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IDENTITY AMID CULTURAL FRAGMENTATION: A POSTCOLONIAL STUDY OF AKBAR'S *MARTYR!*

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Abstract

This research study examines the representation of diasporic identity in *Martyr!* by Kaveh Akbar (2024) through the lens of Stuart Hall's theory of cultural identity and postcolonial theory. This study contends that identity is not static or essential in *Martyr!* but rather is flexible, broken, and always being negotiated via memory, trauma and cultural displacement. The novel is centered on the main character, Cyrus Shams, an Iranian-American addict grieving over the death of his father and searching for a sense of purpose in his life, all of which is colored by the violence of his past, the trauma he inherited and the pressure surrounding the dominant cultural narrative. The research uses qualitative textual analysis and close reading to examine the themes of martyrdom, loss, hybridity and artistic expression as sites of identity formation and resistance. In the novel, martyrdom is redefined beyond its traditional religious connotations and becomes an existential and ethical quest for meaning within the diasporic experience. The study also points to the role of art and language as a space of mediation where the negotiation occurs, but not the resolution, of fragmented identities. Through portraying personal suffering in the context of larger stories of displacement and postcolonial violence, *Martyr!* brings attention to the relational, performative and contingent nature of diasporic identity. This study makes a significant contribution to the modern postcolonial and diasporic studies of literature by offering a conception of identity as a process that is continually being negotiated, remembered, and represented.

Keywords*:* *Culture Negotiation, Diasporic Identity, Hybridity, Martyrdom, Postcolonial Theory.*

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1. Introduction

The issue of identity is prominent in the postcolonial and diasporic texts, especially in the context of migration, displacement, cultural fragmentation and transnational experiences. In a world of forced and voluntary mobility across borders, identity is no longer defined as fixed, stable and singular. Rather, it is fluid, negotiated, and historically produced as memory, representation, power and cultural interaction. Post colonialist thinkers reject essentialist ideas of identity and instead focus on hybridity, difference and the ongoing effects of colonial legacies on the present-day subjectivities (Hall, 1990). In this context, diasporic literature is a crucial area for exploring how people negotiate multiple and sometimes competing cultural affiliations as they move across the place of origin and the homeland.

The "Identity" has become a key term in literary and cultural studies. The previous psychological frameworks included ones that emphasized continuity and coherence of the self in development, like the theory of Erik Erikson (1950) on ego identity. But these strategies did not consider the historical disruptions and cultural dislocations, and the power dynamics of colonized and diasporic communities. Later, poststructuralist and postcolonial writers challenged the essentialist notions and offered a view of identity as fluid and ever created. One of the most significant theories on cultural identity is provided by Stuart Hall (1990), who states that identity is not a fixed and predetermined reality, but a process of "being" and "becoming." Hall (1990) argues that identities are developed through the process of representation, historical change and cultural negotiation, and not through a fixed origin or essence. The importance of this theoretical approach for diaspora studies lies in its acknowledgement of hybridity, fragmentation and subjectivity unstable.

Diasporic identity is created in the context of migration, displacement, and a negotiation with and a sense of nostalgia for the culture, as well as through the experience of migration and displacement. The word diaspora, which is normally used for people who have left their home country, now refers to a general situation of being in-between cultures, histories, and places. According to Avtar Brah (1996), diaspora is not a merely physical phenomenon, but an emotional and imaginative bond to homeland as well. Likewise, the term "Black Atlantic" used by Paul Gilroy draws attention to the importance of memory, movement, and double consciousness in creating cultural experiences in the diaspora and "double consciousness," or the "double otherness" of the black community (Gilroy, 1993, p.109). All these views illustrate that diasporic identity is neither fixed nor final, but constantly negotiated and built through relations with the homeland and host land cultures.

Hybridity and the understanding of identity in postcolonial and diasporic contexts further complicate understandings of identity. The idea of the "third space" (Bhabha 1994) is used to describe a space of in-betweenness in which multiple identities, traditions, languages, and histories intersect. Hybridity challenges fixations of colonizer and

colonized, self and other, homeland and host land. Bhabha (1994) does not represent identity as complete or pure, but, rather, incomplete, ambivalent and constantly negotiated. For second generation diasporas, negotiation becomes even more complicated when they have a cultural dislocation in the societies to which they belong. Such people often experience racial marginalization, cultural misrecognition and inherited trauma, leading to fractured and unstable sense of self.

The postcolonial theory also focuses on representation and colonial discourse as a factor in the construction of identity. The book, Orientalism (1978) by Edward Said, illustrates by means of his work how Western systems of representation create non-Western identities in unequal power dynamics. Identity is not something that is only self-constructed, but is sometimes imposed by dominant culture. Frantz Fanon (1952) also discusses the psychological effects of colonialism, in that it causes alienation, disintegration of the self and internalized inferiority. These theoretical approaches highlight the legacy of colonial past on current identity and culture.

The concept of trauma, memory and disjointed consciousness have become the focus of more contemporary scholarship on diasporas as key elements of diaspora identity building. Trauma challenges linear conceptions of time and generates disjointed stories that generate disjointed subjectivities. Memory is also not merely a memory of the past but a dynamic and performative act of representation. According to Hall (1990) the past is always narrated through culture and so identity is not the reconstruction of an original "self", but is a recreation of history and experience over time. In diasporic writing, individual stories of trauma, loss and violence frequently sit alongside collective narratives of migration and displacement, resulting in layered experiences of belonging and displacement.

