

## The Interplay of Identities in Jamal abu Hamdan's Novella *The Blood Line*

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### Abstract:

This paper argues the construction of identity in Jamal abu Hamdan's novella *The Blood Line* (خيط الدم). It is argued that identity is the product of many things other than the typical blood line. The novella, we contend, dramatizes the interplay of different identities within individuals and the multi-dimensional nature of identity. Although religion is a primal aspect of identity constitution, history, language, and past experiences are other factors that aggravate or mitigate the religious makeup of identity. Moreover, identity is often influenced by factors like gender and place. Hence, identity is the product of its sociocultural and sociopolitical environment, which should explain our claim that it is a construct rather than fixed or essentialized. Alternatively, this novella shows that one's sense of self, i.e. one's individual identity, is different from group identification, i.e. the collective identity. They often clash, with the latter proving to be stronger than the former—as the novella's end shows and since social demands are stronger than individual wishes. Past heritage, i.e. a common past, rather than acting as a marker of difference among people, can unify polar identities and bring the best out of them in a loving relationship, even if this relationship is doomed to fail due to sociocultural norms. The novella, thus, explores the contested nature of identity and its gamut from the personal—selfhood—to the collective—selflessness.

**Keywords:** Contemporary Arabic Novel; Identity; Jamal abu Hamdan; Jordanian Literature; World Literature

## Introduction

Jamal abu Hamdan's novella *The Blood Line: A Novel* (Khayt Aldam: Riwayāhis an example of the contemporary Arabic novel in Jordan. It was written years before its publication in 2005, namely during the civil war in Bosnia and after the civil war in Lebanon. The idea was inspired by a little journalistic column about the refugees escaping both wars to Europe. It was written, the initial brief description of the novella goes, for cinematic adaption (p.5). Hence, we have a short yet precise novella (or a long short story) that acts through symbolic suggestion rather than excessive details despite the illusive claim in the title that it is a novel. In fact, the writer may have intentionally retained the word novel (riwayāh) in the title to hint at the fact that this short novel states much more than is given in its language. Its theme is universal, and the historical events it tackles are weighty. It remains our task to generalize its message and fill in the narrative gaps left to us as readers of a postmodern work written for cinematic adaption and with montage and collage effects.

Our reading of this novella is a timely and relevant one because in today's globalized age, the notion of identity continues to receive tremendous attention from literary scholars, theorists of culture, and sociologists. Moreover, postcolonial critics find in questions of identity a rich hunting ground for theorizing human transactions and political issues. In theory, our approach falls under the rubrics of identity theory studies. Practically, our study is an example of a literary and cultural studies critique.

Despite the scarcity of full-length studies of the novella, its reception in the Arab world (and in Jordan in particular) highlighted its romantic message of love and its protest message against religious bigotry, sedition, the revenge mentality, and patriarchal logic (خيط الدم " لجمال ابو ) (جريدة الغد / " حمدان : نص رومانسي يؤسس لمرحلة عشق جديدة (Al Ghad Newspaper / The Blood Line by Jamal abu Hamadan: A Romantic Text Recording a New Phase in Love). In addition, the critic Hikmat al Nawaiseh noted the novella status of abu Hamdan's work and presented this as a feature of modern novelistic production in Jordan and the Arab world in the last decade ( صحيفة ) (Dr. Hikmat al Nawaiseh, *Al Ahd Cultural Magazine/ Essays: The Preoccupations of Jordanian Novel*). And because the novella is originally written in Arabic, readings or critiques of it in English are also scarce. Therefore, we take our study of the dynamics of identity in abu Hamdan's novella to be significant, original, and well-timed. And since we are presenting an Arabic novel in English, hoping for an international readership, our study is also affiliated with world/comparative literature. Whenever necessary, we give the original Arabic text and our translated version of this text. When we do not directly translate the Arabic text, we give adequate paraphrasing.

This paper argues the construction of identity in abu Hamdan's novella *The Blood Line* (خيط الدم). We argue that identity is the product of many things other than the typical blood line of the novella's title. Although religion is a primal aspect of identity constitution, history, language, and past experiences are other important factors. We contend that identity is the product of the interplay of different factors. Alternatively, this novella shows that past heritage, i.e. a common past, rather than acting as a marker of difference among people, can unify polar identities and bring the best out of them in a loving relationship, even if this relationship is doomed to fail due to societal norms. The novella, thus, explores the possibilities of hope within

hard times and the ultimate victimization of love—a personal and subjective experience par excellence—at the hands of religious dogmatism.

