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Migrancy and Liminal Identities: A Bhabha's Perspective on *We Are All Birds of Uganda* by Hafsa Zayyan

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Abstract: This qualitative study examines Zayyan's novel, *We Are All Birds of Uganda* (2021), through the postcolonial critique using Bhabha's concept of liminality, particularly viewing the diasporic identity of South Asian Muslims in Uganda. The study employs the method of textual analysis for the interpretation of the text. The critical analysis further emphasizes the varied immigrants' experiences, their voluntary and involuntary migrations, and their struggle for identity in the host land. Voluntary migration has depicted present-day London, and in-voluntary migration has been represented as forcible migration or expulsion of South Asians, particularly Muslims from Uganda. The story reconciles the old and new identities through the representation of a split timeframe. The findings of the study reveal the major characters' fractured and volatile identities that become harmonious after the acceptance of various aspects of identity, and their hybrid identities become liminal. The study further reveals that despite the challenges, individuals with multi-generational diasporic identities have the potential to bring a unique perspective and rich cultural heritage to the communities they belong to. By embracing and celebrating their diverse identities, they can contribute to a more inclusive and multicultural world.

Key Words: Postcolonialism, Diaspora, Identity, Migration, Liminality, *We Are All Birds of Uganda*

Introduction

Postcolonialism, which emerged in the mid-20th century, is a theoretical framework and multidisciplinary field of study to analyze the political, social, and cultural effects of colonialism and imperialism on formerly colonized societies, particularly in the Global South. It also explores the power associations between the colonizer and the colonized and how these relations continue to shape contemporary politics, culture, and social structures. According to Sawant (2011), the term post-colonialism has a narrow focus on the national culture after imperial rule came to an end. Due to critical works like *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft (1989) and *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* by Gayatri Spivak (1987), the term postcolonialism has been widely acclaimed globally by the readers of the West as well as the East. According to Ashcroft et al. (1989),

Postcolonialism is now used in wide and diverse ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialism, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre-and post-independence nations and communities. (p.169)

Khan (2011) examines that post-colonialism has gained academic attention, notably since Said's key book *Orientalism* (1978) was published. Said clearly explains and critiques the systematic marginalization of the East in this work, and he also brings attention to the fact that the West has normalized the dissemination of deliberate textual misunderstanding that does the same. The key features of post-colonialism after the colonial period resultantly include resistance, decolonization, hybridity, marginality,

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▪ **To Cite:** Ismail, A., Ijaz, Q., & Ali, S. (2023). Migrancy and Liminal Identities: A Bhabha's Perspective on *We Are All Birds of Uganda* by Hafsa Zayyan. *Qlantia Journal of Social Sciences and Humanities*, 4(3), 68-75.

<https://doi.org/10.55737/qjssh.921941067>

power relation, and third worlds continuing to shape societies whose revolutions have been overthrown by institutional links to their former colonial rulers. Post-colonialism plays a significant role in shaping diasporic identity, particularly for those who are descendants of colonized peoples.

Diasporic identity refers to the sense of identity and belonging that is formed by individuals or communities who have migrated or been dispersed from their original homeland and have settled in different parts of the world. This term is often used to describe the experiences of individuals who have left their country of origin due to political, economic, social, or environmental factors. Hall's (1993) concept of *diaspora* is used to highlight the complex and diverse nature of identity formation, where individuals are not tied to a single fixed identity but rather to a constantly evolving process of identity formation.

Turner and Turner (1978) gave the idea of *Communitas* in *Image and Pilgrimage*, which refers to a state of collective identity that emerges during liminal periods, such as during pilgrimage or rites of passage. The experience of *Communitas* is characterized by a sense of shared identity, a blurring of boundaries between individuals, and a feeling of being part of a larger collective. This state of liminality can be accompanied by a sense of heightened emotion and intensity, as well as a feeling of transcendence or spiritual transformation. Tololyan (1996) argues that cultural evolution in diasporic communities often differs from that of the initial settlement. According to Tololyan, diaspora groups that are dispersed over a long period often develop their own distinct cultures, traditions, and languages.