These concerns are powerfully represented in *Martyr!* Kaveh Akbar's novel, (2024), is about Iranian-American diasporic experience, exploring themes of grief, addiction, spirituality, trauma, and existential questioning. In the novel, protagonist Cyrus Shams finds himself coping with cultural fragmentation and emotional dislocation as he tries to find his identity in the overlapping influences of Iran, America, religion, memory and family history. Born in the United States, Cyrus is still deeply moved by the memories of Iran and the unhealed trauma from displacement and loss. His experiences reflect the fragmentary and fluid nature of diasporic identity whereby selfhood is always being reconstructed, through memory, longing, and cultural negotiation.

The novel also reflects many of the theoretical concerns discussed by Hall (1990), Bhabha (1994), Said (1978), Fanon (1952), and Du Bois (1903). Cyrus' identity is not fixed by his cultural inheritance but through a series of processes of representation, hybridity, displacement, and emotional conflict. His condition is described by W. E. B. Du Bois (1903) as "double consciousness" or a dual awareness created by the different cultural

and social conditions he faces. Likewise, Bhabha's (1994) notion of hybridity and Hall's (1990) notion of a process of identity formation offer frameworks for the understanding of Cyrus's sense of a fractured sense of belonging.

While some recent criticism has focused on trauma, addiction, grief and poetic fragmentation within *Martyr!*, there is little research on the novel that has explored Hall's theory of cultural identity and diaspora. Previous scholarship has tended to focus on the notions of diasporic dislocation and fractured consciousness as separable concerns rather than as an interconnected process that helps to shape identity. This study thus examines the fluidity, contestation, and continuous production of identity in the context of *Martyr!* by engaging with Hall's (1990) anti-essentialist theory of identity. This research will focus on how identity is fluid and constructed in *Martyr!* and how it is negotiated, displaced, remembered, and reconstructed throughout. It also explores personal history of Cyrus Shams and the formation of his cultural consciousness in the face of changing affiliations, emotions and diasporic realities. Furthermore, the novel is explored in relation to other postcolonial and diasporic discussions about cultural hybridity, belonging, trauma and the reconfiguration of the self in transnational contexts. The following research questions will be used to guide the study:

1. How does the novel depict the fluid and constructed nature of diasporic identity?
2. In what ways does Shams' personal journey reflect the fluid cultural identity formation?
3. How does the selected fictional narrative contribute to the diasporic discourse in exploring cultural identity and diaspora?

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative research design and uses textual analysis to examine the representation of diasporic identity in *Martyr!* by Kaveh Akbar. Grounded in postcolonial theory and cultural studies, the research primarily draws on Stuart Hall's (1990) theory of cultural identity and diaspora. Through close reading, the study analyzes narrative structure, language, symbolism, and characterization to explore identity as fluid, fragmented, and continuously negotiated. Particular attention is given to themes such as memory, trauma, displacement, addiction, and martyrdom in relation to diasporic subjectivity and cultural hybridity. The analysis relies solely on the primary text and interprets identity as dynamic and historically constructed rather than fixed or essentialized.

3. Textual Analysis

This section critically analyzes *Martyr!* through Stuart Hall's concept of cultural identity and diaspora (1990). It explores the themes of identity, memory, martyrdom, and

diasporic consciousness through the experiences of the protagonist, Cyrus Shams, in the context of historical trauma, cultural dislocation, and social pressures. The discussion is further connected with the postcolonial perspectives of Bhabha (1994), Gilroy (1993), Fanon (1952, 1961), and Said (1978). The analysis demonstrates that identity in *Martyr!* is not fixed but continuously shaped through memory, culture, trauma, and artistic expression. By connecting personal sorrow with historical violence and transnational migration, the novel presents identity as fluid, relational, and constantly negotiated within social, cultural, and historical contexts. The sections below explore how identity is constructed, fragmented and reconstructed in the novel within the diasporic experience.

3.1. Identity and Representation in Diasporic Contexts

The process of identity and self-construction is observed in various works and theories. The novel *Martyr!* is a foreshadowing of identity as a precarious and ever-negotiated construction. According to Stuart Hall (1990), cultural identity is not an essential part of people but a continuous production. The experience of being an Iranian-born and American-raised man puts Cyrus in the position where identity is both demanded and perceived. It is usually a negotiation between authenticity and social legibility. The passages picked up from the novel which is fluent in terms of Cyrus struggles with fluidity, separation, and performativity. Among the first instances of *Martyr!* by Kaveh Akbar is: "There's no difference to the outside world between a good guy and a bad guy behaving like a good guy. In fact, I think God loves that second guy a little more." (pg. 9). This scene highlights one of the main elements of the identity as concept and performance. The drag concept is often used that linked to performance, costume, and role-playing. This concept shows that Cyrus finds that a large part of social identity is instead living up to expectations, not living up to the truth within. According to Hall, Cyrus realizes that identity is not a condition but a perpetual state of becoming, shaped by the need for social recognition. This performance is heightened in the case of a diasporic subject. According to Hall, one is mediated through the eyes of others; a person is never unseen, assessed, or positioned.

