameworks, this study aims to unravel the complex nature of cultural identity negotiation, shedding light on the complex influences that shape the experiences of women in diaspora literature.

Islamic Feminism emphasizes the importance of recognizing and valuing the various cultural identities that Muslim women go through. It opposes the oversimplified depiction of Muslim women and instead emphasizes the variety of their experiences. Similarly, Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory explores the concept of *Nepantla* or *mestizaje*, a state of being in-between different cultures, identities, and social worlds. Anzaldúa delves into the ways in which individuals, particularly those belonging to marginalized communities, manoeuvre through various interconnected identities such as race, gender, and sexuality. These frameworks underscore the intricate nature of identity and emphasize the importance of recognizing individuals as multidimensional entities. They resist simplified, singular narratives and instead embrace the fluidity and multiplicity of identities.

In addition, Muslim Feminism advocates for the rights and agency of Muslim women within their cultural and religious contexts. It challenges patriarchal interpretations of Islamic texts and promotes women's autonomy in both private and public spheres. Anzaldúa's theoretical framework highlights the significance of challenging oppressive systems and establishing environments that allow marginalized perspectives to be expressed. It celebrates the act of speaking out and asserting one's identity against dominant cultural narratives. Both theories empower individuals to resist and challenge oppressive systems. They emphasize the importance of reclaiming agency and voice, whether through reinterpretation of religious texts in Muslim Feminism or through the assertion of hybrid identities in Borderlands theory.

Furthermore, Muslim Feminism acknowledges the diverse cultural backgrounds of Muslim women, many of whom live in diaspora communities. It recognizes that these women often navigate between their heritage and the dominant culture of their host countries. Anzaldúa introduces the concept of "mestiza consciousness," which embraces the ambiguity and hybridity of living between cultures. This consciousness allows for a more inclusive, flexible identity that transcends binary categorizations. Both frameworks celebrate cultural hybridity and the fluidity of identity. They acknowledge that existing within multiple cultures can serve

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as a catalyst for resilience and innovation, while also potentially leading to tension or uncertainty.

Moreover, Muslim Feminism challenges Western feminist narratives that often portray Muslim women as oppressed and in need of liberation. It argues for a more nuanced understanding that respects the agency and choices of Muslim women within their cultural and religious contexts. Anzaldúa's work challenges normative narratives about race, gender, and sexuality. She calls for a broader, more inclusive understanding of identity that acknowledges the lived experiences of marginalized individuals. Both theories seek to broaden the discourse around identity and oppression, challenging dominant narratives that fail to capture the complexity of individuals' lives. They advocate for a more inclusive, respectful approach to understanding different forms of cultural identity in diaspora literature. By recognizing the multiplicity of cultural identities which individuals navigate and how these identities intersect and impact each other, the study challenges fixed notions of cultural identity and engages in broader discussions on diversity, inclusivity and representation in literature and society. In sum, the integration of Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory in this research marks a significant advancement in the fields of diaspora literature and feminist literary criticism.

Although Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory have distinct areas of focus, with Muslim Feminism mainly emphasizing the rights and empowerment of Muslim women and Borderlands theory, as articulated by Gloria Anzaldúa, examining the experiences of marginalized groups such as Lesbian women, both theories ultimately aim to promote women's rights in various contexts. Notwithstanding their variations, both theories meet at the central principle of championing for the rights and agency of women, no matter their religious or cultural ties. They underscore the importance of intersectionality by acknowledging that women's experiences are influenced by various factors including religion, culture, ethnicity, and sexuality. Religion is crucial in moulding cultural identity and impacting beliefs, behaviours, and societal relationships. For the female protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, their religious identities are integral to their cultural self-perception and their experiences within diasporic communities.

Therefore, combining Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory provides a comprehensive and nuanced framework for analysing how these protagonists navigate their cultural identities. By using these two theories, this study aims to defend the rights of the

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female protagonists, highlighting their struggles and triumphs as they assert their cultural identities within the diaspora. The intersectional approach facilitated by these theories allows for a deeper investigation into the complexities of cultural identity negotiation, providing insights into how religion, culture and gender intersect in the lives of diaspora women. This combined theoretical framework is particularly suited to exploring the protagonists' journeys, as it acknowledges and addresses the multifaceted nature of their identities and experiences.

### **2.5. Justification of the Chosen Theories and Methodologies**

Feminist literary criticism offers a significant viewpoint for examining literature through the examination of gender dynamics, power hierarchies and the portrayal of women's encounters. It aims to challenge patriarchal norms and biases in literary texts, especially in how women have been historically marginalized. In her article "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies," Cooke affirms that feminism offers a broad perspective that transcends cultural boundaries and norms. This perspective allows individuals to recognize instances where there are unjust or unequal expectations placed on women regarding how they should be treated or behave (92). It also highlights the importance of rejecting these unfair expectations and promoting activism to bring about positive changes. Examining problems from a feminist perspective gives individuals the opportunity to enhance their comprehension of the widespread presence of gender disparity and strive towards establishing a fairer and more impartial society that caters to all individuals, irrespective of their cultural heritage.

In the context of diaspora literature, this approach sheds light on how female protagonists navigate cultural identities. Muslim Feminism enhances feminist literary analysis by focusing on the experiences of Muslim women within the realms of gender, religion, and culture. It highlights their autonomy and wide-ranging experiences as a means to question preconceived notions. Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* theory complements this by exploring the fluidity of identities where cultures converge. By integrating these frameworks, the researcher can delve into the complexities of diaspora literature, particularly regarding marginalized women negotiating cultural identities in liminal spaces. This multidisciplinary method enhances our comprehension of gender, culture, and identity within society by analysing them through the perspective of literature.

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In this study, the researcher combines Muslim Feminism and Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory, because they provide an intersectional lens through which to examine the complexities of cultural identity in diaspora literature. Muslim Feminism acknowledges the complex and diverse nature of identity in which it understands the interconnectedness of different aspects such as gender, religion, ethnicity and culture, all of which collectively shape individuals' experiences and viewpoints in diasporic societies. Similarly, Borderlands theory emphasizes the intersectionality of identities in borderland spaces, where multiple cultural, linguistic, and historical influences converge. Thus, by integrating these theories, this study aims to explore how cultural identity is shaped by and intersects with other aspects of identity, offering a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of the female protagonists in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

In addition, the examination of agency and resistance within diasporic contexts is an essential aspect of this study, particularly concerning the cultural identity of female protagonists. Muslim Feminism foregrounds the agency of marginalized groups, including women within Muslim communities, and emphasizes acts of resistance against patriarchal norms and societal expectations. Similarly, Borderlands theory highlights acts of resistance and cultural reclamation in borderland spaces, where individuals, especially women assert their identities in the face of marginalization and patriarchy. By using these two theories, this research seeks to examine how the female main characters perceive, navigate and negotiate their cultural identities while living in the diaspora. This investigation delves into the methods through which they demonstrate autonomy and challenge oppressive societal systems.

Furthermore, the framework of Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory also allows for an examination of cultural hybridity and fluidity within diaspora literature. Muslim Feminism acknowledges the diverse ways in which individuals negotiate and embody cultural identities within diaspora communities, challenging monolithic representations. Similarly, Borderlands theory embraces the concept of *mestizaje* or cultural hybridity, emphasizing the fluidity and interconnectedness of cultural identities. Consequently, this study explores the dynamic nature of cultural identity, transcending rigid boundaries and embracing the complexities of hybrid identities within diasporic literature.

Within the narrative analysis of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, the integration of Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory provides valuable insights into the experiences of the female protagonists. These theories

offer lenses through which to analyse character motivations, relationships, and cultural dynamics, enriching our understanding of the narratives. With the help of examining the overlapping relationship of gender, culture, conflict and identity within the novels, this study seeks to uncover the nuanced ways in which the protagonists navigate their cultural identities, exploring themes of agency, resistance, cultural hybridity and others within diasporic literature.

### 2.5.1. Relevance to Research Question and Sub-Questions

The principal research question is: How do the female protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* negotiate their cultural identities within diasporic contexts? This research question serves as the focal point of the study, directing attention to the experiences of the female protagonists in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* within the complex framework of diasporic communities. The study seeks to explore deeper themes of identity, belonging and cultural blending in diaspora literature through an analysis of how the characters manage their cultural identities. This investigation is guided by specific sub-questions that aim to get deeper into the details of the protagonists' encounters and engagements with their cultural roots, societal pressures and individual empowerment. The sub-questions are:

- What role does religion play in shaping the cultural identity of the female protagonists?
- How do the female protagonists navigate the tensions of cultural acculturation within diasporic societies?
- What strategies do the female protagonists employ to assert agency and resist societal expectations regarding gender roles and cultural norms?
- How do the novels depict the complexities of cultural hybridity and the fluid nature of cultural identity within diaspora communities?

The exploration of religion as a shaping force in the cultural identity of the female protagonists is integral to understanding the complexities of their experiences within diasporic contexts. Muslim Feminism provides a significant perspective for examining the connections between religion, gender and culture, offering valuable understandings of how individuals interact with their Muslim identities. In consequence of drawing on Muslim Feminist perspectives, this study seeks to uncover how religious beliefs and practices influence the



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protagonists' sense of self, their relationships with others, and their navigation of cultural expectations and norms within diaspora communities.

Moreover, the tensions of cultural integration within diasporic societies present notable challenges for the female protagonists as they aim to merge their cultural heritage with the demands of their new environments. Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory provides a framework for understanding the liminal spaces where multiple cultures converge, offering insights into the protagonists' experiences of cultural hybridity and belonging. By applying Borderlands theory, this study aims to explore how the protagonists negotiate these tensions, examining the ways in which they navigate between cultural traditions and assimilation pressures, and the impact of these dynamics on their sense of identity and belonging.

The protagonists' resistance against societal expectations regarding gender roles and cultural norms is a central theme in understanding their negotiation of cultural identities. Muslim Feminism focuses on highlighting the empowerment of marginalized factions, such as women in both Muslim and non-Muslim societies, and their defiance of patriarchal standards. By examining the protagonists' actions and decisions through a Muslim Feminist lens, this study aims to uncover the strategies they employ to assert their agency and challenge oppressive structures within diaspora communities, shedding light on the complexities of gendered experiences and cultural expectations.

The novels *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* offer rich portrayals of cultural hybridity and the fluid nature of cultural identity within diaspora contexts, providing valuable insights into the complexities of diasporic experiences. Therefore, drawing on both Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory, this study examines how the protagonists navigate the intersections of multiple cultural influences, negotiating their identities in dynamic and evolving ways. By examining the selected novels through these theories, the study seeks to expose the implications of cultural hybridity, exploring how the characters' identities are moulded by their involvement with diverse cultural practices, languages and historical contexts prevalent in diasporic societies.

### **2.5.2. Rationale for Novel Selection**

The two novels under study present female protagonists grappling with cultural identity, belonging and resistance amidst diasporic settings. Their stories offer a rich exploration of cultural identity negotiation, making them ideal subjects for this comparative analysis. Both

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works were released in the 21st century, capturing modern viewpoints on diaspora encounters and the negotiation of cultural identities. This contemporary context ensures the research's alignment with current discussions in diaspora literature and cultural studies. Additionally, the novels are written in English, enhancing their accessibility to broad readers and research community. This linguistic feature enables a wider audience to engage with the narratives and supports the dissemination of research findings across academic and literary platforms.

The settings of both novels are situated within diaspora communities, providing rich cultural landscapes for exploring questions of identity, belonging and cultural hybridity. The diasporic settings serve as a backdrop for examining the complexities of cultural identity negotiation and offer insights into the diverse experiences of diaspora communities. Both novels reflect on socio-cultural motives, including religious beliefs, societal expectations, and familial pressures. These socio-cultural dimensions shape the experiences of the female protagonists and provide fertile ground for analysing the negotiation of cultural identities within diaspora contexts.

### 2.5.3. Criteria for Choosing the Female Protagonists

The selection of female protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* was guided by several key criteria, ensuring that the chosen characters are representative of the complexities of cultural identity negotiation within diaspora literature: Both protagonists, Najwa in *Minaret* and Amal in *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, occupy central roles within their respective narratives. Their experiences and struggles are focal points of the novels, making them suitable subjects for exploring questions of cultural identity and belonging. Najwa and Amal come from diverse cultural backgrounds, reflecting the heterogeneity of diaspora experiences. Najwa, a Sudanese immigrant living in London, and Amal, an Australian-born Palestinian-Egyptian, navigate different cultural landscapes and grapple with unique challenges related to their cultural identities. The female protagonists are characterized by their complexity, agency and resilience. They defy simplistic stereotypes and embody multifaceted identities shaped by their cultural heritage, personal experiences, and societal contexts. Their nuanced portrayals allow for a deeper exploration of the intersectionality of gender, culture, and identity within diaspora literature.

Both protagonists grapple with questions of religious belonging and cultural identity. Najwa's journey as a devout Muslim woman in secular London and Amal's decision to wear

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the hijab in Australia highlight the complexities of negotiating religious and cultural affiliations within diaspora contexts. Najwa and Amal confront societal expectations and norms that dictate their roles and behaviours based on gender, ethnicity, and cultural background. Their struggles against patriarchal structures and cultural stereotypes illustrate the agency and resilience of diaspora women in asserting their identities and aspirations. The protagonists navigate the complexities of cultural hybridity and adaptation as they negotiate between multiple cultural worlds. Their experiences of straddling different cultural identities, languages, and traditions underscore the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural identity within diaspora communities.

### **2.6. Conclusion**

This chapter provides a comprehensive overview of the methodology employed in this study to explore the negotiation of cultural identities by the female protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*. Through the selection of theoretical frameworks, namely Muslim Feminism, Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory, and literary analysis as the primary methodological approach, this study seeks to delve into the complexities of diaspora experiences and cultural identity negotiation within contemporary literature. The justification for choosing *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* as the focus of this study was rooted in their thematic relevance, contemporary significance, and cultural, linguistic and historical considerations. These novels offer rich portrayals of diaspora communities, female agency, and cultural hybridity, making them ideal subjects for this comparative analysis. The criteria used to select the female protagonists, Najwa and Amal, were guided by their centrality to the narratives, diverse cultural backgrounds, and complex characterizations, ensuring that their experiences embody various aspects of cultural identity. In the following chapters, these methodological tools will be applied to conduct a comparative analysis of *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, unravelling the dynamics of cultural identity negotiation, religious affiliation, gender and societal expectations within diaspora literature.

# **Chapter Three**

**Exploring Cultural Identity Through the  
Protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look  
Big in This?***

## Chapter 3: Exploring Cultural Identity Through the Protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

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### Chapter 3: Exploring Cultural Identity Through the Protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

#### 3.1. Introduction

This chapter delves into the complicated processes through which the female protagonists in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* and Randa Abdel-Fattah's *Does My Head Look Big in This?* negotiate their cultural identities within their respective diasporic societies. By examining these characters' lives through the theoretical frameworks of Muslim Feminism and Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory, this chapter aims to uncover the multifaceted nature of cultural identity in diaspora literature. In *Minaret*, readers follow the journey of Najwa, a Sudanese immigrant in London, whose religious faith and cultural practices shape her cultural identity in profound ways. Similarly, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* introduces the readers to Amal, an Australian-Palestinian teenager, who grapples with her decision to wear the hijab and its implications on her cultural identity in a Western society. This chapter explores several dimensions of cultural identity, including religion, language, cultural practices, and clothing. By applying Muslim Feminism, the researcher will analyse how the protagonists' religious beliefs influence their self-perception and societal interactions. Additionally, Borderlands theory will provide insights into their experiences of cultural hybridity and the fluidity of their cultural identities as they navigate the intersections of their cultural heritage and their lives in the diaspora. The analysis is structured to first provide a contextual background for each novel, followed by a detailed examination of key aspects of cultural identity. This approach highlights the unique experiences of Najwa and Amal and also draws broader connections about the complexities of cultural identity negotiation in the diaspora. Through this investigation, the researcher's objective is to illuminate the methods by which these characters establish their autonomy and push back against societal norms, thereby enhancing comprehension of cultural identity in diasporic literature.

#### 3.2. Section 1: Analysis of *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela

##### 3.2.1. Contextual Background

In *Minaret*, the story unfolds in medias res<sup>1</sup> in which Leila Aboulela uses foreshadowing and flashback to paint a vivid picture of Sudan in the 1980s, a time of political unrest and

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<sup>1</sup> Medias res: A contemporary literary technique that means starting the narrative from the middle of the plot. "In medias res." Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, Merriam-Webster, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/in%20medias%20res>. Accessed 22 May. 2024.

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societal change. The protagonist, Najwa, originates from a prosperous and powerful family, enjoying a privileged existence in Khartoum. A young girl filled with the sense of empowerment just because she used to drive unveiled with too short skirts and tight blouses, towards the university in her own car, where female drivers were a minority and women comprised less than thirty per cent of university students. So, her independence has been a source of pride. 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. (Aboulela 15)

However, following a military overthrow of the regime, Najwa's father is detained and executed, leading to a period of upheaval within the family. After her father's arrest, Najwa, her twin brother Omar, known for his dissolute lifestyle, and their mother were compelled to flee to London. In London, Najwa and Omar initially indulged in shopping and leisure, seemingly oblivious to the gravity of their situation. The family's circumstances deteriorated further when Najwa's father was tried and executed. This outcome was exacerbated by the inflammatory articles penned by students like Anwar, a young member of the Communist front. Anwar frequently criticized the corrupt government and the elite, particularly targeting Najwa's father with accusations of corruption. Despite facing disapproval from her mother and the unsuitability of the relationship, Najwa discovered that she was developing romantic feelings for Anwar. Najwa says

I told Mama about him. She said, 'Don't risk your reputation and waste your time on someone who is never going to be a suitable husband for you.' She could see I was not convinced and her argument became tense. 'Your father would never approve. And you wouldn't be able to live that kind of life, no servants, no travelling. Believe me, you'd feel bad in front of your friends and the family. It would be such a humiliation for you and us.' (Aboulela 35)

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The situation in London deteriorated further for Najwa and her family. Abandoned by their acquaintances and lacking both employment and educational qualifications, they were forced to sell their luxurious apartment and move into a more modest one. Omar, severely addicted to drugs, sold all his valuable possessions, mistreated their mother, and even stole Najwa's jewellery to fund his addiction. His drug-related activities eventually led to his imprisonment, leaving their ailing mother in the hospital under Najwa's care. After some time, Najwa's mother passed away, leaving her completely alone. Najwa's maternal uncle, Saleh, had immigrated to Canada with his family and invited Najwa to join them. However, she refused to leave her brother behind, despite his long-term incarceration.

During her mother's funeral, a group of Muslim women came to perform the washing ritual. One of them, Wafaa, gave Najwa her phone number and invited her to attend classes at the mosque. Najwa, unfamiliar with religious practices at that time, carelessly threw the number into her bag. Shortly thereafter, Najwa received a condolence letter from Anwar, who was now living in London as a political asylum seeker. Anwar requested that Najwa contact him, setting aside their previous disagreements in Sudan. Meanwhile, Najwa began assisting Auntie Eva, the wife of Uncle Nabeel, an old family friend. Through this experience, Najwa learned how to cook and manage household chores, finding solace and companionship in their family.

Eventually, Najwa decided to contact Anwar, and they began meeting regularly. During their encounters, Anwar frequently teased her about her father and family. Rather than reacting with anger, Najwa often changed the subject to avoid conflict, seemingly striving to appease him. In her pursuit of his approval and admiration, she was persuaded to lose her virginity to him after he convinced her that it was a normal part of being a modern woman in London. However, Anwar persisted in demeaning her, frequently doing so in the presence of his friends (Aboulela 235). Subsequently, Uncle Nabeel's family relocated to another city, and Najwa found herself working as a maid for other families. Seeking stability and commitment, Najwa asked Anwar to marry her, but he declined, revealing that he was already engaged to his cousin, whom he later married and with whom he had two sons. Feeling a profound emptiness and the need to find a deeper sense of purpose, Najwa ended her relationship with Anwar and began attending the mosque.

Later, Najwa contacted Wafaa, who guided her in deepening her understanding of her faith, introduced her to mosque gatherings and assisted her in adopting the veil. During one of

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these gatherings, Lamya, a PhD student, visited the mosque seeking a maid who could also serve as a nanny for her young daughter, Mai. Consequently, Najwa began working for Lamya, who lived with her younger brother Tamer, a devout Muslim university student. Their mother, Doctora Zeinab, resided in Cairo but visited them periodically. Najwa settled into a routine, balancing her responsibilities at work with attending mosque gatherings and prayers.

Over time, she and Tamer developed a close friendship, bonded by their discussions on religious matters and mutual respect. This friendship eventually blossomed into love. One day, while Najwa was conversing with Tamer in his room, he suddenly kissed her, and Lamya walked in and witnessed the scene. Enraged, Lamya slapped Najwa and dismissed her from her position. Following this incident, Tamer left the house to live in the mosque, abandoning his studies. Doctora Zeinab then visited Najwa, offering her a substantial amount of money to leave Tamer for good, as he intended to marry Najwa despite their significant age difference. Obsessed with the idea of performing Hajj and helping her brother Omar start anew after his release from jail, Najwa accepted the offer. She began preparing for her pilgrimage to Mecca, all the while holding onto memories of her past life in Sudan.

### **3.2.2. Cultural Identity and Religion**

Najwa's exploration in *Minaret* beautifully illustrates the significant influence of religion on her cultural identity. As she delves deeper into her evolving Islamic beliefs, she uncovers a meaningful avenue to reshape her cultural sense of self, establish bonds within a community and cultivate resilience in the face of challenges. In her active participation within the mosque and meaningful exchanges with fellow Muslims, Najwa experiences a profound reinvigoration of purpose and a deepened sense of belonging, ultimately reshaping her understanding of the diaspora experience. This transformative journey highlights the power of faith in shaping one's cultural identity and fostering a sense of connection and direction in the midst of cultural displacement.

#### **3.2.2.1. The Evolution of Najwa's Faith**

Najwa's journey of faith in *Minaret* is a central theme that reflects her quest for cultural identity and belonging. At the outset, Najwa's engagement with Islam is superficial, given her upbringing in a non-religious, prosperous household in Sudan. However, she could sense a feeling of guilt sometimes. Najwa, talking to her best friend Randa about Islam, says



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‘What do we know? We don’t even pray.’ Sometimes I was struck with guilt . . . ‘When I fast in Ramadan, I pray. A girl in school told me that fasting doesn’t count unless you pray.’ Randa raised her eyebrows. ‘You spend half the month saying you’ve got your period and can’t fast!’ ‘Not half the month. I cheat a bit but not half the month.’ ‘Last year we were in London and we didn’t fast at all’ . . . I looked down at the picture and thought of all the girls in university who wore hijab and all the ones who wore tobés. Hair and arms covered by our national costume. (Aboulela 29, 30)

Even while living in Sudan, Najwa experienced a sense of incompleteness when she encountered Islamic contexts, though she could not fully comprehend or articulate this feeling. Thus, as Cohen claims in page five of the first chapter, she feels diasporic even in Sudan. For instance, one evening, as she was driving home late, she heard the dawn call to prayer, which intensified her sense of longing and spiritual void. She says

The sound of the azan, the words and the way the words sounded went inside me, it passed through the smell in the car, it passed through the fun I had had at the disco and it went to a place I didn’t know existed. A hollow place. A darkness that would suck me in and finish me . . . Still I could hear the azan. It went on and on and now, from far away. I could hear another mosque echoing the words, tapping at the sluggishness in me, nudging at a hidden numbness, like when my feet went to sleep and I touched them. (Aboulela 31)

This peculiar feeling that Najwa experienced was essentially her latent faith, awaiting an awakening. This awakening did not occur in Sudan due to the influences of her family's lifestyle, her friends and her surroundings. Also, one day she saw a group of students praying at university and suddenly she felt a sense of envy towards them (Aboulela 44, 134). Moreover, her initial displacement to London exacerbates her sense of dislocation and loss, leading her to question her identity and purpose. In London, the shift in Najwa's faith begins subtly. The loss of her familial wealth, social status and Anwar forces her to confront the void

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in her life. This period of vulnerability and introspection sets the stage for her spiritual awakening. Najwa's turn towards Islam becomes a means of finding solace and stability amidst her chaotic surroundings. It provides her with a link to her past and a method to redefine her sense of self in a foreign setting.

Najwa's profound regret and distress are palpable as she reflects on the unexpected absence of her observance of Ramadan, a sacred period of fasting and spiritual contemplation in the Islamic faith. The depth of her emotions underscores the immense value that Ramadan holds in her cultural belief system, emphasizing the sense of detachment she experienced upon the belated realization that she had not been actively engaging with the rituals and practices associated with this significant time (Aboulela 230). This moment of awakening serves as a pivotal juncture in Najwa's spiritual journey, prompting her to initiate a crucial dialogue with Anwar regarding his failure to notify her of the commencement of Ramadan, thereby highlighting the fundamental necessity of remaining informed and attuned to the religious calendar and observances. The encounter with Anwar acts as a catalyst for a profound transformation within Najwa, compelling her to reassess her priorities and commit herself to a renewed sense of devotion and spiritual discipline. This occurrence triggers a deep-seated alteration within Najwa, prompting her to reassess her priorities and embark on a journey of heightened devotion and spiritual dedication.

By contrasting her current situation with the hypothetical scenario of being in Khartoum, where the observance of Ramadan would have been a central aspect of daily life, Najwa underscores the impact of environment and routine on her religious practices. Her frustration with the lack of alignment with her spiritual duties reaches a peak when she has a pivotal moment of epiphany regarding the necessity for a transformation. This internal struggle is further reflected in her statement about being unable to continue living with a troubled conscience and the weight of guilt that had been burdening her (Aboulela 244). Najwa's declaration that she is tired of feeling disconnected from her faith and weary of carrying guilt signifies a deeper desire for inner peace and spiritual fulfilment. The incident becomes a catalyst for her to distance herself from Anwar, suggesting a broader transformation in her priorities and values. This pivotal moment lays the foundation for Najwa to prioritize her religious beliefs and commit to a more devout and fulfilling path, setting her on a new trajectory guided by faith and a renewed sense of purpose.

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After undergoing a transformative journey towards devout faith, Najwa held a steadfast conviction that had she and her family embraced religion or engaged in regular prayer, the series of misfortunes they faced would not have occurred. She firmly believes that the trials they endured were a divine punishment from Allah due to their lack of obedience, and she is certain that had they been more devout, Allah would have shielded her family and their possessions from harm. In Najwa's perspective, drawing closer to Allah through faith and prayer would have served as a protective barrier against the tribulations they encountered. While visiting Omar in prison, she tells him

Look, I know how you feel. We weren't brought up in a religious way, neither of us. We weren't even friends in Khartoum with people who were religious . . . . If Baba and Mama had prayed, if you and I had prayed, all of this wouldn't have happened to us. We would have stayed a normal family . . . Allah would have protected us, if we had wanted Him to, if we had asked Him to but we didn't. So we were punished. (Aboulela 95)

#### **3.2.2.2. The Significance of the Mosque and Religious Community**

The mosque assumes a crucial and central position in Najwa's spiritual odyssey, serving as a significant locus of her religious development and exploration. Not only does it function as a site dedicated to prayer and devotion, but it also operates as a communal focal point where she encounters understanding and encouragement. Acting as a refuge from the feelings of isolation and bias prevalent in the larger societal context, the mosque emerges as a safe haven for Najwa. For Sysoyev, engaging actively in the various activities and gatherings hosted by the mosque, Najwa nurtures her faith and also forges a more intimate and profound bond with her spiritual beliefs. She argues that

The Tajweed class is my favourite. I learn how to pronounce the letters correctly, when to blur two letters together, when to pronounce the n in a nasal way, for how many beats to prolong a certain letter. This concentration on technique soothes me; it makes me forget everything around me. (Aboulela 79)

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By engaging deeply in the activities arranged by the mosque, Najwa has the opportunity to strengthen her connection to her religious beliefs at a more profound and intimate level, thereby enhancing her spiritual exploration to a greater extent. A fellow devout Muslim named Wafaa, whom Najwa encounters at the mosque, assumes the role of a mentor, providing guidance on various aspects of Islam and motivating her to participate in religious instruction sessions. In one instance, during a conversation initiated by Wafaa regarding the practice of prayer, Najwa responds with her thoughts and experiences on the subject

‘No ... no I don’t.’ I had learnt to pray as a child. I had prayed during Ramadan, during which I fasted mostly in order to lose weight and because it was fun. I prayed during school exams to boost my grades. I liked wearing my mother’s white tobe, feeling the material around me. I liked feeling covered, cosy. But I had often bobbed up and down, not understanding what I was saying, impatient to get the whole thing over with. ‘But you should pray, Najwa,’ Wafaa said, ‘so that Allah will bless you. It’s the first thing we’re going to be asked about on Judgement day.’ (Aboulela 160)

This mentorship is crucial in Najwa’s transformation. The mosque's gatherings provide her with a structured environment to learn about her faith and practice it among like-minded individuals, reinforcing her sense of belonging to a community. When Najwa participated in a mosque assembly, she noticed a cohort of youthful Muslim females originating from London. This assembly of girls intrigued her, prompting her to delve deeper into comprehending their demeanour. Evidently, they exuded a distinct British identity and seemed entirely comfortable in the London environment. While a few adorned hijabs, others opted not to, showcasing a level of uniqueness and assertiveness that Najwa had not experienced during her youth. The amalgamation of cultural backgrounds and personal expressions within this group of young Muslim girls stirred Najwa's curiosity, urging her to reflect on her own upbringing and societal influences in her Third space of enunciation. It was evident to Najwa that these girls embodied a blend of traditional values and modern outlooks, representing a generation navigating the complexities of cultural identity and belonging in a multicultural society (Aboulela 77). In other words, despite being born in a foreign society, these girls were more

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devout and attached to their cultural identity than she had been in an Arabic society. In this respect, Stanecka asserts that despite being born as a Muslim in the traditional sense, Najwa did not actively engage with her religious beliefs while residing in Khartoum. Seldom did she partake in prayer rituals or make visits to the mosque, suggesting a lack of religious observance during her time in the city (77). It is evident from Stanecka's account that Najwa's religious practices were minimal or non-existent when she was in Khartoum.

