
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Hybridity and the Illusion of Identity Quest in Amin Maalouf's *The Disoriented*

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I intend to focus on the interrelatedness between hybrid cultural identity, sense of belonging and the illusion of identity quest, which are of paramount importance to the construction and formation of identities. In fact, the concept of identity with respect to intercultural elements had always been highly debatable and controversial. In this vein, the main objective of this paper would be that of exploring some of the countless manners in which cultural identity could be forged and shaped. To attempt to do so, I would engage in deconstructing the predominant identity-related themes in the novel *The Disoriented* by Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf. His fluid migratory experiences and the vision he harbors about cultural dynamics have paved the way for his unconventional and original manner to internalize and externalize the issue of identity. Based on that, I would shed light on how his mobile and hybrid identity mirrors and emulates the various facets of identity that emerge from his fictional production. More specifically, I would examine the notion of cultural identity through the themes of migration, diaspora, exile, alienation, liminality and alterity in *The Disoriented*. Given these first considerations, the significance of this article would be that of questioning how cultural identity had been intertwined and reconfigured in literature, particularly in the works of a culturally hybrid author like Amin Maalouf. Another impact of this paper is that it shall display that cultural identity could never be circumscribed or essentialized, and that it seems to be perpetually fugitive and in constant motion.

KEYWORDS

Cultural Identity, Hybridity, Diaspora, Alienation, Otherness, Migration, Exile, Liminality.

ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 22 September 2023

PUBLISHED: 22 September 2023

DOI: 10.32996/ijts.2023.3.3.3

1. Introduction

Approaching alterity (the Other) from an intercultural perspective requires an indispensable reflection on the interrelatedness between identity and culture. Starting from a multidisciplinary point of view, in this article, I intend to highlight that the relationship between identity and culture is an essential factor in order to appropriately undertake paths of identity construction and negotiation in contexts of liminality and hybridity. The theme of identity vis-à-vis culture is of paramount importance and criticality in contemporary societies, because of the processes of homologation on the one hand and fragmentation and individualization on the other hand, which especially affect migrants who find themselves immersed in multicultural atmospheres, in the vital need of building and claiming their own identity in hybrid cultural contexts and liminal spaces (La Barbera, 2015). In this fashion, I aspire to deal with this question from a predominantly literary frame of reference, for an adequate interpretative reading of the subject matter. Thus, while engaging research from a theoretical point of view, I would like to also linger on the examination of Amin Maalouf's novel *The Disoriented*.

I strongly believe that the analysis of the interaction between identity and culture is a necessary tool to coexist with the Other, a way of defining journeys of empowerment to constructively interact with the different Other, especially on the cultural front. That

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being said, identity construction patterns are called into question, which has a remarkable impact not only on diasporic cultural allegiances, but also on the unneglectable fact of cultural denigration, which migrants are constantly exposed to no matter how good is their ability to integrate, relate to the Other and to different cultures (Georgiou, 2010). Assuming that diversity is a fundamental human resource that lays the foundations for a positive reciprocity between identity and alterity, it seems incumbent that cultural elements are crucial to identity negotiation, since being different from the Other could presuppose some sort of interferences with an individual's identity construction (Prinz and Siegel, 2019).

2. Literature Review

Addressing the issue of identity, it is very important to adopt a multidisciplinary spirit, which can account for its different facets. Of course, the purpose here is not to report the multiple points of view through which the theme of identity had been addressed by the different disciplines that dealt with it but to synthetically illustrate some of its characteristics on which scholars seem to have reached a certain agreement, beyond a variety of perspectives adopted in different contexts.

That is a fundamental procedure, since any discourse on identity can only exist in the awareness that it is a polysemic and elusive concept, whose aspects of complexity cannot be ignored. The main interdisciplinary convergence points that can be identified regarding the concept of identity are the following: identity simultaneously recalls both the idea of equality and difference; identity is not a taken for granted, fixed and immutable entity, but an evolving reality in the continuous process of making; the identity construction process of an individual does not take place in conditions of isolation, but it has a social nature and is defined by the interaction with other members of a certain cultural context.