The performativity of identity in a diasporic situation is also evident in the novel when Cyrus recalls an incident in which Gabe tells him that there is no difference in the eyes of the world between a good guy and a bad guy acting like a good guy. Cyrus takes this to mean good-person drag, which is a term that best captures the concept of identity as exterior performance as opposed to interior truth. This scene fits the point of view Hall raises in his claim that identity is not an essence. It is a product, something constantly staged and renegotiated. The concept of drag highlights the fact that Cyrus recognizes the people, in the context of the diaspora, externally living standards and acts in a specific way to be readable according to the dominant cultures. It is shown that the fluidity of selfhood

and the internal struggle of Cyrus between authenticity and social performance is shown in the line.

On the other side, identity is revealed as dependent and mediated by society. This performance is further complicated in the case of Cyrus, who wants to own Persian cultural identity while also displaying very American cultural behaviors, such as his passion for video games, his viewing of American media, and his digitized lifestyle. The tension created by this duality is one of the major ones in his quest to understand himself. This performative conception of identity also forms the way Shams conceives belonging, morality and sacrifice in his context of diaspora. This performativity is not abstract, but directly constitutes the way cultural meaning and moral value are imagined in the context of the diasporic identity.

The other important extract in this concept belongs to chapter one of the *Martyr!* by Kaveh Akbar is: "Cyrus pretended to be "of those who perish." He liked how the Quran put it that way, not "until you die" but "until you are of those who perish" (pg. 14). This citation displays the primal interest of Cyrus in the types of identity which are based on death, sacrifice, and meaning. The way it is framed suggests that identity is not something that one is but something one can perform to be. Akbar also highlights its performative aspect. The fact that Cyrus identifies with the dead in the context of the novel implies that he is not desiring death, but a sense of belonging in a group that is morally clear and potentially existentially meaningful, something that he is otherwise deprived of in his diasporic existence of the liminal. Such a performative way of defining sacrifice also intersects with the ambivalent role that Shams plays between the Iranian background and the American social life.

The tension of the balancing between two cultures is felt even more explicitly; "You're the most American kid I know. You taught Shane how to play Madden, how to torrent Marvel movies. You buy fucking vinyl records. We're having this conversation in Indiana, not Tehran". (p. 29). This harsh note expresses a fundamental identity dilemma of Cyrus. The social norms of Iranian identity and the truth of his upbringing in the United States of America. The fact that Gabe makes such a remark reveals that Cyrus is seen as romanticized in his fixation on the nature of Persiennes', and that the sense of self in his existence is becoming more defined through imagination and desire than through actual cultural experience. This tension is the one that theorists of diaspora term 'imagined nostalgia,' a longing not for previous experience but for an absence of identity. This conflict between the reality of life and the fantasy of cultural belonging is also echoed in the form of symbolic contrasts used in the novel. Such symbolic oppositions represent graphically the conflict between the imposed identity and lived culture.

Equally, the place of the critique of Gabe is furthered in the metaphor of pomegranates and iPhones as depicted in *Martyr!:*

I've read your poems, Cyrus. I get that you're Persian. Born there, raised here. I know that's a part of you. …….. But how many fucking pomegranates are in your poems? Versus how many iPhones? Do you see what I mean? (Akbar, 2024, p. 30)

This contrast shows the gap between Cyrus has portrayed himself as culturally Persian and the truth about his lifestyle, which is Americanized. The figurative foreshadowing of the difference between a pre-modern cultural fruit and a technological object is significant in terms of the division between cultural authenticity and the modern lived reality. This separation is a summary of the experience of many second-generation immigrants, whose identities are produced by inherited narratives and cultural memories rather than experience. Although this kind of identity is actively constructed, it is also subjected to the forces of dislocation, displacement, and mental stress.

3.2. Diaspora Subjectivity and Meaning-Making

This section discusses the causes that allow diasporic selfhood become unstable and fragmented, building on the idea that identity is constructed. In *Martyr!*, diasporic identity is characterized by displacement and contradiction and by constant negotiation between cultural inheritances and social realities. Extending the idea of double consciousness developed by W. E. B. Du Bois, the novel shows that Cyrus is a person who looks himself, in the prism of his own vision and society as well that racializes, exoticizes, and tends to fear him. These multiple self-images create a fragmented sense of self, in which belonging to one's self is not absolute and identity becomes a point of tension rather than stability. These experiences are prefigured by the chosen quotes in the novel, which expose how diaspora shapes Cyrus's perception of himself and his role in the world. Within this state of displacement, trauma becomes an important factor leading to identity fragmentation.

The crucial expression of such contradiction is observed when Cyrus presents himself. "I'm fifty-four." She studied his face. "And you are Iranian, yes? Yeah. Born in Tehran but came to America when I was a baby." (p. 100). Such a scanty self-portrait summarizes his in-betweenness his Iranian background compared to a purely American childhood. It is a textual diasporic situation: the subject is linked to a homeland through memory, narrative, and inheritance, rather than through lived experience. Consequently, Cyrus fills the diasporic space that Brah (1996) refers to, where cross-cultural identities coexist and compete. He was born in Iran, which makes him Iranian, but it is his whole life experience that makes him American, which creates the duality that places him between cultures but not within one.

This conflict of identity is again brought up as "Another death-obsessed Iranian man? So you grew up insulated from death?" (p. 101). The line shows the influence that stereotypes and cultural discourses have on the diasporic self. The Iranian identity is

instantly connected with political violence, martyrdom, and fatalism, associations which Cyrus internalizes and opposes. Even among the Iranian diaspora, the middle ground of identity is caricature, expectation and inherited trauma. The term death-obsessed strengthens the way Iranianism is constructed in terms of war, revolution and martyrdom, and others view Iran and how it defines itself. This condition is closely related to the idea of double consciousness in which identity is constructed through a continuous self-surveillance.

