



A Study of Cultural Hybridity and Liminality in the Works of Hala Alyan

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Article History	Abstract
Received: 08 June 2023 Revised: 05 Sept 2023 Accepted: 30 Oct 2023	<p><i>The concept of Liminality emerged from the anthropological works of Arnold Van Gennep and Victor Turner. Liminality refers to the "threshold". The liminal stage is a transitional or in-between phase of different characters and situations. In the era of postcolonialism, liminality has been applied in the context of culture. Concept of hybridity was at first used in the field of science and later in postcolonial scenario, it got associated with the mixing of cultures. Liminality theory has put a significant impact on postcolonial studies because it provides a framework for understanding the complex experiences of people who have been displaced and dislocated. In the postcolonial context, liminality and cultural hybridity are often experienced by people who have migrated from one place to another. The migrants face the challenge of adapting to a new culture while also maintaining their own cultural identity. They may also find themselves caught in a liminal state, in between two cultures, feeling like they don't fully belong to either one. On the other hand, they may feel that they belong to both cultures in equal measure and form a new hybrid culture which is mixture of the culture of their homeland and native state. The Palestinian American writer Hala Alyan's novels and poems are full of such characters and situations which explore the themes of liminality and cultural hybridity.</i></p>
CC License CC-BY-NC-SA 4.0	<p>Keywords: Liminality, Cultural Hybridity, Diaspora, Post-Colonialism and Migration</p>

1. Introduction

Hala Alyan was born in Carbondale, Illinois; she grew up in Kuwait, Texas, Lebanon, Oklahoma, and Maine. She completed her B.A at the American University of Beirut, her M.A at Columbia University, and her Psy.D at Rutgers University. Alyan is a clinical psychologist, adjunct assistant professor at New York University, and the proud owner of a Lannan Foundation Fellowship. Along with her husband, she resides in Brooklyn, New York. A certified clinical psychologist Hala Alyan has experience of working in forensic, hospitals, educational, and counselling settings. She specializes in the identification and management of issues related to cross-cultural issues, drug addiction, stress, and mood disorders. She has conducted workshops utilizing narrative therapy with prisoners, trauma victims, and refugees.

The word liminality has been derived from Latin word limen which means a threshold. Threshold means the gate, the sill of a gate or a starting point of something. Various anthropologists and psychologists have used this term to study the in-between space or location in cultural aspect and other aspects. Liminality can be applied in almost all of the aspects of life and studies. It has been applied in architecture, music, dance, culture and gender studies. Hybridity has been a contentious topic from its origin as a scientific term in nineteenth-century to its postcolonial, cultural, linguistic, and geographic contexts. Some theorists, like Bhabha, refer to it as a "Third Space" that is laden with ambiguities, others refer to it as a "liminal" space and study it with historical, cultural, and societal perspectives.

The concept of liminality was at first used in psychology and later on it was used in the field of anthropology by Arnold Van Gennep in 1909 in his work "Les Rites de Pasaage". Gennep used the term liminality in relation with different rights related to marriage, child birth, coming of age and cremation etc. He divided these rights in three categories which are rights of separation, transition rights and rights of Incorporation. The initiate those who are going through these rights are at first stripped off from their

social status and they are separated from the society. After this they go through the liminal period, when certain rituals are performed. After performing rituals once again they are re-incorporated into their previous society.

The theory was further elaborated by anthropologist Victor Turner and he gave a great contribution in the study of ritual symbols. Victor Turner studies many cultures and he tried to find similarities between different rituals in different societies. Turner studied human social life in context of structure and anti-structure along with its study in the ritual context. For him anti-structure is also important for human existence because with these human beings can understand their humanity and spirituality.