The significance of the mosque and the religious community for Najwa is profoundly highlighted during the month of Ramadan. Ramadan serves as a time of increased spiritual connection and community bonding for Muslims around the world. The events depict how the act of communal worship during this holy month brings people together in a unique way. Najwa and the rest of the community have been drawn closer due to Ramadan. The mosque, which is usually a place of worship and congregation, becomes even more significant during this time as it becomes filled with individuals striving to better themselves spiritually. The collective effort to shed faults and sins, coupled with the physical nourishment from fasting, creates an atmosphere of introspection and humility. The reference to the mosque being full of people signifies not just physical presence but also a sense of unity and shared purpose among the worshippers (Aboulela 187).

The heightened spiritual experience during the last ten nights of Ramadan is underscored by the increased crowd, the powerful recitations, and the shared emotional journey of everyone present. This sense of togetherness is further emphasized by a woman's comparison of the mosque to Mecca, the holiest city in Islam. The woman's comment about feeling like she was in Mecca highlights the profound impact that the mosque and the community have on individuals during Ramadan. The resemblance she draws between the local mosque and the holy city of Mecca suggests that, for her, the spiritual fulfilment and unity experienced in that moment were reminiscent of the deeply sacred atmosphere found in Mecca during pilgrimage (Aboulela 188). Ultimately, Najwa underscores the significance of the mosque and the religious community as spaces that foster spiritual growth, communal support and a sense of interconnectedness among worshippers like her. It portrays how Ramadan serves as a time for individuals to come together, uplift one another, and strengthen their faith through shared rituals and experiences.

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### 3.2.2.3. Key Moments of Faith and Cultural Identity

Several key moments in *Minaret* highlight how Najwa's faith provides her with comfort and helps shape her cultural identity. One significant moment is her decision to start wearing the veil, as all she wanted is to become a better Muslim (Aboulela 105). This act symbolizes her commitment to her faith and marks a clear shift in her self-perception. Wearing the veil becomes a public assertion of her cultural identity and a means of distancing herself from her past life of secularism and indulgence. Her first experience of wearing the veil was spiritual, as she was trying on her mother's tobes in her apartment; Najwa selected a brown, silky one from her collection. Fastening her hair with an elastic band and securing the curls with pins, she draped the tobe over herself, covering her hair. Upon seeing her reflection in the mirror, she observed a different version of herself, resembling her mother in a regal and somewhat enigmatic manner (Aboulela 246). Reflecting on the idea that concealing rather than highlighting, restraining instead of exposing, might hold its own attractiveness, she sought guidance from Wafaa on purchasing veils and mastering the art of tying them correctly. As she made her way back home, she walked with a smile, conscious of the new fabric framing her face. Catching a glimpse of herself in a shop window, she initially grimaced at her reflection but then reconsidered, thinking 'not bad, not so bad' (Aboulela 247).

Muslim Feminism plays a pivotal role in providing an essential perspective for analysing Najwa's continuously evolving cultural identity. This particular framework brings to light the emphasis on empowering Muslim women through the reinterpretation of religious scriptures and practices. Najwa's personal journey mirrors this transformation as she transitions from a passive acceptance of her religious beliefs to an active and engaged participation in them. While living in Khartoum, she became accustomed to occupying the follower role, which has become a significant aspect of her cultural identity. Her lack of a truly charismatic persona or distinctive demeanour is a stereotypical characteristic, particularly within the context of Muslim societal norms, particularly concerning women. Even upon relocating to London, Najwa continues to maintain this mindset. She articulates

I never know which point of view I support. I find myself agreeing with whoever is speaking or with the one I like best. And I become anxious that someone's feelings will get hurt, or worse take serious offence, as sometimes happens, and stop coming to the mosque. (Aboulela 79)

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Nonetheless, her status as a follower underwent a transformation when she eventually solidified her cultural identity, leading to a shift in her perspective and a newfound clarity regarding her desires and beliefs. This evolution enabled Najwa to gain a deeper understanding of herself, her purpose in life and her place in society.

The decision to don a veil emerges as a symbolic gesture of self-governance within a societal structure that respects and acknowledges her religious and cultural heritage. This deliberate choice resonates with the principles espoused by Muslim feminists, who advocate for the rights and independence of women within Islamic environments. Najwa vividly demonstrates this sense of autonomy during Anwar's visit to her residence when she opts to meet him downstairs instead of granting him immediate access by buzzing him in. She meticulously adorns herself in a new ankle-length skirt, a long-sleeved blouse, and a headscarf, reminiscent of the day at Selfridges when she daringly tried on a revealing black dress and playfully paraded in front of him. Despite the gravity of the situation, traces of mirth and a mischievous desire to tease him for one last time linger within her. With deliberate precision, she secures her headscarf with a pin, symbolizing a blend of tradition and personal agency. Descending the stairs at a leisurely pace, she observes the astonishment etched on Anwar's countenance, marking a pivotal moment in her assertion of self-determination and defiance against his norms (Aboulela 247, 248).

Another poignant moment is during her mother's illness and eventual death. Najwa finds strength and solace in her prayers, drawing on her faith to cope with her grief and responsibilities. This period underscores the transformative power of faith in providing emotional and psychological resilience. Upon arriving at the mosque for the ceremonial cleansing of her deceased mother's body, Wafaa beseeched Najwa to intercede through prayers for the soul of her late mother. Consequently, Najwa experienced a familiar sense of desolation resonating within her being (Aboulela 135). This emotional response led her to a profound realization of an inner void, a void that seemed to be the very place where one's yearning for a divine connection should spring from, yet she found herself lacking in that spiritual depth.

In an earnest attempt to guide Najwa in this moment of mourning and spiritual reflection, Wafaa shared a particular supplication with her, one that entreated Allah to cleanse the departed mother's soul of any transgressions with the purity of water and ice. While the exact verbiage of the prayer may have slipped from Najwa's memory, the vivid imagery of ice

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lingered, serving as a poignant reminder of the significance of the act (Aboulela 135). Moreover, Wafaa's compassionate gesture left Najwa with a lingering sense of responsibility towards her mother, a feeling that her mother still depended on her in some ethereal way. Despite the prevailing belief among others that her mother had transitioned to a state of liberation where she no longer required earthly ties, Najwa's encounter with Wafaa's teachings instilled in her a profound sense of duty and connection that transcended the physical realm.

Najwa's desire for a wash, a purge, and a restoration of innocence, following her breakup with Anwar represents a crucial moment of faith in her journey. She vocalizes a deep craving for spiritual restoration and a return to a state of chastity. The longing she articulates to feel secure in the presence of God underscores a fundamental need for comfort, direction, and a sense of belonging to a higher power. Furthermore, Najwa's yearning to reconnect with her parents and relive their presence, as seen in her dreams, signifies her quest for solace, connection and a profound sense of attachment to her cultural and familial heritage (Aboulela 242). This sentiment underscores the vital role that family, tradition and memory play in shaping Najwa's self-perception and her perception of the world that surrounds her. Through evoking memories of her parents and the nostalgia associated with being in their company, Najwa strives to find a source of inner strength and support amidst the chaos and uncertainties that characterize her life. Her pivotal moment of seeking faith, purification, and a reconnection with her cultural and religious origins marks a significant turning point in her outlook and priorities, emphasizing the transformative influence of spirituality and heritage in moulding her cultural identity and sense of belonging.

Najwa's reflection on her brother's situation encapsulates a key moment of faith for her, wherein she recognizes the pivotal role that the laws of Shariah play in safeguarding individuals and preserving the fabric of society. In the passage by Najwa, she expresses regret that her brother, Omar, was not punished under the laws of Shariah the first time he took drugs (Aboulela 193). She reflects on how applying the prescribed punishment of one hundred lashes could have potentially deterred him from continuing down a destructive path and ultimately protected him from the harm he inflicted upon himself. This moment serves as a pivotal point for Najwa, highlighting her strong belief in the importance of upholding the laws of her religion as a means of guiding and safeguarding individuals in society.

Najwa's conviction in the efficacy of Shariah law in maintaining order and promoting righteous behaviour is evident in her lamentation over her brother's situation. In emphasizing



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the value of implementing the laws of Shariah in addressing immoral or criminal actions, Najwa underscores her faith in the system's ability to steer individuals towards a virtuous path and shield them from harms that may befall them otherwise. Furthermore, Najwa's contemplation on her brother's experience serves as a catalyst for her deeper realization of the significance of adherence to Islam principles in guiding and protecting individuals within the community. Through her reflection on the potential impact of Shariah-mandated punishments, Najwa underscores the transformative power of faith and the role that religious principles play in shaping one's understanding of morality and justice.

Moreover, Najwa's interactions with Tamer further illustrate her evolving relationship with Islam. Tamer, a devout Muslim, treats Najwa with respect and engages her in meaningful discussions about their faith, like the signs preceding the Day of Judgement (Aboulela 108) and many others. These conversations deepen her understanding and appreciation of Islamic principles, reinforcing her commitment to her faith. One day, while Najwa and Tamer were engaged in conversation within the confines of their home, Najwa provided an example of a saying attributed to Khalifa Omar. This saying highlighted the notion that the Rum, or the Europeans, exhibit a certain resilience superior to the Arabs. It suggests that when they face defeat in battle, they promptly rise, dust themselves off, and resume the fight (Aboulela 118). Najwa expressed her own struggles in letting go of the past and moving forward, revealing a difficulty in this aspect. She acknowledged that her approach differs from that of Europeans due to inherent differences. Tamer, on the other hand, demonstrated a notable level of trust and understanding towards Najwa, unlike others such as Anwar who may have underestimated her. His trust was evident when Lamya misplaced her pearl necklace, as Tamer never once doubted Najwa's integrity. Instead, he proposed a joint effort to search for the lost item, firmly believing that she would never engage in any form of theft. Najwa confirms, "He is confident. Like Mai, he trusts me in a childish way" (Aboulela 115).

Another significant moment of faith for Najwa is when she reflects on the intense experience of Ramadan and how it has deepened her connection to her religion and cultural identity. Throughout the fasting month, Najwa finds herself energetically dedicated to observing the rituals of fasting and attending the mosque after work. The mosque becomes a central place for communal worship and breaking the fast, where she is surrounded by a throng of fellow worshippers. The crowded and spiritually charged atmosphere during Ramadan symbolizes a collective effort among the community to shed their faults and draw

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closer to their faith (Aboulela 188). Najwa's description of feeling a sense of hope and confidence during Ramadan underscores the transformative power of this holy month for her. She discovers solace and conviction in her religious beliefs, convinced that through adherence to her faith practices, she will attain increased happiness and spiritual satisfaction. This part emphasizes a crucial juncture for Najwa, demonstrating how her encounters during Ramadan contribute to the enhancement of her faith, the reinforcement of her dedication to her cultural heritage, and the cultivation of a profound reliance on the divine (Aboulela 189). The rituals and sense of community within the mosque contribute to shaping her beliefs and providing her with a profound spiritual foundation to navigate life's challenges with faith and optimism.

Furthermore, Najwa's aspiration to undertake the pilgrimage of Hajj signifies a significant and deeply profound expression of her faith and spiritual dedication. This strong desire she holds emphasizes the immense importance of participating in Hajj, highlighting it as a pivotal experience capable of bringing about a thorough purification and renewal in one's life (Aboulela 209). The Hajj ritual is deeply rooted in a robust framework of Islamic customs and is widely acknowledged as a fundamental pillar of the Islamic faith. To Najwa, the idea of embarking on this sacred journey symbolizes not just a physical expedition but a profound spiritual odyssey towards redemption and rejuvenation.

Her firm belief that the completion of Hajj will lead to a complete absolution of sins and offer a fresh start conveys a profound sense of optimism and hope for spiritual rejuvenation. This belief underscores her deep faith in the transformative and spiritually cleansing power of this sacred practice. Through her vocalization of the desire to fulfil Hajj and her conviction in its ability to usher in a new beginning, Najwa eloquently demonstrates her strong religious faith and her trust in the transformative capabilities of this religious custom. Essentially, Najwa's words encapsulate a pivotal juncture of faith in her life, where she articulates her profound convictions in the purifying and cleansing impact of Hajj. This moment serves as a testament to her dedication to her faith and her preparedness to embark on a journey laden with immense spiritual significance for her.

#### **3.2.2.4. Cultural Hybridity and Borderlands Theory**

Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory provides valuable insights into the experiences of cultural hybridity that Najwa encounters. Residing in the bustling city of London, Najwa develops an identity crisis and finds herself situated in a unique position within a

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metaphorical borderland, where she deftly navigates the intersection between her Sudanese heritage and the influences of her new surroundings. She initiates her narrative as follows

I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move. Most of the time I'm used to it. Most of the time I'm good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back. But sometimes a shift makes me remember. (Aboulela 1)

Najwa describes her physical borderland as a humble flat in London, in stark contrast to the luxurious house she lived in while in Sudan. Alqahtani states, "Najwa's expression 'come down in the world' represents her awareness of her degraded social and financial status after losing her family" (247). This statement vividly illustrates the borderland space Najwa inhabits, existing between established cultural boundaries where she does not fully belong to either side. Although Najwa lives in London, she remains nostalgic for her past memories and lifestyle in Sudan. This liminal space creates a sense of displacement and dislocation, embodying what Anzaldúa describes as a place of ambiguity. Consequently, Najwa struggles to understand where she truly belongs. On another occasion, besides discussing her physical borderlands, Najwa also expresses her emotional borderlands space. This emotional borderland is highlighted when she is employed as a domestic worker for her aunt and receives a payment of £20 during the Christmas season. Anwar responds by laughing and commenting, "So you're now celebrating Christmas. You've become a true citizen of London." Subsequently, Najwa responds by stating, "I don't know what I'm becoming" (Aboulela 151). Her cultural identity seems to be evolving in ways she cannot fully comprehend at that moment.

Anzaldúa's theory sheds light on the fluid and intricate nature of identities that take shape in such liminal spaces. The focus is on the idea that Najwa's cultural identity is not static or permanent; instead, it is a fluid concept that constantly develops through her engagements and experiences in various cultural domains. Notably, her active participation in the local mosque and her intimate connection with Tamer serve as poignant examples of this hybridity, as she seamlessly integrates aspects of her Sudanese roots and her diasporic existence into her evolving sense of self. Reflecting on her own journey, Najwa muses that there are moments when she finds herself momentarily adrift, unsure of which version of herself she truly

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embodies. She says, “for a brief moment I am not sure who I am, the Najwa who danced at the American Club disco in Khartoum or Najwa, the maid Lamya hired by walking into the Central Mosque one afternoon” (Aboulela 111).

As a result of the feelings of loss and displacement that Najwa experiences when being in London, she keeps constantly envision, as described by Sherman (32), an idealized homeland in her imagination, in which she seeks solace and comfort amidst the challenges and circumstances of her current situation in London. Najwa's expedition depicted in *Minaret* exemplifies the significant influence of religion on her cultural identity, highlighting the profound impact it has on her overall sense of self. As she navigates through her evolving Islamic faith, she discovers a transformative pathway towards reconstructing her cultural identity, forging connections within her community and cultivating inner resilience in the face of various challenges. Her interactions within the mosque and engagements with fellow Muslims serve as catalysts for her newfound sense of purpose and belonging, ultimately shaping her perception of the diaspora in a profound manner. By using the frameworks of Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory, scholars and researchers can delve deeper into understanding how Najwa's religious convictions and practices serve as the cornerstone for her ongoing negotiation of cultural identity within the complex diasporic landscape. By analysing her experiences and beliefs in a detailed way, one might uncover the complex connections between religion and cultural identity, offering valuable perspectives on the varied nature of diasporic experiences and the impact of faith on shaping individual identities in such environments.

#### **3.2.3. Language and Communication**

Through the perspective of Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory, this study demonstrates the ways in which Najwa's proficiency in two languages reflects her overarching pursuit of cultural identity and a sense of belonging within the diaspora community. Her experience navigating different languages sheds light on the intricate dynamics between language, authority and cultural identity, offering a thorough understanding of the complexities inherent in living on the borderlands. By delving into Najwa's linguistic journey, this research underscores the multifaceted nature of existence in the borderlands, where individuals grapple with questions of identity, power dynamics and the complexities of cultural belonging.

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### 3.2.3.1. The Role of Language in Shaping Najwa's Cultural Identity

Language plays a pivotal role in shaping and preserving cultural identity, a fact especially prominent for those residing in diasporic communities. In the case of Najwa, as illustrated by Sherman on page 41, language functions as a vital conduit that enables her to maintain a deep connection with her Sudanese background while also facilitating her integration into the cosmopolitan setting of London. Although Arabic stands as a resilient bond to her history and traditional values, her adeptness in English proves to be indispensable for her acclimatization to the unfamiliar milieu of her new home. The duality of language proficiency allows Najwa to navigate her dual cultural heritage with ease and underscores the dynamic interplay between language, identity and belonging in a globalized world.

In Sudan, the Arabic language serves not only as a tool for exchanging information but also as a symbol of cultural and spiritual heritage. The profound ties that Najwa has to her native land through this language offer her a profound sense of uninterrupted history and inclusion, enabling her to confront and overcome the difficulties associated with being uprooted from her homeland. Despite the obstacles posed by displacement, the linguistic bond she shares with Sudan through Arabic plays a crucial role in maintaining her sense of cultural identity and connection to her roots. In a passage, Najwa narrates Anwar an incident when talking to the president of Sudan on phone in her childhood, she says

Once, years ago, when I was in primary school, he phoned and when I answered I said “hello” in a very English way . . . ‘Then,’ I continued, ‘the President got angry and he said, “Speak properly, girl! Speak to me in Arabic” (Aboulela 16).

Najwa's narrative provides insight into her upbringing within a prosperous Sudanese household where the prominence of English overshadowed Arabic, resulting in a detachment from her cultural heritage. The account of her manner of answering the phone in a distinctly English manner to the president serves to underscore her high level of proficiency in English, which was likely honed through her enrolment in exclusive private educational institutions sponsored by her well-to-do family. This inclination towards English at the expense of Arabic serves as a representation of a societal hierarchy and accentuates a disconnection from her origins and legacy.

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Through adopting a Western lifestyle in Sudan and predominantly engaging in English communication, Najwa unwittingly distances herself from her cultural roots. The episode where the president reproaches her for not conversing in Arabic illustrates the anticipation and pressure to conform to conventional Arabic linguistic standards and cultural principles. The conflict between her fluency in English and the preservation of Arabic illustrates a broader internal conflict encountered by individuals similar to Najwa, who find themselves torn between embracing Western influences and upholding their cultural inheritance. Najwa's account mirrors the intricate social dynamics and identity dilemmas that emerge from the confluence of language, privilege, and cultural assimilation. It incites contemplation on the repercussions of lexical selections on cultural identity and the importance of language in moulding one's perception of self and fitting in within a distinct cultural environment.

In the multicultural city of London, Najwa's adeptness in using two languages mirrors the complexity of her dual cultural identity. Her proficiency in Arabic serves as a strong link to her Sudanese heritage, as she predominantly communicates in this language within the confines of her family and the mosque. This linguistic choice enables her to uphold traditions and values that are deeply rooted in her cultural background. On the other hand, the necessity of using English arises when engaging with individuals who do not share her proficiency in Arabic, thereby highlighting the practicality and versatility of her bilingual skills in navigating diverse social interactions.

Najwa's exploration of her linguistic and cultural identity is intricately intertwined with her personal journey and evolving beliefs. Initially, her proficiency in English was cultivated through her upbringing in a privileged family and education in private schools where English held precedence over Arabic. This resulted in a gradual disconnection from her Arabic heritage as she became more accustomed to the Western lifestyle prevalent in Sudan. However, as Najwa delves deeper into her faith and embraces Islam, a noticeable shift in her language patterns becomes apparent. The integration of Arabic phrases such as 'Alhamdulillah', 'Insha'Allah', and 'ya habibi' (Aboulela 74, 75) into her everyday speech serves as a symbolic reconnection with her cultural roots. These expressions not only act as linguistic markers of her newfound religious affiliation but also serve to bridge the gap between her Sudanese upbringing and her evolving self.

Upon relocating to London, Najwa's bilingualism emerges as a valuable tool in navigating her dual cultural identity. The use of Arabic within her familial and mosque communities acts

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as a lifeline to her Sudanese heritage, offering a sense of comfort and continuity in an unfamiliar setting. Conversely, English functions as a means of communication beyond these spheres, allowing her to effectively engage with individuals who do not share her linguistic background. Through this skilful blend of languages, Najwa embodies a nuanced and multifaceted identity that seamlessly fuses her Sudanese lineage with her global encounters. The incorporation of Arabic expressions underscores her cultural pride and strengthens her sense of connection and belonging to her roots. By embracing both English and Arabic, Najwa not only transcends linguistic barriers but also intricately harmonizes the various aspects of her cultural identity into a cohesive whole.

Language holds a significant and pivotal role in the novel *Minaret*, as it is intricately interwoven with the power dynamics that are in motion, particularly within the various relationships of the protagonist, Najwa. The manner in which she engages in communication with Anwar, who consistently undermines both her and her family, stands out as a poignant illustration of how language can be effectively wielded as a tool for asserting dominance and control. Anwar's continual reliance on Najwa for aid in enhancing his English language skills serves as a clear demonstration of her remarkable linguistic abilities in this specific area, thus presenting a sharp contrast with his usual authoritative demeanour. This complex and elaborate interaction between language and power dynamics within the narrative contributes depth and intricacy to the characters' engagements, highlighting the subtle and nuanced ways in which communication can mould and impact relationships. The utilization of language as a mechanism for asserting dominance and control is a recurring motif throughout the novel, underscoring the intricate web of power struggles and hierarchies that exist within Najwa's world. Najwa says

He wrote smoothly and effortlessly in Arabic. It was writing in English that made him struggle, that made him need me. He said, 'I want to write reports for Amnesty International.' He suggested we talk in English all the time, so that his pronunciation would improve. (Aboulela 163)

Despite the advanced proficiency she possesses in the English language, Najwa frequently encounters complex linguistic and cultural nuances that require her adept navigation skills. These intricacies tend to manifest most noticeably during her interactions with Anwar, where

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the challenges are magnified. Anwar, who does not possess the same level of fluency in English, often turns to Najwa for assistance in rectifying his written compositions and improving his language skills. This interplay between them gives rise to a subtle yet significant transformation in the power dynamics inherent to their relationship, shedding light on Najwa's superior linguistic prowess. It also shows the profound impact of language on her perception of self and cultural origins. As a matter of fact, Najwa's role as Anwar's language mentor puts her linguistic talents on display and functions as a tool for shaping and elucidating her own cultural identity.

The examination of this dynamic is delved into more extensively in the context of Najwa's involvement within the mosque community. As she progresses in her understanding and ability to express Islamic principles in the Arabic language, she garners esteem and acknowledgment from her peers. Proficiency in linguistic skills in both Arabic and English serves as a source of empowerment for Najwa, enabling her to effectively traverse and impact diverse cultural domains. This proficiency proves beneficial in deepening her comprehension of religious doctrines such as Hadith and Shariah laws, thus contributing to her religious and cultural acumen. Additionally, it facilitates her engagement in discussions and interactions that involve a blend of cultural perspectives and linguistic nuances, like her rich discussions with Tamer.

#### **3.2.3.2. Language and Cultural Hybridity**

Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands* theory provides a significant framework for analysing Najwa's linguistic journey in a profound manner. Residing within the socio-cultural borderlands of London, Najwa skilfully navigates the complex network of multiple languages and dialects, embodying a remarkable form of cultural fusion that is both captivating and enlightening. Her bilingual proficiency highlights her flexibility and reflects her continuous cultural evolution, which seamlessly blends the richness of her Sudanese heritage with the complicated threads of her diasporic encounters. In a touching moment, Najwa recalls Anwar's fondness for specific words such as “frustrated, inevitable, sexy” (Aboulela 163) demonstrating her playful exploration of language and the deep connections she forms with it. The fusion of Arabic nouns with English verbs to form innovative compound words showcases her empowerment in shaping a distinct cultural identity that transcends conventional boundaries. Through this linguistic interchange, Najwa blurs the distinctions between languages and constructs a personalized vocabulary that captures the essence of her



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cultural and linguistic blend in a profound manner. This poignant incident emphasizes the fluidity of language as a medium for self-expression and cultural amalgamation, offering insights into Najwa's intricate balancing act among her diverse linguistic influences.

Najwa's utilization of both Arabic and English languages serves a dual purpose beyond mere functionality; it serves as a manifestation of her complex hybrid cultural identity. The linguistic decisions she makes facilitate communication and embody her capacity to navigate through diverse cultural landscapes, amalgamating elements from her historical background and current experiences. Through her seamless transition between languages, she showcases a harmonious blend of her past traditions and current realities, reflecting her multifaceted and dynamic cultural identity.

### **3.2.4. Cultural Practices and Food**

Cultural practices, such as culinary traditions, play a pivotal role in preserving and showcasing cultural heritage, particularly for individuals residing in diasporic environments. These customs serve as a vital method for Najwa to uphold her Sudanese roots, offering a sense of connection and assurance amidst the disruptions of her life in London. Through participation in these cultural rituals, Najwa not just commemorates her heritage but she also establishes a connection to her identity and history, nurturing a sense of belonging and resilience in a foreign setting.

#### **3.2.4.1. Food as a Cultural Anchor**

Food holds significant symbolic value in the cultural identity of Najwa, serving as a powerful representation of traditions and heritage. It functions, as Sherman stated on page 42, as a method of cultural interchange, enabling Najwa to impart her cultural background to others while also gaining insights into various cultural traditions. For instance, when Najwa works as a maid for various families, her ability to cook and share traditional Sudanese dishes helps her forge connections with her employers and their families. These interactions highlight the role of food in bridging cultural gaps and fostering understanding and acceptance. Through the act of preparing and enjoying traditional Sudanese cuisine, Najwa finds a profound connection to her roots and a means of preserving her cultural heritage amidst her new surroundings. The process of cooking these familiar dishes offers her a sense of comfort and serves as a tangible bridge to her past, triggering vivid recollections of her

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experiences and life in Sudan. In fact, food becomes a medium through which Najwa can nurture her sense of belonging and uphold the rich value of her cultural identity in a foreign land. In a conversation with Tamer, Najwa says

I laugh. 'I could cook you Sudanese food if you want.'

'Really?'

'Which Sudanese food do you like the best?' I ask him.

'The peanut salad.'

'That's very easy to make with peanut butter. I'll make it for you. What else do you like?' (Aboulela 109, 110, 111).

Najwa's interaction with Tamer exemplifies the deep-rooted connection she maintains with her cultural identity through the medium of food, a fundamental aspect of human culture. By graciously offering to prepare Sudanese delicacies for Tamer, Najwa not only shares a meal but also extends a fragment of her rich heritage, symbolically bridging the gap between their diverse cultural backgrounds and fostering a sense of unity and understanding. The specific mention of the peanut salad, a cherished traditional Sudanese dish, serves to underscore the significant role that indigenous cuisine plays in Najwa's life, acting as a tangible link to her roots, traditions, and ancestral practices. The act of meticulously crafting this particular dish showcases Najwa's culinary prowess and expertise and also serves as a conduit to her past, evoking memories and experiences from her homeland of Sudan, thereby creating a sensory journey through time and space. This culinary exchange between Najwa and Tamer nourishes both the body and the soul, illustrating the power of food in fostering connections, preserving cultural heritage and transcending linguistic and societal barriers.

In this conversation, Najwa's eagerness to prepare Sudanese food for Tamer demonstrates her inclination to impart a part of her cultural identity and uphold a feeling of being part of a new community. In another instance she describes him eating, "tearing large pieces of bread, scooping out the peanut sauce that is chunky with onions and green peppers. It amuses me that he can eat well even when he is ill" (Aboulela 117). By engaging in the preparation of these familiar culinary delights, she discovers solace and confirms her ties to her cultural

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origins. The mere act of culinary creation emerges as a channel through which Najwa can sustain the depth of her cultural heritage, establishing a concrete connection to her history while grappling with the obstacles of acclimating to an unfamiliar territory. Through the medium of food, Najwa nourishes her heritage and conserves the core of her customs, strengthening her sense of self amid the backdrop of change and transition. This culinary gesture serves as a manifestation of Najwa's commitment to honouring her roots, thereby reinforcing her sense of belonging and cultural identity in the face of evolving circumstances.

The ritualistic nature of engaging in the preparation of traditional dishes, like *kubeibah* (Aboulela 218), *ta'miyah* and *samosas* (Aboulela 46) serves as a foundational practice for Najwa, anchoring her firmly in the depths of her cultural origins. Through the meticulous process of cooking and savouring Sudanese cuisine, she is able to artfully reconstruct a semblance of home and a feeling of connection, even within the unfamiliar confines of a city like London, as she used to go to the halal restaurant near the mosque to eat her dinner (Aboulela 74). These gastronomic traditions play a crucial role in aiding Najwa to safeguard and uphold her cultural legacy, while simultaneously allowing her to impart these valuable customs onto others, thereby fortifying her sense of self and belonging in a multicultural society. From the perspective of Muslim Feminism, one can observe that Najwa's engagement in cultural traditions, such as culinary habits, serves as a method of challenging the prevailing cultural norms. By maintaining these practices, Najwa asserts her cultural identity, preserving her cultural heritage in the face of displacement.

#### **3.2.4.2. Cultural Practices and Cultural Identity Formation**

Beyond food, other cultural practices also play a significant role in Najwa's life. These include social customs and religious rituals. For example, despite indulging in a rather unconventional lifestyle in London, Najwa harbours a deep-rooted wish to embrace marriage, much like any other Sudanese girl. The desire to embark on the journey of marriage is not solely to her cousin Samir, as she mentions she would have accepted his proposal if made, but rather it stems from her yearning to experience motherhood, nurture a family and savour the responsibilities of managing a household (Aboulela 124). This aspiration reflects Najwa's desire to intertwine her modern lifestyle with the traditional values and beliefs instilled in her cultural upbringing. It highlights how Najwa navigates between her present circumstances and

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her intrinsic cultural identity, showcasing a strong interplay between personal desires, societal expectations and cultural heritage.