The first point dwells on the concept of identity as being built on the dialectic between equality and otherness. It responds to the need to identify oneself with and feel similar to others, but also to the opposite need to assert one's uniqueness and stand out from others. Addressing the origin of the identity construction process from a psychoanalytical point of view, Krause affirms that the phenomenon of "primary identification" stands at the basis of individuals' identity formation, followed by the phenomenon of "introjective identification".

During the first phase, children identify themselves with their mothers; and, during the second phase, they also come to internalize parts of the world and the people they come in contact with. They re-elaborate them and relive them in personal and original terms, thus constituting themselves as differentiated individuals. Under this light, the foundation of identity is a double process of both identification and separation (Krause, 2010).

According to Codol, identity is based above all, on the awareness of being a unique subject different from all of the other subjects of the physical and social world (Codol, 1982). Therefore, since its origins, identity construction implies difference and calls into question otherness. For anthropologist Remotti, the entire identity process is configured as a continuous series of "assimilations with" and "separations from" something that is considered "Other than the self", for which

"Otherness is present not only at the margins, beyond borders, but also in the very core of identity". [...] "Identity is also made of otherness" (Remotti, 2001).

In the second point, Remotti describes again identity as a mask and the identity building process as a matter of decisions. It consists of a negotiation, a selection of connections between elements that each individual chooses among infinite other connections and elements. In a sense, it is a simplification of reality that the individual needs in order to lead their existence according to a path of coherence and continuity. To meet this need, it is necessary to precisely and continuously choose, exclude, negotiate, assimilate and adapt to constant changes of contexts and situations.

Even the sociologist Bauman claimed that identity is something that must be invented rather than discovered, a sort of puzzle which every individual should be committed to composing. However, there is no certainty in identity, since the final image of the puzzle is unknown from the beginning and there is no definitive result to aim for. Regarding identity, Bauman recommends to "experiment with what you have" (Bauman, 2020) and argues that there is no possibility of knowing whether you have the right pieces, whether there are missing pieces, or how to obtain what you think is potentially useful. This conveys the impression that belongingness and identity might not be guaranteed for a lifetime, but that they are negotiable and revocable to a large extent (Bauman, 2020).

In the third point, Oyserman points out that

"Personal identity is always social, in the sense that it is made up of individuals' multiple belongings. [...] For example, I can simultaneously be an American citizen, a musician, a Jew, a member of a voluntary association and a fan of a football team. While

each of these groups contributes - albeit in different degrees and forms - to giving us a specific identity, none of them can be considered as our only category of belongingness" (Oyserman et al., 2012).

From what has been scrutinized so far, identity appears to be a process of continuous negotiation and a changing construct built both on the self and otherness. Its social nature causes it to be deconstructed into several different facets, configuring it as a non-monolithic entity.

By illustrating some of the most significant characteristics of the concept of identity, I underlined that it responds to the fundamental need to feel similar to others and, at the same time, to be different from others, affirming individual uniqueness. According to Oyserman, identity is shaped as a sort of "narrative", a dialectical path through which individuals try to provide coherence and continuity to their existence, finding and rebuilding their balance over time. The author emphasizes that personal identity performs a "locative" and "integrative" function. The first places the individual in a system of relationships by tracing "boundaries", distinguishing between themselves and the others, between "we" and "them"; the second allows not only a discontinuity with the other, but also a continuity with ourselves (Oyserman et al., 2012), thus giving coherence to our existential path.

Oyserman then advances that these very functions apply not only to individual identity, but also to that of social groups that identify with a collective identity. In this respect, the locative function is given by territorial and symbolic borders, while the integrative one is delineated by the group leaders. For the author, this type of identity is the result of a historical process and precise historical choices. In other words, social identity denotes a matter of will and awareness, while cultural identity refers to an innate construct:

"While identity refers to a partially aware process of self-recognition, through which the subject (individual or collective) appropriates elements of a given culture, sometimes modifying them and consistently reworking them [...], culture often refers to unaware processes, linked to traditional behaviors and practices" (Oyserman et al., 2012).