The idea of the double consciousness comes into the limelight:

W. E. B. Du Bois, the American sociologist, do you know his work?" "I'm not an expert. I just read a bunch of his stuff in school. He wrote about civil rights, racism. And I remember he had this……..…It's just hard not to think about, like, 'what would a person who hates me think about this (Akbar, 2024, p. 156)

This scene is a direct reflection of the thoughts of Du Bois which say marginalized subjects form an inner second sight, fully knowing how they are perceived by the dominant culture. The knowledge that Cyrus has towards the way the Americans will view him as foreign, threatening, or suspicious influences him in his self-perception and his behaviors. This identity is distorted through the perceived eyes of other people, forming a discontinuous experience in which he must watch his looks and what he embodies all the time. Consequently, Shams exists between several identities without fully belonging to any of them.

The subject is culminated in this argument: "But he was also awash in the world and its checkboxes..…Each camp thought he was too much the other thing". (Akbar, 2024, p. 244). It is one of the most direct statements of diasporic fragmentation, which introduces identity as a delay to in-between. These national, religious, cultural, and sexual binary categories are incapable of holding him in. Rather than fitting, he finds himself in a brutal cycle of living between various, and not necessarily compatible, identities. This is like the theories such as Hall (1990), who claim that diasporic identities are processes of transformation and difference, never in any state of arrival but always in becoming.

Collectively, these extracts indicate that diaspora in *Martyr!* is not just a background but one of the characteristic frames of identity. The duality of consciousness causes Cyrus to live in many selves, to balance between conflicting cultural demands, and to move through areas where he is both hyper-visible and invisible at the same time. He loses both his identity and completeness as a fragmented, fluid and constantly negotiated one, burdened by history, migration and cultural perception. This disjointed state also defines the interpretation of martyrdom and sacrifice in the diasporic imagination.

Martyrdom is the philosophical axis of this novel, defining the inner world of Cyrus, his artistic aspirations, and his interpretations of death, meaning, and identity. The concept of martyrdom has been used to examine people's perception over loss, the

influence of politics individual on grieving, and the need to create meaning that can profoundly blur boundaries between art, sacrifice, and self-destruction. The obsession with martyrdom is never a single case, as it overlaps with diaspora, identity, and inherited trauma, proving that the concept can be used as a cultural symbol and an individual obsession.

The first expression of the love of death and martyrdom in Cyrus appears in his reflections from the seventh chapter of the *Martyr!* by Kaveh Akbar. As he said;

Without meaning. The difference between 290 dead and 289. It's actuarial. Not even tragic, you know? So was she a martyr? There has to be a definition of the word that can accommodate her. That's what I'm after. (Akbar, 2024, p.75).

This text is a direct connection of the martyrdom obsession of Cyrus to the personal sorrows. The death of his mother was a tragic death for human. He tried to find out the meaning of Martyrdom and in flight 289 were dead and 1 was martyr because she was her mother. An American missile reduced 290 passengers to dust, plaguing him as a demonstration of death without a story, a reason, or a culturally and socially approved sense. Martyrdom thus becomes a rhetorical framework in which he tries to recreate or even redeem her narrative. Meaning-making is a mental need. The martyrdom presented in the story also indicates the political situation in Iran. The institutionalization and commodification of martyrdom are seen through Ali, who describes Tehran during and after the war. When the streets are named after martyrs, schools are opened to educate the children of martyrs, and a system rewards martyrdom with privilege. Cyrus describes:

"Great question," said Cyrus, shrugging his shoulders. "All I know is I'm fascinated. Like in Iran, there are these schools for the children of men killed in the war, who they call 'martyrs.' Those martyr school… ..... Like trust fund kids, except instead of trust funds they have dead parents. It's nuts. (Akbar, 2024, p.76)

Such a contrast brings out the ridiculous irony of the culture where martyrdom is a currency. It makes Cyrus's wish for something significant in the form of maternal martyrdom more difficult by leading him to realize that meaning is something manipulated, provided, or politicized. His own wish to be considered the martyr can be made more evident when Gabe enquires, "You want to be a martyr? Gabe asked, raising his eyebrows. I guess. Yeah!, actually. Something like that." (p. 31). The eyebrows up are a gesture of disbelief and worry, a sense of the fact that Cyrus is indulging himself in martyrdom which might easily degenerate into self-murder. His answer, "I guess. Yes," really, explains the extent of penetration of the fantasy. "*Martyrs!* Orkideh said. "My god, now you want to be a martyr? And you want to end this book about martyrs with yourself." (p.102). This antagonistic statement underscores a threatening failure between author and subject, narrative and self. In the case of Cyrus, martyrdom is not only a concept of art but

also a potential personal fate. It mirrors the novel's critical point that the trap of turning suffering into something meaningful.

His self-dilemma is enhanced with references to the mental pain:

A martyr wears simple footwear, , he thought to himself. *And you want to end this book about martyrs with yourself.* he thought to himself…Some nights he'd lie awake till morning, frightening sleep away with the desperation of his wanting it (Akbar, 2024, p.113)

The words reveal the heartbreak under his philosophical affectation. The wish to martyrdom is cut with unresolved grief, depression, and the lack of a chance to find a sense in the normal life.