A diasporic young writer, Hafsa Zayyan, born of a Pakistani mother and Nigerian father, graduated from the University of Oxford with a degree in Law and went on to obtain a Master's degree in Law and Finance from the University of Cambridge. Zayyan worked as a corporate lawyer in London for several years before pursuing her passion for writing. Zayyan, based in London and a lawyer by profession, penned the novel in six months and remained Co-Winner of the inaugural Merky # Books New Writers' Prize in 2019 and shortlisted for the Goldsboro Glass Bell for her debut novel *We Are All Birds of Uganda* (2021). The young author has also been recognized for her writing through several other awards, including the Bath Novel Award and the London Writers Award. She is an advocate for diversity in the publishing industry and has spoken publicly about her experiences as a *Black Muslim* woman in the legal and literary fields.

We Are All Birds of Uganda (2021) is a compelling and thought-provoking novel that explores themes of identity, belonging, and displacement through the experiences of its two protagonists, Sameer and Hassan. By shifting between the past and the present, the novel highlights the continuity of these themes across time and space and shows how they can impact individuals and communities in different ways. The historical backdrop of Zayyan's first novel, *We Are All Birds of Uganda*, has been written in the African context that incorporates the expulsion of Asians from Uganda in the 1970s and helps to shed light on the African history during the rule of Idi Amin. The novel is enthused by Zayyan's mixed background and explores the reconciliation of old and new identities, blending the strengths and struggles of Ugandan Asians through generations.

The study explores the migrant's liminal identity, particularly of the people who reconcile their past identity with their present selves. The fact that the story is inspired by Zayyan's mixed background, as well as her Ugandan heritage and British upbringing, suggests that the novel might offer a unique perspective on the issue of migrants' liminal identity. Bhabha (1994) says, "Hybridity" represents the ambivalent 'turn' of the discriminated subject into the terrifying, exorbitant object of paranoid classification – a disturbing questioning of the images and presence of authority" (p. 174). Bhabha's statement suggests that the idea of hybridity can be threatening to those in positions of power or authority because it challenges their ability to categorize and control individuals based on their perceived identities. When individuals or groups refuse to conform to these fixed categories, they become objects of suspicion and paranoia.

Bhabha's concept of liminality, which is built upon the earlier work of Van Gennep (1960), refers to the state of being in-between, or on the threshold between two different cultures, social groups, or ways, destabilizing aspect of identity formation that creates a space of ambiguity and potential for the individual to negotiate and re-define their identity. This claim underpins Bhabha's knowledge of diasporic identities that the migrant ethos is inherently partial because it is "neither the one nor the other but something else



besides" (Bhabha, 1994, p.54). This can involve seeking out communities of individuals from their home country, participating in cultural events or traditions, or finding new ways to incorporate their cultural heritage into their daily lives in their new country. This is because these characters are going through a "half-life" in which they are experiencing a "partial presence" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 139).

The present study probes into Zayyan's novel *We Are All Birds of Uganda* to analyze the postcolonial facts through the Bhabha's perspective of liminality and identity faced by Asians, particularly Muslim immigrants in Uganda and London. Further, it explores the problems of migration and liminal identities in the novel through the experiences of the main characters. The study is qualitative in nature and employs the method of textual analysis for the interpretation of the text.

Objective of the Study

The objective of the study is:

- To explore the migrants' liminal identities highlighted in the novel *We Are All Birds of Uganda*.

Research Question

This study attempts to find out the answer to the following research question:

- How have the migrants' liminal identities been presented in the novel *We Are All Birds of Uganda*?

