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The Concept of Identity: A Reading of Postmodern Discourse

مفهوم الهوية: قراءة في خطاب ما بعد الحداثة

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Abstract:

In this article, we discuss a central issue with profound human dimensions: the concept of identity in postmodern discourse. In attempting to deconstruct it from various perspectives (historical, religious, cultural, etc.), This is in order to move beyond classical theories which no longer respond to the intellectual and cultural transformations of contemporary societies. Consequently, these theories have resulted in a conflict that has shattered human relations. We therefore present a deconstructive perspective on the issue of identity as a problem open to cultural debate that transcends all boundaries, with a view to establishing a new humanist doctrine free from historical animosities between peoples .

The concept of identity requires revision in order to build a new world composed of the genuine elements that constitute true identity; one that will build a completely different world, based on a humanistic and universal vision that achieves lasting human peace and heals the rifts in civilisation and the human diaspora .

In this presentation, we shall attempt to discuss the new concept of identity in postmodern discourse, and the

fundamental issues that shape it, drawing on our own cultural experience and the reality of Arab life today.

Keywords: **(Identity, the clash of civilisations, modernity, globalisation, human tolerance)**

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1.INTRODUCTION

The issue of identity is one that has long been raised and debated by thinkers and writers, and has been the subject of extensive study and research, owing to its close connection to humanity and its destiny. Consequently, there have been numerous perspectives on the matter, based on different visions and approaches, which have given rise to intellectual concepts that have had a significant impact on human culture and historical destiny. In light of this, our approach has focused primarily on its historical dimensions within diverse cultural fields, as the question of identity falls within the broader question of identities, and has taken the form of an open-ended project, subject to review and reconsideration whenever new circumstances arise and profound transformations occur that affect the fundamental structures of a society or a nation. This means that Amin Maalouf's intellectual and cultural premises took their earliest roots in a question phrased in the plural, for identity is plural, and the conflict between them is open to all times and places; that is, the history of identities that have historically overlapped and intertwined, yet its central question revolves around: what is the identity of humankind in this new world? And what future does it hold in the light of the symbolic transcendence of the boundaries of thought and culture?

2. Self-identity / Classical concept:

Identity makes an individual feel a strong sense of belonging to a community or clan, or to a group of people who share the same identities or sexual orientations. The elements of classical identity are largely determined by nature and nurture; consequently, it is a fixed, closed system. However, this structure does not allow for fragmentation or division, In light of this, identity, as he sees it, 'cannot be fragmented, divided equally into thirds, or categorised into specific, mutually exclusive boxes…[1] rather, it is a single identity composed of elements fashioned according to a unique blend that is never identical from one person to another' He thus breaks down the components and elements of identity, thereby distinguishing between identity and the elements that constitute it; for if those elements were to be fragmented and identity were to be built upon just one of them—that is, a part of the whole—this would inevitably lead to its historical collapse, and that identity would become lethal and destructive.

The author's personal experience marked a moment of emotional realisation regarding the concept of identity, encapsulated in his question: 'Am I French or Lebanese?', to which he replies: 'Both… What defines my being is not that of another person; it is that I stand at a crossroads between two countries, two or three languages, and a set of cultural traditions, and this is precisely what defines my identity… I was born in Lebanon, Arabic is my mother tongue, and I discovered Dumas, Dickens and Gulliver's Travels through translations into Arabic… Yet, on the other hand, I live on French soil, drink its water, and write my novels in its language; it will never be a foreign land to me." There is an implicit acknowledgement on Maalouf's part of his diverse affiliations; they constitute the

whole that has shaped his identity, an indivisible whole from which no part or component can be separated.

The concept of classical identities implies that there is a primary sense of belonging that takes precedence over all other affiliations, whatever the circumstances[2]. For some, the legitimate identity is religion; for others, it is social class; and for others still, it may be language, geography or race. For this reason, The author argues that this logic has caused various conflicts across the world, as no sense of belonging is superior by logic: 'Where people feel their faith is under threat, religious affiliation comes to define their entire identity; whereas if the threat is to their mother tongue or their ethnic group, they will fight fiercely against their fellow believers."[3] In this context, he cites examples of some of the conflicts that have unfolded along these lines, such as the fighting between the Catholic Hutu and Tutsi, who speak the same language, and the situation of homosexuals in Italy during the Fascist era, etc...