Religious and existential language also brings forth the meaning-making. "*Eloi eloi lama sabachthani"* (p.204). This text sounds like the cry of rejection of Christ and connects the sufferings of Cyrus to an epic of the isolation of God everywhere. It represents a desire of perfection, his hurt should be seen, proven, and turned into something significant. This search is later heralded against in the novel by another character who states: "Art is where what we survive survives." (p.245). This sentence becomes a philosophical anchor - a hint that meaning does not come about due to death, but of the translation of experience into art. To Cyrus, who cannot come to terms with the loss of his mother and his identity, art is the only place where pain could be brought to something instead of just being absorbed.

Lastly, in Chapter 30 of the novel, the fact that Orkideh, the artist whom he held in high regard, is his mother destroys the whole intellectual route:

"I always…I always thought my mom was on that flight, you know? …The gulf between my mother making nothing from her death and this artist in Brooklyn making something. These two opposite Iranian women…except it was the same person." (Akbar, 2024, p. 295)

Martyrdom, meaning, art, maternal loss come to one impossible truth. The woman whom he mythologized into his life is the woman whom his art could make his death redeem. This discovery is not the answer to his meaning. It is the revelation of its pointlessness. The martyr whom he wanted was not a symbol, it was a human person.

The concept of martyrdom comes out in *Martyr!* as a highly multidimensional concept that transcends far beyond the political or religious implications of it. The novel describes martyrdom as a cultural and political philosophy influencing the general imagination of the Iranian diaspora, defining the way people perceive sacrifice, opposition, and value. Meanwhile, martyrdom serves as an internal desire, a figurative area where heroic figures such as Cyrus bargain their personal ambitions of importance, affiliation and existential meaning. Martyrdom as a philosophical question is also brought up in the story in the thoughts of Cyrus as he questions the limits between self-sacrifice and self-

erasure, moral action and performative suffering. Additionally, martyrdom is turned into an artistic mania, especially the way Cyrus tackles the music, identity, and self-expression and entails the concept of sacrifice into the practice of creativity.

Lastly, martyrdom as a psychological surviving strategy is made visible in the novel, a plot device where the characters cope with displacement, bereavement, and unresolved grief by turning it into meaning. Combined, these dimensions reveal that martyrdom in *Martyr!* is not the unitary theological or political notion, but a multifaceted and dynamic discourse, which influences the formation of the subjectivity of the individual and the formation of the identity of the diaspora. Under this state of displacement, both personal and historical trauma become the driving forces in shaping fragmented identity. These traumatic experiences are stored in memory, and loss becomes a permanent presence in the mind.

Identity in *Martyr!* is shaped by trauma and loss, which plays a primary role in the formation of consciousness and the meaning of selfhood in Cyrus. The story places personal loss in the wider context of historical and political violence, showing personal pain that cannot be separated. It is inherently connected to the intergenerational memory. In even the initial chapters of novel, the tragedy of the Iran air flight 655 that resulted in the death of the mother of Cyrus, Roya, creates a backdrop of inherited trauma and can fill his life. The loss is described as impersonal where the plane was shot by a U.S. Navy warship which immediately turned it and the 290 passengers were reduced to dust, a fact that brings out the abruptness and coldness of the loss.

The quantitative loss of life 290 against 289 further points to the arbitrariness of the violence against the individual and the community, and this is the tension which Cyrus is unconsciously striving to live with in his life. This feeling of being isolated is only worsened by the fact that his father died suddenly during his sophomore year in college leaving him alone in the world with no other family member except his uncle Arash. These stratified losses form a psycho-topography where grief, displacement, and memory meet and Cyrus must negotiate his identity that has been built out of absence, remembrance, and inherited narratives in part. This type of identity formation through memory is an expression of the intergenerational transmission of the trauma of diasporic. “Congratulations, your sons have been martyred.” (p.45). The political and social systems mediate grief and memory, which are made repetitively in the novel.

The martyrdom and deaths of soldiers are institutionalized in Iran whereby when soldiers inform old women, Congratulations, your sons are martyred or when they are in schools allowing children of martyrs to receive privileges that others do not get. These are instances of personal loss being nationalized, and in some way, it frequently deprives the personal loss of its personal significance, often it creates a communal identity. The fact that Cyrus is cognizant of this dynamic and negotiates in such a diasporic situation, is a

demonstration of intergenerational memory. It is both an asset and a liability. He acknowledges that inherited trauma; the loss of his mother, his father being stroke, the political violence that had molded his home country could not be separated with his current life but still influenced his emotional and existential lives.

The efforts of Cyrus to find meaning in loss relate to narrative, art, and memory. The memories of the stories of his family, like the experience of his uncle in military (p.224), or his thoughts about his mother running (p.295), prove the fact that the memory is a performative act. It is not an absolute store of facts but a negotiation, reconstruction, and interpretation space. In this meaning, trauma is not simply encountered but rather re-worked in narrative, art and cultural relations.