Initially hybridity was used in biology and botany as at first it was used for the pollination of plants. Later this theory was used in various disciplines like linguistic and cultural theories by nineteenth century. Hybrid means making of a new element by the mixture of two. Hybridity was Initially used as an insult for the people who were product of mixed breed. But the concept of hybridity is very important into the post-colonial discourse where it talks about an in-between culture. In the same way cultural Hybridity denotes the mixing of two cultures and birth of new culture with the admixture of two. As Mikhail Bakhtin defines hybridization in relation of languages:

What is hybridization? It is a mixture of two social languages within the limits of a single utterance, an encounter, within the arena of an utterance, between two different linguistic consciousnesses, separated from one another by an epoch, by social differentiation or by some other factor. (358)

Robert J. C. Young, in his book "Colonial Desires: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race" (1995) discusses hybridity in detail, he starts from the scientific term hybridity and its uses as cultural hybridity. He reads even the Victorian text in relation with hybridity and he believes that hybridity has become a very important part of colonial discourse of racism. Robert Young believes that Hybridity brings such changes which gives a completely new identity to the former subject. As he remarks, "Hybridity thus makes difference into sameness, and sameness into difference, but in a way that makes the same no longer the same, the different no longer simply different" (26).

Nikos Papastergiadis mentions about Hybridity in his book *The Turbulence of Migration: Globalization, Deterritorialization and Hybridity*, and he talks about, "twin processes of globalization and migration". He discusses about the concepts of assimilation of the migrants in the host country and talks about some communities of migrants who came in prominence and, "argue in favour of new models of representing the process of cultural interaction, and to demonstrate the negative consequences of insisting upon the denial of the emergent forms of cultural identity" (Papastergiadis, 3). A research paper with title *Hybridity* by John Hutnyk studies hybridity in relation with diaspora. According to him the Diaspora authors are also occupied with hybridity and he calls hybridity a process not a product. As he states,

With relation to diaspora, the most conventional accounts assert hybridity as the process of cultural mixing where the diasporic arrivals adopt aspects of the host culture and rework, reform and reconfigure this in production of a new hybrid culture or 'hybrid identities.' (81)

The term "hybridity" has recently been attributed to the writings of Homi K. Bhabha, whose theory related to the relationship of colonizer and colonized emphasizes their mutual dependence and the reciprocal transformation of their perspectives. According to Bhabha, the "Third Space of enunciation" is the setting in which all cultural expressions and frameworks are created. As per Bhabha, the assertion of a hierarchical "purity" of cultures is unrealistic since cultural identity always develops inside this contradicting and ambivalent zone. Bhabha believes that acknowledging this ambivalent zone of cultural identification may help us to move beyond originality of cultural identity and it may lead us towards the awareness of powerful hybridity in which the cultural diversity functions:

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. (Bhabha 38)

In his seminal work "The Location of Culture" Bhabha, discusses Liminality and Cultural Hybridity and he stresses importance of border location and the threshold environment. Ashcraft et al. also stresses the importance of liminal theory for postcolonial studies as it helps us to study in between space and cultural changes along with the transcultural space. According to Homi. K. Bhabha liminality is a transitory and in between space, which is indetermined, ambiguous and hybrid. Bhabha stressed more

on significant practices and the liminal discourses. It includes some geographical borders like ocean crossing sea- shore borders and marketplaces etc. As a critic comments:

Bhabha, in terms of liminality, elaborates on cultural hybridity, his main contribution to the postcolonial study. Bhabha used liminality in a way to indicate to an in-between space or territory in which cultures mix and interact to create new hybrid forms. (Omidvar 3)

In the opinion of Bhabha, hybridity was used by colonial government for translating the Identity of the colonized people within a singular framework. For him the hybrid identity is result of the interaction between the colonizer and the colonized and when a new identity comes with their interaction that is a hybrid identity. He states that, "This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibilities of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (Bhabha 4).

Homi Bhabha, also gave the concept of third space which emerge out as a tension between two cultures. For him the third space is the culture's in-between space. He regards the third space as an opportunity for the growth of new and fresh idea which doesn't accept any fixed idea. When Bhabha discusses third space he further says that his concept of hybridity is not based on the idea that any particular culture is pure. He does not consider any culture pure because culture is an ever-changing process. For him hybridization is an ongoing process and culture is also an ongoing process. He connects to the terms of hybridity and liminality with time and space.