In another instance, Najwa also underscores the significance of cultural practices like marriage in shaping her sense of self and belonging, highlighting the importance of tradition and community in her cultural identity. She recalls

My class at the University of Khartoum would have graduated by now. They would be looking for jobs, the girls marrying one by one, getting pregnant, and looking different. I could imagine myself with them; picture an alternative life to the one I was living in London. I could picture our house, busy and tingling because I was getting married. My mother and father were arguing over whom to invite to the wedding . . . My skin glowed from the scrubbing and *dilka* it was getting every day. My muscles ached from the new dance routines I was learning. The telephone didn't stop ringing, my friends came over, we giggled nonstop. (Aboulela 132)

The quote by Najwa signifies the importance of cultural practices, specifically marriage, in her life and how it contrasts with her current reality in London. Najwa's longing for the traditional practices surrounding marriage, such as the anticipation of her own wedding, preparing her body with care and the festivities with family and friends, showcases how deeply rooted these customs are in her cultural identity. The imagery she uses paints a vivid picture of the vibrant and joyous celebrations that accompany such milestones in Sudanese culture. By engaging in the visualization of her involvement in these rituals, Najwa is not solely recalling events from her history but also articulating a wish to uphold a link to her cultural legacy while residing in a foreign country.

After participating in a sexual relationship with Anwar outside the institution of marriage, it becomes apparent that she is experiencing feelings of regret and dissatisfaction regarding the circumstances she finds herself in. The depiction of the room as incorrect, disordered, reminiscent of a student's living space, and permeated with the scent of Anwar's cigarettes

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(Aboulela 173) serves to emphasize her disenchantment with the environment and atmosphere surrounding their intimate liaison. Najwa contrasts this unsatisfactory reality with her idealized perception of how the experience should have unfolded within the confines of marriage. She envisions a lavish setting at the finest hotel in Khartoum, featuring her bridal gown hanging gracefully in the wardrobe, immaculate white linens, a picturesque view of the Nile, and beautiful henna designs embellishing her hands. These specifics signify her yearning for the sanctity and cultural importance of marriage, along with the customary rituals linked to it, such as henna adornment.

The reference to her mother's involvement and the image of a peach-coloured dress bought from Selfridges introduce another dimension to Najwa's sorrow. The disparity between her actual outfit of plain jeans and a yellow T-shirt and the imagined opulent gown underscores her feelings of displacement and the absence of familial encouragement and cultural festivity that should have accompanied her union with Anwar. In actuality, Najwa's introspective reflections underscore the intricacy of her sentiments subsequent to her choice to partake in a relationship beyond the confines of matrimony. She expresses her remorse and yearning for what might have been, as well as her recognition of the cultural and emotional importance that marriage, the wedding night and customary practices like henna hold for her. Through her expressions, Najwa grapples with the consequences of her decisions and the stark disparity between her aspirations and the harsh reality she is now confronted with.

Attending the mosque and engaging in the various community events, such as Taraweeh prayers and Eid el fitr, play a crucial role in enhancing Najwa's sense of belonging and connection to a cultural and religious group that aligns with her own heritage (Aboulela 187). By actively participating in these traditions, she strengthens her cultural identity and fosters a network of support that contributes significantly to her overall well-being and mental health while residing in a foreign land. The emotional and psychological benefits derived from these communal activities are invaluable in helping Najwa navigate the challenges of being away from her native country and finding solace in a familiar and welcoming environment. The cultural rituals and ceremonies hold great significance for Najwa, especially in terms of fostering a sense of belonging within her cultural group.

The festive gathering during Eid at the mosque represents a powerful symbol of solidarity and festivity, bringing together women from various cultural backgrounds to celebrate and

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preserve their rich heritage. Najwa's statement, "I'm not sad, this is a happy occasion and I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant" (Aboulela 184) demonstrates her acknowledgment and embrace of the importance of these cultural events. Through active engagement in such communal and cultural activities, Najwa discovers a sense of identity and connection, shedding her previous rebellious emotions and embracing the customs that anchor her to her origins. This transformation indicates a change in Najwa's perspective and a deeper recognition of the traditions that bind her to her culture and sense of self. By participating in these cultural traditions, Najwa encounters happiness, acceptance and a reaffirmation of her position within her cultural and societal milieu while living in the borderlands. Najwa's cultural practices reflect her hybrid cultural identity. Living in the cultural borderlands of London, Najwa's engagement with Sudanese food and other cultural practices symbolizes her ability to navigate and integrate multiple cultural identities. These practices are not static but evolve, reflecting her dynamic and fluid sense of self.

### **3.2.5. Clothing and Cultural Symbols in *Minaret***

Clothing holds immense significance as a potent symbol of one's cultural identity and individual expression, especially within diasporic communities. The act of dressing for Najwa is not merely a matter of fashion but a profound indicator of her Sudanese and Muslim roots, embodying her deeply held principles, convictions, and ties to her ancestral legacy. Through her choice of attire, Najwa communicates both her personal style and her commitment to preserving and honouring her cultural heritage in a foreign land.

#### **3.2.5.1. The Veil as a Cultural and Religious Symbol**

Najwa's choice to wear the veil serves as a religious gesture and also as a cultural one, representing her dedication to her Sudanese and Muslim heritage. While sitting Mai, she engaged in viewing Arabic channels and programs, which significantly contributed to her strong connection to her cultural heritage. Through these programs, she absorbed various elements such as religious knowledge and Hadith teachings. Reflecting on one particular instance, she vividly recalls witnessing the pilgrims in Mecca circling the Ka'bah, which stirred a deep longing within her as she expressed, "I wish I were with them" (Aboulela 98). Observing young girls adorned in hijab, she couldn't help but ponder on her own past decisions and contemplate if there were aspects she might regret. She says

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I see teenage girls wearing hijab and I wish I had done that at their age, wish there was not much in my past to regret. The religious programmes make me feel solid as if they are telling me, ‘Don’t worry. Allah is looking after you, He will never leave you, He knows you love Him, He knows you are trying and all of this will be meaningful and worth it in the end.’ (Aboulela 98)

One of the most prominent aspects of Najwa's clothing is her decision to wear the veil. This choice is deeply rooted in both her religious beliefs and cultural identity. From a Muslim Feminism perspective, the veil may be interpreted as a means of empowerment and self-assertion, countering common Western beliefs that frequently regard it as a sign of subjugation. Najwa's adoption of the veil signifies a profound transformation in her life. Initially indifferent to religious practices, her growing faith and involvement in the mosque community lead her to embrace the veil. This shift represents her reclamation of cultural identity, offering her a sense of belonging and spiritual fulfilment. The veil becomes a visible assertion of her Muslim identity, providing her with a means to navigate the diasporic space with a clear sense of self.

Clothing plays a significant role in shaping Najwa's social interactions and the perceptions others have of her. The choice to don traditional and religious attire can evoke a diverse range of responses from the people in her environment, varying from acceptance to discrimination. These encounters shed light on the intricacies of navigating life in diaspora, where clothing serves as a tool that can either bridge connections or create barriers between individuals. The multifaceted nature of these interactions shows the importance of understanding the cultural, social and personal significance of clothing choices in shaping one's cultural identity within a diverse and dynamic society. When going out, Najwa wears a beige headscarf, a floor-length skirt and a short coat that doesn't reach the knees (222). Najwa's comparison of her clothing before and after putting on the veil illustrates the significant influence that concealing herself had on how she was perceived and how she interacted with others. Prior to wearing the veil, Najwa describes feeling exposed and objectified by the staring construction workers, conscious of their looks and the subsequent remarks, highlighting her lack of confidence and unease with the attention she attracted because of her physical appearance. She says

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I walked past an ice-cream van, a building covered in scaffolding, workmen sitting out in the sun. A whistle and a laugh as one of them shouted out something I didn't catch, though I understood the tone. I flushed, aware that all the weight I had gained had settled on my hips . . . I forced myself to look away from him and walk on. It was awkward to walk fast, not only because of my skirt but also because of the high heels of my sandals. (Aboulela 130)

The depiction of her physique as she passed by the spectators, with a focus on the extra weight she had gained and her hair flowing over her shoulders, accentuates her fragility and self-awareness at that particular moment. However, upon donning the veil and changing her attire, Najwa encounters a profound transformation in the way people view and treat her. She says

When I went home, I walked smiling, self-conscious of the new material around my face. I passed the window of a shop, winced at my reflection, but then thought 'not had, not so had'. Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn't see me any more. I was invisible and they were quiet. All the frissons, all the sparks died away. Everything went soft and I thought, 'Oh, so this is what it was all about; how I looked, just how I looked, nothing else, nothing non-Visual.' (Aboulela 247)

She observes that the construction workers no longer acknowledge her, growing silent and discontinuing their objectifying conduct. This newfound sense of invisibility leads Najwa to recognize that the attention she previously garnered was purely superficial, lacking any substantial connection or comprehension of her true self beyond the external facade. This juxtaposition underscores the societal bias that can be linked to a woman's appearance when not covered, underscoring the importance of the veil and concealing her body. Through Najwa's contemplation of her encounter, the account illuminates the sense of empowerment and freedom she experiences by veiling herself, asserting her autonomy and cultural heritage beyond the shallow scrutiny of others.



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Through her choice of attire, Najwa effectively manoeuvres through the complex social dynamics present in her environment, utilizing her clothing as a means of conveying messages and expressing her identity. By carefully selecting her garments, she is able to establish connections and form bonds with fellow members of the mosque community, showcasing her adherence to cultural and religious dress norms which in turn cultivates a feeling of unity and mutual regard among the group. On the other hand, her traditional clothing can also serve as a visual indicator of her outsider status within the wider London society, underscoring the obstacles she faces in integrating her cultural heritage into the broader societal fabric. Therefore, Najwa's sartorial choices play a significant role in both fostering a sense of belonging within her immediate community and highlighting the complexities involved in navigating between different cultural spheres.

#### **3.2.5.2. Cultural Symbols and Their Significance**

Beyond the veil, additional cultural representations also hold significant importance in shaping Najwa's sense of self. The utilization of traditional Sudanese attire, exemplified by the *tobe* (Aboulela 43) and *jalabiya*, serves as a powerful mechanism through which Najwa establishes a profound connection with her home land and rich cultural legacy. By adorning these traditional garments, Najwa both pays homage to her roots and fosters a tangible bond with Sudan, thereby strengthening her feelings of attachment and perpetuity towards her cultural heritage. The symbolic weight carried by these clothing items transcends mere fashion, ultimately serving as a conduit for Najwa to uphold her cultural identity and reinforce her place within the broader Sudanese community in the diaspora. These cultural symbols are not solely focused on their aesthetic appeal, but rather they hold significant meanings and connections within. They serve as a representation of Najwa's profound reverence towards her customs and her aspiration to pay tribute to her rich cultural heritage. Through the deliberate choice of adorning herself with these traditional garments, Najwa is effectively participating in the conservation of her culture, while also asserting her sense of self within an unfamiliar environment.

Najwa sheds light on the importance of religious programmes as a critical cultural symbol of her faith, highlighting their role in strengthening her cultural identity and sense of belonging. She claims that

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The religious programmes make me feel solid as if they are telling me, ‘Don’t worry Allah is looking after you, He will never leave you, He knows you love Him, He knows you are trying, and all of this, all of this will be meaningful and worth it in the end.’ (Aboulela 98)

By accentuating the significance of these programmes, Najwa demonstrates how they serve as a profound source of reassurance and comfort, particularly in the context of her life in the diaspora. Her statement elucidates the ways in which engaging with religious content and rituals bolsters her resilience and provides guidance, reminding her of the omnipresence and benevolence of Allah in her existence. This perspective reinforces her conviction that her dedication, affection and loyalty are recognized and cherished by a supreme being, fostering within her a deep sense of purpose and significance in her life's journey. Essentially, the quote shows how religious programmes function not just as spiritual nourishment but also as sturdy pillars of support that underpin Najwa's cultural identity and ties to her faith, ultimately enriching her feelings of security and importance when confronted with challenges in the diaspora.

Sudanese songs are also a crucial cultural symbol for Najwa, she says “I put on the only Sudanese tape I had, one by Hanan Al-Neel. I saw you sitting in the middle of greenery, the moon straight up above you ...” (Aboulela 131). The tape crafted by Hanan Al-Neel holds a profound significance as a representation of a pivotal aspect of Sudanese culture. Music, encompassing both traditional melodies and popular tunes, serves as a vessel for encapsulating the cultural essence of a particular community, acting as a reservoir of shared experiences and values. When opting to immerse herself in the sounds of a Sudanese tape, Najwa is actively participating in the preservation of her cultural heritage, thereby nurturing her link to Sudan and ensuring its endurance across geographical boundaries.

Through the act of engaging with the tape, Najwa initiates a cascade of recollections from her university years, where the melodies act as potent triggers for a flood of memories. The evocative power of music is evident in its capacity to stir emotions and unlock dormant memories within individuals. To Najwa, the Sudanese songs transcend mere auditory pleasures; they are imbued with a tapestry of personal and communal reminiscences that whisk her back to a bygone era when she revelled in the camaraderie of friends and the

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familiarity of her native surroundings. The tape serves as a conduit for memories of cherished friends and the nurturing presence of her parents, serving as a poignant reminder of the social and familial ties woven into specific cultural encounters. The melodies resurface moments of warmth, solidarity, and companionship that characterized her sojourn in Sudan, fostering a sense of kinship with those connections even amid physical separation.

Through partaking in the tape's melodies, Najwa finds solace in a feeling of inclusivity and reassurance, offering a sanctuary amidst the sentiments of isolation and displacement commonly associated with the diasporic journey. The melodic strains of Sudanese music extend a lifeline of emotional comfort and a semblance of continuity in her transient existence. The wistfulness evoked by the songs serves as a poignant yet tender reminiscence of the facets she has bid farewell to, encapsulating a yearning for her homeland and the erstwhile life she led. This yearning transcends mere geographical nostalgia, encompassing a profound ache for the cultural, social, and emotional landscapes that have shaped her very being. The Sudanese tape emerges as a poignant emblem of Najwa's homeland within an alien milieu, encapsulating both the tangible and intangible facets of Sudan that underpin her sense of self. Through the medium of music, Najwa manages to recreate a semblance of home, albeit fleetingly, offering a brief respite from the pangs of displacement. Her affinity towards Sudanese music serves as a poignant illustration of the intricate layers of cultural identity entwined within the diasporic experience, shedding light on how cultural practices and symbols serve as vital navigational tools for individuals straddling dual identities and seeking to sustain their ties to their cultural heritage.

### **3.3. Section 2: Analysis of *Does My Head Look Big in This?* By Randa Abdel-Fattah**

#### **3.3.1. Contextual Background**

*Does My Head Look Big in This?* by Randa Abdel-Fattah is a novel that explores the life of Amal Mohamed Nasrullah Abdel-Hakim, a sixteen-year-old girl of Australian-Palestinian-Muslim girl. Set in Melbourne, the story opens in medias res when Amal decides to wear the hijab full-time. The narrative delves into the challenges and triumphs Amal faces after this decision. Engaging in activities such as exploring the latest fashion trends, socializing with her peers, and harbouring ambitious aspirations for her future endeavours, Amal's existence embodies the essence of a quintessential teenager. Nevertheless, a pivotal moment alters the course of her life when she opts to wear the hijab on a permanent basis, a choice that stems

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from a profound spiritual awakening experienced while engrossed in a television program. Although cognizant of the obstacles that lie ahead, Amal finds a profound connection to her religious beliefs and is resolute in her commitment to wholeheartedly embrace them. The initial obstacle emerges within the confines of her own home, where her parents, although supportive of her decision, express apprehension regarding the potential backlash she may encounter. Her mother, in particular, is fraught with concerns about the societal pressures and biases that Amal may confront, while her father has fears for her overall well-being and safety (Abdel-Fattah 23). Despite these valid concerns, they exhibit respect for Amal's autonomy and extend support towards her.

Furthermore, Amal's closest friends, Yasmeen and Leila, offer their steadfast companionship, although Leila grapples with her own struggles pertaining to cultural identity and familial expectations. Transitioning to her prestigious educational institution, McClellan Grammar elicits a spectrum of reactions from her peers. While her friends Simone and Eileen display a mixture of curiosity and encouragement, they find themselves grappling with a supportive understanding of Amal's decision. Conversely, the broader school community proves to be less accommodating, subjecting Amal to instances of ignorance and racism from certain classmates, and even encountering subtle biases from some teachers. A poignant challenge materializes in the form of the school principal, who raises concerns regarding the appropriateness of wearing the hijab within a Christian academic environment. Nevertheless, Amal adeptly articulates her stance and successfully advocates for her right to don the hijab. Negotiating the intricacies of school life transpires as a daily goal for Amal, as she endures stares, hushed conversations and disparaging remarks. In spite of the challenges she encounters, she remains in her belief, utilizing wit and strength as coping strategies in the presence of pessimism.

The profound choice to wear the hijab serves as a catalyst for an introspective voyage, compelling Amal to grapple with questions surrounding her cultural identity and the complicated experience of being a Muslim adolescent in the diaspora. Amal's social life is significantly impacted as well. The dynamics of her relationship with Adam, a fellow classmate whom she has romantic feelings for, grow increasingly complex. While Adam demonstrates respect for Amal's decisions and admires her resilience, the presence of cultural and religious disparities serves as a notable impediment in their connection. Amal finds herself grappling with conflicting emotions towards Adam, as she is acutely aware that

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pursuing a romantic involvement with him would clash with her deeply held religious beliefs. In the midst of navigating these intricate personal and societal dilemmas, Amal discovers a source of comfort and support within her family and broader community. The interactions she shares with her extended family members offer a stark contrast to the challenges she faces in her school environment, providing her with a sense of warmth and empathy.

Engaging in activities within her local mosque and participating in community initiatives further reinforces her feelings of belonging and pride in her cultural heritage. The narrative of the novel culminates in a climactic moment where Amal is compelled to confront a significant challenge at school. She bravely stands up against the prejudice and bias exhibited by her peers and educators, asserting her fundamental right to freely practice her faith. This display of courage garners her admiration and respect and also catalyses a broader discourse on the themes of tolerance and inclusivity within the school community. In the subsequent resolution of the story, Amal's perseverance ultimately results in a heightened level of acceptance from those in her immediate social circle. Her friends and family members continue to offer support, and a notable shift is observed as some of her classmates begin to comprehend and appreciate the choices she has made. Amal's personal journey unfolds as a profound narrative of self-discovery and empowerment. Through navigating the complex nature of her dual cultural identity, she adeptly balances her cultural roots with her evolving position within Australian society. *Does My Head Look Big in This?* emerges as a poignant and engaging exploration of Amal's quest for selfhood and validation.

### **3.3.2. Cultural Identity and Religion**

Amal's connection to her religious beliefs was solidified even before she made the decision to wear the hijab, thanks to the knowledge and teachings she received at Hidayah Islamic College. This educational background played a crucial role in laying a firm and unshakable foundation for her faith. The choice to don the hijab marked a pivotal moment in her life, shedding light on the complex interplay of both internal and external struggles that often accompany outward displays of religious devotion. Nevertheless, this decision ultimately proved to be a source of empowerment, fortifying her faith and reinforcing her dedication to live an authentic life according to her religious principles. The narrative of Amal's transformation presented in *Does My Head Look Big in This?* delves deeply into the complexities of the obstacles and achievements that arise from embracing, and openly manifesting one's cultural identity within a diverse and multicultural societal context. This

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investigation provides a subtle viewpoint on the different aspects of navigating religious expression in a diverse environment, emphasizing the complex nature of the difficulties and benefits that accompany such a journey.

In addition to that, Amal discusses further the issue of the hijab and its significance with Adam, in which she says

Every girl is going to interpret the hijab differently. It depends on their culture or their fashion sense, you know? There's no one uniform for it . . . A lot of Africans wear those really colourful wrap-around dresses and veils . . . stricter women cover their faces, but it's not required in Islam. It's their choice to go to that extent. (Abdel-Fattah 71)

Amal's discussion with Adam regarding the hijab offers a thorough insight into the various ways in which Muslim feminists interpret and engage in wearing this religious garment. The insights provided shed light on numerous essential facets of the hijab's significance, illustrating its diverse interpretations across different cultures and individual choices. Amal's assertion that each girl will have her own interpretation of the hijab underscores the vast cultural diversity present within the global Muslim community. This diversity manifests itself in the myriad styles and variations of hijab donned by women hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds. Through acknowledging that African women may opt for vibrant wrap-around garments and headscarves while others may opt to cover their faces, Amal underscores the multitude of ways in which Muslim women manifest their religious beliefs and cultural heritage. This viewpoint resonates with Miriam Cooke's advocacy for comprehending the diverse experiences of Muslim women, emphasizing that there exists no singular method to adhere to or embody Islam. Amal's recognition that the manner in which the hijab is worn can be influenced by a woman's cultural background shows the profound link between cultural lineage and religious expression. The hijab is not a uniform practice but rather intricately combined with the cultural customs and norms of various Muslim societies. This cultural impact enriches the act of wearing the hijab, enabling it to serve as a dual reflection of both religious devotion and cultural identity.

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Amal's observation regarding the intersection of the hijab with fashion sense reflects a dynamic and continuously evolving comprehension of the hijab within contemporary Muslim societies. The assertion that there is no one uniform for it made by Amal highlights the versatility of the hijab, showcasing how it can be seamlessly integrated into diverse fashion styles, thereby enabling Muslim women to convey both their religious beliefs and individual style preferences. This convergence of faith and fashion represents a crucial domain for Muslim feminists, such as those exemplified by Cooke, as it underscores the adaptability and modernization of Islamic customs. It serves as evidence that Muslim women possess the ability to negotiate their cultural identities in manners that are both deeply rooted in religious observance and aligned with prevailing fashion trends. Amal's dialogue with Adam is aimed at challenging the prevailing monolithic perceptions of Muslim women and the hijab. Through enlightening Adam about the multiplicity of hijab practices, Amal is actively engaging in a cultural exchange that fosters comprehension and combats stereotypes. This facet is a pivotal component of Muslim feminist discussions, which strive to illuminate the complicated realities of Muslim women's experiences and push back against oversimplified narratives.

### **3.3.2.1. Exploring Amal's Islamic Faith**

Preceding Amal's choice to wear the hijab, she had already developed a meaningful connection with her Islamic faith, diving deep into its principles and teachings. Growing up in a dedicated household, she was filled with a resilient sense of religious teachings and ethical principles that steered her daily existence. The pivotal role played by Hidayah Islamic school, a prestigious institution focused on religious education, cannot be overstated in moulding Amal's comprehension and observance of Islam. During her time at Hidayah, she was exposed to a holistic curriculum that encompassed various facets of religious studies, laying a solid groundwork for her faith. This educational experience was not limited to theoretical knowledge alone but also engrossed her in a vibrant community that shared and bolstered her religious convictions, fostering a sense of belonging and support. The immersive nature of her education at Hidayah equipped her with a profound understanding of Islamic doctrines and nurtured a network of like-minded individuals who reinforced her commitment to her religious beliefs. Amal says

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I can't stop thinking about Hidaya and I feel sick with longing for my friends and teachers. Sick with longing for a school where you learnt what every other student in any other Melbourne school learnt but you could also pray and fast and wear a hijab and get on with being a teenager without having to answer questions or defend yourself against new headlines . . . without being a prefix to terrorism, extremism, radicalism, any ism. (Abdel-Fattah 12)

Hidaya Islamic school served a multifaceted role in Amal's life, extending far beyond the boundaries of a mere educational institution. For Amal, it represented a sacred space where her religious beliefs and practices were not merely respected but actively cultivated. The nurturing environment at Hidaya was meticulously designed to foster a deep sense of spiritual belonging and reinforce her Islamic identity. Within the confines of this institution, Islamic teachings were seamlessly woven into the fabric of everyday life, allowing Amal to cultivate a comprehensive and integrated understanding of her faith. The emphasis placed on rituals such as prayer, the study of the Quran, and adherence to Islamic ethics played a pivotal role in shaping Amal's worldview and character. This immersive and transformative experience at Hidaya strengthened Amal's bond with her faith and equipped her with the resilience and conviction needed to navigate the inevitable challenges that awaited her in a secular academic environment.

As a consequence, Amal's decision to wear the hijab can be viewed as a natural progression in her spiritual journey, given the strong religious grounding she possesses. The hijab, in Amal's perspective, transcends mere apparel; rather, it serves as a conspicuous proclamation of her dedication to the principles of Islam. By wearing the hijab, she exemplifies her ambition to comply with the teachings of her faith and to be acknowledged as a devout Muslim girl. She says

So what? I can deal with all the crap ... I want to try ... and I want that identity. You know, that symbol of my faith. I want to know what it means to be strong enough to walk around with it on and stick up for my right to wear it. (Abdel-Fattah 24)



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This pivotal choice holds significant weight as it signifies a moment of transformation where Amal consciously opts to outwardly manifest her religious convictions, notwithstanding the potential adverse reactions that society may exhibit. This act of religious expression through the hijab encapsulates a profound personal and public declaration of faith, showcasing Amal's inner spiritual strength and her readiness to embrace her cultural identity openly. The hijab, as a symbol of religious observance, exemplifies Amal's commitment to her beliefs and reflects her courage in standing firm in her faith despite the challenges that may arise.

Despite encountering these obstacles, Amal's choice to don the hijab enhances her commitment to her faith. This decision acts as an additional benefit by reinforcing her religious beliefs and enables her to lead a life that is genuine and true to herself. The hijab transforms into a wellspring of inner fortitude, aiding her in manoeuvring through the complexities of her dual role as an Australian and a follower of Islam. It signifies her resilience and resolve to uphold her convictions in the midst of challenges and opposition in her Third space of enunciation. The act of wearing the hijab symbolizes her dedication to her faith and her determination to embrace her cultural identity wholeheartedly. Through the hijab, Amal finds a sense of empowerment and spiritual connection that guides her in navigating the complexities of her cultural identity with grace and conviction. In this vein, she declares

I'm terrified. But at the same time I feel like my passion and conviction in Islam are bursting inside me and I want to prove to myself that I'm strong enough to wear a badge of my faith. I believe it will make me feel so close to God. Because it's damn hard to walk around with people staring at your "nappy head" and not feel kind of pleased with yourself. (Abdel-Fattah 7)

Amal's parents indeed have a significant impact on moulding her beliefs and actions, instilling within her a strong sense of cultural pride and a steadfast adherence to Islamic principles. They have consistently encouraged her to embrace her cultural heritage. This upbringing instils in Amal a sense of pride and belonging, crucial for maintaining her cultural identity in a multicultural society. Their teachings empower Amal to navigate the complexities of her hybrid cultural identity with confidence, embracing her Palestinian roots

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while integrating into Australian society. Amal's parents also emphasize the importance of Islamic values, particularly compassion and kindness towards others, as exemplified by their instruction to care for Mrs. Vaselli. Despite Mrs. Vaselli's unkindness, Amal is taught to show kindness and respect, following the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (Abdel-Fattah 161). This principle reinforces the idea that Islamic values are not just about personal faith but also about ethical conduct and social responsibility. Through their actions and teachings, Amal's parents model good manners and respect for others. Through teaching Amal to care for Mrs. Vaselli, they highlight the importance of empathy, patience and maintaining one's moral principles, even in the face of adversity. This lesson becomes a practical application of their faith, demonstrating how religious teachings translate into daily actions.

From the perspective of a Muslim feminist, particularly when viewed through the insightful analysis of Miriam Cooke, Amal's choice to adopt the hijab and her subsequent contemplations on how it was received by staunch feminists shed light on crucial facets related to agency, choice and cultural identity. The decision made by Amal to wear the hijab serves as a strong declaration of her agency and independence, showcasing her ability to make decisions autonomously. She claims that among the people who are not going to support or tolerate her decision are "hard-core feminists who don't get that this is me exercising my right to choose" (Abdel-Fattah 17). In this quote, Amal underscores that her decision to embrace the hijab is a personal and conscious form of self-expression, rather than a symbol of subjugation. This viewpoint resonates with Miriam Cooke's stance, which underscores the significance of comprehending the choices made by Muslim women within the specific cultural and religious environments they inhabit. As per Cooke, the hijab might indicate a form of empowerment for Muslim women, demonstrating their agency in making decisions concerning their bodies and cultural identities. Amal's choice to wear the hijab represents her method of exercising her right to choose, challenging the singular perceptions of feminism that might perceive the hijab solely as a tool of patriarchal dominance.

Amal's contemplation also brings to light the close relationship between cultural identity and a sense of belonging. Opting to don the hijab, Amal is not solely validating her religious convictions but is also establishing a niche for her cultural heritage within a broader societal context that is predominantly non-Muslim. This particular choice serves to underscore the idea that wearing the hijab can represent a profoundly intimate and validating gesture, one that nurtures a feeling of connectedness and communal unity. Cooke's artistic portfolio

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frequently delves into the imperative to challenge prevalent Western preconceptions regarding Muslim women. Amal's remark concerning the lack of comprehension from hard-core feminists regarding her decision serves to underscore the critical need to expand the discourse within feminism to encompass and appreciate the diverse array of experiences women encounter on a global scale. Through her hijab, Amal actively questions the assumption that all women are expected to adhere to Western paradigms of emancipation and instead advocates for a more encompassing comprehension of what it signifies to be a feminist in contemporary society.