The author poses a profound and complex question regarding the elements and mechanisms of identity, in relation to the ongoing transformation of the concept of belonging, and places his first homeland, Lebanon, within an intricate equation where opposites converge and disparate elements come together; he views his identity from a subjective perspective, through a broad lens. He is a Lebanese who speaks Arabic and is Christian by faith, a fact which, following his emigration, has created a situation of highly specific complexity; consequently, various conflicting and divergent allegiances are distributed within him, whilst Lebanon, with its anthropological components, remains part of his identity, and if we were to break down this aspect and examine it closely, we would find that Lebanon is a country where the prominent religious sects have clashed – and continue

to do so – in order to preserve their position and share of power, in a futile and suicidal war amongst the people, which has driven the oppressed minorities, or those who refused to take part in the conflict, towards emigration. Through Maalouf's analysis of this reality, he developed the idea that identity is acquired; it is the product of a constant and ongoing search for the essence and nature of the human being. In doing so, he broadens the concept of identity, moving it beyond the narrowness of belonging into the realm of personal freedom[4]. In this context, we pose fundamental questions: Did his second sense of belonging instil in him a feeling of alienation, prompting him to emigrate to another country? Why was Lebanon unable to overcome that abhorrent, bloody conflict? Why was Europe his specific destination? We might think the answers to these questions are simple, but they are in fact highly complex, as they all point us towards a new cultural reality concerning a different conception of identity – in its functional aspect – designed to correct the outdated and obsolete mindsets that have dragged humanity into the quagmire of diaspora and the paths of hell.

The conflict between different or opposing identities, in which one pushes the other from the centre to the margins, sees the oppressor change whilst the victim remains the same: the defeated peoples. The Holy Qur'an, for instance, illustrates this violent struggle in the conflict between the Persians and the Romans, and the way their roles and fortunes alternated over time[5]. This conflict was not a struggle between right and wrong, but rather, in its account, it recounted historical events concerning the two greatest civilisations of that era, as a prelude and preparation for the birth of another civilisation whose sun would rise upon the earth, with the Persians and Romans

becoming part of it and a fundamental factor in its composition. This prompts us to ask numerous questions: how did Islam, in its earliest days, manage to achieve coexistence amongst different nations? And what precise mechanisms and laws did it introduce to regulate people's culture and their way of life? Are these fixed, or are they subject to change?

The concept that Maalouf condemns is "that which reduces identity to a single affiliation, confining human beings to a biased and intolerant stance—one that is extremist, domineering and, at times, even suicidal—which often turns them into murderers or followers of murderers, thereby distorting and perverting their view of the world". 5 Through his analysis of identity, he has developed a fundamental idea and a new proposition, which he believes is capable of rectifying the system of human relations: 'Identity is a fundamental need that occupies a prominent place in guiding the lives of the majority of human beings; for human beings are by no means solitary wolves but social creatures; however, affiliations are not linked solely or primarily to physical characteristics such as skin colour, facial features and body shape, but are more likely to be spread through shared cultural practices, Consequently, the upheavals affecting the world of everyday life—that is, a critical stance towards the meaning of long-standing customs—undermine people's identities."

2. Cosmic Identity / Globalisation:

Western democracy has sought to establish a society that respects freedoms, driven by a desire to move beyond the calamities of the twentieth century—tyranny, oppression and the stifling of freedom and human dignity[6]. Drawing on lessons from historical experiences, it has presented a new and unique

model that has achieved a degree of cohesion and harmony amongst humankind, In discussing religious affiliation as a fundamental and central issue in understanding this qualitative shift in thought and culture, Maalouf deconstructs the notion that 'there is one religion – Christianity – which has always been poised to convey modernity, freedom, tolerance and democracy, as opposed to another religion —Islam—which has been doomed from the outset to tyranny and obscurantism'[7] He concluded that this notion is fallacious and dangerous, as it closes off all horizons for a large section of humanity. He presented a historical analysis of Islam during certain periods, finding that from its very beginnings it was characterised by a remarkable capacity for coexistence with other religions, just as "Islam established a protocol of tolerance at a time when Christian societies would not tolerate anything, and for many centuries, this protocol represented the most advanced form of coexistence on the entire earth"[8]. Christianity, on the other hand, has historically been incapable of coexisting with others. Following this comparison, Maalouf poses an important question: Why has the Christian West today succeeded in coexisting with others and in creating societies that respect freedom of expression, whilst the Islamic world—which has long practised tolerance—now appears to be a stronghold of religious extremism? And why has development been so positive in the West and so disappointing in the Islamic world?

The religious framework lends identity a broader character than any other form of affiliation; and, from a geographical perspective, we find that Islam and Christianity constitute the two most prominent and intertwined groups, whilst the remaining religions are distributed as limited minorities, In his discussion of the concept of identity within its religious

framework, Maalouf highlights certain historical facts which he has deduced from his readings; he found that torture, persecution and slaughter have frequently been perpetrated in the name of religion[8], The ecclesiastical authorities committed the most heinous and brutal crimes, condoned slavery, the enslavement of women and the most extreme forms of tyranny; the Inquisition stands as the greatest testament to this. As for Islam, it too has witnessed criminal extremist movements that have committed atrocious crimes and bloody massacres in the name of religion, such as the Taliban, and there are many examples of both. It has also been observed that the most heinous crimes of the twentieth century were not the sole product of religious extremism; rather, other forms of extremism were entirely opposed to religion, such as Stalinism, Nazism and certain other forms of nationalism.