The emotional effects of inherited grief are also depicted in the *Martyr!* by Kaveh Akbar: "But he was also awash in the world and its checkboxes ……neither gay nor straight. Each camp thought he was too much the other thing: (p. 244). The passage demonstrates that grief is not an individual phenomenon, it is culturally located. It is represented by the fictional character of Cyrus and his wanderings, the Iranian diaspora continues the histories of war, exile, and political violence and thus trauma becomes a phenomenon that is both collective and long term. Meanwhile, the attempts of Cyrus to reconcile these inherited narratives with his American upbringing provide an inner tension that makes his artistic output as well as his philosophical investigations into martyrdom, selfhood and meaning. Through this, *Martyr!* does not depict trauma and loss as a singular experience but as an accretive one, which forms the identity of individuals and intergenerational awareness and the perpetual negotiation of belonging, memory, and self-expression of the diasporic subject. This continual negotiation is a direct cause of the formation of cultural and negotiated identities.

Diaspora and hybridity are the issue of focus in *Martyr!* although they bring into their focus the identity of Cyrus as a negotiable and fluid construct due to the transnational displacement and cultural encounter. The novel places the protagonist in the territory of a reconstructed transnationality, between the United States and Iran, the legacy and that of the modern world, diasporic individuality and communal history. Cyrus is a personification of the diasporic identity that is shaped by the cultural legacies of his motherland and at the same time he is shaped by the social, political, and cultural norms of the host country. His thoughts highlight the inseparable struggle of living across cultures, where membership is never unique but in a permanent state of negotiations, adaptations, and opposition.

The story underlines on several occasions the hybridity of the subjectivity of the diaspora. In the experience of diaspora, Cyrus notes that he is confused by the world and its multiple-choice markers making him neither Iranian, nor American, neither Muslim nor non-Muslim (p.244), and that identity markers are quite numerous and fluid. This

interethnic is not only a place of enrichment but also a place of conflict as he must deal with conflicting cultural demands, past experiences, and social biases. The hybridity mentioned in the novel is not only a personal experience but a reaction to structural and political pressures and this stands true to the argument by Hall that "diasporic identities are constructed in relation a product of the interaction between memory, historical consciousness and their interaction with power structures" (p.156). The negotiation of identity is all about translation of cultural schemes as we see in his reflection about the concept of being a marginal being the realization of being looked at in dominant social frames, and the imperative to shape an identity that can be recognized in those frames.

As both an emotional and physical experience, displacement highlights the unpredictability of the identity of the diaspora. Cyrus is taken out of his own birth land since early childhood, as he grows up in America with inherited family and cultural traumas. His consciousness of non-presence, of motherland and fatherland, of continuity of cultural memory, constructs a sense of identity in which identity is constantly shifting. The novel is expressed through observing and thinking, like the impressions of Cyrus on the New York City as the one that reminds him of Tehran, which is why he makes the comparison between the two: "Wander, watch, wander, watch...Poor people putting out blankets on the street...Right by them, in Central Park...rich people have their servants, their nannies, spread blankets over grass so they can eat fruit with their babies" (p.154). These observations reveal the role of displacement as sharpening his perception of social and cultural hierarchies, which drives the feeling that diasporic identity is negotiated concerning space and difference.

The historical consciousness and cultural memory influence the diasporic self in *Martyr!* as well. The awareness of the political violence that Cyrus possessed about Iran, war legacies, martyrdom stories inform his process of bargaining the selfhood in the diaspora. His situationally and contingency, his own loss and the history of the world, are interlaced with the past and present, his personal loss and the larger history, all of which is in the process of being re-made by memory, by the expression of art, by social experience. "I was Iranian, then I was Iranian in America. When I say "nations," I mean "armed marketplaces." (p.309). Hybridity in this meaning is not a given mixture of cultures but a negotiated movement, a negotiated articulation and re-articulation of the self, both over time, space, and space.

Moreover, the novel puts stresses on the fact that diasporic identity is performative and social mediated. The way of hybridity involving internalization and externalization in arts, cultural codes, and the social expectations is depicted in the ways in which Cyrus deals with the codes of the cultures, artistic practices and societal expectations. The seedlings of his thoughts in terms of the double-consciousness, martyrdom, and cultural expectation express a deep sense of the necessity to invoke the identity in the manner that

can be read by the various audiences. This performativity supports the theoretical understanding by Hall that diasporic subjects are never wholly independent in the formation of identity; on the contrary, identity is produced in the context of engagement with the pasts, cultural practices and social structures of power.

Finally, *Martyr!* describes diasporic identity to be multidimensional, fluid, and contested, which is determined by hybridity, displacement, memory, and negotiation. The way Cyrus as a diasporic subject man abides by or is aware of historical and political forces, the way he explores art, grief and reflection, portrays the ongoing work through which diasporic subjects create and recreate their subjectivities. The novel shows that diaspora identity is never a given inheritance but a negotiable, performative, shifting practice, one which requires continuous interaction with both the histories of individual and collective pasts, with the cultural and social structures of belonging and otherness.

The art in *Martyr!* is the essential tool that helps Cyrus to negotiate the notion of identity, memory and grief, turning personal and historical trauma into a form of expression. Artistic engagement in the novel serves as an instrument of coping and as a way of meaning-making enabling the main character to cope with the dissonance between the cultural narratives he inherited and the diasporic experience he undergoes. Even in the early chapters, there is a sense of obsession with how to render the personal pain into artistic expression, be it poetry or contemplation or eventually, in artistic terms, through images. This role is summed up by the fact that he concedes that art is a place in which the experience that we have gone through has survived (p.245); art in this case serves to preserve experience, remembrance of loss and a place where we can heal our fractured identity. This healing role of art becomes more profound in its association with individual revelation and memory.