By identity construction, we mean that identity is the product of one's speech and actions; that it changes over time; that it is constituted by multiple factors. However, we should also distinguish between one's sense of self (what we call "individual identity" or one's distinct personality) and the obligations of group membership and ethnic identity affiliations. The novella, we will see, dramatizes the split between the two with Mawla Hasatovitch and Hala al Safi, despite their mutual love, ultimately unable to transcend the communal/collective side of identity. Against the constructionist theory of identity, we have essentialist notions of identity as fixed. Constructionist views see identity as the site of negotiation, social interaction, and linguistic performance. In this sense, identity is fluid rather than fixed. The essentialist view draws on the dichotomies of gender and binary logic. In this regard, the collective view of identity can fall victim to essentialist views and images because it treats identity in terms of "us" versus "them" and is resistant to accommodation. In the process, individual identity can get lost behind group membership. In the words of Karen Cerulo (1997), "Commitment to ethnic identity stems from a culturally based need for community—community lacking individual cost" (p. 389). We will see that in the course of the novella the collective sense of identity triumphs over personal preferences and wishes. Whenever identity is at issue, the individual is pitted against the community.

The idea of the novella revolves around a simple love relationship between a man and a woman of different religions and from politically turbulent regions. This reveals how identity is a mix of societal and historical factors and how group belonging triumphs over personal relations. It is no wonder, then, that Mawla and Hala, despite their mutual love, decide to separate from each other and return to their countries, as the novella's end seems to suggest. While at one level the novella deconstructs the notion of a pure, simple identity, it—on the other hand—negotiates the limitations inherent in the attempted hybridization of identities via its exposition of the heavy price individuals pay due to blood identity. To illustrate our thesis about the interplay of identities within and among individuals, we divide this article into three sections. Each should shed some light on a distinct aspect of identity. However, the sections by no means indicate that identity is free from the overlap of multiple factors. And since we are not sociologists, we are not claiming that we cover all potential factors that impact people's conception of identity. Before we start our analysis, we deem a review of identity theory helpful to the discussion to follow.

If identity is a construct, it should be noted that it is so via a process of negotiation and representation between the self and other. In fact, in identity theory—and with the aid of recent psychological and sociological research—we are past the thought that identities are fixed and unchanging (Ugbem, 2013, p. 2). And with the work of cultural and postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha, critics began to see identity in terms of hybridity, cultural ambivalence/diversity, and the intersection of place, time, and subject position. According to Bhabha (1984), in "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse," the colonial subject occupies the ambivalent world of the "not quite/not white" (p. 132). Like many identity theorists, Bhabha assumes an anti-essentialist stance. As Caroline Howarth (2007) argues, "Identities are continually developed and contested through others' representations of our claimed social groups" (p. 20). According to the same scholar, identity acquires meaning in "the dialectic between how we see ourselves and how others see us" (p. 20). Identity should be seen from the

position of the other as it is more complex than people looking the same, behaving the same, speaking the same language, or having a common past. Moreover, self-identity gains meaning through our difference from others. Difference, not sameness, is at issue here. Sameness entails assimilation and loss of the individual self and characteristics. Difference entails deviation from group expectations and traditional roles in search of personal fulfillment. The love relationship across religion between Hala and Mawla is a case in point.

Ugbem (2013) defines identity as "a critical aspect of social interaction as it is the basis for individual and group definition in relation to others in the society" (p.2). Ugbem adds that identity "inherently connotes a principle of 'we' and 'them' in group interaction and defines boundaries between groups in the society" (p. 2). For Maya Miskovic (2007), identity can be understood as "'oneness,' 'one true self,' which people with a shared history and ancestry have in common, and yet, it is an entity which is constantly recreated, as people make sense of themselves and the world around them" (p. 515). For Jan Stets and Peter Burke (2000), identity as a sense of self functions in terms of categorization, i.e. belonging to social groups and occupying certain roles within these groups (p. 225). Hence, identity theorists distinguish between group membership and the content side of identity related to beliefs, desires, obligations, cultural attributes (i.e. language, religion, and customs), and even physical features of group members (Fearon and Laitin, 2000, p. 849). To sum up, identity theorists underscore group membership, which relatively weakens individuals' self-definition and individuals' sense of themselves as unique personalities, which, in turn, relatively mitigates group belonging. This contested, twofold nature of identity (self-identity and collective identity) is crucial to our discussion of the novella.