In this sense, cultural identity could be viewed as

"A particular modality - increasingly important in the contemporary world - of distinguishing between us and them, based on the sense of a common origin" (Oyserman et al., 2012).

For the author, it is

"The origin in an intergenerational community that occupies a certain territory and shares a distinct language and history" (Oyserman et al., 2012).

In light of these assumptions, it becomes clear that a certain degree of juxtaposition might exist between social and cultural identity. However, this distinction allows us to value the strong link that exists between community, territory and culture. In fact, the latter originates from a set of activities, traditions, ways of life and values that a certain human group, settled in a given territory and speaking a given language, utilizes to respond to the practical and spiritual needs to make sense of the world.

Over time, these activities and attitudes become a key to understand the reality that is handed down from generation to generation and that gives rise to tradition, which arises within a united group, characterized by social relationships and permanently settled down in a territory for which it has a strong sense of rootedness. In turn, tradition and belonging to an environment become the basis for the community's cultural identity, giving its members cohesion and a sense of continuity with the past. These are important existential references whose intensity could persist over time even if social structures change or new value systems are established, since cultural identity is not a monolithic construct exempt from change. Yet, it has a partly "unconscious" nature and it always refers to a sense of common origin, even when it is inhibited or lost.

This way of considering cultural identity - linking it to tradition, language, history and territory - is not supposed to be simplistic, for nowadays it appears to be difficult to identify social contexts characterized by a homogeneous cohesion between people, places and cultures. Neither should it be ignored that the very concept of culture is complex and still at the center of a debate that is redesigning its meaning. However, despite the complexity of current contemporary societies, the concepts of culture and cultural identity seem to keep eliciting an essential part of their meaning from the link between a territory and its inhabitants. Regarding the concept of culture, anthropologist Brown states that

"There is only one culture [...], the universal human culture, which can be interpreted as a universe of local cultures [...]. Considered in absolutely elementary terms, local culture is the ability to give local answers to universal needs" (Brown, 2004).

Further on, he clarifies that:

"Of course, needs are not something definitive, as identity is not, as culture itself is not, since there is a continuous and troubled reshuffle of cultural contents imposed by history [...]; but it always remains a reference to belongingness that cannot be deleted under any circumstances, even if reasons change over time. If in other eras local culture was the basis of consensus, which is sharing existential meaning among the generations living together in a very specific local context, today referring to one's local belongingness becomes the condition for a fruitful and active participation in universal dialogue" (Brown, 2004).

Therefore, even in the current era of globalization, cultures keep maintaining an indispensable local dimension, by virtue of which cultural identity is the expression of a primordial link between a community and the territory it belongs to. Besides, this link appears to be very significant because it might represent a solid basis to embrace and open up to other cultures, in the perspective of an intercultural exchange that would transform differences into a source of mutual enrichment.

3. Methodology

The research method adopted in this article consists of an interdisciplinary approach that attempts to examine the literary texts transcending rigid disciplinary boundaries, which might allow me to embark on the analysis from a plurality of perspectives. It is an analytical method mostly inspired by postcolonial and literary criticism, in which the primary sources are sites of cultural representations, empowerment and resistance. Identity is dealt with from a postcolonial point of view with which hybridity and liminality, as well as intercultural negotiations, are exalted.

4. Results and Discussion

In this section of the paper, I shall continue to tackle the theme of the interculturality torn between identity illusion and sense of belongingness. To fulfill this purpose, the starting point is the following ponderation expressed by Maalouf in his novel *The Disoriented*:

"People still thought in terms of their religious affiliation; they couldn't help but do so, but they knew that was wrong, that they should be ashamed. So they lied. And by their transparent lies, they showed that they could tell the difference between how people actually behaved and how people should behave. People these days spew out whatever is in their hearts, and it's not exactly pretty. Not in this country, not anywhere in the world." (Maalouf, 2012, p. 340)

What emerges from this passage is the inevitability for the majority of people to stick to their religious beliefs when it comes to manifesting their cultural allegiances. Yet, such a way of reflecting and belonging has become an integral part of a plural identity that might push people to intentionally mimic others' allegiances even when their principles are formulated differently.