Literature Review

Liminality refers to the state of being 'in-between' or 'threshold,' creating feelings of ambiguity, confusion, and potential that often lead to identity crises. Hall (1993) claims identity as a performative process, negotiating continually through an intricate historical process of conciliation and revival. According to Quance (2000), the margin has a rather constrained binary system that puts the center and margin in a kind of bind. Liminality and limen, as opposed to margin and marginality, imply open and multiple systems, active dynamics and mediating, and transit and transformational space. In this sense, liminality represents a more dynamic and fluid concept than *marginality*, as it implies a space of transformation and growth rather than a static and peripheral position. According to Brubaker (2005), migration has never been permanent or one-way. The migrants are unable to sever their ties to their home countries abruptly and permanently. They do continue to have ties to their nation of origin.

Sheffer (2013) says that it is incorrect to assert that the idea of diaspora solely pertains to Jews, and the new significance of diaspora is distinct from the Jewish and historical perspective. So, the word diaspora originally meant an unavoidable movement, but due to the expansion of colonies and the onset of globalization, it has new meanings in the fields of culture, politics, and literature. Early notions of the diaspora are explored in *Modern Diasporas in International Politics* (1986), edited by Gabriel Sheffer. However, the modern definition also recognizes the voluntary movement of people as diaspora.

Köseoğlu (2017) explores Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and examines those immigrants who move from Bangladesh to England and exposes the cultural conflicts and psychological trauma that the immigrants experienced in England during the post-war age. Psychological discursiveness impact perception (Ramzan et al., 2023). The perceived level of social support directly affects one's overall quality of life (Adeeb et al., 2017). The presence of resilience serves as a protective factor against psychological distress (Riaz et al., 2021). Smith, especially, who came out of a multicultural family, reveals the trauma of migrants. Smith's identity was shaken by her mother's Jamaican nationality and her father's English ancestry. The isolation and alienation of the major characters in England depict disillusionment that can be associated with a cultural and racial difference that third-generation Sameer expects about England before his arrival and makes him dissatisfied after his arrival. As he confronts alienation in the country, the social circumstances and traditions in the other land are not compatible, and therefore, he feels that he is an outsider in a foreign land in which he is discontented when both reality and fantasy contradict one another. According to Mir (2018), social and economic instability is what drives people to migrate in search of a decent place to live. He examines *Exit West* by Hamid as a contemporary depiction of the forced migration of individuals across nations and continents from regions experiencing instability.

Chakraborty (2018) states that Bhabha has indeed emphasized the importance of borders and locales that shape subjectivity and identity in postcolonial societies. Bhabha views borders as liminal spaces where the interplay of power, culture, and identity leads to negotiation. Indian writer Rushdie (1991) also talks about the partial identity of the migrants. In *Imaginary Homelands*, he asserts: "Our identity is at once plural and partial. Sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures; at other times, we fall between two stools, but however ambiguous and shifting the ground may be, it is not an infertile territory for a writer to occupy" (p. 15). Kaya (2021) suggests that these transitional periods of borders can be both disorienting and transformative, allowing individuals to question and challenge the norms and values of their society.

In *We Are All Birds of Uganda* (2021), the characters are from different classes and races. They are led by their painstaking search for business and social locus. The use of liminality as a concept is important to explore the challenges and complexities of voluntary or involuntary migration of characters that focus on acquiring identity in the host land. The present study may contribute to a greater understanding of multicultural and postcolonial facts in literature, particularly diasporic literature.

Theoretical Framework

The term liminality was coined by Van Gennep in 1906 to describe the midway phase of ceremonial change from one cosmic or social state to the other. It is significant to comprehend that the ceremonial migration is an enactment instead of a rule; rules may confine the performance, but the way things happen and how people interact within that confinement may yield previously unheard-of insights or even create new symbols and meanings. This can involve seeking out communities of individuals from their home country, participating in cultural events or traditions, or finding new ways to incorporate their cultural heritage into their daily lives in their new country. This is because these characters go through a "half-life" where they are experiencing a "partial presence" (Bhabha 1994, p. 139). In *The Location of Culture* maintaining effective sources of cultural identity, Bhabha (1994) shows how history and cultures constantly intrude on the present, demanding that we transform our understanding of cross-cultural relations. The present study deals with the representation of a split timeframe, delving into voluntary and involuntary migration and liminal identities through a textual analysis of the selected novel *We Are All Birds of Uganda* by applying Bhabha's notions.