## Discussion

### *I. Identity and Place*

The action of the novella revolves around two characters: Mawla Hasatovitch and Hala al Safi. They move to live in Paris by way of escaping from wars. They are confused and disoriented because of the new life they start in Paris. It is as if this city has snatched them and engulfed their identities (p. 1). Both Mawla and Hala write about Paris in their diaries in terms of loss and confusion (p. 1). This immediately shows the relationship between place and one's identity and the correspondence between the characters' identities despite their apparent gender difference. Since identity can be defined in terms of relatedness to a place or a geographical locale, a new place can effect a sense of identity loss or dislocation. On the other hand, place can challenge one's sense of identity and allow for a new realization regarding the nature of identity.

The diaries Hala and Mawla write express their feelings of estrangement from Paris and the residue of former places in their identities. They are strangers in a city that is also strange to each of them (p. 2). The self and the other are in a state of loss and scattering. They look for each other but are destined to be distanced from each other. Each of them brings their own wounds to Paris (p. 2). For Mawla's mother, for instance, estrangement from her country is tantamount to death, and death in Paris is even harder (p. 20). Because of their alienation, the self apparently seeks the other, its other half, in a loving relationship and in a new place away from the birthplace of each identity.

Hala and Mawla develop a relationship in this strange city. It is as if the place is complicit in the hybridization of their love relationship. During a visit to the Louvre Museum, they notice that one picture they see uses only black and white colors; in reaction, they discuss its color symbolism. Mawla argues that white is all colors and black is the absence of colors (p. 15). Hala argues that gray is the real color while other colors are fake and meaningless (p. 15). The picture they discuss seems to be inspired by war. It is actually war that brings them together, the very war that is caused by difference and inability to tolerate this difference in ideology, behavior, skin color, style of living ... etc. The relationship between black and white is one of opposition and negation. Gray is the neutral hue and the middle ground between extremes. Similarly, Paris for Mawla and Hala is the intermediate position between different places and polar identities.

Hala expresses surprise that a small bullet can unite times and places and different people (p. 17). A bullet that misses someone and allows him/her to live also allows a life story to develop and proceed. It unites two people by missing them and sparing their lives (p.17, p.18). In a sense, place—Paris in this case as the new environment for their meeting and interaction—heightens the characters' sense of identity. Place brings together polar identities and simultaneously aggravates one's sense of one's original identity.

Each of the lovers was a stranger in their home. Their attachment to their original cities is part of their attachment to an inseparable history. For example, Mawla's mother feels that she is one with Sarajevo and cannot be separated from this city (p. 49). So, identity is rooted in place and cannot be simply compromised through distance from one's birthplace. Place, i.e. Paris, cannot make its inhabitants forget their past, although they try to do so (p. 55). Hala is a Christian in a dominantly Muslim country, and Mawla is a Muslim in a dominantly Christian continent (p. 45). In this novella, place is strongly linked to religion. In turn, both are essential for identity formation.

Mawla and Hala seek a Polonia forest to cleanse themselves from the dirt of their past (p. 57). This place is a hybrid, luminal space, a third-space in the words of Bhabha that negates polar/binary logic and allows for the negotiation of meaning. As Bhabha (1990) says, "hybridity to me is the 'third-space' which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" ("The Third Space" p. 211). The grove they visit is symbolically a neutral land where identity is free from spatial affiliations and thus a history of injustices. In other words, the authority of identity factors like religion and family is suspended in such a neutral place. The novella then moves toward an existential conclusion of fated death. Since their pure, simple, and innocent interaction as human beings is impossible away from the historical and cultural heritage of each of them, a tragic end to this relationship does not come as a surprise. Their thoughts in the forest about Adam and Eve as one body and soul get shattered (p. 61). In other words, their union is fated to end, and their (religious) identities remain different. Personal desire is not compatible with the collective identity we share by virtue of a common religion.