Another aspect of Amal's faith is her dedication to her religious values and ethics. Her commitment is not just superficial but deeply ingrained in her beliefs and actions. This is particularly evident in her conversations with her friends Simone and Eileen regarding her relationship with Adam. When asked if she would date Adam if he asked her out, Amal's response is unequivocal: "Nah, you know I don't do the whole boyfriend/girlfriend thing . . . you know I can't in Islam. You know the whole thing about no sex and physical intimacy before marriage" (Abdel-Fattah 73, 74). This response highlights her strong adherence to Islamic teachings about relationships and physical intimacy. Despite her feelings for Adam, Amal prioritizes her faith and the values it instils, demonstrating her truthful commitment to her religious principles. Amal emphasizes that her decision is not influenced by her parents but is a reflection of her own beliefs: "just don't think it's because of my parents. If I wanted to have a boyfriend, I could easily get away with it behind my parents' back" (Abdel-Fattah 74). This statement underscores her personal conviction and integrity. Amal explicitly states that her decisions are shaped by her interpretation of Islam and her aspiration to abide by its teachings, rather than being swayed by external influences or parental expectations.

Amal's mention of her parents' trust, when saying "They trust me heaps so if I spoke to a guy for ages on the phone every night and said he's just a friend they'd believe me, no questions asked" (Abdel-Fattah 74) illustrates the high level of integrity she maintains in her relationships. Her parents' trust is a testament to the strong moral and ethical values they have instilled in her. Amal respects this trust and chooses to honour it by adhering to her religious principles, even when she could easily deviate without their knowledge. Amal's decision not to engage in a romantic relationship with Adam reflects her self-discipline and respect for her faith. It shows that she is not swayed by societal norms or peer pressure but remains steadfast in her beliefs. This self-discipline is a significant aspect of her character in which she

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highlights her maturity and deep-rooted commitment to living a life that aligns with her values. Amal's dedication to her religion and values also speaks to the broader theme of navigating cultural identity in a predominantly non-Muslim society. Through choosing not to participate in boyfriend/girlfriend relationships, she sets herself apart from many of her peers. This decision, however, strengthens her sense of self and her connection to her cultural and religious heritage, allowing her to maintain her cultural identity while living in the diaspora.

#### **3.3.2.2. The Importance of the Religious Community and Support in Amal's Journey**

The hijab functions as a potent symbol of Amal's strong dedication to her religious beliefs and her steadfast commitment to upholding her faith amidst the pressures exerted by society. Initially, her parents harboured reservations regarding her choice to don the hijab, apprehensive that she might not possess the readiness to confront the societal adversities and biases associated with being a visibly Muslim adolescent in a predominantly non-Muslim diasporic context. Their primary concern revolved around her capacity to endure the ramifications of this crucial decision. Nonetheless, as Amal persisted in her determination, her parents gradually comprehended and honoured her decision (Abdel-Fattah 24, 25). They acknowledged her contentment and resoluteness, ultimately standing firmly beside her. This is vividly illustrated when they advocate for her decision during discussions with Miss Walsh, showcasing their support and profound pride in Amal's resolve. Actually, Amal's mother assumes a critical role in nurturing her daughter's self-assurance and self-belief. The composure and certainty exhibited by her mother while wearing the hijab in public serve as a wellspring of motivation for Amal (Abdel-Fattah 28). Witnessing her mother's conduct, Amal aspires to epitomize the same level of confidence and ease in embracing her cultural heritage while residing in the diaspora. Her mother emerges as an exemplary figure, someone Amal yearns to imitate in terms of audacity and conviction.

Furthermore, Amal's circle of friends also plays a crucial role in providing indispensable support and motivation. Her Turkish friend Leila promptly expresses jubilation and solidarity towards Amal's resolution, elated by the prospect of both sharing the experience of wearing the hijab. This camaraderie bolsters Amal's determination and alleviates her sense of solitude in her decision-making process. Conversely, her Pakistani friend Yasmeen initially counsels against the choice, fearing that Amal might encounter challenges in her new school environment. Nevertheless, witnessing Amal's resolve, Yasmeen swiftly extends her backing,

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reinforcing Amal's decision (Abdel-Fattah 20, 21). Aside from that, Amal's non-Muslim friends, Eileen and Simone, also play a vital role in her journey. Even though they do not adhere to her religious beliefs, they demonstrate a remarkable level of cultural tolerance and show endless support for Amal's decisions (Abdel-Fattah 42, 44). This affirmation and advocacy for Amal become particularly evident when she encounters negative comments or disturbances from peers at school or members of the public. The support and defence from Eileen and Simone serve to strengthen Amal's self-assurance significantly. Their support serves as a poignant illustration of how cultural empathy and genuine friendship have the power to bridge divides and establish a robust system of encouragement and protection for individuals like Amal. Even her teacher Mr Pearse showed tolerance towards her decision when he devoted his office for Amal to pray (Abdel-Fattah 46) and constantly asking her whether she has coped with the others after wearing the veil (Abdel-Fattah 217).

In Ramadan, for example, Amal's friends, despite their different religious backgrounds, demonstrate an understanding of the physical challenges she faces while fasting. By finding a quiet corner for a midday nap, Simone and Eileen provide Amal with much-needed rest, showing their support in a practical and considerate manner. This act adheres to Sysoyev's idea in which it signifies more than just friendship; it highlights their willingness to accommodate Amal's needs during Ramadan, reinforcing their respect for her religious observance (Abdel-Fattah 332). Also, Adam and Josh's reluctance to eat or drink in front of Amal, even after she assures them it is acceptable, underscores their sensitivity to her fasting. Adam's sweet and apologetic reaction when he almost offers Amal chewing gum exemplifies a thoughtful awareness of her commitment to her faith (Abdel-Fattah 332). This sensitivity is crucial in creating a supportive environment where Amal feels respected and valued. The actions of Amal's friends reflect a broader theme of cultural tolerance and mutual respect. By actively participating in behaviours that make Amal's fasting easier, they show that they value her religious practices and are willing to adapt their behaviours out of respect. This respect is a cornerstone of their friendship, highlighting how differences in belief can be navigated with empathy and understanding even in the diaspora.

The importance of community support is further emphasized when Amal decides to wear the hijab in public for the first time, marking a significant step in her personal journey. Upon stepping out, she comes across three veiled women at a food court who warmly smile and greet her with the traditional Muslim salutation, "Assalamu Alaykom," creating a moment of

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connection and acceptance (Abdel-Fattah 28). This unexpected but heart-warming encounter with strangers within her own community leaves Amal with a deep sense of belonging and validation, reinforcing the idea that the hijab represents more than just a fashion statement; it symbolizes unity and shared values among Muslims. So she continues

I'm experiencing a new identity, a new expression of who I am on the inside, but I know that I'm not alone. I'm not breaking new ground. I'm sharing something with millions of other women around the world and it feels so exciting. (Abdel-Fattah 28)

These simple yet meaningful interactions, along with the consistent support from her family, friends and the broader community, contribute to Amal's growing confidence and faith in her decision to wear the hijab. Gradually, she begins to feel a newfound sense of empowerment and liberation, as though the fabric around her head is a shield protecting her cultural heritage and religious beliefs. In this respect, she claims "I felt protected from all the crap about beauty and image. As scared as I was walking around the shops in the hijab, I was also experiencing a feeling of empowerment and freedom" (Abdel-Fattah 29). This empowerment she experiences resonates with the core principles of Muslim feminism, which advocates for women's right to don the hijab as a form of religious expression and cultural identity assertion. Throughout her transformative journey, Amal serves as a prime example of how the hijab can be a symbol of inner strength, cultural identity and communal solidarity within the diaspora, embodying empowerment on both individual and collective levels.

#### **3.3.2.3. The Role of Faith in Amal's Cultural Identity Formation**

Amal's consistent belief acts as a potent source of serenity and guidance, providing her with a deep feeling of internal calm and a definite goal that grounds her securely in the face of the numerous obstacles and prejudices she faces in her everyday existence in the diaspora. Opting to don the hijab emerges as a critical embodiment of her spiritual convictions, representing a significant instance of individual development and unwavering faith in her beliefs. This decision both showcases her commitment to her religious principles and underscores her strength in upholding her cultural identity in the midst of societal pressures and preconceptions. She says

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That's when this warm feeling buzzes through you, knowing that He knows you're trying to be strong to please Him. Like you're both in on a private joke and something special and warm and extraordinary is happening and nobody in the world knows about it because it's your own experience, your own personal friendship with your Creator. I guess when I'm not wearing the hijab I feel like I'm missing out. I feel cheated out of that special bond. (Abdel-Fattah 7)

In the midst of encountering initial resistance from her parents, who articulated apprehensions regarding the possible societal repercussions she could encounter, Amal's determined resolve and resolute dedication ultimately convince them of the authenticity of her commitment. Such ardent advocacy for her decision underscores the profound nature of her beliefs and accentuates the resilience and strength she derives from her religious convictions. Within this context, she conveys to her parents the depth of her convictions and the unshakable faith that propels her forward, saying

I walked into my classroom and I wanted to throw up from how nervous I was. But this decision, it's coming from my heart. I can't explain or rationalize it. OK, I'm doing it because I believe it's my duty and defines me as a Muslim female but it's not as ... I don't know how to put it ... it's more than just that. (Abdel-Fattah 52)

Furthermore, Amal's acts of prayer and contemplation are depicted as transformative experiences that offer her a sense of grounding and clarity, enabling her to navigate the convoluted dynamics of being a Muslim adolescent in a predominantly non-Muslim environment. These rituals transcend mere routine practices, as they are infused with a profound sense of serenity and contentment that nourish her soul. For example, the shared experience of performing the morning Fajr prayer alongside her parents fills Amal with joy and tranquillity, particularly when she listens to her father's melodic recitation of the Quran. This communal spiritual engagement not only reinforces her bond with her faith but also strengthens her familial ties, creating a haven of peace and happiness in her life. She describes her emotions during praying vividly, saying

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And it's when I'm standing there this morning, in my PJs and a hijab, next to my mum and my dad, kneeling before God, that I feel a strange sense of calm. I feel like nothing can hurt me, and nothing else matters. And that's when I know I'm ready [to wear the hijab]. (Abdel-Fattah 29)

Another pivotal moment that underscores the significance of Amal's faith in shaping her sense of self arises when Ms Walsh, her school principal, questions her choice to wear the hijab. Ms Walsh raises doubts about whether Amal's parents influenced her decision to don the hijab. During this confrontation, Amal firmly defends her stance, emphasizing that the choice was entirely her own and demonstrating confidence in her decision. This particular exchange highlights Amal's autonomy and emphasizes the crucial role her faith plays in her existence, giving her the strength to articulate and uphold her convictions even when challenged by figures of authority (Abdel-Fattah 38, 39). These encounters play a fundamental role in moulding Amal's cultural identity, strengthening her determination to remain authentic to her beliefs. Her faith emerges as a wellspring of internal fortitude, equipping her to resist external pressures and biases. It equips her with a series of moral principles and ethical norms that control her behaviour and choices, cultivating a sense of goal and orientation in her life. Amal's journey stands as proof of how belief can act as a foundation of cultural identity, especially in the setting of a diaspora, where maintaining connections to one's cultural and religious heritage can be challenging.

#### **3.3.3. Language and Communication in Amal' Life**

Amal predominantly engages in communication in the English language with her family and friends, both within the confines of her home and outside. This decision showcases the amalgamation of Australian cultural norms and practices into her day-to-day routines, highlighting her adeptness and ease in using English, which happens to be the predominant language within her wider social sphere. Nonetheless, the sporadic incorporation of Arabic terms and expressions like 'yallah,' 'ya Amal,' and 'habibti' indicates her enduring ties to her Palestinian cultural background. She says

Even though my parents speak to me predominantly in English there are some Arabic words which are instinctively part of their everyday vocabulary. Yallah



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means “come on” or “hurry up.” When my parents are in a particularly affectionate mood they sometimes prefix my name with ya so I’m “ya Amal,” which means “oh Amal.” When I was little, I actually thought my name was Yaamal. (Abdel-Fattah 22)

These linguistic inclusions function as symbolic representations of her sense of self, enabling her to uphold a connection to her cultural origins while navigating through the complexities of life in Australia. Through this linguistic duality, Amal showcases her ability to seamlessly blend her past and present, creating a harmonious coexistence of her heritage and the cultural milieu she currently resides in. The strategic use of Arabic words amid predominantly English conversations underscores the nuanced ways in which individuals negotiate their multifaceted identities in multicultural settings, illustrating the complex interplay between language, culture, and personal heritage.

Moreover, in the various social interactions that occur within the educational setting and the wider community, Amal's utilization of the English language serves as a visible marker of her active involvement in Australian society. Through the medium of English, she is unlikely to effectively convey her thoughts and ideas, hindering her integration with her peers and contributing to her lack of belonging within the Australian cultural landscape. This linguistic proficiency enhances her communication skills and serves to underscore her unique dual cultural identity, reflecting her simultaneous identification as both Australian and Palestinian. The incorporation of Arabic phrases and expressions into her English discourse represents a fascinating fusion of languages, symbolizing the richness of her multicultural background. This linguistic amalgamation serves as a powerful representation of the complexity and fluidity of her cultural identity, showcasing her ability to effortlessly navigate and transition between diverse cultural contexts with grace and ease in the Third space. Amal's linguistic dexterity and cultural adaptability are vividly displayed through this interplay of languages, underscoring her nuanced understanding of her hybrid cultural identity and the dynamic interplay between her various cultural affiliations.

Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory underscores the significance of language in the formation of one's cultural identity and encounters within diverse cultural environments. In the context of Amal, her proficiency in two languages serves as a prime example of this theory,

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showcasing her adeptness at moving seamlessly between English and Arabic as a reflection of her presence in what is commonly referred to as the third space. This particular space is notably characterized by the convergence of various cultural backgrounds and the emergence of a distinct, hybrid cultural identity or as Anzaldúa puts it “mestizaje.” Amal’s linguistic expertise mirrors her cultural hybridity and serves as a tangible expression of her capacity to uphold her cultural roots while living in the diaspora.

As a matter of fact, living in the borderlands offers Amal a unique set of challenges and opportunities. The intricacies of balancing two distinct languages and cultures can prove to be quite complex, necessitating her adept navigation of varying expectations and societal norms. Nonetheless, this situation also serves to enhance her overall life experience by granting her access to a wide array of diverse cultural knowledge and practices. This linguistic dualism widens her worldview and also deepens her comprehension of her own sense of self, as she grapples with the task of harmonizing and amalgamating her cultural roots. Actually, Amal’s use of both English and Arabic in her daily life is a crucial aspect of her cultural identity formation and her experience of living in the borderlands. This bilingualism reflects her negotiation of cultural identity within the diaspora, embodying Anzaldúa’s concept of the third space and mestizaje. Through her language use, Amal maintains a connection to her Palestinian heritage while fully participating in Australian society, in which she illustrates the fluid and dynamic nature of cultural identity in the diaspora.

### **3.3.4. Cultural Practices and Food**

#### **3.3.4.1. Food as a Cultural Connector**

In the novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, food functions as a crucial link between Amal’s cultural background and her everyday experiences in the diaspora. The traditional meals prepared within her household serve as powerful symbols of her deep-rooted Palestinian heritage, providing her with solace and a sense of continuity amidst the convoluted nuances of her mestiza cultural identity. According to Sherman on page 42, the act of partaking in family dinners and gatherings centred around food is portrayed as pivotal moments of cultural reaffirmation and a feeling of belonging. Amal’s dietary preferences and culinary choices exemplify her skilful navigation between the Australian way of life and the customs of her Palestinian roots. While interacting with her peers, she enjoys consuming popular Western dishes like pizza and gelato, albeit with minor adjustments to align with her

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religious dietary restrictions, such as refraining from consuming pork-based products like ham, pepperoni, salami, and bacon (Abdel-Fattah 135, 138). This amalgamation of diverse culinary practices highlights her sincere commitment to upholding Islamic dietary laws. It demonstrates her remarkable capacity to adapt to and savour the cultural diversity present in her surroundings without compromising her deeply-held beliefs.

At her house, Amal adheres to a diet abundant in traditional Palestinian delicacies such as makloba, fatoosh, mansaf, and warak aneb (vine leaves) (Abdel-Fattah 99). These culinary delights hold a significance that surpasses mere sustenance; they represent a cultural legacy that binds Amal and her kin to their homeland. Each dish serves as a vessel for cherished memories, narrative threads and a profound sense of belonging that transcends the confines of physical or geographical borders. Through the act of preparing and tasting these age-old recipes, Amal's family honours their cultural heritage and forges a palpable connection to their Palestinian origins. Here, the role of food extends beyond mere nourishment, playing a pivotal part in fostering familial ties and communal unity. Home-cooked meals, especially during festive occasions with visitors, serve as a platform for Amal's family to exhibit the richness of their gastronomic customs. Amal frequently expounds upon the details of these culinary creations, elucidating their ingredients and culinary techniques. This practice showcases the diverse and vibrant culinary heritage embedded in Palestinian culture and underscores the profound significance of food as a conduit for cultural expression and a source of pride.

Moreover, during the holy month of Ramadan, the importance of traditional Palestinian cuisine is emphasized to a greater extent. The array of dishes enjoyed during this sacred period symbolizes the family's commitment to their cultural customs and religious beliefs. The process of preparing and enjoying these meals serves to strengthen their sense of unity and inclusion within their community (Abdel-Fattah 326). The gatherings for Ramadan meals are portrayed as instances of familial intimacy and cultural revelry, where the spiritual and cultural facets of Amal's cultural background intersect harmoniously. Amal's culinary encounters serve as a prime example of the notion of cultural fusion in the borderlands. She adeptly manoeuvres between relishing Western dishes with her peers and upholding her cultural legacy within the confines of her home. This cultural hybridity mirrors the overarching concept of residing in the in-between spaces, as expounded by Anzaldúa's theoretical framework. Amal's capacity to transition between diverse cultural norms and

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seamlessly integrate them into her daily routine stands as a testament to her flexibility and fortitude. Thus through these culinary practices, the novel highlights the importance of food in maintaining cultural identity, fostering community bonds and navigating the complexities of life in the diaspora.

### 3.3.4.2. Cultural Practices and Amal's Attachment to Heritage in the Diaspora

The novel effectively brings to light a multitude of cultural customs and traditions, ranging from the observance of religious festivities to the preservation of family rituals and active participation in community gatherings. These cultural practices play a pivotal role in shaping Amal's sense of self, reinforcing her cultural roots and fostering a deep-seated pride in her cultural heritage. The novel underlines the significance of these practices in upholding cultural legacy and nurturing a cohesive sense of belonging in the diaspora. Amal's genuine appreciation for cultural traditions shines through when she is present at a wedding ceremony of a family acquaintance, where she enthusiastically recounts the vibrant ambiance, particularly noting the spirited performance of the *dabke*, a traditional Syrian dance, by the guests. In this joyous occasion, Amal and her companion Yasmeeen enthusiastically partake in the festivity, immersing themselves in the celebratory spirit. Amal openly expresses her fondness for Arabic melodies and tunes in which she says

I love Arabic music and as soon as I'm on the dance floor a wave of energy takes over my body. Yasmeeen and I start belly dancing, laughing and singing aloud to the familiar pop Arabic song as we shake our hips and torso in different patterns. After half an hour of belly dancing we link hands in the *dabke* line. (Abdel-Fattah 277)

Apart from that, Ramadan holds a significant place in Amal's life, as evidenced by the novel's dedication of three chapters to recounting her experiences during this sacred period. Throughout these chapters, Amal reflects on her initial endeavours at fasting during childhood, candidly admitting to resorting to clandestine eating as a way to cope. However, as she matures, Amal undergoes a profound transformation in her perception of Ramadan, realizing that it encompasses more than just refraining from food and drink; it also involves developing empathy for the millions of individuals worldwide who grapple with food

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insecurity (Abdel-Fattah 326). In delineating her journey, Amal's narrative vividly portrays her evolution in both spiritual and cultural realms. Furthermore, she articulates the myriad challenges she faces while fasting during Ramadan, particularly when juggling her academic commitments, thereby demonstrating her resilience and sincere dedication to her faith (Abdel-Fattah 339).

Moreover, Amal finds solace in partaking in the pre-dawn meal known as *suhoor* alongside her parents, underscoring the communal aspect of sharing the fajr prayer together (Abdel-Fattah 325). The recurring tradition of breaking their fast by attending movies on weekends serves as a symbol of familial togetherness and exemplifies how her family harmoniously merges their cultural and religious customs with contemporary leisure activities, resulting in a distinctive fusion of traditions that define their unique cultural identity (Abdel-Fattah 331). Through these depictions, the story explores Amal's different experiences during Ramadan, shedding light on the various aspects of her personal development and the interaction between tradition, modernity and spirituality in shaping her perspective. Hence, Amal's account acts as a striking depiction of the shift in power of religious ceremonies and the considerable influence they could wield on an individual's sense of self and inclusion.

Furthermore, the commemoration of Eid al-Fitr, which signifies the conclusion of Ramadan, stands as yet another customary observance that adds happiness and significance to Amal's existence. In this respect, she says "I always feel a little sad and nostalgic at *Eid* breakfast. Ramadan sure is hard but I really do love the whole atmosphere of it" (Abdel-Fattah 345). Amal vividly describes the jubilant ambiance of Eid, commencing with the fajr prayer and engaging in Quran recitations alongside her family members (Abdel-Fattah 344). The communal visit to the mosque for Eid prayers holds immense importance as a unifying event where Amal delights in listening to the Imam's sermons and exchanging warm greetings with family acquaintances through embraces and well wishes of "kola sana winta bikhair" (happy Eid). The feeling of togetherness and the shared cultural legacy are distinctly evident during these festivities, fostering a sense of belonging and unity. Amal says accordingly

Then the call to prayer starts to sound through the loudspeakers, preparing us for the communal prayer where we thank God for the food we have after a month of fasting and pray for those without. It's a haunting, beautiful reminder

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that the time has come to stand humble before God and I get goosepimples listening to it. (Abdel-Fattah 346)

Amal's contemplations on Ramadan and Eid underscore the significance of cultivating empathy and engaging in acts of philanthropy. She duly recognizes that the act of fasting instills in individuals an appreciation for the challenges faced by the less privileged in society. On the occasion of Eid, the community promptly rallies to contribute to donation boxes within the mosque premises, exemplifying the ethos of charitable giving and solidarity towards the impoverished. These traditions serve to reinforce the core values of compassion and magnanimity that lie at the heart of her cultural and religious affiliation. Indeed, cultural practices and traditions play a crucial role in Amal's life. Her participation in events like weddings, Ramadan, and Eid celebrations underscores the importance of these practices in maintaining her cultural heritage and providing a sense of belonging. Through these experiences, Amal navigates her dual cultural identity, blending her Palestinian cultural roots with her life in Australia. These cultural practices connect her to her heritage and foster a strong sense of community, stability and cultural pride among diaspora populations.

#### **3.3.5. Clothing and Cultural Symbols in *Does My Head Look Big in This?***

Amal's decision to embrace a full-time commitment to wearing the hijab, thereby embodying the role of a full-timer, stands as a profound manifestation of her deep-rooted faith and strong connection to her cultural heritage. This deliberate choice serves as a powerful testament to the significance she places on her religious beliefs and cultural identity. Nevertheless, it is crucial to note that Amal's decision to adopt the hijab as a constant part of her attire does not in any way curtail her keen sense of fashion and style. On the contrary, Amal adeptly navigates the realms of religious devotion and fashion trends, skilfully intertwining the two to create a harmonious blend that showcases her unique perspective on the intersection of tradition and modernity. Her wardrobe serves as a visual representation of her ability to strike a delicate balance between modesty, as dictated by her Islamic faith, and sartorial elegance. In this matter, Amal says

I believe in Allah/God's commandments contained in the Koran. God says men and women should act and dress modestly. The way I see it, I'd rather follow God's fashion dictates than some ugly solarium-tanned old fart in Milan who's

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getting by on a pretty self-serving theory of less is more when it comes to female dress. (Abdel-Fattah 8)

When venturing outside her home, Amal often opts for a combination of jean jackets and cargo pants, which she pairs with her hijab, effectively demonstrating her adeptness at merging elements of her cultural and religious heritage with contemporary fashion sensibilities (Abdel-Fattah 177). This sartorial choice underscores her commitment to her faith and highlights her individuality and distinctive style preferences. The variety in Amal's outfit selections mirrors the multifaceted nature of her personality, showcasing her vibrant and dynamic character. At times, she can be seen donning a pink chiffon hijab complemented by a white cotton headband, elegantly matched with a long, sleek black skirt, a soft-pink fitted cashmere top, and stylish pink heels (Abdel-Fattah 281). This particular ensemble serves as a prime example of her skilful incorporation of trendy elements into her wardrobe while still upholding the modesty standards prescribed by her religious beliefs. The meticulous selection of colours and fabrics in her outfits further underscores her attention to detail and her commitment to presenting herself in a stylish and polished manner.

Through her choice of attire, Amal effectively communicates her sense of self and confidence to the world. The hijab, a significant emblem of her cultural and religious background, plays a pivotal role in shaping her cultural identity, highlighting her connection to her heritage and faith. Contrary to common misconceptions, the hijab does not restrict Amal's ability to express herself through fashion; instead, it is seamlessly integrated into her clothing habits as a fundamental component. Amal's strategic incorporation of trendy and stylish pieces into her ensembles serves as a powerful statement that wearing a hijab does not imply sacrificing one's sense of style or individuality. Instead, it highlights how fashion can function as a tool for self-expression, enabling Amal to navigate her cultural identity as a contemporary Muslim woman with grace and confidence. Just as Muslim feminists defy stereotypes about Muslim women and the hijab through their sartorial choices, Amal challenges preconceived notions and promotes a more inclusive understanding of diversity within fashion. Her unique style sends a clear message that wearing the hijab is not synonymous with oppression or conformity, but rather a reflection of personal autonomy and cultural identity. Amal's remarkable ability to fuse her religious values with a passion for fashion paints a vibrant picture of a modern Muslim woman who embodies both faithfulness

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and trendiness, serving as a beacon of inspiration for others seeking to harmonize tradition with modernity in the diaspora.

In *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, Amal employs a variety of cultural symbols to underscore and introduce facets of her heritage, aiding readers in comprehending and valuing her cultural background to a greater extent. These symbols encompass a broad spectrum, from familial designations to idiomatic expressions and media influences, serving as a reflection of her hybrid cultural identity and the complicated dynamics between her Palestinian lineage and her experiences in Australia. Amal elucidates that within Arabic culture, adults who are family friends are commonly addressed as "uncles" and "aunts," while their offspring are regarded as "cousins." She articulates, "Aunt Cassandra and Uncle Tariq aren't related to me but in Arabic culture most adults who are family friends are addressed as uncles and aunts. Their children are "cousins". It makes for a pretty large extended "family" (Abdel-Fattah 106). This custom underscores the significance of extended family ties and communal bonds within Arabic culture, nurturing a profound sense of intimacy and inclusion within the community. Through the sharing of this cultural symbol, Amal enables her audience to grasp the communal essence of her heritage more deeply.

By incorporating such symbols into her narrative, Amal effectively bridges the gap between her readers and her cultural background, fostering a sense of empathy and understanding among her audience. The utilization of these cultural symbols enriches the storytelling experience and serves as a means of promoting cross-cultural awareness and appreciation. Through her narrative techniques, Amal both educates her readers about her cultural heritage and invites them to partake in a journey of cultural exploration and understanding. Consequently, Amal's adept use of cultural symbols contributes to the multifaceted portrayal of her cultural identity and enriches the overall narrative with depth and authenticity. As a matter of fact, the incorporation of cultural symbols in the novel serves as a vehicle for Amal to convey the richness and complexity of her heritage to a diverse audience, fostering a sense of connection and mutual respect across cultural boundaries.

Moreover, Amal familiarizes her audience with Arabic idiomatic expressions, which play a significant role as cultural indicators and contribute layers of meaning to her story. In one instance, she illustrates a common Arabic imprecation, "May God damn you and your moustache," (Abdel-Fattah 109) utilized to convey feelings of anger or frustration. This particular proverb underscores the distinctive linguistic characteristics inherent in Arabic



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traditions, shedding light on the methods through which sentiments are communicated within Amal's societal sphere. Another idiom that Amal delves into is "His mind is like a shoe," (Abdel-Fattah 266) employed to depict an individual exhibiting obstinacy or inflexibility. These idiomatic expressions are not solely lively and vivid, but also function as evidence of the complex and rich tradition of the Arabic language and cultural inheritance. By weaving these colloquial sayings into the narrative fabric, Amal skilfully brings to life her cultural heritage, providing her audience with insight into the core of her origins and upbringing.

Amal's cultural identity is profoundly influenced by the impact of Western media. An example of this influence is seen in her viewing of the movie "Erin Brockovich," which plays a significant role in shaping her perspectives and attitudes. The film serves as a catalyst for Amal, inspiring her to cultivate a stronger sense of empathy and proactivity, prompting her to make the decision to visit Mrs. Vaselli of her own volition for the very first time (Abdel-Fattah 188). This particular instance serves as a poignant illustration of the power that Western cultural artefacts possess in positively shaping Amal's hailing from diverse cultural backgrounds, ultimately fostering a shared sense of humanity and moral obligation. The various cultural symbols present in Amal's life, such as familial terms, idiomatic expressions and media influences, serve as manifestations of her deep connection to both her Palestinian roots and the Australian society in which she resides. These symbols effectively embody the notion of borderlands as conceptualized by Gloria Anzaldúa, wherein individuals adeptly navigate and reconcile multiple cultural identities within themselves. Through Amal's seamless integration of Arabic terms and expressions alongside her active engagement with Western media, she vividly exemplifies the hybridity and fluidity of her cultural identity and the inherent flexibility of cultural boundaries.

#### **3.4. Conclusion**

In this chapter, the researcher has delved deeply into the cultural identities of the protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*. Through the lens of religion, language, food, clothing, and cultural symbols, this research has explored how Najwa and Amal navigate their hybrid cultural identities within the diasporic spaces they inhabit. Both characters demonstrate a profound connection to their cultural heritage while simultaneously adapting to and integrating aspects of the societies in which they live. Najwa's journey in *Minaret* reveals her gradual rediscovery and deepening of her Islamic faith, which provides her with a sense of peace and purpose amidst the challenges of exile and loss. Similarly, Amal

### **Chapter 3: Exploring Cultural Identity Through the Protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?***

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in *Does My Head Look Big in This?* shows a strong commitment to her faith and cultural practices, balancing her Palestinian roots with her life in Australia. The support of her family and friends, along with her personal determination, plays a crucial role in affirming her cultural identity. The next chapter, which is the final one, will continue this analysis by comparing the two female protagonists, examining how they seek and affirm their cultural identities in the diaspora. Through conducting a comprehensive comparative analysis, the researcher will be able to delve further into the complex nuances of the similarities and disparities present in the experiences under investigation. This meticulous examination will shed light on the protagonists' variations and reveal the overarching significance they hold in shaping cultural identity within the realm of diaspora literature.