V.P. Marotta, discusses various approaches towards hybridity in his paper entitled *The hybrid self and the Ambivalence of Boundaries*. The approaches are essentialist or modern hybrid also called as organic hybridity, intentional hybridity and the postmodernist or the culturist aspect. Organic hybridization is a conservative force because it creates a hybrid that does not overtly oppose the established order. Organic hybridity emphasises the fact that fusions between fixed essentialist cultures have always occurred. Intentional hybridity theorists are those who envision a hybrid who actively opposes and destabilises the continuity and security of the existing social and cultural order. Informed by critical social theory, the third postcolonial perspective offers an answer to the culturalist focus of earlier views (Marotta 296). Sumera Rahim and Muhammad Rashed Abbas in their research paper *Aspects and Effects of Hybridity in Ayadh Akhtar's Novel American Dervish* regard hybridity a very important aspect of Post-Modern era and studies its phases like mental, physical, psychological, and cultural. They further comment:

When a person moves from one place to another, soon he becomes outsider for the newly adopted place and tries to become insider. It is a laborious task for him/her to maintain his/her original identity. Stuck between a commitment to previous culture and a determination to adopt the new one or tries to mingle within the host culture for his/her own benefit, need and the requirement for attachment or lacking ability to get rid of the influence of the past knowledge or experience, a migrant faces a break in his/her identity. (Rahim and Muhammad Rashed Abbas, 1150)

In the field of international media and communication studies, hybridity has become more visible. While hybridity has been used in a number of works to characterize mixed genres and identities, still the analyses that postulate cultural hybridity as a communicative space or activity are still uncommon. Marwan M. Kraidy, in his research paper with title *Hybridity in Cultural Globalization* discusses two quandaries of hybridity which are ontological and political:

A merely descriptive use of hybridity creates two quandaries, one ontological and the other political. Ontologically, whereas a descriptive approach sees hybridity as a clear product of, say, global and local interactions, I believe that hybridity needs to be understood as a communicative practice constitutive of, and constituted by, sociopolitical and economic arrangements.... Politically, a critical hybridity theory considers hybridity as a space where intercultural and international communication practices are continuously negotiated in interactions of differential power (317).

2. Literature Review

Iram Rubab and Muhammad Rizwan in their paper *A Critical Analysis on Identity Crisis in Hala Alyan's 'Salt Houses'* studies the works of Hala Alyan in relation with Palestinian and American Culture. They try to depict this cultural tension and intercultural identity faced in the day-to-day life by the migrants with the help of the dialogues of various characters of Hala Alyan's novel *Salt Houses*. As they state:

Alyan constructs a new transnational and intercultural identity in the diasporas. This identity has been connected with homeland, who were keeping a memory of their culture in exile. They find themselves at a crossroad, in a zigzag maze, unable to find a stable direction. (28)

Ali Mohammed Saadon and Dr. Arwa Hussein Mohammed critically analyses Hala Alyan's poetry collection *Hijra* in their research paper entitled *Collective Memories, and Diasporic Experiences in Hala Alyan's Poetry* which is full of diasporic feelings and the trauma faced by people due to displacement. As it has been written, "This title reflects her vulnerability to the trans-generational trauma of the Palestinian diaspora and.... the rootedness of her Arabic identity and her sense of responsibility toward the language of her ancestors." (1116) Wael Salam in his paper *The Burden of the Past* studies that Hala Alyan covers historic past, social and political adjustment along with the emotional trauma of the Arab migrants in her novels:

Alyan takes her novel beyond the psychodynamics of traumatic memories to comment on the political and social dimensions of trauma. *Salt Houses* tells a story of the Yacoub, who have endured the Nakba, the Naksa and the Gulf War. They end up living scattered in Jordan, France, the United States, and in summer vacations, in their apartments in Lebanon. Their exilic consciousness and their estrangement never let them feel at home, and they feel insecure as they relocate constantly. (12)

Acting Across Diaspora: Transnational Spaces and Voices in Hala Alyan's The Arsonists' City discusses the culture of fear and other terrors faced by the Arab-Muslims in the new lands. It also throws a light on the negative attitude of some fanatic people towards them who associates them with terrorism and fundamentalism. The writer has tried to focus on the loneliness, racial discrimination, religious dilemma and other hardships faced by the diaspora population in a foreign country. As he states, "She casts a piercing spotlight on the exclusion, alienation and racial and ethnic differentiation of Arab immigrants, their being relegated to subaltern positions in terms of race, nationalism and religion." (Aladylah,3)