Paris fails to unite the lovers, and they remain estranged from others and themselves. Ironically, Paris is not the city of light, love, and freedom as we would think. Instead, Hala and Mawla unwillingly carry their blood identities and their bloody past to Paris (p. 45). Besides,

Paris is a harsh city for Mawla's mother and for him as well when he loses both his mother and his love Hala. He walks the streets of Paris aimless and lost (p. 91). In a changed place, characters do not lose their sense of the religious constitution of their disparate identities. Paris makes this novella not simply a romantic story in a sense but also a romantic tragedy of fated love. Although Hala and Mawla love each other and are ready to sacrifice or abnegate important sides of their identities—i.e. religious and cultural differences which are part of one's collective identity—to make their relationship prosper, the collective triumphs over personal wishes.

## *II. Identity and Gender*

In addition to place, there is a gender aspect to identity the novella makes clear. And identity is the effect of the interplay of such factors. No single factor can negate the others. Hala's family objects to her relationship with a Muslim man. Their reasoning goes that man is different from woman, and consequently allowed different things. Strict gender differences between man and woman allow for essentialized identities rather than constructed ones. Hala's brother objects to her relationship with a Muslim man and tells her that she as a woman is different from him (p. 18), giving himself the right to make friends with women. Gender differences seem to allow for differences in behavior. But man and woman still seem as inadequate versions of humanity and seek to complement each other in mutual relationships of love.

Gender differences with relation to identity construction are more manifest in another scene. For Hala and Mawla, art is an escape from a difficult history. When they are in a Paris art exhibition, she claims that she looks at paintings of Matisse with a different eye from his (أسمع, أنا) ("أعرف أنني أتطلع الى اللوحات بعين مغايرة لعينك") (p. 27). And he claims that it is the same eye but with different emotions (p. 28). She asserts that she as a female is emotional and he as male is rational (p. 28). This dialectical play on identity between "I" and "eye" is significant. If they see things with different "eyes", this also means that the "I" associated with each eye is also different. Mawla stands for the masculine principle of Adam and Hala stands for the feminine principle of Eve. They separate from each other as Adam and Eve seeking a paradise not present on an earth that lost its innocence (p. 98). Gender differences remain unavoidable and insurmountable despite the characters' personal desire for oneness. Hence, gender is an essential aspect of identity (de)construction. Gender as fixed categories essentializes identity while gender as only one of multiple factors that constitute identity aids in its construction. And place (whether nature as with the Polonia forest Hala and Mawla resort to or the art exhibition) works with gender to set restrictions to the erasure of religious and social differences the characters seek. Or rather, attachment to a place and the history associated with that place make one unable to transcend their impact on one's identity.

## *III. Identity and Language*

The estranged relationship of Mawla and Hala also gets complicated by the linguistic barriers separating them (p. 9). She is Eastern from Lebanon, and he is European from Sarajevo in Bosnia. She is an Arab, and he is European. His Arabic is poor, and she does not speak his native language. Hence, the language they use to communicate is French. She speaks fluent Arabic and French, and he speaks poor French and poor Arabic but good Slavic (p. 10). In the absence of a common language, they cannot find true communication or a sincere exchange of feelings. In other words, they cannot get to know each other. It is through the medium of French that they can hope for a prosperous relationship. The notion of language adds one more dimension to identity construction and the interplay of different identities within and among

people. Identity is the product of multiple factors like, among others, language, religion, place, and gender. As such, identity is a construct and dominantly collective. For instance, we tend to identify with those who speak a similar language or practice the same religion and social customs. On the other hand, a foreign tongue is immediately recognized as a marker of difference. Just like skin color, language serves to heighten one's sense of belonging to or exclusion from certain social categories. Linguistic variation is also a sign of cultural difference. Since language is the medium of culture, each language represents a cultural outlook to life and aids in the formation of a sense of identity. Contrary to its apparent meaning, identity is founded on the negation of the distinct and unique aspects of our emotional and whimsical being.

#### ***IV. Identity and Religion***

Although identity is negotiated by factors like place, gender, and language, it is religion that emerges as the most significant aspect of identity construction in this novella. Significantly, Mawla is a Muslim and Hala a Christian. Such a religious difference, we will see, triggers the tragic chain of events in this novella. Just as with gender, religion can be used to essentialize identities by bringing out inherent/unchanging differences among people. Variantly, religion works with a constellation of different factors to make identity a dynamic, evolving entity.