When confronted with such dichotomy, it goes without saying that a diasporic individual is very likely to face a state of identity crisis or identity questioning. While the citizens of the host country might regard them as a foreigner, the citizens of the native country might take them for someone appropriating a foreign civilization, culture or religion. This is exactly the controversy that Adam is confronted with on his return to Lebanon after the war to attend the funeral of his former friend Mourad. In fact, when he asks Mourad's widow about when she might be alone to pay her a visit, she shocks him with the following response:

"My poor Adam, you really have become an emigrant. You're asking me when I'll be alone? Alone, in this country, on a day like this? For your information, I'm in the village, in the old house, and there must be a hundred people here, maybe two hundred. Neighbors, cousins, vague acquaintances, people I've never even met. They're everywhere. In the reception rooms, in the kitchen, in the hallways, in the bedrooms, out on the big terrace, and they'll be here all night and for days to come. Alone? Did you really think I would be alone? Why don't you go, leave, don't worry, catch your flight, go home, to Paris, we'll see each other some other time, in other circumstances." (Maalouf, 2012, p. 38)

This inescapable reality greatly dampens Adam's spirit as he hates to be regarded and approached as a foreigner despite being thoroughly integrated into France. Given that he refused the catastrophic situation of Lebanon during the civil war and felt the urge to go into exile, he now has a hard time giving in to the sense of belonging to Lebanon. From birth until the age of twenty-seven, he led his life in Lebanon. From then on, he continued his life in France until the age of forty-seven. Therefore, France is not foreign to him as he seems to have become inseparable from its historical background and cultural reality. The dilemma of belongingness of the protagonist Adam is very similar to that of Amin Maalouf himself: their cultural experiences and vision of the world and identity are very much alike, if not identical.

In his book entitled *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*, Maalouf makes explicit, in a clear and straightforward manner, his stand on identity, sense of belonging, language and culture, demonstrating his perception from the very first lines of the book:

“How many times, since I left Lebanon in 1976 to live in France, have people asked me, with the best intentions in the world, whether I felt “more French” or “more Lebanese”? And I always give the same answer: “Both!” I say that not in the interests of fairness or balance, but because any other answer would be a lie.” (Maalouf, 2001, p. 14)

The aforementioned passage means that the writer cannot “amputate” a part of his identity. The composition of his identity consists of multiple elements that are not identical, that might contradict each other, but that are never compartmentalized. They are united in a miscegenation that allows him to be himself as well as “tolerate” the different Others, which leads to accepting them as they are. In Maalouf, the notion of miscegenation is therefore conceived as a kind of otherness and decentralization of the self.

This belief makes it possible to welcome the Other and have the opportunity to negotiate with them to reach a mutual understanding: the decentration of the self is to consolidate otherness and reject any illusion of reductionism. Adam, like Maalouf, does not advocate for an immutable, autonomous and authentic culture; he is not attached to a single country or a single allegiance. The whole world, with all its religious and ethnic diversity, could grant him a harmonious coexistence characterized by interculturality.