The interrelation of art, memory and martyrdom is anticipated in the encounters of Cyrus with Orkideh especially in the installations she makes in New York. He observes: “I always… I always believed that my mom had been flying that plane... Then I had the idea of writing a book on it. Martyrdom. The distance between my mother who made nothing out of her demise and this painter in Brooklyn who made something. These two antagonistic Iranian ladies... except that it was one and the same person” (p.295-296). Family trauma is combined with the aesthetic work, demonstrating how an artistic work may restructure the meaningless loss. The process of turning personal loss into political it elaborates enables Cyrus to bargain with his own disjointed diasporic self-formation, and this is where past and present, Iran and America, death and survival, are able to live together.

Another concept in the novel that highlights artistic practice is that of performative selfhood, which relates to the concept of identity as postulated by Stuart Hall as the means of endless construction and negotiation. The commentary of the poet, music, and the visual

art by Cyrus illustrates that he is always interested in authenticity and representation because he struggles with the tension between right things or facts and what right for society. The artistic sensibility cannot be discussed out of the context of his diasporic consciousness. The process of artistic creation becomes the reaction to the dislocation, the trauma of the past and the inherited sorrow that is the mark of his existence. Art in this regard, serves as both a personal refuge and a social commentary, as a means of his negotiation between personal anguish and social acknowledgment.

Besides, art is a mediator between time, space, and culture. Through his experience with the installations of Orkideh and artistic heritage of the Iranian history, Cyrus places himself into a chronology of the cultural memory, and connects his modern life in America to the historical traumas of Iran. The experience of looking and engaging with these artistic forms enables him to recreate accounts of loss, resistance and identity. Thus, uniting the fragmented parts of his life into a consistent, but temporary that he knows about himself.

Finally, *Martyr!* depicts art as a transformative aesthetic space, in which there is a fusion of memory, identity, and trauma. In artistic form, Cyrus maneuvers the realities of diaspora, the obscurities of martyrdom and performs an agency of some sort in the presence of inherited and personal suffering. The novel insinuates that art is not just an aesthetic but also an existential one. It helps the main character to survive emotionally, assert and establish some sense in his life that is constituted by grief and displacement, as well as, cultural negotiation. In combination with art, even the language emerges as a strong medium with which identity is created and disputed.

In *Martyr!*, language serves as a form of personal expression and repository of cultural and political authority, identity and as the mediator of the experience of diasporic subjects. The novel repeats that there is no such thing as a neutral language, it is always historical, ideological and affective and shapes the way individuals view themselves and the way people view them. “It was invented, of course, language……one 2man is called Iranian and so they kill each other.” (Akbar, 2024, p. 124). Cyrus cogitates of identity as a social creation of the language, pointing out that language is invented. As this passage demonstrates, ethnic and national types are arbitrary, performative and demonstrate that linguistic categories can be used to divide people, rationalize violence, and impose cultural dominance. By predicting the constructability of these types of categories, the novel criticizes essentialist conceptions of identity and puts the emphasis on the way in which political power is naturalized within the very words which structure social life.

The other axis, which is closely related to language, is the representation. It is another way in which power is manifested within the novel. The cognizant consciousness of the way others see him as an Iranian in America as a possibly devout Muslim as a possibly death-obsessed young man is mediated via culturally loaded language as well as through symbolic categories. “Cyrus smiled. I honestly actually do worry about that, no

joke. Being a young Iranian man making a book about martyrdom, going around talking to people about becoming a martyr. It's not inert, you know?" (p. 156). Language in this sense is not just a means of communication, but acts as a mechanism on which social surveillance, stereotyping and internalized oppression of the self-act to establish diasporic subjectivity and fragmented selfhood.

The novel goes even further to reveal that storytelling is also a negotiation and representation process. Repeating the history of their families, personal memories and past traumas, Cyrus performs a kind of linguistic and narrative defiance, attempting to establish control over the narratives that constitute him. Art and literature, hence, are extensions of the power of language, means of redefining, re-interpreting, and reprocessing meaning. This can be seen where Cyrus considers the meeting point of art and survival. Language is reconfigured through artistic representation to become a medium of maintaining memory, expressing grief, and disrupting the dominant discourses of historical narration that would bring the diasporic experience to the margins or silence it.

In addition, there is the focus of the novel on the relational and contingent character of representation. The Iranian, Iraqi, Muslim or martyr labels are neither vacuum. They are created, argued and solidified in the historical, political and social discourse. The linguistic and symbolic structures of the novel point out to the treatment of power relations in everyday life, which determines perception and personal identity and social belonging. The thoughts by Cyrus on language, storytelling and representation finally depict the argument put forward by Hall. In his theory of identity, which is that identity is created by articulation-created, disrupted and re-created by the interactions of historical memory, cultural codes, and discursive forces.

This novel explores the issue of language and representation, *Martyr!* proves the idea that identity is never provided, it is constantly mediated by linguistic, cultural, and political situations. The diasporic subject is forced to manoeuvre through these mediated spaces between inherited histories, categories imposed, and self-made ones. In this context, it can be seen that language is a channel of constraint and resistance, as it shows the intertwined relationship between discourse, power and identity in the novel. All these narrative strategies show how the novel is adding to the diasporic discourse by making the identity fluid, relational, and constantly in the process.