The author's personal experience, in all its facets, presented a vivid picture whose spirit and thought grew and flourished in the context of a real being who embodied his reality—the events he lived through before and after his emigration—and a non-existent being—in terms of time—represented by the historical experiences he read about in their historical context; from these, he gathered what was useful to him, and cast the remainder outside the realm of history, before emigrating to his new destination. His emigration thus took place on two levels: a realistic level, involving the move from a land that was not his own—with all its historical, ideological, cultural and linguistic differences—and a forward-looking, open-minded level that springs from the self, propelling it towards the vast, liberated horizon of the universe; for 'awareness of emigration' means liberation from the bonds of any authority; it is an inner, subjective transformation. A person does not attempt to

understand themselves until they find that they must recreate themselves anew, or effect a radical change within themselves and transcend their historical condition, and in this transcendence seek out the vanguard of the moral and ideological conceptions that draw them towards the future; for he cannot give meaning to his existence through the earth but only through migration towards humanity'[9], And since humanity is more all-encompassing than religion, his stance towards the latter was that it should be harnessed to build a coherent humanity in which all beliefs and differences amongst human beings are fused, so that humankind may occupy a noble position above all other considerations, thereby realising unity and stability, free from any sense of inferiority or contempt "For every religion shares distinctive elements to the extent that it creates a special bond uniting it with others, despite some inevitable internal tensions and disappointments, in order to forge alliances and achieve genuine stability within a strong relational bond; there is no domination of one religion over another, for these are religions centred on humankind and whose source is God."

The author was deeply immersed in the wave of modernity and the radical changes it brought about in its early stages; he believed in it both as a concept and in practice, and saw in it a genuine catalyst for oppressed and subjugated peoples to free themselves from their stagnant and rigid world, and to move towards new horizons that were more open and liberated. Given the rapid dynamism that characterised that era in the field of scientific and technological development—which created means of communication between individuals, societies and peoples—these became, in turn, accessible to all with a high degree of equality. This facilitates dialogue and communication, which the

author regards as the fundamental and reliable guarantee for breaking down the barriers between advanced civilisations (Europe, America) and other civilisations; for this reason, he embraced the project of modernity and defended it with reason and evidence, as he believes that 'those who reject modernity live in a state of alienation'[10]. Proceeding from this point, The author set about laying the foundation stone for the construction of the 'global village', and began to gather everything that might elevate it to the highest degrees of perfection and the noblest ranks; He found in the setbacks of the past and the disappointments of history the necessary material to correct history's missteps and humanity's failures; so he gathered the bones from its ruins, rebuilt it, and strengthened its structure. In the present, he found new intellectual and cultural elements, whose capital is science and whose foundations are.

3. The Philosophy of Translation

Building on what has been mentioned above, it can be said that the field of translation, since its inception, has consistently sought to convey science, knowledge and cultures; it has contributed, and continues to contribute, to the building of civilisations, as the Russian poet Pushkin said: 'Translators are like horses that carry civilisations'[11]; they are also a bridge for communication and cultural exchange, 'for translators are the builders of bridges that peoples have come to cross in order to visit one another', according to the French poet Victor Hugo. Returning to Arabic literature and its history, we see that literary translation played a major role in the revival of literature and the arts from the very beginnings of the Renaissance; In this context, the French orientalist André Michel states: 'Had it not been for the translators of the nineteenth century[12], modern Arabic literature would never have seen the light of day'.

Thanks to translation, Arabic literature came to embrace two literary genres: the play and the novel. During the Renaissance, a generation of Arab writers—such as Butros al-Bustani, Muhammad al-Ghamrawi and Taha Hussein, who represented the first phase of the movement's history. At that time, translation was a mechanical, automatic process content to convey knowledge unconsciously, as a result of the Arab world's shock at the Western Renaissance, which left a profound sense of astonishment in the hearts of Arab writers, between a desire to transfer every aspect of the new civilisation—literature, the arts, science, philosophy and thought—and a desire for both imitation and innovation to keep pace with the West, which was advancing in all fields. As for the second generation, it represented the phase of conscious translation; its pioneers absorbed the spirit of the age, the culture of the 'other' and the new realities brought about by globalisation[13], The spirit of the age is evident in their creative works rendered into Arabic; they succeeded in transforming translation from a mere process of transfer into an interactive cultural act that elevated the dialogue to its highest expression, driven by a desire to contribute to the building of the global village and to mend its fractures from.

Conclusion:

It is clear from the foregoing that Amin Maalouf's concept of identity dissolves illusory and fictitious boundaries by stripping false affiliations of their content and depriving them of their essence and existence, in order to establish for them a new existence that eliminates all distinctions and differences between human beings, uniting them under the concept of humanity in its highest manifestation; Therefore, the capital of civilised societies is the human being who is conscious of their role and destiny in life, for they are the secret of existence and its

fundamental pillar; and from this, identity, in its universal sense, becomes non-identity, because the human dimension is stronger and deeper than any affiliation and is the common denominator amongst all human beings, Amin Maalouf's project, within the framework of identity, is one that combines historical awareness and human history, enriched by the spirit of globalisation, to build a global village filled with dialogue, coexistence and peace.

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