In this context, Adam adopts a hybrid identity that aims at crossing all borders and encompassing the entire planet. Such identity is patently established at the intersection of diverse and varied cultures and languages. On this same topic, Maalouf is again keen to specify that:

“So am I half French and half Lebanese? Of course not. Identity can’t be compartmentalized. You can’t divide it up into halves or thirds or any other separate segments. I haven’t got several identities: I’ve got just one, made up of many components in a mixture that is unique to me, just as other people’s identity is unique to them as individuals.” (Maalouf, 2001, p. 2)

Since these differences and variations are not compartmentalized nor categorizable, they come together to construct a hybrid but also amalgamated identity, made up of the entirety of the cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnic differences and variations. The potential of cultural difference lies in the challenging ability to accept the other. Acceptance would be possible if there is reciprocal tolerance and recognition between individuals. For the act of interculturality to succeed, the society of the host country should valorize the diasporic subject’s culture as much as it valorizes its own culture. When such reciprocity is attained, cohabitation would be possible, still bearing in mind that appropriating another culture while thoroughly renouncing the original one might result in a form of alienation and a state of liminality. This is why identity hybridization is indispensable, especially when it comes to a diasporic scenario. Far from withdrawing into itself, the hybrid identity is always dynamic, able to evolve and in a state of motion. The act of reducing and essentializing identity to one single allegiance freezes it, paralyzes it and isolates it from the world in perennial motion. It follows that being proud of having a homogeneous and “pure” identity would only exacerbate the ostensible reasons behind the rejection of the Other (De Toro and Bonn, 2009).

On this topic, Moroccan writer Ben Jelloun also argues that:

“Those who wanted to freeze identity are totalitarianisms like fascism or religious fundamentalism. The identity that Hitler dreamed of was a “pure” hysterical identity, knowing full well that purity does not exist. Racism is precisely an identity folded in on itself to the point of turning insane and not admitting any external contribution to it. Racism is an identity plagued by this notion of purity in which no intermixture is allowed.” (Ben Jelloun, 2011)

By comparing these critical reflections of Ben Jelloun to Maalouf’s vision of identity, it is possible to realize that they share approximately the same principles: miscegenation turns out to be the potential “solution” that would lead to a hybrid, plural, intercultural and anti-racist identity.

Nevertheless, further exploring the quest for identity, it turns out that it could lead to displacement that in turn could lead to identity confusion or bewilderment. Before embarking on such discussion and interpretation of identity construction as pictured by Maalouf in *The Disoriented*, I shall recall a definition of the concept of identity that the writer himself proposes in *In the Name of Identity: Violence and the Need to Belong*:

“Each individual’s identity is made up of a number of elements, and these are clearly not restricted to the particulars set down in official records. Of course, for the great majority, these factors include allegiance to a religious tradition; to a nationality —

sometimes two; to a profession, an institution, or a particular social milieu. But the list is much longer than that; it is virtually unlimited." (Maalouf, 2001, p. 10)

In the same book, he also denounces that:

"From the very beginning of this book, I have been speaking of murderous or mortal identities. Identities that kill. The expression doesn't strike me as inappropriate insofar as the idea I'm challenging — the notion that reduces identity to one single affiliation — encourages people to adopt an attitude that is partial, sectarian, intolerant, domineering, sometimes suicidal, and frequently even changes them into killers or supporters of killers. Their view of the world is biased and distorted." (Maalouf, 2001, p. 30)

In *The Disoriented*, Maalouf attempts to bring forth another representation of identity that is at times predominant and at times minoritarian. Thus, the marginalized side of identity is envisaged by Maalouf as follows:

"A member of a minority longs to pass over his difference in silence rather than highlighting it or carrying it like a banner. He reveals his difference only when backed into a corner—something that inevitably happens. Sometimes, it takes only a word, a look, and suddenly he feels like a stranger in a land where his people have been living for centuries, for millennia, long before the majority communities of today. Faced with such circumstances, everyone reacts according to their temperament—meekly, bitterly, deferentially, or with flair. "Our ancestors were Christians when all of Europe was still pagan, and they spoke Arabic long before the advent of Islam," I remember saying to a coreligionist one day, somewhat smugly." (Maalouf, 2012, p. 316)

In addition to this, Maalouf claims his double allegiance to both his countries in equal measure:

"What makes me myself rather than anyone else is the very fact that I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity. Would I exist more authentically if I cut off a part of myself?" (Maalouf, 2001, p. 14)

Following this trajectory of reflection, I should further delve into the exploration of the theme of the fluidity, mobility and plurality of identity, which has already been encountered several times before. In almost all of Maalouf's literary works, at the center of the macabre situation of humanity there is a protagonist supposed to preach peace, reconciliation between cultures and tolerance towards the Other. In *The Disoriented*, such benevolent figure is represented by the protagonist Adam and his voluntary exile. Despite fanaticism and cultural exclusion, his existence abides by the slogan of cultural diversity and plurality. It seems that he reflects and incarnates a condition of identity fluidity, uprootedness and unattachment.