Jessica Abughattas, in her online article *Cities and Senses in the Poetry of Hala Alyan* analyses her poetry collection *Four Cities*. She finds that Hala Alyan depicts the themes of family life, nationalism, war scenario and love in her above-mentioned book of poetry. She finds that Alyan's description of various geographical area is associated with the quest for identity. She talks about Arab Women writers in general and states:

Since its conception, the poetry of Arab American women has confronted stereotypes, raised questions about personal and cultural identity, and depicted their homelands with heart-wrenching nostalgia. While distinctly Arab-American, their poetry, like Hala Alyan's, pays homage to the emphasis on individuality... (1)

While critically analysing Hala Alyan's poetry collection *The Twenty-Ninth Year* in her blog Lora Strum comments, "*The Twenty-Ninth Year*, a poetry and prose collection exploring Alyan's nomadic past fleeing the Gulf War and upheaval in the Middle East, and her future as a Palestinian-American woman." As the book deals with her dilemma and challenges of aging. The poetry collection presents the glimpses of her nomadic past and endeavors of adjustment in changing surroundings and culture.

Analyses

The works of Hala Alyan are marked by the diasporic trauma, wars and migration. Her first novel *The Salt Houses* starts on the eve of the wedding of Salma's younger daughter Alia with Atef. She reads the coffee mug and finds that the family will soon be uprooted again, which happens in reality too, due to 1967 Six-Day War. Earlier Salma had to leave her ancestral home in Jaffa because of World War II. Salma is compelled to leave her home in Nablus; her son Mustafa, is drawn into a military political situation and gets killed during the 1967 six-day war and Alia and her husband Atef go to Kuwait with Salma's elder daughter Widal, where they painfully start a family with their three kids. Alia and her family once again lose their home, and their land, in 1990 when Saddam Hussein invades Kuwait, and they go to Jordan and their children disperse to Beirut, Paris, Boston, and other places. Alia's children named-Riham, Souad and Karam start their own families and once again deal with the challenges of assimilation in different locations.

In Hala Alyan's works we find hybrid identity of various characters due to their displacement from their motherland. Such an incident occurs in the novel *The Salt Houses* where Salma feels sad that her daughter Alia doesn't veil her face for being brought up Nablus in the novel *The Salt Houses* where as Salma and her late husband Hussam followed all the norms of their religion. She contemplates that if her husband would have been alive, "He wouldn't have been prepared for the changes sweeping the

youth. The way the west has begun to sweep into their cities, the way occupation divided the generations sharply. The youth draw no glitter, the elders to bitterness” (Alyan, 16).

Hala Alyan’s first book on Poetry entitled *Atrium* has poems on diverse themes. Which talk about life and experiences in different situations and locations. The first part of this collection starts with twelve poems on twelve Zodiac signs. There are some poems referring to the names of Greek gods and goddesses too. In the collection one of her poems is entitled Bellydancing, where the writer talks about an Arab girl performing the same. Traditionally the Arab women used to wear Veil and they were not allowed to participate in such danced but with the influence of new culture the same women enjoy Belly dancing. As Alyan writes,

Cliché, isn’t it?
The Arab clicking her hip bone,
angling her length in front of the mirror.
Vanity,
An icicle for thirst ___it is good,
sometimes, to perform for one’s self,
...
the idea of ballet by non-ballerina.
Its good, sometimes, (77)

Adjustment in a new cultural, geographical and political set up has always been a challenging task for the diasporic community and especially for the migrants who have been forcefully uprooted. It is not any easy task to adopt new culture and lifestyle and to forget one’s own traditions and heritage. The displaced community keep on doubting their loyalty towards both of the Nations. Such a dilemma is portrayed in Hala Alyan’s poetry collection *Four Cities* which focuses on the themes of love and war and the poet remembers all the cities, she has lived in. In a poem entitled *Z, at a dinner in Michigan*, she laments about her lost home in Iraq and the happy family life with the mentioning of traditional foods. But later she talks about her liminal dilemma of hating a nation and loving the other,

I hid between the stones. I want to say teach
me how to love one country
without hating the other. (35)