Textual Analysis

'You can't exactly stop birds from flying, can you? They go where they will...' (Zayan, 2021, p. 132). *We Are All Birds of Uganda* (2021) is a compelling and thought-provoking novel that explores themes of identity, belonging, and displacement through the experiences of its two protagonists, Sameer and Hassan. By shifting between the past and the present, the novel highlights the continuity of these themes across time and space and shows how they impact individuals and communities in different ways. Bhabha explores diasporic identities, in which he asserts that the "culture that the migrant carries with him/her is intrinsically partial" since it is neither the one nor the other but something else besides" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 54).

As a London-based lawyer and diasporic writer, Zayyan depicts the picture of Asian Muslims and how they were racially attacked. Saeed, Sameer's father, tells about his stay as a migrant and says that due to cultural differences, they were ill-treated, as revealed in these lines; "You know when we first came to Leicester in the early seventies," his father says, "and we all lived on top of each other in these tiny flats in Belgrave, the government decided that they were too many of us in the local schools and we needed to be moved to different ones." "They had quotas for us". (Zayyan, 2021, p. 34). According to the Commonwealth Immigrants Act 1962, the Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies were allowed to enter the UK. However the withdrawal and the following independence, anyone choosing CUCK (Citizens of the United Kingdom and Colonies) was now issued a passport by the British government, and in 1968, the Commonwealth Immigrants Bill introduced a quota system, allowing 1500 vouchers to East African Asians which created identity crises and problems of citizenship for Asians in Britain. This quota system would have taken years to resettle in Britain, as shown by the fact that "Sameer's father had been once a refugee" (Zayyan, 2021, p. 4).



Sameer, grandson of Hassan, represents present-day London, migrated to find livelihood and for the comforts of life. His voluntary migration comes to terms with his loss, and he begins to reflect on his life and the choices that have brought him to this point. He feels trapped in a world of privilege and status, where success is measured in billable hours and corporate bonuses. He wonders if he has become the very thing he despises – a cog in the machine of capitalism, disconnected from his values and identity. Sameer has always felt torn between two worlds due to cultural differences and his Muslim background. This feeling of being caught between two cultures and not quite belonging to either is often referred to as *in-betweenness* or liminality. This thing proves painful for Sameer in the other land when his colleagues kick him out of the party since "You lot don't drink" (Zayyan, 2021, p. 53). The same is endorsed by Bhabha as "The possibility to reach any sort of personal identity is fetishistically an object of desire and revealed as "ambivalent, split between its appearance as original and authoritative and its articulation as repetition difference" (1994, p. 171). The point in the novel is acute as confused Sameer is stuck between his deep roots in Uganda and present-day London to find his high career. His father warns him, "You won't find whatever it is you are looking for there." (Zayyan, 2021, p. 130).

Mark Lewis, a deal partner of Sameer working together for the new project going to be held in Singapore, acknowledges Sameer's talent and diligence towards his work but often shows disdain due to the religious and cultural differences. As indicated in these lines, ' I thought that you wouldn't be my sort of thing- thought you knew that you and I were cutting ties when you accepted it, he laughs, and Sameer shifts uncomfortably on the spot where he is standing. Anyway, the partnership is still working out who's going to Singapore- there are a number of potential candidates in the pool.' (Zyyan, 2021, p. 45). Lewis's disdain and degrading remarks coerce Sameer to be homeless on the land he is working for. "Chris, a man who has treated him differently to the way he treated everyone else, who spat on him every chance he got, who has made him feel an outsider. A man who has been, quite frankly, racist." (Zayyan, 2021, p.252). Though he considers himself the lifeblood of the firm, such excruciating actions and comments are disappointing and inadequate and compel him to feel like just a fungible resource, like the paper in the printer or the staples in the stapler.