The psychological conflict of Cyrus constitutes a major aspect in the identity construction in *Martyr!* and unveils the fusion of inner conflict, emotional susceptibility and the culture and diasporic negotiation pressure of the situation. The novel represents his inner world as full of deep sorrow, compulsive reflection and estrangement with inherited and acculturated cultural structures. At a tender age, Cyrus is highly sensitive emotionally, as demonstrated: "A martyr wears simple footwear, he thought to himself… Some nights he'd lie awake till morning, frightening sleep away with the

desperation of his wanting it "(Akbar, 2024, p.113). Such instances of weakness reveal that the combination of familial grief, inherent trauma and the consequences of diasporic displacement are among the factors leading to mental instability, which shape his self-image and socialization.

In the novel, the conflict of performance and authenticity is also addressed in the self of Cyrus. His meditations of cultural and social expectation show that he is aware of the gaze of other people whether it is in America or in the world of Iranian diasporic communities. This is seen when he regards himself as being awash in the world and its check boxes, neither an Iranian nor American, neither a Muslim nor not-Muslim, neither drunk nor effectively recovering as well, neither gay nor straight. Each of the camps believed he was too much the other of them (p.244). Such observations demonstrate that Cyrus feels like identity is a sequence of externally imposed categories, in which he is always bargaining how he is perceived and the perception he desires. His mental battle is consequently mixed with the performative nature of identity, which resembles what Hall has said and that the self is perpetually acted out and made up in reaction to social and cultural pressures.

The relationship with the memory and the trauma of the past adds to the internal conflict of Cyrus. The thoughts of inherited grief, including the death of his mother in an Iran Air Flight 655, the death of his father, and the political violence in general in Iran, give his psychological tension a base point in both personal and universal history. His past appears to him as a vault of unresolved trauma, which cannot be separated with his current experience. This is stressed in the lines such as: "If so much of my language is junk, both the language of my speech and the language of my body, it seems like a not insignificant portion of my living must be doomed to junk. There's nothing in my life that isn't bound to my language, or my DNA". (p.278). His artistic and intellectual activities are also connected with the psychological aspect. The development and reflection of art, literature, and cultural critique serve as a way of coping, as well as negotiation identity. Whether in his thoughts of martyrdom, diaspora, or in his thoughtful approach to aesthetics, the mind of Cyrus is seen as one conscious of making peace between his emotional agitations and his intellectual rationality. His interests in philosophy, poetry and visual arts enable him to turn anxiety and grief into reflective activities, bargaining meaning and selfhood even when faced by uncertainty and turbulence.

Finally, the psychological conflict of Cyrus helps to understand the novel reflects the greater concern of the diasporic self. There are no stable identity and no total autonomy of identity but the result of the ever-present interaction of sorrow, memory, interpersonal anticipation, and individual contemplation. The novel represents selfhood as a persistent bargain, and emotional vulnerability, cultural dislocation, and historical consciousness interplay here to create a fine, multidimensional, and profoundly human image of

psychological life in the forming conditions of the diasporic and postcolonial situation. However, the novel does not describe this fragmentation as irreversible, but suggests the mechanisms where identity is not fixed, but can be restructured.

So, this analysis has explored the formation and negotiation of diasporic identity in *Martyr!* based on the theoretical framework of cultural identity as postulated by Stuart Hall. It has demonstrated how identity is constructed through displacement, trauma, and double consciousness, which creates a fractured but developing self in Cyrus Shams. The analysis also shows how art, memory and representation make identity not fixed but fluid and thus the novel can play a significant role in building meaningful contribution to the current diasporic context.

4. Conclusion

This paper has explored the diasporic identity established in *Martyr!* (2024) by Kaveh Akbar based on the postcolonial theory, specifically the theory of the cultural identity and diaspora of Stuart Hall. As the analysis shows, the novel does not depict identity as a stable and essential category but as a process that is continuous, fragmented, and mediated through history through memory, trauma, and representation. *Martyr!* prefigures, through the character of Cyrus Shams, psychological and cultural conflicts in second-generation diasporic subjects who are both inherently historical and those who are actually present. The identity of Cyrus is comprised of discontinuity as opposed to genesis. His connection with Iran is mediated through assumed memory, political violence and symbolic inheritance, even as his American identity is still incomplete because of the continued alienation and radicalized misrecognition. This dual estrangement is indicative the Hall perspective of a diasporic identity to be a process of being and becoming which stresses negotiations over belonging. Instead of a cultural synthesis, Cyrus exists in a transient place where identity is unsteady and unstable.

The paper also points out the pivotal role of the memory and the trauma in the construction of diasporic subjectivity. In *Martyr!*, inherited trauma exists as a stabilizing factor that removes the narrative coherence and sense of definition. Addiction is symbolic as an unresolved grief and cultural dislocation response that supports the theory that diasporic suffering is not an individual one but one created historically and collectively. The novel re-create martyrdom as an unclear ethical and existential model instead of an established religious ideal. The involvement of martyrdom by Cyrus points to the wish to convert suffering to meaning, and despite the fact that the novel is not keen on making sacrifice redemptive. This uncertainty confronts the essentialist concept of cultural and religious identity focusing on reinterpretation and instability. Art and poetry become important locations of identity negotiation within which fragmented experiences can be expressed without giving them untrue unity. The novel is an important work of diasporic

becoming, showing the production of identity to be constantly accomplished through storytelling, struggle, and reimagining as opposed to being achieved through belonging.

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