# **Chapter Four**

Comparative Analysis of Cultural Identity in  
*Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

## **Chapter 4: Comparative Analysis of Cultural Identity Negotiation in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?***

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### **Chapter 4: Comparative Analysis of Cultural Identity Negotiation in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?***

#### **4.1. Introduction**

The examination of cultural identity within the diasporic setting serves as the fundamental basis for both *Minaret* authored by Leila Aboulela and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* written by Randa Abdel-Fattah. These literary works present captivating storylines that explore the experiences of their main characters, Najwa and Amal, as they grapple with the complicated nature of their dual cultural identities. In this particular section, a thorough comparative scrutiny is undertaken to analyse the concept of cultural identity as depicted in these two pieces of literature, drawing insights from the realms of Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory. Through a detailed investigation of the internal and external struggles faced by the protagonists, their approaches to cultural acculturation, as well as the underlying themes of empowerment and opposition, the objective of this section is to show the strategies employed by Najwa and Amal in navigating their cultural identities amidst the myriad challenges and societal expectations prevalent in a diverse cultural milieu. By employing this comparative framework, the section sheds light on the complex interplay of religion, language, cultural traditions, and symbolic representations in shaping the protagonists' perceptions of self and affiliation. The discoveries resulting from this analysis are poised to offer valuable insights into the broader comprehension of cultural identity within diasporic communities, thereby setting the stage for a more profound understanding of the personal journeys undertaken by the protagonists and the rich tapestry of cultural environments they inhabit.

#### **4.2. Section 1: The Female Protagonists' Cultural Identity Negotiation**

##### **4.2.1. Internal and External Conflicts**

Religion significantly influences the cultural identities of Najwa and Amal, playing a pivotal role in their personal growth and interactions within their communities. It serves as a source of both internal and external conflict. This is clearly evident in the novel *Minaret*, where Najwa's reconnection with Islam serves as a profound and intimate journey that brings her comfort and a sense of belonging following her family's downfall. Her active participation in the mosque community in London emerges as a crucial element in the process of reconstructing her cultural identity. The narrative depicts Najwa's faith as a source of strength,

## Chapter 4: Comparative Analysis of Cultural Identity Negotiation in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

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empowering her to face past hardships and navigate the complexities of her new life with poise and resolve. Najwa's internal struggle originates from the depths of her connection with her faith, which is a central theme in *Minaret*. Throughout the novel, she wrestles with strong emotions of regret arising from her past behaviours and a pervasive feeling of insufficiency in her religious rituals. This profound internal conflict becomes most apparent when she finds herself envious of other Muslim girls who exhibit a stronger devotion to their faith, thereby highlighting her inner turmoil and quest for spiritual contentment. An illustrative moment occurs when Najwa witnesses a group of university students engaged in prayer, leading her to experience a sharp pang of envy as she recognizes the depth of their spiritual dedication and the disciplined approach they have towards their beliefs (Aboulela 44).

Similarly, in *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, the character Amal also encounters internal struggles, albeit of a different nature, as she grapples with the challenge of harmonizing her faith with the desire to cope with a predominantly non-Muslim society. Amal's choice to sport the hijab is brimming with instances of self-doubt, particularly as she envisions the possible responses from her peers and the societal expectations that might follow (Abdel-Fattah 17). Nevertheless, despite these uncertainties, Amal's internal conflict is counter balanced by her unshakable conviction in her right to manifest her religious identity. Through the perspective of Mirriam Cooke, the internal conflicts showcased in the narrative serve as a poignant reflection of the protagonists' transformative paths towards self-acceptance and empowerment. Within this framework, Najwa's experiences of guilt and envy serve as poignant markers of her arduous journey to reclaim her faith and attain inner peace. Meanwhile, Amal's struggles with self-doubt stand out as a testament to her remarkable resilience in embracing her unique cultural identity in the face of societal expectations and norms. The characters of Najwa and Amal collectively exemplify the complex and dynamic relationship between personal faith and the external pressures exerted by society, shedding light on the complexities inherent in navigating one's beliefs and values within a broader social context.

Najwa encounters significant external conflicts stemming from her religion as well. The novel *Minaret* portrays how her decision to don the hijab in London results in her being subjected to bullying and discrimination by non-Muslim individuals. These external hurdles not just worsen her feelings of being out of place but also obstruct her desires to blend into the

## Chapter 4: Comparative Analysis of Cultural Identity Negotiation in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*

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larger society. The experiences of Najwa shed light on the biases and animosity that visibly Muslim women frequently face in Western cultures. In this matter, Najwa says

Laughter from behind me. Something hits the edge of the seat next to me and bounces down the aisle; I don't know what it is. He has missed his target this time. Will they move closer, and what if they run out of things to throw? . . . I hear footsteps come behind me, see a blur of denim. He says, 'You Muslim scum,' then the shock of cool liquid on my head and face. I gasp and taste it, Tizer. He goes back to his friends – they are laughing. My chest hurts and I wipe my eyes. (Aboulela 80, 81)

Similarly, Amal in *Does My Head Look Big in This?* also grapples with prominent external conflicts. Her choice to wear the hijab is met with doubt and bias from some classmates and even teachers. Ms Walsh, for instance, initially questions the genuineness of Amal's decision, suspecting that her parents coerced her into wearing the hijab (Abdel-Fattah 41). Amal's strength in standing up for her choice showcases her firm resolve to uphold her religious identity despite external pressures and adversities. Such conflicts both shape the characters' journeys and serve as a reflection of the broader societal attitudes towards Muslim women and their visible religious markers. The novels highlight the complexities and nuances of navigating religious identity in environments where it is met with misunderstanding and prejudice. The struggles faced by Najwa and Amal underscore the importance of resilience and self-assurance in the face of external challenges to one's religious beliefs and practices. These narratives offer valuable insights into the experiences of Muslim women grappling with societal expectations and biases while striving to stay true to their faith. The characters' responses to external conflicts provide a lens through which readers can examine the intersections of religion, identity, and belonging in diverse cultural contexts. Using Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory, these external conflicts can be analysed to reveal how the protagonists navigate and resist societal prejudices. Najwa's and Amal's experiences illustrate the broader challenges faced by Muslim women in asserting their cultural identities within hostile environments. Their struggles and resilience exemplify the strength required to maintain one's faith and cultural identity in the face of external adversity.

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In contrast, Amal's bold decision to wear the hijab in the novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?* stands out as a public and courageous declaration of her religious beliefs. Despite facing initial opposition from her parents and societal biases, Amal displays sincere resolve in her choice, viewing the hijab as an integral component of her sense of self. This deliberate action underscores her dedication to her faith and her aspiration to assert her cultural and religious heritage in a predominantly non-Muslim society. Amal's adoption of the hijab represents her allegiance to her principles and her steadfast resolution to communicate her cultural and religious roots in a society that may not always be welcoming.

Both protagonists, Najwa and Amal, encounter distinct obstacles that are directly linked to their religious beliefs. Najwa is faced with the challenging task of reconciling her previous way of life with her newly embraced religious dedication, whereas Amal grapples with preconceptions and bias in her surroundings. By utilizing the Borderlands theory as a framework for analysis, it can be observed that Najwa and Amal epitomize the notion of hybridity, existing within the intersections of multiple cultures and navigating the complexities of their religious affiliations amidst varying societal landscapes. The narrations of Najwa and Amal act as a portrayal of the complex and constantly changing process of cultural identity formation within the diasporic encounter, underscoring the lively nature of moulding one's perception of oneself in various environments. Their individual journeys underscore the fluidity and intricacy inherent in the formation of personal identities when situated within the context of diaspora and cultural diversity.

Najwa's internal struggle is also evident in her interactions with Anwar, despite her deep affection for him; she grapples with the ethical dilemmas posed by their romantic involvement. Anwar's hesitance to formalize their relationship is driven by his disdain for Najwa's family and his preference for a clandestine affair, factors that further intensify Najwa's feelings of remorse and humiliation (Aboulela 233). This conflict between her emotional attachments and religious principles adds layers to her inner turmoil, underscoring the convoluted nature of her quest for spiritual enlightenment. Furthermore, Najwa's external challenges transcend societal norms and religious biases, extending into the realm of her personal connections. The fraught dynamic between her and Anwar is compounded by his negative perceptions of her family and his reluctance to commit to a legitimate partnership. Anwar's treatment of Najwa, particularly his inclination towards secrecy, serves as a significant external hurdle that undermines her sense of self-worth and tests her faith. This

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intricate interplay mirrors the broader societal obstacles that Najwa confronts and also highlights the individual barriers that impede her journey towards a balanced and devout existence.

Najwa's internal turmoil experiences a profound impact due to the apprehension of her father, a pivotal event that fundamentally disrupts the very core of her existence. This jolting incident compels her to directly confront the harsh realities surrounding her family's political and social positioning, along with the beliefs she holds. The arrest of her father dismantles the world of privilege she was accustomed to, and also triggers a deep-seated sense of culpability and obligation within her. Najwa says

When Baba was hanged, the earth we were standing on split open and we tumbled down and that tumbling had no end, it seemed to have no end, as if we would fall and fall for eternity without ever landing. As if this was our punishment, a bottomless pit, the roar of each other's screams. We became unfamiliar to each other simply because we had not seen each other fall before.  
(Aboulela 61)

In response to this distressing occurrence, Najwa finds herself compelled to reassess her faith and her role within the societal framework she inhabits, thereby heightening the internal conflict she grapples with - a conflict rooted in the clash between her historical foundations and the ever-evolving landscape of her religious convictions. Furthermore, the detention of Najwa's father gives rise to substantial external dilemmas, fundamentally transforming her standing in society and jeopardizing her financial stability. This pivotal juncture thrusts Najwa into a realm characterized by uncertainty and fragility, where she must confront the harsh judgments of society and the stark loss of the comforts she once took for granted. The social stigma associated with her father's political downfall exposes Najwa to intense scrutiny and exclusion, both within the confines of her immediate community and in the broader societal context. As a result of this seismic shift in her circumstances, Najwa is compelled to navigate through unfamiliar social dynamics and entrenched biases, thereby further complicating her quest to establish a firm footing in terms of her religion and cultural identity.



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Najwa's emotions towards Tamer embody an additional stratum of inner turmoil, reflecting when youth was on her side, envisioning a conventional existence alongside Tamer, unshackled from the weight of her past and existing obligations (Aboulela 119). The stark juxtaposition between this wistful yearning and the harsh realities she faces is a core theme in Najwa's emotional landscape. This stark contrast is made evident in the constant juggling act she performs, balancing her feelings for Tamer with the familial duties that bind her. Despite harbouring a deep fondness for Tamer, Najwa grapples with the complex interplay between her personal desires and the intricate web of societal expectations and familial dynamics that envelop her existence (Aboulela 196). The mere prospect of a romantic liaison between Najwa and Tamer precipitates external conflicts, particularly exacerbated by the staunch opposition from Tamer's family, epitomized by Doctora Zeinab's disapproval of their union. In this matter, she says to Najwa

This is a compensation for you because you are not going to work for us again and because my son has made you promises he is incapable of keeping. You will have nothing to do with our family again . . . You will take this money and stay away from my son! Just take it and leave him alone. You're ruining him, ruining him. (Aboulela 262)

The futile attempt by Doctora Zeinab to entice Najwa to sever ties with Tamer serves as a poignant reminder of the entrenched social barriers and prejudices that Najwa confronts in her pursuit of love and personal fulfilment. This ongoing conflict propels Najwa into a confrontation with the harsh realities of her societal status, compelling her to make agonizing choices to safeguard her principles and protect those close to her, thus adding layers of complexity to her quest for a coherent and gratifying sense of self.

Furthermore, Najwa's external conflicts are not limited to just one individual, as they also encompass her interactions with another character named Lamya. In a particular instance, when Lamya discovers that her pearl necklace is missing, she promptly points the finger at Najwa without any evidence, which indicates an ingrained bias and preconceived notions towards Najwa. This specific situation serves to emphasize the external struggles that Najwa is forced to confront due to her physical appearance and the unjust assumptions that are made about her solely based on her choice to wear a veil. In this respect, Najwa illustrates

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It strikes me that even now, knowing I am innocent, she will never treat me as her equal. I had hoped to come closer to her or at least get her to chat with me like her mother did. Now I know that she will never do that. She will always see my hijab, my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin colour, which is a shade darker than hers. (Aboulela 116)

The hasty accusation made by Lamyia sheds light on the deep-seated societal prejudices and lack of trust that Najwa continually encounters, thereby further underscoring the obstacles that she must overcome in her pursuit of being acknowledged and valued. It is evident that Najwa's journey towards acceptance and respect is fraught with challenges, given the pervasive biases and misconceptions that she constantly grapples with in her interactions with others.

Another significant conflict emerges in Najwa's life when she comes to the realization that the holy month of Ramadan has commenced, and she has not been observing the fast due to her absorption in Anwar and their indulgent lifestyle. This recognition evokes a profound sense of remorse and inner turmoil within Najwa because Ramadan holds immense importance in Islam as a period of spiritual contemplation and self-discipline (Aboulela 230). The sharp pang of regret she experiences for neglecting her religious obligations intensifies her feelings of alienation from her faith. Consequently, this newfound awareness sparks a heated argument between Najwa and Anwar. Her feelings of anger and frustration do arise from her guilt and from the understanding that her association with Anwar has led her farther away from her ethical and spiritual principles. Thus, she tells him "I can't live a life where I don't even know that Ramadan has started. I can't. I'm tired of having a troubled conscience. I'm bored with feeling guilty" (Aboulela 244). Anwar, embodying a life of pleasure-seeking and defiance of conventional standards, serves as a representation of Najwa's internal conflict between her inner guilt and her current state of moral decline.

During the course of their dispute, Najwa articulates her distress regarding the absence of observing the fasts and the resulting spiritual emptiness it engenders within her. Anwar's dismissive and apathetic stance towards her religious duties exacerbates the inner conflict she experiences. This contention transcends beyond the mere issue of missed fasts; it symbolizes a broader internal conflict within Najwa as she wrestles with her sense of self and the

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decisions that have distanced her from her faith. Ultimately, this particular juncture acts as a catalyst for Najwa to reassess her life and her bond with Anwar. It highlights the profound repercussions of neglecting her religious rituals on her self-perception and spiritual welfare. The clash that unfolds amid Ramadan accentuates the stark disparity between Najwa's hidden devoutness and her present circumstances, prompting her to re-evaluate the trajectory she has embarked upon and the individual she aspires to be in the future.

Najwa faces yet another significant conflict in her life, this time in the form of a clash with Anwar regarding her choice to embrace her faith more deeply and wear the hijab. This particular decision serves as a pivotal moment for Najwa, symbolizing both her dedication to her religious beliefs and her longing to re-establish a connection with her cultural origins. Despite these personal reasons, Anwar, known for embodying a lifestyle more inclined towards secularism and rebellion, vehemently opposes her decision. So, he tells her

‘It’s a phase you’re going through. You’re not like these people, you’re not one of them, you’re modern.’ His first impression of me was the one that had endured. The university girl in the tight, short skirt who spoke private-school English, who flirted and laughed, was daring and adventurous . . . ‘In the mosque I feel like I’m in Khartoum again’ . . . You’re wrong. There’s more to Sudan than Islam.’ (Aboulela 243, 244)

His response to Najwa's newfound devotion is laced with disapproval and a sense of disappointment, as he interprets her adoption of the hijab as a step backward into traditional norms and a rejection of the principles of freedom and modernity that he holds dear. Anwar's resistance goes beyond mere opposition to the hijab itself; it delves into a fundamental clash between their respective ideologies and core values. In his attempts to sway Najwa, Anwar aims to steer their relationship back to its previous state, devoid of any religious restrictions or symbols, thus highlighting the intricate layers of conflict at play in their differing perspectives.

On the contrary, Najwa is experiencing a revitalized sense of purpose and a newfound clarity in her faith. The hijab has now evolved into a powerful symbol representing her independence and spiritual dedication, mirroring the profound internal changes she has

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undergone and her resolute decision to align her actions with her religious convictions. Anwar's persistent demand for her to discard the hijab and revert to their previous way of life places Najwa in a challenging predicament; making her adhere to Cooke's idea of resisting patriarchal norms within her cultural context. This dilemma escalates to a critical juncture as Anwar's relentless attempts to sway Najwa's beliefs collide head-on with her steadfast determination. Najwa comes to the realization that Anwar's refusal to embrace her faith and respect her choices serves as a stark reminder of a fundamental discord between them. She comprehends that her quest for spiritual contentment and self-acceptance must not be compromised in the name of their relationship. Ultimately, the clash between Najwa and Anwar regarding her devotion and hijab emerges as a pivotal moment in her personal journey, underscoring the obstacles she encounters in harmonizing her past experiences with her present circumstances, as well as the resilience she must summon to prioritize her faith above relationships that do not foster her spiritual development. This internal conflict epitomizes the broader tensions that many individuals confront when their religious convictions clash with the societal expectations imposed upon them.

On the other hand, Amal, although experiencing internal conflicts to a lesser extent compared to Najwa, still grapples with occasional moments of self-doubt and the burdens associated with meeting her religious and cultural expectations. The pivotal moment of her decision to wear the hijab serves as a significant act of faith, symbolizing both a declaration of her cultural identity and a dedication to her deeply held values. Amal staunchly defends her choice even in the face of opposition from her parents, demonstrating her commitment to her beliefs and her determination to stay authentic to herself. One of the initial major external challenges that Amal confronts as a result of her hijab-wearing choice revolves around the resistance from Ms Walsh, the school principal. Ms Walsh contends that wearing the hijab violates the school's regulations (Abdel-Fattah 57, 60) and expresses apprehension that Amal might be coerced by her parents into wearing it (Abdel-Fattah 38). This clash brings to light the societal biases and misconceptions surrounding visible manifestations of faith. However, Amal stands firm, clarifying that her decision to don the hijab is entirely independent and not influenced by her parents (Abdel-Fattah 39). This particular conflict underscores the obstacles Amal encounters in asserting her cultural identity and also showcases her resilience and the backing she receives from her family and friends, who provide invaluable support in helping her navigate through these external pressures.

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Amal is confronted with yet another substantial external dilemma in her interactions with non-Muslim peers, particularly Tia, who persistently critiques Amal's choice to wear the veil and challenges her religious beliefs (Abdel-Fattah 77). The critical comments and demeanour of Tia serve as a microcosm of the broader societal bias and lack of comprehension towards Islamic customs and principles. In an incident, Amal says

Tuesday morning. I'm at my desk in home room, fuming over an article about terror suspects and "people of Middle Eastern appearance" when Tia walks up to my desk again. "Hey Amal, how's it going? She asks in a sickly sweet voice. "Did you catch that doco on those Muslim fundamentalists last night? You're Arab aren't you? It must feel awful knowing you come from such a violent culture." (Abdel-Fattah 151, 152)

This conflict underscores the myriad obstacles that Amal must confront in upholding her cultural identity within an overwhelmingly non-Muslim milieu. Despite Tia's censure and doubt, a contentious atmosphere emerges, but Amal remains resolute in her convictions and truthful in her determination. This solid stance not only underscores Amal's deep-rooted faith but also her adeptness at navigating and countering the adverse perceptions of those in her surroundings. In essence, Amal's ability to remain steadfast in the face of adversity both showcases her strong religious beliefs and also her adeptness at overcoming societal prejudices and misunderstandings in the borderlands.

Amal is also confronted with conflict within her own family, especially from her Uncle Joe and his spouse, who are against her choice to wear the veil. Their argument revolves around the belief that residing in Australia necessitates blending into the dominant culture and that donning the hijab is inappropriate as it overtly manifests her religious beliefs. Amal says

I guess Samantha didn't hear Uncle Joe telling me that he thinks that I've got no hope of a future if I continue to wear the hijab. According to his theory, in today's climate Muslims are better off retreating and concealing their identity not only because they need to assimilate but also to get ahead in society. (Abdel-Fattah 104)

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This clash serves to emphasize the struggle between preserving one's cultural and religious heritage and the pressure to adhere to the norms of a society predominantly made up of non-Muslims. The response of Uncle Joe and his spouse sheds light on a divide in terms of generation and ideology within the family, mirroring larger societal discussions regarding assimilation and cultural representation. In spite of their disapproval, Amal remains resolute in her determination to uphold her convictions, thereby demonstrating her bravery and enduring dedication to her faith when faced with opposition from her own relatives.

On the occasion of the first commemoration of September 11, Amal is confronted with an escalated level of animosity as a result of her adherence to the Muslim faith (Abdel-Fattah 155). This particular event serves to worsen pre-existing biases, thereby culminating in explicit acts of prejudice and antagonism towards Amal. An illustrative example of this is when a bus operator directed a scornful gaze towards Amal, coupled with a deliberate action of increasing the radio's volume to accentuate news coverage pertaining to Muslim extremists (Abdel-Fattah 157). This specific occurrence serves as a prime illustration of the external confrontations that Amal is forced to contend with as a conspicuous follower of Islam within a Western societal framework, where the conflation of her religious beliefs with unfavourable clichés serves to heighten the levels of marginalization she experiences. The enhanced level of surveillance and hostility directed towards Amal on such a highly charged anniversary serves to further detach her from her surroundings, thus emphasizing the obstacles she encounters while trying to navigate through the complexities inherent in aligning her cultural and religious background amidst the backdrop of pervasive prejudicial attitudes.

In addition to that, the Bali terrorist attack poses a significant dilemma for Amal, who grapples with fear and unease over being unfairly connected to the perpetrators due to her Muslim background. Her feelings of deep sadness and frustration are evident when she mentions

I cry, but it's bizarre because I can't even break down and grieve without wondering about what people are thinking of me. I wince every time Ms Walsh says the word "massacre" with the word "Islamic" as though these barbarians somehow belong to my Muslim community. (Abdel-Fattah 245)

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This struggle highlights the pervasive and harmful effects of prejudice, compelling Amal to consistently defend her religion and community against the actions of a small group of violent individuals, thus emphasizing the broader societal obstacles that Muslims encounter in the diaspora. The aftermath of the Bali bombing has created a complex emotional and psychological landscape for Amal, where she must navigate her personal grief while also confronting societal biases and stereotypes that unfairly target her cultural identity. This experience underscores the challenges faced by Muslims in the modern world, where acts of terrorism by a few individuals can lead to widespread suspicion and discrimination against an entire community. Amal's internal turmoil reflects a larger issue of Islamophobia and the need for greater understanding and empathy towards marginalized groups who bear the burden of collective blame for the actions of a few extremists. The narrative of Amal's struggles following the Bali bombing sheds light on the nuanced complexities of cultural identity, belonging and discrimination that continue to shape the experiences of Muslim individuals in today's global society.

The aftermath of the Bali bombing serves to exacerbate the conflicts experienced by Amal, given that her peers have commenced making derogatory remarks related to Islam. This particular situation compels her to explore further into the complexities of her cultural identity, particularly as she struggles with the contrast of blending into the societal norms while remaining true to her religious convictions. The weight of ambiguity regarding her sense of belonging in the nation of her birth becomes increasingly burdensome for Amal. The incident amplifies her feelings of vulnerability and also subjects her to heightened levels of scrutiny. Consequently, she finds herself caught in a whirlwind of prejudice and suspicion simply because she is Muslim. The amalgamation of anxiety and sorrow adds layers to her emotional turmoil, exacerbated by the realization that expressing her grief for the victims of the bombing openly might invite unwanted judgment from others. In moments of despair, Amal articulates her inner turmoil, expressing

By recess I've had enough. I spend the rest of the day in the sick bay wondering how naïve I was to ever think that I could find my place in my country and be unaffected by the horrors and politics in the world. (Abdel-Fattah 246)

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One of the peers in her academic cohort, Lara, exacerbates this conflict by suggesting that Amal delivers a speech on the intersection of Islam and terrorism during the upcoming Forum meeting. This proposition transcends a mere suggestion and transforms into an implicit accusation, insinuating that Amal is required to provide a justification and create a distance between herself and the reprehensible actions of terrorists. In response, Amal's retort is both sharp and impactful, asserting

Ok, well I'll give the speech if you give a speech about the Ku Klux Klan ... and while we're at it, maybe somebody else could talk about the IRA. Remember we covered a bit of it in Legal Studies last term? I'm just dying to understand how the Bible could allow people to throw bombs and still go to church. (Abdel-Fattah 251)

This dialogue serves to underscore the unjust expectations thrust upon Amal to constantly defend her faith in the face of extremism. Furthermore, it showcases her resilience and adeptness at confronting biased viewpoints head-on. By drawing a parallel between the Ku Klux Klan and the IRA, Amal poignantly reminds everyone that no religious belief system should be unfairly judged based on the actions of a select few individuals. Her forceful counterargument shines a spotlight on her definite refusal to bear the unjust burden of representing an entire faith group and her firm stance on being recognized as an individual rather than a stereotype. This particular instance plays a pivotal role in highlighting her agency and her defiance against the prevailing cultural and religious prejudices she encounters, thereby accentuating the overarching theme of internal and external struggles in her ongoing quest to preserve her sense of self and cultural identity.

Amal also grapples with conflicts related to her cultural customs and language. An example of this is when Uncle Joe makes a disrespectful comment about Amal's decision not to consume pizza topped with extra ham, which highlights his unease with her dietary constraints stemming from her religious convictions (Abdel-Fattah 159). This act diminishes the significance of Amal's cultural traditions and signifies a more general discomfort with her commitment to her faith. Furthermore, Uncle Joe's wife Mandy proposes that Amal's parents should forbid the use of Arabic language at home, contending that it could impede Amal's mastery of English (Abdel-Fattah 160). This intervention in Amal's linguistic and cultural



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traditions showcases a lack of regard for her heritage and a wish to integrate her into the prevailing culture. These clashes serve as manifestations of the pressures that Amal must endure in order to comply with societal norms at the expense of her religion and cultural identity.

Apart from that, Amal is grappling with a significant internal dilemma regarding her prospective career path and the potential ramifications associated with wearing the hijab. She is deeply concerned that the challenges she currently faces in finding part-time employment could be exacerbated by her choice to put on the hijab in the future. The apprehension she experiences stems from the fear that, despite her stellar academic performance at university, her outward display of religious devotion might impose restrictions on the range of career opportunities available to her (Abdel-Fattah 218). This apprehension is a manifestation of her inner conflict as she struggles to harmonize her religious beliefs with her professional ambitions, thereby underscoring the overarching difficulty of upholding one's cultural and religious authenticity while contending with possible prejudices in a fiercely competitive job market. This conundrum faced by Amal epitomizes the complex relationship between personal values and career pursuits, highlighting the knotted dynamics individuals encounter when striving to maintain their cultural identity amidst societal expectations and occupational challenges. The intricate nature of Amal's predicament underscores the complexities inherent in reconciling individual faith with external expectations, illustrating the multifaceted nature of cultural identity negotiation in the realm of professional advancement.

Amal's application for a job at a food shop provides a clear illustration of the discrimination she encounters as a result of wearing her hijab. In her quest to acquire valuable work experience, Amal decides to submit her application for a position at a nearby food shop. Nevertheless, the proprietor promptly rejects her application upon observing her hijab, asserting that their establishment's success hinges on the visual presentation of the female staff, implying that Amal's appearance does not align with their desired aesthetic (Abdel-Fattah 309). This particular incident has a profound impact on Amal, significantly undermining her self-assurance and prompting her to re-evaluate her choice to wear the hijab. Seeking solace and guidance, she turns to her mother, articulating her feelings of exasperation and uncertainty: "Mum, maybe I shouldn't have worn it ... Maybe I was stupid ... Where am I going to go now? It's just going to hold me back" (Abdel-Fattah 311). This juncture encapsulates the external challenges that Amal grapples with as she navigates her sense of self

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in a society that frequently assesses her based on her outward appearance rather than her qualifications or intrinsic qualities.

The rejection serves as a clear indicator not only of the bias ingrained in day-to-day social exchanges but of the institutional obstacles that are apparent for Muslim women who wear visible religious attire in the employment sector. Amal's encounter serves as a powerful and emotional reminder of how cultural and spiritual symbols, such as the hijab, can transform into subjects of conflict and bias in the borderlands, as Anzaldúa refers to it as a place of oppression. Despite this setback, the dialogue that Amal engages in with her mother marks a pivotal moment. Her mother extends support and motivation, emphasizing the significance of remaining loyal to one's principles and convictions. This familial encouragement emerges as a vital foundation of resilience for Amal, empowering her to reassert her dedication to her faith and sense of self despite the external obstacles she encounters (Abdel-Fattah 311). This clash further elucidates the overarching concept of internal and external struggles in Amal's journey. Internally, she wrestles with self-doubt and the apprehension of being hindered by her religious decisions. Externally, she is met with the preconceptions and biases of a society that frequently finds it challenging to embrace visible representations of cultural and spiritual diversity. Through these trials, Amal's fortitude and resolve to navigate these hurdles become apparent, unveiling her fortitude in the face of adversity.

In addition to the aforementioned, Amal finds herself in a situation where she is confronted with both internal and external turmoil when Adam expresses his wish to kiss her, a request she must firmly decline in accordance with her religious convictions (Abdel-Fattah 235). According to Cooke's logic, this refusal sparks a heated disagreement as Amal grapples with elucidating that engaging in such physical closeness goes against the teachings of Islam, which strictly forbid any form of sexual engagement prior to marriage. The clash serves to emphasize the conflict between her individual beliefs and Adam's anticipations and it underscores the broader dilemma of upholding one's moral principles within the realm of romantic entanglements. Amal's commitment to her religious principles is put to the test as she tries to remain steadfast in her faith while navigating the hard dynamics of adolescent relationships. In this complicated situation, Amal is struggling to merge her personal morals with the stresses and anticipations that arrive with being in a romantic relationship during her formative years. Amidst internal and external conflicts, Amal's steadfast commitment to her religious beliefs serves as a compelling exemplar of the obstacles many individuals confront

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in the diaspora while striving to harmonize personal values with societal standards and anticipations.