Rahool is an IT consultant and volunteer migrant in London, and his work often requires dealing with clients. He quits his struggle with the job because the company doesn't value him. He feels that "I've been in it for years, and I still have no idea what I'm doing?" (Zayyan, 2021, p.11). He struggles to assimilate into a new culture, but his ambiguous thoughts question his identity and show his concern about his homeland that he left behind and thereby to discover himself. According to Bhabha (1994), this hybrid third space is an ambivalent site where cultural meaning and representation have no primordial unity or fixity.

Hassan's first letter to his deceased wife Amira exhibits their attempt to assimilate with the new culture that bore fruit in the form of a successful business of cotton ginnery in Uganda. They came to Uganda with nothing but hope in their hearts. Their parents had left India for a better future, and they continued their legacy. They worked hard and built a life for themselves. They made friends, started businesses, and raised a family. But all of that changed when Idi Amin came to power. He was a tyrant ruler who ruled Uganda with an iron fist. He targeted South Asians, accusing them of being exploitative and stealing from the Ugandan people. It was all lies, of course. The migrants were hardworking and honest people who had contributed to the growth of the country. A new locality, new culture, and new identification were once unacceptable for Hassan due to its impurity. The experiences of homelessness in his own homeland made him mentally tortured and disturbed. He ordered Asians to leave their homes, their businesses, and their belongings behind. They were given just 90 days to pack up and leave the country. It was a nightmare. Their lives were uprooted, and they were forced to start all over again in a foreign land.

I remember the day we left Uganda. Our home was empty, and our belongings were scattered around. It was a stark reminder of the life we had left behind. We didn't know where we were going or what we would do when we got there. We were refugees, forced to flee our own homes. It wasn't just the loss of our material possessions that hurt. It was the loss of our identity. We had lived in Uganda for generations, and it was our home. But suddenly, we were outsiders, unwanted and unloved. (Zayyan, 2021, p. 104)

The new regime forced Muslim Asians to leave Uganda. Some of the migrants went back to India, and some moved to British. Hassan's family has chosen to flee London. Shahzeb, Hassan's son, talks impulsively to his father to register him again as British because the new regime in Uganda has seized their business and livelihood in the land where they were born. This situation has disrupted the Asians' normal functioning of life and left them empty-handed. As revealed in these words, "We must start the process to re-register me as British- otherwise Papa, you will belong to neither country." (Zayyan, 2021, p.109). It is partly a response to and a resistance against the endurance of colonialism. It aims to change political, cultural, and social systems to make it possible for all people to live in democratic societies. It is realistic as it asserts its consistency and stability, but it is also unrealistic as it is constantly changing. Bhabha (1994) also endorses the same as "It is indeed something like culture's in-between, baffling both alike and different" (p.54).

Spivak (2000) says that no class of people or group of people is free of social interactions because all groups are entangled in social and political relations. As a result, even though marginalized groups act and talk from different places, it is still an appropriation. Finding the features of cultures that are lively and fecund is a key idea in postcolonial theory. These are significant transformative efforts that should not be overlooked. Marginalized groups create cultural negotiation: "Our small minority of Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs has created for itself a little India, an integrated India" (Zayyan, 2021, p. 38). They, in fact, celebrate each festival, whether *Diwali*, *Vaisakhi*, *Ashura*, *Khushali*, or *Eid*, without any distinctions. Bhabha (1994) asserts that "The social articulation of difference, from the minority perspective, is a complex, ongoing negotiating that seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 2).