This very aspect is also endorsed by Maalouf himself in the prologue to his book *Origins*:

"I've never had a true religious affiliation. If anything, I've had several incompatible ones. Nor have I ever felt an overriding loyalty to one nation. It is true, I don't have just one country. On the other hand, I willingly identify with the history of my large family — with its history and its legends. Like the ancient Greeks, I ground my identity in a mythology; I know it is fictitious, but I revere it as though it reveals truth." (Maalouf, 2008, p. 15)

In the same vein, the reason why Adam claims to be a citizen of the world - with diverse allegiances, nationalities and roots - is to overcome identity hostilities and belligerence. For this purpose, he provides a veracious example of the cultural pluralism that is essential to the establishment of a harmonious dialogue between cultures. Hence, his attempt to bring together all his old friends, who should overcome their cultural differences and assemble in a spirit of tolerance and conviviality. What Adam attempts to construct is a space and time that would condemn wars and allow peace to triumph over the fear of the Other. Throughout his brief journey in his native country, he approaches the "different" Other in a manner that would forge intertwinements and interconnect the various cultures and doctrines. Throughout all of this process, Maalouf's intimation does not go unnoticed: it is a question of experiencing cultural differences not in repudiation and repulsion, but in complementarity and interaction. Individuals should stick to their cultures and religions, yet also recognizing the existence of the different Other as a vehicle of enriching their principles rather than threatening them.

5. Conclusion

As has been observed so far, the exploration of the intricate relationship between identity and culture through intercultural lenses is not only an academic experimentation but also a vital endeavor in our contemporary world. This article has underscored the undeniable connection between one's sense of self and the cultural and geographical milieu they are immersed in. In the context of increasingly multicultural and hybrid societies, the understanding of how identity and culture intersect becomes paramount. The experiences of diasporic subjects, who often find themselves straddling multiple cultural worlds, highlight the urgency and

cruciality of this discourse. This paper has sought to contribute to this dialogue from a theoretical standpoint, shedding light on the complexities of identity in the literature, and from a literary standpoint as well, with a particular focus on Amin Maalouf's novel *The Disoriented*.

It is my firm belief that comprehending the interplay between identity and culture is an indispensable tool for fostering constructive interactions with diverse backgrounds. This understanding not only challenges conventional patterns of identity construction, particularly in diasporic communities, but it also addresses the issue of cultural denigration faced by migrants, regardless of their ability to adapt to new cultures.

Diversity, as a valuable human resource, lays the foundation for positive interactions between individual identities and alterity. Hence, cultural elements play a pivotal role in the negotiation of one's identity. The act of being different from Others can often lead to a complex negotiation that shapes an individual's sense of the self. In essence, this article attempts to sharpen the importance of recognizing the intrinsic link between identity and culture in the midst of our ever-evolving global society. By acknowledging this connection, we could pave the way for more egalitarian and empowering interactions with diverse cultural backgrounds.

The importance of this research lies then in its potential to enhance comprehension and analytical thinking regarding how identity is continually shaped and depicted in literature, always in a state of mutation. This results in the creation of literary works that perpetuate identities existing in-between cultural boundaries, especially when crafted by writers who have diverse cultural backgrounds. These narratives significantly influence how individuals perceive both themselves and others. Additionally, I attempted to elucidate that cultural identities are aspects of human existence that cannot be neatly defined or reduced to fixed traits, given their transitional, adaptable, and transient qualities.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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