In light of these challenges, Amal's realization that "putting on the hijab isn't the end of the journey. It's just the beginning of it" (Abdel-Fattah 324) reflects a profound comprehension of the path she is treading. The hijab, instead of serving as a definitive proclamation of religious belief, symbolizes the initiation of an unceasing voyage of self-discovery, resilience and determination. Amal's expedition is characterized by a continual process of negotiating her sense of self, grappling with inner uncertainties and external influences. This declaration captures the core of her challenges and personal development, acknowledging that her dedication to wearing the hijab and upholding her faith is an ongoing journey that entails manoeuvring through a multifaceted terrain of cultural, societal, and individual hurdles. Through these trials, Amal grasps that her sense of self is not fixed but transforms through the adversities and victories she confronts, underscoring the fluidity of cultural and religious identity within the diaspora or the borderlands.

### **4.2.2. Language and Communication**

Language plays a significant and core role in the process of negotiating one's cultural identity for both Najwa and Amal, as it functions as a critical element in shaping how they perceive themselves and interact with the world around them. In the boundaries of her home environment, Najwa's utilization of the Arabic language, in comparison with her use of English in public settings, showcases the complex and multifaceted nature of her being and the complexities that accompany it. The Arabic language acts as a bridge to her cultural heritage, linking her to her Sudanese roots, family customs, and the cherished memories of her former life prior to the tumultuous events that led her to relocate to London. By speaking Arabic at home, Najwa is able to uphold a sense of continuity and safeguard her cultural identity amidst the significant changes that have occurred in her life. It serves as a symbol of refuge where her origins and authentic self are recognized and honoured.

On the other hand, the use of English by Najwa in public settings symbolizes her integration into British society and her attempt to adapt and merge into a society that differs markedly from her own. English embodies her external persona, the aspect of herself that engages with the wider world and strives to find a sense of belonging within it. This ability to speak both Arabic and English reflects her dual cultural identity, illustrating the ongoing

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juggling act between her Sudanese background and her experiences in the diverse urban landscape of London. It mirrors her internal conflict and the constant negotiation between two cultures, as she grapples with deciding which facets of each culture to embrace and showcase in different circumstances.

On the contrary, Amal's linguistic journey embarks on a slightly different trajectory. Despite primarily engaging in conversations in the English language, she effortlessly integrates Arabic vocabulary and expressions into her speech, thus reflecting her dual cultural background. The utilization of Arabic terms like "yallah" (meaning "let's go") and "habibti" (translated as "my dear"), along with cultural idioms, functions to strengthen her connection to her Palestinian roots. This integration of Arabic phrases into her daily interactions serves as a means of communication and also as a way to confirm her cultural identity. Amal's ability to fluently switch between English and Arabic demonstrates her expertise at navigating diverse cultural environments, showcasing her self-assurance in her multicultural identity. Through the fusion of English and Arabic, she constructs a personalized language that echoes her life experiences and heritage. This linguistic blend also acts as evidence of her dedication to fostering a sense of belonging in both cultural spheres. It underscores how Amal upholds her cultural legacy while embracing her Australian nationality, embodying a type of cultural fusion where both aspects harmoniously coexist and enhance her self-perception.

Amal's proficiency in linguistic duality serves as a clear demonstration of her skill in traversing diverse cultural environments effortlessly, showcasing her confidence in her multifaceted cultural identity. Through the amalgamation of English and Arabic, she crafts a unique and personalized linguistic framework that deeply resonates with her lived experiences and ancestral background. This linguistic interplay functions as a symbol of her dedication to fostering a profound sense of belonging in both cultural spheres and underscores her commitment to preserving and celebrating her rich heritage. It vividly underscores how Amal upholds her cultural legacy while wholeheartedly embracing her Australian nationality, embodying a sophisticated form of cultural amalgamation where these distinct facets harmoniously coexist and mutually enhance her sense of self-awareness. Both Najwa and Amal perceive language as an indispensable cornerstone of their cultural identities, serving as a potent medium through which they articulate their profound connection to their roots while actively engaging with the societal fabrics of their respective homelands.

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### **4.2.3. Cultural Practices and Food**

Cultural customs and gastronomy play a crucial role in shaping Najwa's and Amal's perception of themselves. Najwa's fondness for traditional Sudanese dishes such as makloba and fatoosh acts as a bridge to her homeland and provides her with a sense of comfort amidst the trials of residing in a foreign metropolis like London. These customary meals go beyond mere sustenance; they are infused with recollections, cultural importance and familial ties. The tastes and scents of Sudanese cuisine trigger a feeling of longing and attachment to her origins, offering solace and a sense of belonging in an otherwise unfamiliar setting. These culinary traditions aid Najwa in navigating the complexities of her mixed heritage, granting her a sense of anchorage and a tie to her cultural legacy. The custom of preparing and relishing these recipes acts as a concrete connection to her history, helping her maintain her cultural identity while adjusting to her new life in London.

Amal's food preferences exhibit a reflection of the dual nature of her cultural background in a similar fashion. Within the confines of her own abode, she derives immense pleasure from sampling the traditional Palestinian cuisine, a practice that serves not only to nurture familial solidarity but also to epitomize their deep-rooted connection to their ancestral legacy. Delicacies such as makloba, fatoosh, mansaf, and warak aneb transcend mere sustenance; they stand as emblems of their cultural heritage and customs. These culinary offerings foster a feeling of continuity and inclusion, enabling Amal to establish a profound link with her origins and her family's historical narrative. The act of sharing these customary dishes with family members and visitors serves as a form of honouring and safeguarding their cultural essence, strengthening the ties that bind them to their Palestinian roots.

Concurrently, Amal actively participates in the culinary traditions of Australia in tandem with her peers, adapting her food choices to align with her religious beliefs. When socializing with friends, she takes pleasure in relishing popular Australian dishes like pizza, meticulously selecting toppings that adhere to her halal dietary restrictions. This amalgamation of diverse culinary customs mirrors her dual cultural identity in the borderlands. Through her acceptance of both her Palestinian culinary legacy and the food practices of her Australian surroundings, Amal showcases her capability to merge different facets of her cultural identity, attaining a harmonious equilibrium that enables her to feel a sense of belonging in both cultural realms.

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These culinary practices, whether exemplified by Najwa's Sudanese cuisine or Amal's fusion of Palestinian and Australian flavours, play a crucial role as essential mechanisms for navigating the complex nuances of their hybrid cultural identities. In fact, these gastronomic endeavours offer a profound sense of continuity, groundedness and a tangible link to their cultural roots and also afford them the flexibility to adjust and cope with their novel surroundings. Engaging in the culinary arts and partaking in communal dining experiences enable both Najwa and Amal to reaffirm their cultural principles, cultivate a feeling of inclusion, and deftly navigate the knotted webs of their multicultural backgrounds. The profound importance of food in their daily lives serves to underscore the pivotal role of cultural customs in shaping one's sense of self, providing solace and preserving a coherent cultural identity amidst the myriad challenges associated with residing in the diaspora.

By employing Borderlands theory to scrutinize the function of cultural traditions and food preferences in the experiences of Najwa and Amal, one can discern the manner in which they navigate the complexities of cultural hybridity. Anzaldúa's theory underscores the presence of intertwined and intersecting cultural domains, within which individuals continuously engage in negotiations and redefinitions of their sense of self. In the case of Najwa and Amal, their culinary choices serve as a concrete manifestation of this negotiation process. These cultural components operate as crucial connections between their cultural origins and their present environments, hence reinforcing their sense of belonging and self-definition amidst the trials of diasporic life. Engaging in both their traditional culinary practices and the gastronomic customs of their new surroundings enables them to bridge the divide between diverse cultural spheres, fostering a feeling of inclusion and resilience in the midst of cultural and societal hurdles.

For Najwa, traditional Sudanese meals provide solace and a feeling of familiarity, anchoring her in her cultural heritage while residing in London. Correspondingly, for Amal, the amalgamation of Palestinian and Australian culinary traditions aids her in navigating her bicultural identity, allowing her to feel at ease in both her cultural background and her modern Australian setting. These culinary habits underscore the fluid and dynamic essence of their cultural identities, moulded by both their cultural legacy and their present diasporic circumstances. Through the perspective of Borderlands theory, the fusion of these culinary heritages serves as a testament to the continual process of cultural identity construction and the capacity to embrace and harmonize multiple cultural influences.

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### **4.2.4. Clothing and Cultural Symbols**

Clothing and cultural symbols play a crucial role in the process of cultural identity formation for Najwa and Amal, two individuals deeply influenced by the cultural backgrounds and beliefs that shape their worldview. Najwa's pivotal experience of embracing the hijab in the aftermath of her family's hardships signifies a significant shift towards a deeper connection with her faith and cultural roots. The hijab, within this narrative, evolves into a potent symbol of her personal growth and steadfast commitment to living in harmony with her religious beliefs. Prior to the trials that befell her family, Najwa navigated a more secular existence, often feeling a sense of detachment from her faith. The moment she chooses to wear the hijab represents a transformative juncture, symbolizing her reclaiming of self and a reconnection with her religious heritage. This decision transcends mere clothing choices; it embodies a conscious embrace of a lifestyle that resonates with her spiritual and cultural ethos, offering her a profound sense of direction and belonging amidst the tumultuous currents of her life journey.

Similarly, in Amal's case, the decision to adopt the hijab emerges as a pivotal aspect of her self-concept and identity. Embracing the hijab is a deliberate choice for Amal, symbolizing her strong dedication to her faith and her intention to proudly manifest her Muslim identity. Nonetheless, Amal's approach to hijab fashion is intricately interwoven with her contemporary and stylish inclinations. She adeptly integrates the hijab into her wardrobe choices, showcasing that it is indeed possible to honour cultural and religious symbols while embracing modern fashion trends and expressing individual flair. Through her sartorial combinations, such as pairing the hijab with chic ensembles like denim jackets, cargo pants, soft pink chiffon hijabs, and form-fitting cashmere tops, Amal illustrates that adherence to religious sartorial norms does not constrain one's ability to engage in fashionable self-expression. In her fashion preferences, Amal not just reveals an ongoing process of negotiating her cultural identity but rather exemplifies her pursuit of a harmonious equilibrium between traditional cultural values and contemporary fashion aesthetics.

Amal's fashion selections showcase her adeptness in navigating the juncture of her cultural and religious background with her aspiration to portray herself as a contemporary young individual. This juxtaposition of customary and modern style underscores the flexibility of cultural identity, indicating that it is not a fixed or uniform notion but rather one that progresses and adjusts over time. Through incorporating the hijab into her daily attire, Amal

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normalizes its visibility in Western environments and confronts preconceptions about the capacity of Muslim women to interact with modernism. Her approach to attire emerges as a form of opposition to the idea that traditional religious symbols and modern fashion are inherently incompatible.

In the instances of both Najwa and Amal, the hijab functions as a potent emblem of their cultural identity and resilience. For Najwa, it symbolizes a reconnection with her faith and a wellspring of fortitude amidst challenges. Conversely, for Amal, it serves as a proclamation of her faith and a validation of her skill in manoeuvring through diverse cultural domains. Through their acceptance of the hijab and its integration into their lifestyles in substantial ways, both protagonists exhibit how cultural and religious symbols can be pivotal in shaping a blended identity, enabling them to preserve a link to their heritage while also engaging with the contemporary milieu. Viewed through the framework of Borderlands theory, their encounters with the hijab elucidate the dynamic and negotiated essence of identity in the diaspora, underscoring how individuals can forge novel, layered identities that respect both tradition and contemporary influences.

Drawing from the theoretical framework of Borderlands theory, the hijab, alongside a plethora of other cultural symbols present in the lives of Najwa and Amal, function as poignant representations of the complex process of negotiating identity within the context of diaspora. These symbols play a crucial role as potent signifiers, encapsulating both Najwa's and Amal's profound cultural heritage as well as their personal convictions. Far beyond being a mere garment, the hijab serves as a profound manifestation of their faith and a bold affirmation of their cultural identity and sense of belonging in the midst of a diverse and multicultural society. It serves as a tangible expression of their abiding dedication to their religious principles while simultaneously symbolizing their resilience in the face of external pressures and biases.

In Najwa's case, the hijab holds profound meaning as it symbolizes a return to her faith, providing her with solace and inner strength following the tumultuous events in her life. It stands as a representation of her journey back to her origins and her quest for inner peace and purpose through her religious convictions. The hijab transforms into a visible emblem of her internal metamorphosis and her strong commitment to living in harmony with her faith, notwithstanding the adversities posed by her environment. Similarly, for Amal, the hijab stands as a proclamation of her identity and her steadfast resolve to navigate the intricate



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challenges of being a Muslim woman in a Western societal framework. Through the integration of the hijab into her sartorial choices, Amal asserts her religious identity and confronts stereotypes and misconceptions surrounding Muslim women, thereby challenging societal norms and preconceptions.

Through the intentional utilization of these cultural symbols, Najwa and Amal adeptly navigate the intricate landscape of cultural diversity, successfully bridging the divide between their inherent self-perception and the numerous cultural influences that envelop them. Their decisions demonstrate a careful desire to sustain a link to their cultural legacy while actively engaging with the modern world that surrounds them. This process of negotiation stands as evidence to their capacity to harmonize tradition with contemporary elements, thereby shedding light on the ever-evolving essence of cultural identity within the diaspora. The hijab and various other cultural emblems also function as mechanisms for resisting assimilation and safeguarding a sense of affiliation to their cultural cohorts. These elements enable Najwa and Amal to affirm their individuality and push back against pressures to conform to the prevailing societal norms. By wearing the hijab and embracing additional cultural customs, they carve out a niche for themselves within the broader community, where they can authentically uphold their principles and convictions. This act of cultural conservation plays a pivotal role in nurturing their self-esteem and fostering a sense of empowerment.

In essence, the experiences of Najwa and Amal serve as prime examples that epitomize the concept of living in the borderlands—an abstract space where individuals manoeuvre through a myriad of cultural identities and negotiate their position within a plethora of diverse social contexts. The utilization of cultural symbols such as the hijab by these individuals showcases their autonomy in shaping their identity and questioning societal standards. The theory of borderlands proves to be instrumental in shedding light on the flexible and ever-changing nature of their cultural identity, demonstrating how they adeptly blend various components of their heritage and contemporary influences to craft a unified sense of self. The hijab and other cultural symbols present in the lives of Najwa and Amal transcend being mere indicators of their cultural legacy; they serve as potent expressions of their identity and convictions. Through these symbols, they deftly navigate the intricacies of their diasporic existence, bridging the divide between their cultural roots and their current realities. Their experiences emphasize the significance of cultural markers in the formation of identity and underscore the

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resilience and autonomy of individuals in upholding their distinct sense of self amidst a backdrop of diverse cultural norms and expectations.

### **4.2.5. Acculturation Strategies of Najwa and Amal**

#### **4.2.5.1. Najwa's Assimilation and Separation**

Both Najwa and Amal traverse the multifaceted process of acculturation into their respective diasporic societies in distinctly contrasting manners, which serve to illuminate the rich diversity inherent in their individual circumstances as well as their unique personal experiences. Najwa, for example, partakes in a voluntary assimilation that commenced during her tenure in Sudan, even though she was deeply embedded within an Arab Muslim society that typically upholds traditional values. The lifestyle she cultivated while in Sudan was predominantly characterized by Western influences, where she used to attend parties in the disco. She says “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’ ” (Aboulela 23)

This Western lifestyle effectively established a solid foundation for her ongoing process of assimilation once she arrived in the culturally vibrant city of London. This particular mode of voluntary assimilation is in accordance with the theoretical framework proposed by Parghi and Tripathi in chapter one regarding cultural assimilation, wherein an individual consciously and willingly embraces not just the dominant language of the host society but also adopts its prevailing aesthetic norms and cultural practices, thereby facilitating a smoother assimilation into the new environment. In this vein, Najwa says

Our first week in London was OK. We didn't even notice that we were falling. Once we got over the shock of suddenly having to fly out the day after Baba was arrested, Omar and I could not help but enjoy London . . . the first thing we did was go to Oxford Street and buy clothes. It was fun to do all the things we never did back home; grocery shopping, pushing the Hoover around, cooking frozen food . . . I went through Selfridges trying the perfumes and getting my face made up at the Elizabeth Arden counter. (Aboulela 56)

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In the vibrant and bustling metropolis of London, Najwa finds herself increasingly distancing herself from the richness of her Sudanese heritage, while simultaneously and wholeheartedly embracing and assimilating into the Western lifestyle that she had already begun to adopt during her formative years in Sudan. She says

‘I’m in London,’ I told myself, ‘I can do what I like, no one can see me.’  
Fascinating. I could order a glass of wine. Who would stop me or even look surprised? . . . I could buy one of those rude magazines, the ones always kept on the top shelf. No one would stop me or look surprised. I would carry it home and I wouldn’t even need to hide it. (Aboulela 128, 129)

This deliberate and complete withdrawal from the significant aspects of her Sudanese cultural identity inevitably leads her into a life that is characterized by a series of indulgent pursuits and a pervasive sense of moral ambiguity, which is particularly exemplified by the complex and often tumultuous nature of her romantic relationship with Anwar. Through Najwa's varied experiences, it is clear that the deep complexities involved in cultural assimilation, where the active choice to renounce one's original and beloved culture can provoke a notable and frequently troubling change in self, alongside a significant sense of alienation and dislocation, ultimately shaping her evolving cultural identity and the life choices she navigates in the diaspora.

Nevertheless, following the unfortunate decline of her family's social and economic standing, Najwa embarks on an extensive and transformative journey regarding her cultural identity, which ultimately facilitates her reconnection and reintegration with the vibrant Muslim community situated in London. While having a conversation with Tamer, Najwa asserts, “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” (Aboulela 110). This significant separation represents not merely a deviation from her previously embraced Westernized lifestyle but also embodies her earnest desire to reconcile and harmonize her Sudanese heritage with the complexities of her new existence within the diaspora context. Her proactive participation in various mosque activities, coupled with her deliberate choice to don the hijab, according to Sam and Berry, emerges as potent symbols encapsulating this profound transformation, thereby reflecting her dedicated efforts

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to achieve a harmonious equilibrium between her deeply rooted Sudanese origins and the contemporary circumstances she now inhabits.

The novel effectively illustrates Najwa's strategic implementation of a successful separation strategy by forging substantial and meaningful connections within the Muslim community, which consequently empowers her to redefine and reconstruct her cultural identity in alignment with the principles and tenets of her faith. However, this transformative journey is undeniably fraught with obstacles, as she continues to grapple with an internal conflict stemming from her hesitance to entirely sever the bonds connecting her to her past. Her lived experience poignantly underscores the complexities of cultural negotiation that individuals often encounter in the diaspora, wherein the fervent desire to maintain and preserve one's cultural heritage must be judiciously balanced with the imperative need to adapt and acclimate to the new cultural landscapes that they are now compelled to navigate.

### **4.2.5.2. Amal's Integration Strategy**

In a clear contrast to the aforementioned character, in the literary work titled *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, the protagonist Amal encounters the formidable and often overwhelming challenge of not just integrating into the multifaceted fabric of Australian society but also doing so while resolutely and steadfastly preserving her cultural heritage as well as her religious identity. Unlike her counterpart Najwa, Amal engages in a deliberate and consciously considered decision to wear the hijab, which is not merely an article of clothing but rather a significant and profound act that publicly and overtly asserts her cultural identity while simultaneously demonstrating her true and deeply rooted commitment to her personal beliefs and values. This particular choice functions as a powerful and evocative symbol of her steadfast determination to remain true to her rich heritage, even when situated within the complex context of a society that may not entirely comprehend or fully accept the nuances of her cultural expressions and identity.

Amal's successful integration into the multifaceted society of Australia is characterized by her adept and skilful navigation through the convoluted complexities associated with school life, in which she manages to cultivate and foster meaningful friendships and actively engages in a plethora of social interactions, all while steadfastly maintaining and upholding her deeply held religious convictions without any form of compromise. In spite of the numerous challenges posed by encountering bias and discrimination from various quarters, Amal

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discovers an immense reservoir of strength and encouragement derived from a diverse and supportive group of friends, as well as compassionate educators, who collectively bolster her in her ongoing journey towards cultural identity preservation. This robust and supportive network of individuals plays an indispensable and crucial role in assisting her in effectively balancing the often overwhelming demands of integration with the equally important need to preserve and honour her rich cultural roots.

Throughout the course of the narrative, the protagonist, Amal, demonstrates a staunch defiance against the societal pressures that advocate for assimilation, particularly manifesting in her actions and the decisions she makes regarding her personal life (Abdel-Fattah 24, 38, 52). In this context, she boldly contests the conventional impulses and desires typically associated with adolescence, steadfastly adhering to her intrinsic values and principles, even in the face of compelling temptations to conform to the expectations of those around her (Abdel-Fattah 73, 242). Furthermore, she vehemently opposes the perspective held by her Uncle Joe, who asserts that individuals of Arab descent ought to assimilate fully into Australian society; instead, she passionately champions a more sophisticated and multifaceted approach that acknowledges and celebrates the potential for the harmonious coexistence of diverse cultural identities within a shared societal framework (Abdel-Fattah 97, 105, 181). The narrative of Amal serves as a profound testament to the formidable strength of her deeply held beliefs and convictions, as well as her resolute determination to maintain her cultural and religious identity, even when confronted with the overwhelming pressures exerted by society to abandon such aspects of herself. When she had a quarrel with Tia in Adam's party, Tia screamed

“Why don't you just get out of our country and go back to some desert cave where you belong?” I stand over her, my heart drumming in my chest. “This is *my* country and if you ever forget it again I'm going to rip your head off!”.  
(Abdel-Fattah 240)

By applying the Borderlands theory to their experiences, both protagonists epitomize the perpetual negotiation of cultural identities within the diaspora context. The strategies employed by Najwa and Amal underscore their desires to strike a harmonious balance between their hybrid identities, skilfully traversing the cultural borderlands that lie between

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their heritage and the new environments they find themselves in. Their assimilation, separation and integration strategies revolve around amalgamating facets from both cultural spheres, resulting in the formation of hybrid identities that enable them to adapt and also to flourish in diverse and multicultural settings.

Certainly, the use of the Borderlands theory framework provides a valuable lens through which to analyse the convoluted dynamics of linguistic identities within the broader context of cultural assimilation and integration, as exemplified by the lived experiences of Najwa and Amal. Borderlands theory, crafted by Gloria Anzaldúa, delves into the liminal spaces where diverse cultures, languages and identities intersect, often giving rise to a unique hybrid identity. This theoretical framework proves especially pertinent in deciphering the linguistic odysseys undertaken by Najwa and Amal, individuals who dwell in these metaphorical borderlands where they engage in a perpetual process of navigating and reconciling the complex nuances of multiple linguistic and cultural spheres. For Najwa, her proficiency in seamlessly transitioning between Arabic and English serves as a testament to her adeptness in manoeuvring the expectations and conventions of her Sudanese cultural milieu while concurrently assimilating into the fabric of British society.

Within the confines of her home environment, Arabic transcends its role as merely a language, morphing into a potent symbol of her cultural heritage and familial connections, acting as a constant reminder of her roots and cherished values. Conversely, in public spheres, her utilization of English becomes a pragmatic necessity for effective communication and active engagement within the broader societal landscape. This linguistic *mestizaje* perpetually situates Najwa in a delicate equilibrium, wherein she must deftly harmonize the preservation of her cultural identity with the imperatives of living in a distinctly different cultural milieu. Her proficiency in both linguistic realms symbolically situates her within the borderlands, where she deftly navigates the juncture of her Sudanese heritage and her life in the bustling metropolis of London.

Similarly, Amal's ability to speak two languages fluently and her incorporation of Arabic expressions into her predominantly English conversations serve as a demonstration of her positioning within the liminal spaces that exist between different cultural spheres. By seamlessly interweaving Arabic terms and cultural nuances into her speech, Amal upholds a strong connection to her Palestinian heritage and also actively engages with and contributes to Australian society. This linguistic fusion is a manifestation of her hybrid identity, showcasing

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the harmonious coexistence of her cultural roots with her current societal milieu. The utilization of Arabic in her communication acts as a continual affirmation of her origins, even as she embraces and adapts to the societal conventions of her present environment. This interplay of languages highlights the multifaceted nature of her cultural identity and demonstrates her skilfulness in manoeuvring through diverse cultural landscapes.

The linguistic dexterity displayed by both Najwa and Amal serves as a tangible representation of their presence in the borderlands, symbolizing their adeptness in navigating and integrating within different cultural realms. It underscores their proficiency in cultural mediation and adjustment, enabling them to seamlessly transition between varying acculturation strategies. This flexibility in language usage transcends mere practicality; it embodies a profound facet of their cultural identities, reflecting their attempts to reconcile and amalgamate the disparate facets of their lives. Viewed through the theoretical framework of Borderlands theory, the experiences of Najwa and Amal exemplify the continual process of cultural identity construction within the diaspora, where the amalgamation of cultures necessitates a perpetual process of negotiation and adaptation.

In addition to that, by employing Muslim Feminism as a theoretical lens through which to analyse the subject matter at hand, one can clearly discern the profound impact that both religious doctrines and cultural norms exert on the lived experiences of the two central characters, Najwa and Amal. The narrative arc associated with Najwa serves not merely as a simplistic recounting of her life events, but rather as a rich and nuanced illustration of how her reconnection with her spiritual beliefs provides her with a robust source of empowerment and a profound sense of belonging within a community, as it also introduces her to various complexities and obstacles that are intrinsically linked to her efforts at reintegration and achieving societal acceptance in a world that may not always welcome her. In sharp contrast, the journey undertaken by Amal underscores the critical importance of personal autonomy and the exercise of informed decision-making processes in the context of her religious practices, illuminating how her proactive stance against forced assimilation—bolstered by the support of her community and exemplified through her assertive demeanour—serves as a powerful testament to the kind of empowerment that Muslim Feminism seeks to advocate and promote within marginalized communities.

In fact, the various acculturation strategies that both Najwa and Amal employ in their respective journeys provide significant insights into the hard and often convoluted process of

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negotiating one's cultural identity while existing within the parameters of a diasporic environment. The two protagonists deftly navigate a duality of separation from and integration into broader societal frameworks as strategic approaches to safeguarding and maintaining their rich cultural and religious identities, while the recurring themes of alienation and marginalization that they encounter serve to highlight the ongoing and dynamic negotiation processes required to reconcile their deep-seated ancestral traditions with the realities of their contemporary lives in the diaspora.

### **4.3. Section 2: Common Themes in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?***

#### **4.3.1. Theme of Identity Crisis**

The phenomenon of identity crisis represents a fundamental and pivotal theme that is intricately woven into the narratives of both *Minaret*, a literary work authored by Leila Aboulela, and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, a novel penned by Randa Abdel-Fattah; it is evident that both protagonists, Najwa and Amal, confront and wrestle with the multifaceted and often convoluted complexities of their cultural identities, particularly within the challenging context of diasporic existence. Nevertheless, the manner in which this identity crisis is expressed and the distinct approaches each protagonist employs to navigate through this turbulent terrain diverge significantly, thereby reflecting the unique and varied backgrounds and circumstances that shape their individual experiences and perspectives.

Najwa's identity crisis is profoundly entrenched in the traumatic experiences of her past and the drastic changes she endures throughout her life; having originated from a privileged and affluent background in Sudan, her life is irrevocably altered following the arrest of her father and his subsequent execution. These circumstances compel her to seek refuge in London, a city that presents an entirely new set of challenges. Surrounded by this peculiar and commonly unwelcoming atmosphere, Najwa battles to integrate the shadows of her past self with the undeniable conditions of her ongoing life; causing an intense feeling of detachment and perplexity. Her identity crisis is further characterized by overwhelming emotions of guilt, shame and profound loss, as she grapples with the disconnection from the prosperous, secular lifestyle she once enjoyed, while simultaneously confronting the resurgence of her faith, a facet of her identity that she had previously chosen to neglect and cast aside. This intense internal conflict is exacerbated by various external pressures, including her tumultuous relationship with Anwar, who persistently diminishes and belittles her burgeoning religious



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devotion, as well as the societal prejudices and challenges she encounters as a veiled Muslim woman navigating through the complexities of a predominantly Western society.

Najwa's predicament concerning her sense of self is intensified by the profound sense of isolation she experiences while residing in London, a city where she perceives herself as ensnared in a dichotomy between two vastly different realms: the secular, affluent existence that characterized her earlier life and the deeply devout, modest lifestyle that she aspires to adopt and incorporate into her daily routine. This profound and tumultuous identity crisis compels Najwa to seek refuge and comfort within the confines of her faith, leading her to embrace the hijab and actively participate in various religious practices as a means to reconstruct and redefine her fragmented sense of identity that has been irreparably shattered by her experiences. However, this intricate journey of self-discovery and faith is laden with considerable challenges, as Najwa must navigate the tumultuous waters of her internal conflicts, as well as contend with the external scrutiny and judgments imposed by the individuals in her surrounding environment who often fail to understand her struggles.

In contrast, Amal confronts her own identity crisis with a more proactive and confrontational approach, which stands in opposition to the passive experiences of Najwa. At her young age, Amal, who is of Palestinian-Australian heritage, is grappling with a crucial issue involving her decision to wear the hijab consistently, a decision that symbolizes her steadfast allegiance to her beliefs; nonetheless, this decision also places her at odds with the mainly non-Muslim society navigating her routine existence. Unlike Najwa, whose crisis is deeply entrenched in a history of trauma and upheaval, Amal's struggle is not defined by past experiences but is instead rooted in the continuous and often arduous challenge of asserting her identity within a multicultural landscape that, while rich in diversity, is frequently marred by intolerance and misunderstanding.