Agreeing to the Bhabhian term, Hassan and Sameer try to form a hybrid identity based on an amalgamation of two opposing cultures of Asians and British, of Muslims and non-Muslims, developing a fusion of cultures to open up a new space where the migrants' identities remain ambivalent or belong to neither one nor the other. Identity negotiation for immigrants is a complex and ongoing process. It involves balancing past experiences and memories with current context and expectations in the new country. This journey of finding meaning in the post-immigration experience involves constantly redefining oneself in relation to others and cultural groups.

Towards the end of the novel, Hassan's series of letters urge Sameer to visit Kampala to search out his roots and their life condition and sufferings in the land they left behind. Zayyan's use of *Muzangu*, as English Muslim, and *Muhindi*, as Hindu Muslim, depict the hybridity of culture, identities, and languages. Sameer feels discordant and chaotic when children point out him as *Muzangu* and laugh at him. The malevolent attitude of the civilians seems attractive to Sameer. As Bhabha (1994) calls it, "the borderline work of culture demands an encounter with 'newness.' It creates a sense of the new as an insurgent act of cultural translation. Such art does not merely recall the past as social cause or aesthetic precedent: it renews the past, refiguring it as contingent 'in-betweenes' space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (p. 7).

Constraints of cultural heritage through time and space have made Sameer's life in London "a distant, fading memory" (Zayyan, 2021, p. 198). In this third space, Bhabha (1994) acclaims that "a temporal movement and passage" happens where diverse cultural identities come together and merge, creating a new cultural identity that is different from the original ones, "a connective tissue that constructs the difference" (p. 4). Here, Bhabha argues that this third space allows for cultural hybridity, where difference is embraced without hierarchy, thus reshaping the definition of cultural identity. Identity negotiation for immigrants is a complex and ongoing process. It involves balancing past experiences and memories with current context and expectations in the new country.

Shahzeb argues that the community has been wrong to seek protection from the British and that they must change their mentality if they want to be considered truly Ugandan. Their dream to be called "truly Ugandan" (Zayyan, 2021, p. 81) highlights the challenge of defining national identity in a country that has been colonized and is now facing the task of creating a new postcolonial identity. As the lines unearth, "We are not natives, and we are not Europeans. India has disowned us; Nehru calls us 'guests' of Africa. We are not guests. We are Africans of Asian origin." (p. 81). Zayyan's emphasis on hybridity with themes of place



and memory highlights the complexities of identity and belonging in a world where different cultures intersect and interact. Through the character of Hassan, Zayyan explores the challenges of negotiating a sense of self and belonging in the context of migration and cultural hybridity.

Heading to close, the narrative unearths similarities between the first and second generations, between the past and the present, depicting the revival of the time. It discovers the forceful migration in the novel happens due to cultural, religious, and racial differences in the past, resulting creating identity problems and issues of the settlement. The second period of the narrative uncovers the second generation's volunteer migration to find a livelihood. In this way, the novel depicts voluntary and involuntary migration to some other land or country, causing feelings of loss, deprivation, and craving for a lost past.

Conclusion

The findings of the study reveal that Sameer's and Hassan's identity is liminal and hybrid, composed of the principles and practices of two different cultures: Ugandan Asian and English. Their identity becomes dual, liminal, fractured, fluid, and volatile. However, Sameer struggles to reconcile the disparities between the cultures and their ideals. In fact, at the end of the novel, his return to his native land promises his acceptance of both Uganda and London. Hassan's forcible migration demonstrates migrants' strained relationships, which have affected their fragmented identities. Asian economies and power were in decline during the period of the new dictatorship. The lives of immigrants are also revealed, as well as their acrid ethnic experience with split identities and their fragmentations. Virtually, the experiences of migrants and their liminal identities are viewed as a process in which an individual is continually negotiating his values, culture, and principles while attempting to find a new identity in the host community. The study further reveals that liminal identity is a complex, nuanced concept according to which identity is not always fixed or clear-cut but rather multiple and hybrid that deploys challenging space to meet traditional categories and social norms of any society.

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