Hala Alyan’s second novel *The Arsonists’ City* is based on the theme of movement between times and nations. In the 1970s, Idris and Mazna had their first meeting when Manza was a young actress living with her family in Damascus whereas, Idris was a medical student in Beirut. Manza used to visit Beirut with Irdis where she fell in love with Irdis's best friend Zakaria a Palestinian refugee who was killed as a victim of racial discrimination. After Zakaira's death Irdis and Mazna got married and settled in America, Mazna thinks about having an acting career there, in which she failed because she was a foreigner, she didn’t have a fair skin tone and a command over English. Idris has inherited the family home after his father’s death, he wants to sell that home and for this purpose along with memorial of his father the couple calls their three grown up children to Beirut. They have three children named Ava, Mimi and Naj. All three living in different countries and fighting with the same adjustment issues faced by their parents.

Shifting in a new place is not mere a geographical displacement, it includes cultural and linguistic challenges too. One who is linguistically proficient in his/her motherland may face communication issues in a foreign land. The adaptation to new culture may take years and it may shatter the confidence and morale of a migrant. As it happens with Syria born Mazna in *Arsonists’ City* who has migrated to U.S.A with her husband:

At least shopping day gives her some purpose, but there is always something uncomfortable. On the crosstown bus, the driver gets impatient with her counting out coins. Another shopper asks her something, but she speaks too quickly and when Mazna doesn’t say anything in return, the women giving her a concerned look. In school she was one of the best in English class, but hers is an English of movies and theater, not everyday conversation. She freezes when a cashier says, have a good one. (The Arsonists’ City 311)

Poem entitled Hamra in Hala Alyan's poetry collection *Hijra* expresses the hardships followed by war and displacement. The sudden bombarding and leaving the homes and belonging far behind forever leaves a pain in the hearts of the inhabitants forever. The bloodshed and the cries have left an everlasting impression in their memories. They have left everything so unprepared in such a hurry that it is really difficult for them to accept the change. As Alyan expresses:

It has taken decades for the city to die, the newscaster says. Her
Own house has been swallowed by sea, and she shakes sand from
Her collarbone on air. Years ago, my father owned a window in
Oklahoma, then Texas, then the dry summers whittled his accent
And he never returned. (52)

In her poetry collection *The Twenty-Ninth Year*, Hala Alyan talks about war-torn cities, her fragmented past, chaos of displacement, drug-addiction along with the physical and mental anguish. In this book a poem 'Common Ancestors' talks about the liminal dilemma of an Arab Migrant who is in self-reproach due to her lack of loyalty to her religious faith and changed ways in a foreign land. The poet is depicting the struggle to maintain a balance between two cultures, and the feeling of guilt due to lost connection from the roots. She laments over the transformation of her Arabic identity with the increasing influence of the west over her:

I play this immigration like a viola. If I forget Arabic,
Then extinct is my grandmother, her lentil soup, the photographs...
I forgot that Zaynab came before Fatima. I drank on the first day of Eid.
From roof to dirt, say hallelujah, say hallelujah:
I'm a convert now. I'm a land waiting for my new, westerly name. (35)

Adapting into the new culture an environment takes the above-mentioned character far from her traditional rituals and habits which fills her with a guilt. She calls herself a convert and in a liminal dilemma of change or not to change. She does not want to look a stranger in the new nation that's why she has changed her way of living but her conscience pricks her on her deviation from the faith and religious beliefs.

4. Conclusion

The above analysis depicts that the novels and poems of Hala Alyan portrays ample of characters and incidents where the migrants, Palestinians, refugees, displaced, war-victims, or the diaspora population face the liminal dilemma. The residents and the migrants both are other for one other and when they live together, they exchange their socio-cultural norms, traditions, culture, life- styles and ceremonies. With this exchange they are neither purely original nor purely convert and that particular in-betweenness and mixing of beliefs and culture results in cultural hybridity.

The experiences of the characters in Hala Alyan's novels and poems are open testimonials of their struggle to adjust and their vacillating conscience which questions about their true identity. Being a second-generation migrant, she has heard the accounts of Naksa, Nakba, wars and migration from her parents and other ancestors. She has portrayed their true liminal dilemma turning into cultural hybridity in her poems and novels in a realistic manner.

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