Amal's profound identity crisis is characterized by a significant and palpable tension that exists between her intense desire to assimilate and fit in seamlessly with her contemporaneous peers and her sincere determination to remain steadfastly true to her deeply rooted cultural and religious beliefs, which are integral to her sense of self. She encounters not only scepticism and opposition from unfamiliar individuals but also from close friends, educators, and family members who express doubts and question her resolute decision to wear the hijab, thereby complicating her journey. This external conflict she faces is a direct reflection of her internal struggle, as she grapples with the profound question of whether her powerful faith

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will serve as an impediment to her future aspirations, particularly in a societal context that can, at times, exhibit hostility towards overt displays of Islamic identity.

In spite of these harsh challenges, Amal's response to her identity crisis is notably proactive and assertive, as she actively engages with these challenges head-on, employing a combination of humour, intellectual acumen, and resilience to firmly assert her identity while deftly navigating the complex societal expectations that are imposed upon her. In stark contrast to Najwa, who chooses to withdraw into her faith as a mechanism for coping with her own identity crisis, Amal deliberately utilizes her faith as a powerful tool for personal empowerment, as she strives to create and carve out a space in which she can authentically embody both her identity as a devout Muslim and her aspirations as a modern Australian teenager.

The ways in which Najwa and Amal confront their identity crises highlight the various routes people take in understanding their cultural and religious identities amidst the diaspora. Najwa's experience of an identity crisis is significantly influenced by the traumas she has endured in her past, compounded by the ongoing struggle she faces to reconcile her newly embraced religious devotion with the lingering vestiges of her previous lifestyle and beliefs. Her journey can be characterized as one of deep internal reconciliation, wherein she ardently seeks to establish a sense of peace and harmony in a world that has undergone drastic transformations that have profoundly affected her.

On the other hand, Amal's identity crisis is predominantly shaped by her conscious decision to openly assert and embrace her Muslim identity within a Western societal framework, which presents its own unique set of challenges and complexities. Her struggle manifests as a more external confrontation, as she bravely faces societal prejudices and navigates the difficulties associated with maintaining her religious faith in an environment that is often perceived as secular and indifferent. Najwa's situation is profoundly marked by her retreat into her spiritual beliefs, which she holds dear for their soothing qualities, while Amal's narrative is one of bold faith that acts as a defiance of social expectations and a vigorous reinforcement of her identity. In both cases, the identity struggle acts as a key factor for individual growth and transformation for both women, consequently bringing attention to the intricate and layered dynamics of faith, culture, and self-identity that shape the experiences of Muslim women living abroad. Ultimately, both Najwa and Amal discover ways to navigate their respective crises, albeit through distinctly different pathways, which

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serves to underscore the diverse and varied experiences of cultural identity that exist within the broader context of a globalized world.

### 4.3.2. Theme of cultural Hybridity and Identity Negotiation

Cultural hybridity and the negotiation of identity emerge as paramount themes within the narratives of both *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, as the protagonists, Najwa and Amal, intricately manoeuvre through the multifaceted complexities associated with belonging to two distinctly divergent cultural realms. This thematic exploration delves into the ways in which the central characters strive to harmonize their rich cultural heritage with the various influences and societal expectations imposed upon them by the environments in which they reside, thereby illuminating their persistent and often tumultuous struggle to reconcile these frequently discordant identities.

In the narrative of *Minaret*, Najwa's experience of cultural hybridity is profoundly influenced by her dual existence as a Sudanese woman who finds herself living in the diverse and often challenging context of London. Born into a family that enjoys privileges and is markedly westernized in Sudan, Najwa initially relishes the numerous luxuries and freedoms that accompany her elevated social status. However, the abrupt political downfall of her father, culminating in their subsequent exile to London, compels her to confront the intricate nuances of her identity in a nation that feels foreign and unfamiliar. As she navigates her life in London, Najwa grapples with a profound sense of dislocation and alienation, aiming to reconcile her deeply ingrained Sudanese roots with the realities of her newly adopted life in Britain.

Najwa's adept utilization of language serves as a significant indicator of her multifaceted cultural hybridity, which embodies the complex interplay of her diverse identities. Enclosed by her living quarters, she engages in the tradition of using Arabic, a language that nurtures a strong relationship with her illustrious Sudanese background and supplies her with a feeling of calm and reassurance in the face of the hurdles posed by a foreign and often formidable landscape. Conversely, in public spheres, she is compelled to articulate her thoughts and communicate in English, an act that symbolizes her pressing need to assimilate into and navigate the intricacies of British society, which is markedly different from her own cultural background. This intricate linguistic duality serves as a profound reflection of her internal

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conflict, revealing the ongoing struggle that she faces in her pursuit to preserve her cultural identity while simultaneously adapting to the dynamics of a new and often alien environment.

As Najwa experiences a deepening sense of devotion to her faith, she begins to actively embrace her identity as a Muslim, a transformation that is poignantly manifested in her decision to don the hijab, which in turn makes her negotiation of identity increasingly visible and pronounced. The act of adopting the hijab signifies a substantial shift towards a more traditional and devout expression of her cultural identity, even as she continues to navigate her existence within a secular Western societal framework that often presents challenges to her beliefs and practices. This pivotal decision underscores the internal tension she grapples with between her past experiences and her present reality and also illustrates her fervent quest to achieve a harmonious balance among her Sudanese heritage, her Islamic faith, and the societal expectations imposed upon her by the broader British cultural landscape.

In the narrative presented in *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, the protagonist Amal's experience with the complexities of cultural hybridity manifests in a different manner, particularly as she occupies the unique position of being a second-generation Palestinian-Australian individual who has been raised and socialized within the rich and diverse tapestry of a multicultural society. Amal's diverse identity is largely moulded by her twofold commitment, which merges her Australian roots, rich with its particular cultural standards and principles, along with her strong Palestinian-Muslim legacy that guides her outlook and personal ideologies. She exhibits a remarkable fluency in English, which serves as the primary language for her daily interactions and communications, yet simultaneously she adeptly integrates Arabic phrases and expressions into her spoken discourse, thereby reflecting her enduring and profound connection to her cultural roots and the traditions that accompany them.

The decision made by Amal to wear the hijab on a full-time basis signifies a monumental act of cultural negotiation and self-assertion, as it represents a conscious and deliberate assertion of her Muslim identity in a broader societal context where Islam frequently faces misunderstanding, misrepresentation, and marginalization. In this regard, her hijab emerges as a conspicuous and visible marker of her vigorous faith and cultural heritage, effectively distinguishing her from her peers and contemporaries within her social environment. Regardless, Amal's selection to sport the hijab is loaded with its distinct obstacles; she confronts a range of discrimination, labelling, and societal urges to adhere to common

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Western traditions and anticipations that frequently attempt to diminish her identity. Despite these adversities, she remains steadfast and resolute in her decision, skilfully utilizing the hijab as a means to navigate the complexities of her dual identity and reconcile the various facets of her existence. Through her ongoing interactions with friends and family, Amal continuously engages in a process of negotiation regarding her place within the broader Australian society, all the while remaining true to the core tenets of her Palestinian-Muslim heritage that shape her identity and experiences.

Both Najwa and Amal serve as compelling representations of the intricate theme of cultural hybridity, as evidenced by their concerted efforts to reconcile and harmonize their diverse cultural backgrounds with the multifaceted realities of existing within Western societies that often impose their own set of values and expectations. Najwa's journey is profoundly characterized by her ongoing struggle to ascertain her rightful place within a societal framework that frequently places her Sudanese and Muslim identities in direct conflict with the prevailing norms and expectations of British society, leading to a complex interplay of cultural tensions. Her gradual shift towards a more religiously conservative stance, coupled with her decision to adopt the hijab, epitomizes her earnest attempt to firmly anchor herself in her faith while simultaneously navigating the intricate and often bewildering complexities of her hybrid identity, which frequently oscillates between her cultural heritage and her present environment. Conversely, Amal exhibits a more overt and unapologetic embrace of her dual identity, perceiving herself as an individual who embodies both Australian and Palestinian-Muslim cultural elements, whereby her decision to wear the hijab serves as a powerful assertion of this multifaceted hybrid identity.

Unlike Najwa, who grapples with her cultural positioning, Amal demonstrates a greater degree of confidence in her ability to adeptly navigate the intricate dynamics of the two cultures she inhabits, although she too is not immune to the significant challenges and discrimination that accompany her identity. In both novels, the experiences of the protagonists serve to illuminate the ongoing and often tumultuous process of identity negotiation, a process that lies at the very heart of the lived experience of cultural hybridity, illustrating that the complexities of identity formation are both multifarious and dynamic. Consequently, Najwa and Amal are perpetually engaged in the delicate balancing act of reconciling the demands of their rich cultural heritage with the often overwhelming pressures exerted by the need to assimilate into their respective societies, which are characterized by their own unique cultural

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paradigms. Their respective journeys poignantly illustrate the intricate complexities of inhabiting the so-called "borderlands"—a conceptual space wherein multiple cultural identities intersect and converge, and where the ongoing negotiation of these identities constitutes a continuous and frequently challenging endeavour that shapes their lived experiences.

### 4.3.3. Theme of Belonging and Alienation

Belonging and alienation emerge as particularly salient themes within the narratives of both *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, as the protagonists, Najwa and Amal, seek to navigate the complex and often tumultuous terrain of their individual identities while simultaneously seeking to ascertain their rightful place within the multifaceted societies they inhabit. These thematic elements delve deeply into the characters' arduous and often painful struggles as they seek acceptance and a genuine sense of belonging in environments that frequently perceive them as outsiders, primarily due to the cultural and religious identities they embody and represent.

In the narrative of *Minaret*, Najwa's profound sense of alienation is intricately connected to her lived experiences as an immigrant and a Muslim woman residing in the culturally diverse yet often unwelcoming milieu of London. Following the tragic downfall of her family and the harrowing execution of her father, Najwa finds herself ensnared in an exceedingly precarious social and economic position, which starkly contrasts with her previous status. Once a member of the elite Sudanese societal class, she now inhabits the role of an outsider in a metropolis that, regrettably, does not extend a warm welcome to her presence. Her deep feeling of separation is intensified by the biases related to race and faith that she faces routinely in London. As Najwa becomes increasingly devout in her faith and begins to put on the hijab, her feelings of alienation are further intensified. The hijab, which serves as a significant source of spiritual solace and comfort for her, simultaneously marks her as an individual who is markedly different, subjecting her to the critical gaze and judgment of those who surround her in her daily life.

Moreover, Najwa's relationship with Anwar, who exhibits disdain for her religious transformation and practices, serves to further complicate and exacerbate her already profound feelings of alienation. His total dismissal of her beliefs, along with his refusal to engage with her on any significant level, highlights the deep and painful chasm that separates

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her spiritual self from the secular reality she must manoeuvre through. Over the span of the book, Najwa is shown as wrestling profoundly with her desire for acceptance, ultimately uncovering a semblance of comfort and peace only within the sacred realm of her beliefs and the small yet heartfelt Muslim community she becomes an essential member of.

In the literary work entitled *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, the intricate journey experienced by the protagonist Amal, in her quest for a sense of belonging while grappling with feelings of alienation, is profoundly illustrated through her determined efforts to assert and maintain her Muslim identity within a societal context that is predominantly characterized by non-Muslim cultural norms and values. Although Amal was born and subsequently raised in the multicultural landscape of Australia, she encounters a profound and pervasive sense of alienation that is exacerbated when she makes the personal decision to wear the hijab full-time, a choice that she sees as a significant expression of her faith. The hijab, in this context, transforms into a conspicuous emblem of her distinctiveness, thereby rendering her susceptible to an array of discriminatory actions and prejudicial attitudes emanating from her peers, educational instructors, and even individuals she encounters in public spaces who may not share her cultural background.

The tragic events that followed the Bali bombing serve to further amplify Amal's feelings of alienation, as she finds herself unjustly positioned as the target of Islamophobic sentiments and an atmosphere rife with suspicion directed at her and others who share her faith. The derogatory remarks made by her classmates, coupled with the overwhelming pressure to justify and defend her religious beliefs in the aftermath of violent terrorist acts, contribute significantly to her emotional experience of isolation and a profound sense of being misunderstood by those around her. Nevertheless, in spite of the multitude of challenges that she encounters throughout her journey, Amal exhibits a sturdy resolve to carve out a space for herself within the broader Australian society, steadfastly refusing to compromise her deeply held religious identity in the process. She actively tries to establish an environment in which she can authentically belong on her own terms, striving for a delicate balance between her Australian identity and her commitment to her Muslim faith, thus highlighting the complexities of navigating dual cultural identities in a contemporary setting.

Najwa and Amal are both enduring a profound feeling of disconnection, stemming from their distinct cultural and spiritual backgrounds; yet, it is crucial to understand that their methods of addressing and managing this disconnection vary greatly. Najwa's experience of

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alienation is interrelated with her identity as an immigrant, as well as her continuously evolving and complex relationship with her faith, which adds layers of difficulty to her situation. The journey to establish a feeling of connection is an intricate one for her, as she continually works to blend her past experiences in Sudan with her life today in the bustling hub of London. Throughout Najwa's journey, she gradually retreats from the secular world around her, ultimately discovering a profound sense of solace and comfort within her religious practices and the supportive embrace of the Muslim community that she seeks to engage with.

In contrast to Najwa's more introspective approach, Amal adopts a markedly assertive and proactive stance in her quest for a genuine sense of belonging within the society that surrounds her. Even though she faces overwhelming isolation every day, she courageously interacts with her surroundings, boldly confronting the stereotypes and misunderstandings often linked to her beliefs and cultural background. Amal's journey can be characterized as one of remarkable resilience and defiance as she skilfully navigates the intricate complexities of belonging in a societal context that frequently perceives her as an outsider or an anomaly. In both novels, the underlying themes of belonging and alienation serve to underscore the protagonists' arduous struggles to define and assert their identities within environments that are frequently hostile or indifferent to their rich cultural and religious backgrounds.

The journeys of Najwa and Amal strikingly illustrate the diverse difficulties and barriers that individuals encounter in their quest for a feeling of acceptance in a community that regularly disenfranchises and isolates those who do not align with the existing social customs. Their compelling narratives vividly illustrate the remarkable resilience that is required to maintain a coherent sense of self in the face of alienation, as well as the critical importance of finding community and supportive relationships in the ongoing journey toward achieving a true sense of belonging.

### **4.3.4. Theme of Agency in Personal and Public Spheres**

Both Najwa and Amal exhibit significant levels of agency when it comes to navigating the complexities of their personal and public lives, despite the various societal and cultural pressures that they inevitably encounter. In the novel *Minaret*, Najwa's demonstration of agency becomes increasingly prominent as she embarks on a journey to reclaim her faith and steer her way through life in the bustling city of London. Initially portrayed as passive,



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Najwa's pivotal decision to embrace a devout Muslim lifestyle signifies a crucial turning point where she seizes control over her own identity and destiny. Her decisions to wear the hijab, participate in mosque activities, and fully engage in religious rituals are all indicative of her agency within the realm of her personal life. On a public platform, Najwa's occupation as a nanny and her interactions within the Muslim community serve as a testament to her relentless efforts in establishing a sense of belonging in a foreign society. By shunning the expectations imposed by society and opting to forego the secular lifestyle she once led, Najwa consciously decides to embrace and uphold her religious and cultural heritage.

In contrast, Amal's journey in the narrative *Does My Head Look Big in This?* is distinctly characterized by her strong sense of agency right from the very beginning. Her firm choice to wear the hijab on a full-time basis stands as a bold affirmation of her individuality and solid faith both in personal and public spheres. Amal boldly defies societal norms and cultural pressures by steadfastly adhering to her beliefs despite encountering instances of prejudice and misunderstanding. Her interactions at school, her staunch defence of her decisions to her peers and educators, and her active participation in community endeavours all serve to underscore her proactive stance in preserving her unique identity. Moreover, Amal's agency shines through in her ability to serve as a beacon of inspiration and influence to those around her, including her non-Muslim companions who wholeheartedly rally behind her choices.

Through the perspective of Muslim Feminism, the empowerment and resistance experienced by both Najwa and Amal are brought to the forefront. In Najwa's narrative, we witness a powerful demonstration of agency being reclaimed through her strong faith, showcasing a profound connection between spirituality and empowerment. On the other hand, Amal's story illuminates the value of freedom of choice and the assertion of one's unique identity, emphasizing the significance of individual autonomy within the feminist discourse. By defying patriarchal and societal expectations, both protagonists serve as prime examples of how empowerment can be achieved within the cultural and religious frameworks that shape their lives.

### **4.3.5. Theme of Resistance to Cultural Norms**

The determination of the protagonists to shape their identities in alignment with their own values is emphasized through their resistance to societal norms and expectations. This resistance serves as a testament to their staunch commitment to defining themselves on their

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own terms. In the novel *Minaret*, Najwa's subtle yet profound resistance serves as a prime example of this phenomenon. Through her choice to wear the hijab and fully embrace her religious beliefs, she actively pushes back against the dominant secular and materialistic ideologies that once dictated her existence. Rather than conforming to the prevailing Western societal standards, Najwa opts to seek comfort and belonging within her faith community. By doing so, she boldly challenges and deconstructs the prevailing stereotypes associated with Muslim women, showcasing a rare blend of strength and devotion. Her sincere assertion of self amidst the turbulence of her past and present circumstances further underscores the complexity and depth of her character. Najwa's story showcases the intricate interplay of individual empowerment, societal expectations, and the journey to define oneself in a fast-evolving society.

In the novel *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, the character Amal demonstrates a noticeable and outspoken form of resistance. Her resistance is evident in the way she actively confronts and challenges stereotypes and misconceptions associated with Muslim women. This is especially obvious in her daring choice to wear the hijab, which acts as a strong symbol of her resistance against societal conventions. In her interactions with peers and teachers, Amal takes on the role of an educator, enlightening them about her faith and cultural background. Through these interactions, she effectively combats ignorance and prejudice, contributing to a more inclusive and understanding environment. Amal's true commitment to her religious beliefs and practices, despite facing societal pressures, underscores her strong sense of identity and self-worth. Furthermore, her resistance extends beyond religious boundaries to include cultural norms, as she skilfully navigates the expectations stemming from her Palestinian heritage and the Australian society in which she resides. Amal's multifaceted forms of resistance make her a compelling and inspiring protagonist, showcasing the power of individual agency in the face of societal expectations and stereotypes.

Using the Borderlands theory as a framework, one can interpret Najwa and Amal's acts of resistance as a form of negotiating cultural binaries, where they challenge and transcend traditional cultural boundaries. Najwa and Amal do not limit themselves to one specific cultural or traditional identity; rather, they embody a sense of hybridity and fluidity, embracing the diverse aspects of their backgrounds. Their resistance to societal norms serves as a powerful demonstration of their capacity to navigate and harmonize the various facets of their multifaceted identities, showcasing a nuanced understanding of selfhood and belonging.

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Through their defiance of stereotypes and the assertion of their individuality, Najwa and Amal effectively redefine the prevailing notions of what it means to be a Muslim woman existing within the diaspora context. In the narratives of *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, Najwa and Amal's respective journeys are characterized by themes of agency and resistance that are intrinsic to their cultural identities. These two protagonists actively exercise their agency within both personal and public realms, challenging the established societal norms and cultural expectations that seek to confine and define them within narrow parameters.

Their experiences underscore the continuous process of negotiation and resilience that is indispensable for navigating the intricate dynamics of life in the diaspora, where multiple cultural influences interact. As Najwa and Amal navigate the complexities of their existence in the diaspora, they exemplify the ways in which individuals must constantly adapt and respond to the evolving landscape of cultural identity. In the forthcoming analysis, a comparative examination will delve into how Najwa and Amal navigate and construct their cultural identities within the diaspora, shedding light on the strategies and challenges inherent in this ongoing process of self-definition and cultural negotiation.

### **4.4. Section 3: Parallels and Divergences in Cultural Identity Negotiation: A Comparative Study of Najwa and Amal**

#### **4.4.1. Similarities between Najwa and Amal**

Najwa, the character from the narrative titled *Minaret*, and Amal, the protagonist from the work *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, exhibit numerous significant parallels that merit attention, despite the contrasting environments and cultural backgrounds from which each character originates and operates within. Both of these central figures embark on hard journeys as they grapple with the multifaceted challenges associated with their cultural identities, religious beliefs and the processes of personal development. All of these journeys unfold within the broader context of a diasporic experience that significantly shapes their individual narratives.

##### **4.4.1.1. Struggle with Cultural Hybridity and Identity Negotiation**

Within the complex milieu of their existence, both Najwa and Amal encounter the formidable challenge of harmonizing and reconciling their rich cultural heritage with the

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multifaceted pressures and expectations that accompany living in predominantly Western societies. As devout Muslim women, they skilfully navigate the intricate expectations imposed by their faith, all the while confronting and negotiating the often contrasting cultural norms prevalent in the United Kingdom, particularly for Najwa, and in Australia, particularly for Amal. They find themselves residing within a nuanced cultural "borderland," where they are perpetually attempting to balance the competing demands of two worlds: one that is meticulously shaped by their deeply rooted Muslim beliefs and cultural values, and the other that is characterized by the secular, Western societies that they actively inhabit and engage with.

Najwa, in particular, undertakes the complex process of negotiating her Sudanese-Muslim identity within the diverse and cosmopolitan environment of London, a process that becomes especially pronounced after she makes the significant decision to adopt the hijab as a visible symbol of her faith. In a similar vein, Amal deliberately and consciously opts to wear the hijab in a predominantly non-Muslim setting, a choice that ultimately serves as a powerful means for her to assert and articulate her bicultural identity while simultaneously navigating the intricacies of Australian society.

### **4.4.1.2. Religious Devotion and Identity**

The Muslim identities of both characters serve as a pivotal element in the intricate tapestry of their lives, especially as they increasingly deepen their religious convictions and practices throughout the various stages of their respective journeys. In the case of Najwa, her escalating commitment to her faith—which is poignantly symbolized by her significant choice to put on the hijab—can be interpreted as a profound reaction to the personal bereavement she has experienced, coupled with an urgent need for spiritual stability and grounding in the face of her tumultuous circumstances. This burgeoning faith evolves into an indispensable component of her overall identity, facilitating her quest for solace and imbuing her existence with a renewed sense of purpose and direction. Conversely, for Amal, her decision to wear the hijab is not merely a passive act but rather a deliberate and courageous choice that serves to articulate her dedication to her religious beliefs and principles. This act becomes a public declaration of her Muslim identity, which she wholeheartedly embraces, notwithstanding the myriad challenges and instances of discrimination she encounters in her daily life. In both instances, these women harness their fervent religious devotion as a powerful vehicle for self-

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expression and identity formation, navigating through societal landscapes that frequently marginalize or misinterpret the tenets and essence of Islam.

### **4.4.1.3. Experiences of Discrimination and Prejudice**

As practitioners of the Muslim religion, Najwa and Amal encounter different types of discrimination and bias linked to their spiritual identity, a challenge that has worsened after they opted to wear the hijab as a prominent expression of their beliefs. Najwa finds herself navigating a complex landscape of external conflicts that are a direct result of her hijab choice, including facing judgment and scrutiny from those outside her faith, as well as both subtle and blatant acts of exclusion while living in the culturally dynamic city of London. In the same manner, Amal confronts a widespread sense of Islamophobia, distinguished by ongoing stereotyping and animosity, which she deals with from her classmates and educators alike, in addition to strangers she meets on the streets after she decides to wear the hijab full-time, thereby affirming her devotion to her beliefs. This shared experience of being marginalized and "othered" due to their religious beliefs serves to illuminate the broader societal challenges that are faced by Muslim women living in the diaspora, while simultaneously illustrating the ways in which both protagonists actively confront and resist the pervasive ignorance and xenophobia that surrounds them in their everyday lives.

### **4.4.1.4. Internal Conflicts and Self-Discovery**

Najwa and Amal each engage in profoundly intense and multifaceted internal struggles as they attempt to reconcile their deeply personal desires with the intricate demands of their religious beliefs and the complexities of their respective cultural backgrounds. Najwa's internal conflict is primarily centred on the pervasive guilt she feels regarding her past actions, particularly her tumultuous relationship with Anwar, as well as her arduous journey towards achieving a sense of religious redemption and spiritual fulfilment. This internal struggle is significantly intensified by the stark and pronounced contrast between the hedonistic lifestyle she previously embraced and the newfound devotion and piety she is striving to embody in her current life. In a similar vein, Amal's internal conflict is primarily focused on the delicate balance she must maintain between her personal aspirations, the friendships she cherishes, and her future career prospects, all while remaining steadfast in her religious convictions that guide her actions and decisions. She grapples with the pertinent question of how her choice to wear the hijab will influence her professional opportunities and

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social interactions, while simultaneously contemplating whether it is indeed feasible for her to genuinely belong within a Western society without compromising her deeply held beliefs and values. Throughout these narratives, both protagonists embark on profound and transformative journeys of self-discovery, meticulously navigating their internal crises as they strive to remain true to their authentic selves amidst the overwhelming societal pressures that seek to shape their identities and choices.

### **4.4.1.5. Sense of Alienation and Belonging**

Najwa and Amal grapple with profound sentiments of alienation that stem from their unique cultural and religious identities, which serve as significant markers of their individuality in a society that often marginalizes such distinctions. Najwa, particularly in the aftermath of her family's unfortunate decline from a position of social respectability, experiences a deep sense of isolation that manifests not only in her disconnection from the surrounding British society but also from her previous self, which was characterized by a more secular lifestyle and outlook. The conscious decision she makes to adopt and engage in various religious practices further exacerbates her sense of separation from her immediate environment and the individuals within it. Amal, who possesses a more assertive demeanour, similarly encounters struggles with feelings of alienation, which become particularly pronounced following her experiences of prejudice and discrimination from her peers and even from complete strangers in her daily interactions. These two individuals are caught in a complex transitional phase, balancing the rich essence of their cultural backgrounds with the sometimes unwelcoming aspects of the Western societies they call home, as they work hard to discover and cultivate personal areas where they can authentically experience belonging and acceptance while navigating their multifaceted identities.

### **4.4.1.6. Role of the Hijab as a Symbol**

The hijab serves a profoundly significant and multifaceted role in the narratives presented in both novels, acting as an emblem of faith and spiritual devotion and as a complex representation of personal identity and an instrument of resistance for the characters Najwa and Amal. For Najwa, choosing to wear the hijab marks a significant turning point in her journey, clearly separating her past lifestyle from her new dedication to a life filled with deeper faith and modesty, which contrasts sharply with how she used to live. Conversely, for Amal, the hijab is embraced as a more deliberate and assertive choice, symbolizing her

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profound desire to proudly and visibly assert her Muslim identity, despite the myriad of social and cultural obstacles and challenges that such a declaration inevitably entails. Both women actively utilize the hijab not merely as a piece of clothing but as a powerful means of reclaiming and redefining their identities amidst the pervasive societal pressures they encounter, thereby transforming it into a vital and significant symbol of their personal development and empowerment throughout the course of their journeys.

### **4.4.1.7. Resilience and Agency**

Despite the myriad of formidable obstacles and complexities that they encounter—ranging from intricate issues pertaining to their personal identities, the multifaceted nature of religious beliefs, to the often constraining pressures imposed by societal expectations—both Najwa and Amal exemplify remarkable resilience and assertive agency as they navigate the distinct trajectories of their individual journeys. The tale of Najwa reveals a significant exploration of personal healing, in which she strives for inner calm and a sense of community through her religious faith, while contending with the notable trials and tribulations life has placed before her. Conversely, Amal, despite belonging to a younger age group, clearly exhibits an impressive level of bravery as she confidently embraces her Muslim identity and tackles the bias and discrimination she faces regularly in her surroundings. Both characters, despite frequently contending with various forms of adversity and challenges, manifest a robust and unwavering sense of agency as they try to actively shape their own identities and skilfully navigate their respective places within the broader societal framework of the world around them.

### **4.4.2. Differences between Najwa and Amal**

Despite the observable and noteworthy similarities that can be identified between the individuals Najwa and Amal, it is imperative to recognize that there exist substantial and significant differences that characterize their respective experiences, outlooks on life, and personal journeys that they have undertaken throughout their lives. These clear differences showcase the distinctive and individual contexts in which each of these people operates, alongside the diverse and varying tactics they implement to express and affirm their cultural identities within the complicated and nuanced cultural landscapes that encompass them.

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### **4.4.2.1. Context and Socioeconomic Background**

To begin with, the disparity in their ages emerges as a profoundly significant element that contributes to the differences in their experiences; Najwa, who has attained adulthood, exists in stark contrast to Amal, who is still in the formative years of her teenage life. It is particularly noteworthy that, despite her relatively younger age, Amal exhibits a remarkable degree of wisdom and maturity that, in many respects, surpasses that of Najwa, thereby challenging traditional notions of age-related wisdom. Furthermore, Amal demonstrates a commendable resilience in the face of societal pressures exerted by the Western environment, as she steadfastly clings to her cultural and religious identity, whereas Najwa, in her initial experiences, grapples with the challenges posed by her surroundings and ultimately finds herself surrendering to the pervasive influences of her environment.

Najwa originates from a background characterized by privilege and affluence, situated within the upper echelons of society in Sudan, a nation marked by its unique socio-political complexities. Prior to the catastrophic decline of her family's fortunes, she relished an existence replete with the trappings of wealth and high social standing, wherein her personal identity was predominantly shaped by her elevated social position rather than the more intimate aspects of her faith or spirituality. The calamitous downfall of her family, precipitated by her father's involvement in a scandal of a political nature, compels Najwa to confront a harsh new reality characterized by poverty and servitude, during which her faith emerges as a vital source of comfort and resilience amidst the overwhelming challenges she faces. Her odyssey is profoundly one of profound loss, the quest for redemption, and a significant spiritual awakening, all of which are punctuated by a stark and transformative shift in her social status that fundamentally alters her life trajectory.

In contrast, Amal hails from a family that enjoys a middle-class status and is well-established within the societal framework of Australia, a nation known for its diverse cultural landscape. She steps into a realm characterized by stability and care, where her identity crisis does not emerge from a decrease in her riches or status, but instead from the tangled relationships between her strong religious beliefs and the Western society enveloping her, which often showcases opposing values and standards. The challenges Amal faces are fundamentally centred on the themes of self-assertion and the conscious navigation of her faith within a multicultural milieu, as opposed to grappling with the repercussions of a significant socioeconomic upheaval that would dramatically alter her life circumstances.



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Family influence represents a pivotal distinction that profoundly affects individual development and identity formation. In the case of Najwa, her familial environment has, regrettably, played a detrimental role in exacerbating her personal struggles and challenges. The active involvement of her family in political corruption, coupled with a conspicuous absence of robust moral guidance, has significantly contributed to her divergence from the tenets of her faith and the essence of her identity. Conversely, in stark contrast, Amal's family has continuously served as an unequivocally positive and supportive force throughout her life journey. Her caretakers have steadfastly endorsed the necessity of honouring her cultural identity and have cultivated in her a lasting pride in her background, equipping her with the toughness essential to resist the widespread influences resulting from Western traditions. It follows that if Najwa's family had extended to her an equivalent level of support and motivation akin to what Amal has experienced, her life's direction and personal evolution could have taken a distinctly different and potentially more beneficial course.

The impact that friends and their associated social circles exert on individuals varies significantly and manifests in diverse ways. In the specific case of Najwa, her social circle, most notably represented by the figure of Anwar, exhibits a pronounced inclination towards Western cultural norms, and his overt contempt for religious practices and beliefs serves to inhibit her ability to form a meaningful and fulfilling connection with her own faith. It is only when Najwa summons the inner strength and determination to extricate herself from the influences of Anwar that she ultimately discovers the bravery necessary to re-establish a profound and authentic relationship with her religious identity. Alternatively, inspecting Amal's network of friends indicates that those around her, with their varied cultural histories and experiences, provide substantial backing and recognition for her religious beliefs and cultural roots. The deep respect and understanding that they extend towards her personal choices enable her to uphold her faith and cultural pride with a sense of security, free from the pervasive anxiety of potential judgment or criticism from her peers.

### **4.4.2.2. Approach to Religion and Faith**

Najwa's intricate relationship with the concept of religion can be characterized primarily as one of profound rediscovery and personal evolution. Following an intensely challenging and deeply transformative personal crisis, which encompasses not only the heart-breaking loss of her family's previously held status in society but also the deeply traumatic experience of her father's unjust imprisonment, as well as her entanglement in a tumultuous and emotionally

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charged relationship with Anwar, she finds herself turning towards Islam as a source of solace and strength. The act of adopting the hijab, along with her renewed commitment to religious practices, signifies a critical and meaningful journey toward both repentance and a sincere quest for inner peace amidst the overwhelming feelings of personal guilt and significant loss that she has endured. In this regard, Najwa's faith evolves into a profound refuge, while her observance of religious tenets becomes intricately intertwined with a deep sense of duty and an earnest longing for redemption that permeates her existence.

In contrast to Najwa's journey of rediscovery, Amal's relationship with religion is marked by a proactive and assertive stance that reflects her confidence and self-assurance. Right from the outset of the narrative presented in *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, she consciously makes the deliberate decision to wear the hijab, which serves as a powerful expression of both her faith and her multifaceted identity. Unlike Najwa, whose religious devotion emerges in the aftermath of a series of deeply personal tragedies and hardships, Amal embraces her faith from a standpoint rooted in self-empowerment and personal agency. Her primary struggle revolves around the need to defend her religious choices and navigate the often hostile societal prejudices that she encounters, rather than merely seeking redemption or spiritual solace in the face of external challenges.

### **4.4.2.3. Public vs. Private Struggles**

Najwa's challenges primarily manifest as internal struggles that are deeply personal and largely concealed from the outside world. A significant portion of her internal conflict is intricately intertwined with her profound feelings of guilt, overwhelming shame, and a pervasive sense of personal loss that she grapples with on a daily basis. Although it is true that she encounters external conflicts, which include instances of discrimination attributed to her decision to wear a hijab, the crux of her primary struggle revolves around her own self-worth and her relentless quest to derive meaning from her life following the unfortunate downfall of her family. Her journey, characterized by a profound introspective exploration, ultimately leads her to discover a semblance of peace through quiet moments of religious observance and a deliberate withdrawal from the demands and expectations of society that surround her.

Conversely, Amal's struggles are predominantly situated within the realm of external challenges that are very much public in nature and readily observable by others. Possessing a clear and candid character, she confronts her trials with exceptional determination,

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particularly when dealing with the biases and false notions that emerge from her relationships with her peers, educators, and family members. Unlike Najwa, who tends to internalize her battles, Amal is significantly more engaged in the external world, actively confronting societal expectations while staunchly defending her right to practice her faith as a Muslim within the context of a predominantly Western society. The negotiation of her identity takes place in various public arenas, whether it is within the walls of her school, amidst her circle of friends, or during her interactions with individuals she encounters in everyday life.

The manner, in which each individual protagonist responds to the myriad conflicts and tensions that they encounter, serves to illuminate a pronounced and striking contrast between their respective approaches to adversity. In a clear juxtaposition to Najwa's initial struggle, Amal exhibits a remarkable strength and resilience in the face of challenges, steadfastly refusing to compromise her deeply held beliefs and values despite the pressures exerted upon her. At the start of her narrative arc, Najwa finds herself overwhelmed and significantly burdened by the multitude of hardships and obstacles she confronts, resulting in a profound and unsettling fracturing of her personal identity. Conversely, Amal not only survives but thrives in the midst of adversity, discovering a profound sense of empowerment that is intricately woven through her strong faith and an unshakeable understanding of her own self-worth.

### **4.4.2.4. Relationship with Hijab**

For Najwa, the hijab transcends mere fabric; it serves as a profound symbol of her remarkable transformation and deep-seated repentance, signifying a pivotal moment in her life. This significant garment delineates her heartfelt return to her faith after having previously engaged in a lifestyle that was more secular and hedonistic in nature, characterized by the pursuit of immediate pleasures and worldly desires. The act of donning the hijab represents an integral component of Najwa's spiritual journey, where it functions not merely as an accessory but as a protective shield that fortifies her against the shame and regret associated with her past actions, as well as the often harsh judgment imposed by society at large. Her relationship with the hijab is profoundly personal and intimate, symbolizing a definitive rupture from her former existence while simultaneously embodying a sincere embrace of modesty and loyal devotion to her beliefs.

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For Amal, the hijab symbolizes a robust assertion of self-empowerment that goes further than usual interpretations; it is not simply a reaction to a personal difficulty, but an aware and calculated choice made to publicly express her faith and claim her identity as a proud Muslim woman in a complex sociocultural framework. Amal's relationship with the hijab is fundamentally concerned with the intention of making a bold and assertive statement in a Western society that frequently misunderstands or harshly stigmatizes various Islamic symbols and practices. Despite encountering substantial criticism and backlash for her decision to wear the hijab, she chooses to embrace it as an act of defiance and pride, utilizing this symbol to challenge prevailing stereotypes while simultaneously affirming her individuality and unique identity in a world that often seeks to marginalize her beliefs.

### **4.4.2.5. Romantic Relationships**

Najwa's romantic involvement with Anwar is characterized by a profound sense of tension and a complex web of moral ambiguity that permeates their interactions and emotional dynamics. This particular relationship transpires in a time frame that predates Najwa's significant religious awakening, and it is distinctly marked by an atmosphere of secrecy, feelings of guilt, and a troubling sense of exploitation that complicates their connection. The profound lack of respect that Anwar exhibits towards Najwa's family, coupled with his pronounced unwillingness to engage in a committed and legitimate relationship with her, significantly exacerbates the internal conflict that Najwa experiences as she grapples with her emotions and values. Moreover, their relationship serves as a poignant representation of Najwa's past life—a life characterized by moral compromises and emotional instability that she struggles to reconcile. As Najwa embarks on her journey towards greater religious adherence and spiritual growth, she consciously distances herself from Anwar, ultimately opting for a path defined by piety and devotion, thereby rejecting the remnants of her tumultuous past.

On the opposite, Amal's romantic relationship with Adam is imbued with a sense of innocence and idealism; however, it is not without its own set of challenges that complicate their interactions. The religious principles and values that guide Amal's life prevent her from engaging in a conventional Western teenage romance, as she steadfastly refuses to partake in any form of physical intimacy prior to the sanctity of marriage. This principled stance inevitably creates a significant tension between her and Adam, who finds it difficult to fully

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comprehend and appreciate the depth of her beliefs and the reasons behind her decisions. Unlike Najwa, whose romantic turmoil is primarily rooted in the negotiation of guilt stemming from her past indiscretions, Amal's conflict revolves more around the intricate process of establishing and maintaining her boundaries within the framework of her faith. Despite the considerable costs associated with adhering to her religious convictions, which ultimately leads to the erosion of her relationship with Adam, Amal remains resolute and steadfast in her commitment to her principles.

### **4.4.2.6. Perception of Belonging**

Najwa frequently experiences a profound sense of alienation within the vibrant city of London, a feeling that is significantly exacerbated by both her altered social status and her distinct identity as a Sudanese Muslim woman navigating life in an unfamiliar and foreign land, where cultural and societal norms differ markedly from her own. This pervasive sense of alienation is further intensified by her internal conflicts and the emotional disconnection she feels from the life she once knew, which adds layers of complexity to her experience. Although she actively embraces and seeks comfort in her faith, Najwa finds herself perpetually positioned on the periphery of society, deriving solace from her religious beliefs yet struggling to find a sense of belonging in her immediate environment, which remains unwelcoming and foreign to her.

In contrast, Amal, who also experiences feelings of alienation at certain moments—particularly as a direct consequence of the Islamophobia that she encounters in her daily life—ultimately possesses a more robust and resilient sense of belonging within the Australian context, where she has been raised. Her determination to stake her claim within the societal framework of her homeland is resolved, as she navigates the prejudice and numerous challenges that come her way with a resolute spirit. Amal feels a profound sense of connection that is deeply linked to her identity and her steadfast dedication to integrate her Muslim beliefs with the principles and experiences shaped by her Australian background, which allows her to forge a richer bond with her surroundings, in sharp contrast to Najwa, who appears to be mostly unengaged and removed from her environment.

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### 4.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, an investigation was carried out by the researcher to conduct a comparative analysis of the characters Najwa from *Minaret* and Amal from *Does My Head Look Big in This?* in order to delve into the strategies employed by each protagonist in negotiating their cultural identity within the diaspora. Through a thorough examination of aspects such as their religious identities, language utilization, cultural customs, attire, and symbols, it becomes evident how both characters manage to uphold their cultural heritage while also acclimating to their new surroundings. The narrative of Najwa encapsulates a profound journey of self-transformation as she rediscovers her faith and cultural traditions following a period of displacement, whereas Amal's commitment to her religious and cultural principles serves as a testament to her proactive involvement in upholding her cultural identity within a diverse societal framework. The analysis accentuates the fact that both protagonists leverage their cultural and religious beliefs as mechanisms for empowerment and resilience. The process of adaptation undertaken by Najwa and the resolute stance adopted by Amal in asserting her cultural identity exemplify the array of approaches through which individuals manoeuvre and reconcile their cultural identities in diasporic settings. These revelations shed light on the significance of cultural symbols and practices in nurturing a sense of affiliation and equilibrium, while also shedding light on the broader implications of cultural amalgamation and fortitude within the diaspora.

# **General Conclusion**

### General Conclusion

The culmination of this scholarly inquiry meticulously synthesizes and integrates the diverse strands of analysis and interpretation that have been thoroughly examined and scrutinized throughout the extensive and detailed chapters that precede this final section. This comprehensive study embarked on a profound and rigorous exploration of the intricate and dynamic themes of cultural identity, the processes of acculturation, and the nuanced diasporic experiences of Muslim women through the analytical lens provided by two pivotal and significant literary works: *Minaret*, authored by the esteemed writer Leila Aboulela, and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* penned by the notable author Randa Abdel-Fattah. The meticulous examination and analysis of these literary texts have significantly illuminated and clarified the complexities and challenges associated with cultural negotiation, the transformative nature of identity, and the critical role played by religious and cultural markers—such as the hijab—in both personal and broader societal contexts that shape the lived experiences of individuals. In delving deeply into the protagonists' intricate journeys and narratives, this study has provided a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the intricate interplay and relationship between identity, personal agency and acts of resistance that manifest within the complex and often multifaceted spaces of the diaspora.

In both of the literary works under discussion, the hijab assumes a pivotal and multifaceted role in the intricate process of identity formation for the protagonists, who are navigating their complex cultural realities. For Najwa, the hijab emerges not merely as an accessory but as a profound symbol signifying her reconnection with her rich Muslim heritage, while simultaneously serving as an outward manifestation of the significant internal transformation she undergoes throughout the narrative. This headscarf represents her conscious departure from a Westernized lifestyle that she finds increasingly unfulfilling and her subsequent embrace of a deeply rooted religious identity, which provides her with both comfort and a robust sense of belonging within a diasporic community that often grapples with issues of cultural dislocation and alienation. The profound journey of Najwa effectively highlights how spiritual symbols, such as the hijab, can operate as influential means for declaring one's identity and resisting the dominant cultural forces that strive to make personal narratives and expressions alike.

Similarly, for Amal, the hijab functions as a calculated and public assertion of her cultural and religious identity within the context of a predominantly non-Muslim society that may not



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always be receptive to her beliefs. This piece of clothing symbolizes her sincere commitment to her deeply held beliefs and evolves into a significant source of strength and resilience as she actively navigates the challenging terrain marked by instances of discrimination and bias that she encounters throughout her daily life. In her deliberate act of wearing the hijab, Amal powerfully showcases her independence while boldly opposing the often inflexible societal pressures that attempt to outline her identity, thereby reflecting the essential values of Muslim Feminism, which supports the empowerment of Muslim women through the recognition and appreciation of their diverse cultural and religious backgrounds.

Another key finding of this research lies in the contrast between the acculturation strategies adopted by the two protagonists, Najwa and Amal, two individuals who identify as Muslim women and are traversing the complex landscape of life within a diasporic context, embark upon remarkably divergent trajectories in their desires to negotiate and articulate their intricate cultural identities. In the case of Najwa, as depicted in the narrative *Minaret*, her preliminary inclination towards acculturation manifests as a conscious choice to voluntarily assimilate, which essentially represents a continuation of the Westernized lifestyle that she had previously embraced during her formative years in Sudan. Nevertheless, in the wake of her family's significant decline in social standing and stability, Najwa experiences a profound and transformative journey that leads her to re-establish a connection with her rich Muslim heritage, which is prominently illustrated through her active participation in the London Muslim community and her decision to wear the hijab. Her participation in mosque activities and adoption of the hijab signify a return to her cultural and religious roots, aligning with Miriam Cooke's concept of Muslim Feminism, where religious and cultural identities become empowering tools in a diasporic context. This pivotal shift in her life symbolizes her earnest attempt to reconcile the cultural complexities of her Sudanese roots with the new realities she faces in the diasporic environment she now inhabits.

Conversely, Amal adopts a markedly different stance in the narrative *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, where she unequivocally affirms her cultural and religious identity from the very beginning by making the conscious decision to wear the hijab, a significant act that renders her Muslim identity conspicuously visible within a predominantly non-Muslim societal framework. By actively resisting the pressures of assimilation, Amal successfully upholds her cultural and religious values, while simultaneously integrating herself into Australian society through the nurturing of friendships and her meaningful interactions within the school setting.

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Each character highlights fascinating models of the different approaches that individuals could adopt while dealing with the intricate cultural challenges that consistently surface in diasporic communities. This particular methodology aligns cohesively with the theoretical framework established by Gloria Anzaldúa regarding the concept of Borderlands, since Amal exists within a complex and multifaceted intersectionality of various identities, thereby actively rejecting any attempts to be constrained or limited by the rigid confines of cultural binaries that society often imposes.

This particular research has thoroughly engaged with a multitude of theoretical frameworks in order to conduct an in-depth analysis of the diverse and complex experiences faced by the protagonists of the narratives under consideration. By utilizing Homi Bhabha's sophisticated theory of hybridity, alongside Stuart Hall's insightful conception of cultural identity, as well as Miriam Cooke's critical lens of Muslim Feminism and Gloria Anzaldúa's profound Borderlands theory, this study has effectively contextualized the lived experiences of the protagonists within the expansive and multifaceted discussions surrounding cultural identity as it pertains to the diaspora. The narratives of Najwa and Amal emerge as particularly compelling exemplars that vividly illustrate the intricate ways in which Muslim women, situated in diasporic contexts, adeptly navigate the complex intersectionality that exists among culture, religion, gender, and the profound sense of belonging that they seek to cultivate.

Both literary works emphatically underscore the agency that Muslim women possess as they actively resist the imposition of rigid cultural binaries while simultaneously asserting and reclaiming their cultural identities within the dynamic and often contested spaces of cultural negotiation and exchange. Additionally, this intellectual investigation has significantly enhanced the prevailing academic discussion surrounding diaspora literature by presenting a juxtaposed analysis of the two novels in focus. It has uncovered the striking diversity inherent in diasporic experiences and the various means of cultural adaptation that individuals might engage with, thus making clear that there is no exclusive or monolithic route to shaping cultural identity within the diaspora. The unique journeys undertaken by each protagonist are intricately shaped by an interplay of personal, social, and political factors, all of which significantly influence their respective responses to the myriad pressures associated with assimilation, integration, and the desire for separation from the dominant cultural narratives.

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Through the analytical framework of Muslim feminism, this research has meticulously investigated the intricate ways in which Muslim women residing in the diaspora engage in the multifaceted processes of negotiating their cultural identities, while simultaneously resisting and challenging the reductive and often inaccurate stereotypical portrayals that are frequently assigned to their cultural and religious beliefs by broader societal narratives. All in all, this thesis has delivered a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of the nuanced processes involved in the negotiation of cultural identity and the acculturation experiences of the subjects Najwa and Amal, thereby illuminating the profound complexities and challenges that accompany the experience of living in a state of cultural bifurcation within the diaspora.

The findings shed light on the essential role of safeguarding cultural authenticity, exercising individual agency, and engaging in resistance as crucial aspects of forming and evolving diasporic identities, while also drawing attention to the significant repercussions of these discoveries for the areas of diaspora literature and cultural studies broadly. As the phenomena of globalization and migration persist in influencing and reshaping contemporary societal landscapes, the insights gleaned from this research make a substantial contribution to the nuanced comprehension of the diverse and varied strategies through which individuals, and particularly women, adeptly navigate the multifarious challenges associated with cultural negotiation and the quest for belonging within increasingly multicultural environments.

In conclusion, although Najwa and Amal come from different contexts, they share several profound similarities in their experiences of cultural hybridity, religious devotion and the challenges of negotiating their identities within Western societies. Both face internal and external conflicts, confront prejudice, and navigate complex relationships with their faith, families, and the societies they live in. Their stories are powerful explorations of what it means to be a Muslim woman in the diaspora, and they both showcase the resilience, complexity, and depth of the diasporic experience. However, while both Najwa and Amal navigate complex cultural and religious identities, the differences in their contexts, personal journeys and approaches to faith highlight the varied ways Muslim women in the diaspora experience cultural identity negotiation. Najwa's story is more about spiritual redemption and internal conflict, while Amal's narrative focuses on self-empowerment and public assertion of identity. These differences add depth to their characters and underscore the diversity of experiences within Muslim identity in the diaspora.

### Recommendations

This study has provided a detailed analysis of cultural identity negotiation in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* through the lenses of Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory. However, there are several avenues for future research that could further enrich the understanding of diasporic experiences and cultural identity. Pursuing the following recommendations, future research can build upon the findings of this study, offering richer, more diverse perspectives on the complex processes of cultural identity negotiation and acculturation in diaspora literature:

1. **Expansion of Literary Scope:** Future research could benefit from examining a broader range of diasporic literature beyond the two novels analysed in this study. Including works from different regions and cultural backgrounds would provide a more comprehensive view of how various diasporic communities navigate cultural identity. Additionally, exploring novels from different genres or time periods might reveal new dimensions of acculturation and identity formation.
2. **Incorporation of Additional Theoretical Frameworks:** While this study focused on Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory, integrating other theoretical perspectives such as postcolonial theory, intersectionality, or transnationalism could offer alternative insights into cultural identity. These frameworks may highlight additional factors influencing diaspora experiences, such as race, class, and global economic conditions.
3. **Diverse Diasporic Contexts:** Investigating the experiences of Muslim women in non-Western diasporic contexts could offer a different perspective on cultural identity and acculturation. Comparative studies of diasporic experiences in various countries could reveal how different social, political, and cultural environments shape identity negotiation.
4. **Focus on Other Identity Aspects:** Future research could also delve into other aspects of identity formation, such as the impact of socioeconomic status, educational background, or family dynamics on cultural assimilation and resistance. Understanding these factors could provide a more nuanced view of how multiple elements interact to shape diasporic identities.
5. **Methodological Approaches:** Employing a mixed-methods approach that combines quantitative data with qualitative analysis could enhance the depth and breadth of

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research findings. Surveys, interviews, and field studies could complement literary analysis and offer a more empirical basis for understanding diasporic experiences.

6. **Longitudinal Studies:** Conducting longitudinal studies that track the evolution of cultural identity over time could provide insights into how diasporic individuals' perceptions and negotiations of identity change as they age, adapt to new environments, or undergo significant life events.

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## Summary

This scholarly inquiry investigates the depiction of cultural identity and the process of acculturation within diaspora literature, with a particular emphasis on the narratives of Muslim women as depicted in two modern literary works, *Minaret* by Leila Aboulela and *Does My Head Look Big in This?* by Randa Abdel-Fattah. The analysis employs Gloria Anzaldúa's theory of Borderlands and Miriam Cooke's perspectives on Muslim Feminism to scrutinize the ways in which cultural identity, belonging, and resistance are articulated by the protagonists within the diaspora. This research elucidates the dynamics of acculturation and the transformation of cultural identity in diasporic environments, thereby providing a distinctive comparative lens on the difficulties and methodologies employed by Muslim women as they traverse cultural, religious, and social frontiers in predominantly non-Muslim contexts. The initial chapter, titled "Diaspora Literature and Contextualization of Cultural Identity," delineates the concept of diaspora alongside its literary manifestations, engaging in a discourse concerning its principal themes. Additionally, it offers a meticulous exploration of cultural identity and its constituent elements. The chapter culminates in an examination of the acculturation process and its diverse strategies. The subsequent chapter, "Research Methodology: Theoretical and Analytical Approaches," delineates the comparative analytical framework employed in the study, explicating the theoretical frameworks to the selected literary texts. This chapter elucidates the pertinence of Miriam Cooke's Muslim Feminism and Gloria Anzaldúa's Borderlands theory in relation to the study's aims, thereby justifying the selection of the two novels and their respective protagonists for analysis. In the third chapter, "Exploring Cultural Identity Through the Protagonists in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*," the research undertakes a thorough examination of the cultural identity of the protagonists. This chapter is organized into two sections, each dedicated to an analysis of one of the novels, concentrating on the protagonists' cultural experiences as shaped by religion, language, culinary practices and attire, and how these factors contribute to the formation of their cultural identities. The fourth chapter, "Comparative Analysis of Cultural Identity in *Minaret* and *Does My Head Look Big in This?*," offers a comparative exploration of the negotiation of cultural identity by the protagonists, including their strategies for acculturation and the themes involved. This chapter scrutinizes the protagonists' reactions to cultural conflicts, their strategies of integration or separation, and the ways in which Muslim Feminism and Borderlands theory elucidate their approaches to contesting societal norms and affirming their cultural identities. The study concludes by emphasizing the principal findings

derived from the research, underscoring the contributions of this inquiry to the domains of diaspora studies, cultural identity and feminist theoretical frameworks.

### **Résumé:**

Cette recherche explore la représentation de l'identité culturelle et de l'acculturation dans la littérature de la diaspora, en se concentrant sur les expériences des femmes musulmanes telles que décrites dans deux romans contemporains, *Minaret* de Leila Aboulela et *Does My Head Look Big in This?* de Randa Abdel-Fattah. L'étude utilise la théorie de Borderlands de Gloria Anzaldúa et le Muslim Feminism de Miriam Cooke pour analyser la manière dont l'identité culturelle, l'appartenance et la résistance sont négociées par les protagonistes de ces romans dans la diaspora. La recherche met en lumière le processus complexe d'acculturation et de transformation de l'identité culturelle dans les contextes diasporiques, offrant une perspective comparative unique sur les défis et les stratégies des femmes musulmanes naviguant à travers les frontières culturelles, religieuses et sociales dans les sociétés non musulmanes. Le premier chapitre, « Littérature de la diaspora et contextualisation de l'identité culturelle », introduit le concept de diaspora et de littérature de la diaspora, en discutant de ses thèmes et caractéristiques clés. Il fournit également un examen détaillé de l'identité culturelle et de ses composantes. Le chapitre se termine par une étude du processus d'acculturation et de ses différentes stratégies, telles que l'assimilation, l'intégration, la séparation et la marginalisation. Le deuxième chapitre, « Méthodologie de recherche : approches théoriques et analytiques », décrit l'approche analytique et comparative utilisée dans l'étude, en détaillant l'utilisation des cadres théoriques pour les romans sélectionnés. Le chapitre explique la pertinence de Muslim Feminism de Miriam Cooke et de la théorie Borderlands de Gloria Anzaldúa par rapport aux objectifs de l'étude, en proposant une justification du choix des deux romans et des protagonistes pour l'analyse. Dans le troisième chapitre, « Explorer l'identité culturelle à travers les protagonistes de *Minaret* et *Does My Head Look Big in This?* », la recherche fournit une analyse complète de l'identité culturelle des protagonistes. Le chapitre est divisé en deux sections, chacune analysant l'un des deux romans, en se concentrant sur les expériences culturelles des protagonistes, le rôle de la religion, de la langue, de la nourriture et des vêtements, et la manière dont ces éléments façonnent leurs identités culturelles. Le quatrième chapitre, « Analyse comparative de l'identité culturelle dans *Minaret* et *Est-ce que ma tête a l'air grosse dans ce livre?* », présente une analyse comparative de la négociation de l'identité culturelle des protagonistes, des stratégies d'acculturation et des thèmes abordés. Le chapitre examine les réponses des protagonistes aux

conflits culturels, leurs méthodes d'intégration ou de séparation, et comment le féminisme musulman et la théorie des zones frontalières contribuent à éclairer leurs stratégies de résistance aux attentes de la société et d'affirmation de leur identité culturelle. L'étude conclut en soulignant les principales conclusions de la recherche, en soulignant les contributions de la recherche aux domaines des études de la diaspora, de l'identité culturelle et de la théorie féministe.

### ملخص

يستكشف هذا البحث تمثيل الهوية الثقافية والتفاف في أدب الشتات، مع التركيز على تجارب النساء المسلمات كما صورت في روايتين معاصرتين، "المئذنة" للكاتبه ليلي أبو العلا و"هل يبدو رأسي كبيراً في هذا؟" للكاتبه رندا عبد الفتاح. وتستخدم الدراسة نظرية "الحدود" لغوريا أنزالدوا، و"النسوية الإسلامية" لميريام كوك لتحليل كيفية التفاوض على الهوية الثقافية والانتماء والمقاومة من قبل أبطال هذه الروايات في الشتات. ويلقي البحث الضوء على العملية المعقدة للتفاف وتحويل الهوية الثقافية في سياقات الشتات، ويقدم منظوراً مقارناً فريداً للتحديات والاستراتيجيات التي تواجهها النساء المسلمات في التنقل عبر الحدود الثقافية والدينية والاجتماعية في المجتمعات غير الإسلامية. يقدم الفصل الأول، "أدب الشتات وسياق الهوية الثقافية"، مفهوم الشتات وأدب الشتات، ويناقش موضوعاته وخصائصه الرئيسية. كما يقدم فحصاً تفصيلياً للهوية الثقافية ومكوناتها. ويختتم الفصل باستكشاف عملية التفاف واستراتيجياتها المختلفة، مثل الاستيعاب والتكامل والانفصال والتهميش. ويوضح الفصل الثاني، "منهجية البحث: المناهج النظرية والتحليلية"، النهج التحليلي المقارن المستخدم في الدراسة، مع تفصيل استخدام الأطر النظرية للروايات المختارة. ويشرح الفصل أهمية رواية ميريام كوك "النسوية المسلمة" ونظرية غلوريا أنزالدوا "الحدود" لأهداف الدراسة، ويقدم الأساس المنطقي لاختيار الروايتين والبطلين للتحليل. وفي الفصل الثالث، "استكشاف الهوية الثقافية من خلال أبطال "المئذنة" و"هل يبدو رأسي كبيراً في هذا؟"، يقدم البحث تحليلاً شاملاً للهوية الثقافية للبطلين. ينقسم الفصل إلى قسمين، يحلل كل قسم إحدى الروايتين، مع التركيز على التجارب الثقافية للبطلين، ودور الدين واللغة والطعام والملابس، والطرق التي تشكل بها هذه العناصر هويتها الثقافية. يقدم الفصل الرابع، "تحليل مقارن للهوية الثقافية في روايتي "المئذنة" و"هل يبدو رأسي كبيراً في هذا؟"، تحليلاً مقارناً لمفاوضات الهوية الثقافية للبطلين، واستراتيجيات التفاف وموضوعاته. يدرس الفصل استجابات البطلين للصراعات الثقافية، وطرق اندماجها أو انفصالها، وكيف تساعد النسوية الإسلامية ونظرية الحدود في تسليط الضوء على استراتيجياتها لمقاومة التوقعات المجتمعية وتأكيد هويتها الثقافية. وتختتم الدراسة بتسليط الضوء على النتائج الرئيسية للبحث، مشيرة إلى مساهمات البحث في مجالات دراسات الشتات والهوية الثقافية والنظرية النسوية.