The clash of identities happens on religious grounds. Actually, the blood line in the novella's title specifically refers to religious identity and the violence difference in religion can cause. The man Hala knows, it turns out and surprisingly for her family, is a Muslim from Bosnia (pp. 35-6). He is not a Serb or Croatian. When she says he is from Bosnia, her brother immediately asks if he is a Christian or a Muslim (p. 35). Actually, when she says that he is not Christian, her brother immediately answers "then a Muslim!" (p. 35), thus underscoring a binary relationship of opposition between the two religions. According to her brother, her relationship with this Muslim man is a deformed relationship and should be cut (p. 37). He asks her to end such a relationship because as a Christian she should not fall for a Muslim (p. 38). Her brother differs with her based on his awareness and realization that a Muslim guy should not love her. His judgment is based on his knowledge of the situation in Lebanon when Hala was young (p. 38). Her mother died in the war. The story goes that she was killed by Muslims. Religion is immediately made a factor in identity differences and makeup. Muslims supposedly killed her mother, which triggered Hala's family animosity against Muslims.

On the other hand, Christian Serbs killed Mawla's sister and raped her (p. 41). Mawla tells his mother that those who killed and raped his sister did this because they were Serbs not necessarily because they were Christians (p. 41). He pleads:

"أمي.. الذين اغتصبوا أختي, ثم قتلوها, ما فعلوا ذلك لأنهم مسيحيون .. بل هم صربيون" (41).

Mawla blames ethnic identity and political affiliations not religion and insists that both religions—Islam and Christianity—are religions of love and tolerance (41-2). He tries to reason with his mother:

"أمي, المسيحية, دين محبة .. مثلما الاسلام دين تسامح, الصراع ليس بين الدينين, بين فئات تحركها أطماع سياسية" (42).

The killing of Hala's mother and Mawla's sister apparently took place on religious grounds and because of their religious affiliation. In each case, identity was reduced to religion. Difference in

identity was in both cases a justification for violence. When this collective aspect of identity is dominant, humanism is relegated to a secondary status and religion comes to the fore.

Religion is thrown into ideological clashes among people and made a justification for hatred or a label of difference in identity. The heritage Mawla and Hala carry to Paris makes their love relationship impossible. Political conflicts are given a religious color. So, Moula and Hala find it very difficult to convince their families about their serious relationship. A strange city unites them while religion separates them (p. 45). However, a bloody history behind them in Lebanon and Yugoslavia is another common thing between them. We are told that each of them brings to Paris the smell of blood; that they are tied to each other through the blood line; that Paris cannot cleanse them; and that it cannot untangle their blood association (p. 45). The narrative goes:

"كلاهما يحمل معه الى هذه المدينة راحة الدم. يوثقهما الى بعضهما خيط الدم فكيف لها أن تطهرهما منه و تفك و تأقهما"  
(45).

Mawla and Hala, as a result, agree that they are just victims of an ugly heritage, an ugly war with no religion but that of destruction and killing (p. 56). Hala contends that the finger that presses a gun's lever has no religion (p. 56). In a line of logic that echoes Mawla's intervention on behalf of Christianity, she says that those who killed her mother did not do this because they were Muslims:

"أمي لم يقتلها مسلمون. وأختك لم يغتصبها و يقتلها مسيحيون. كلناهما كانتا ضحية الحرب. الحرب "قتلت أمي. و قتلت أختك. الحرب لا دين لها. دينها القتل و الدمار.. وكل بشاعة تصادف أن كانت الرصاصة من هذا اللون أو ذلك. أما الزناد .. فتضغته أصابع وحشية لا دين لها." (56)

The novella, we have argued, sheds light on different aspects of identity: blood, language, religion, history/past, place, gender, relationship with the other or belonging to those we are connected to. On the other hand, affinity among sufferers is adequate grounds for relatedness and belonging, above all for mutual love. In other words, the novel continues to pit the collective nature of identity as group membership against the personal side of feelings and emotions. In this logic, a name can be a sign of group belonging and a marker of difference. Eager to know this Muslim man his daughter loves, Hala's father asks "Who is he?" (p. 66). Such a question is a direct interrogation of identity. She gives him the name asking if it means anything at all. He says that Mawla's name is significant to him as it indicates who he is (66). Within this logic, the name can indicate one's religious identity. The father says: "Of course his name means a lot to me; it indicates who he is" (p. 66).

"بالطبع يعني لي الشيء الكثير. اسمه يدل عليه." (66)

Therefore, Hala's father does not want her blood to be contaminated in such a relation (p. 66). As a humanist, Hala cares about the person not his religion (p. 66). Trying to convince her family, she says that they fled Lebanon because killing was taking place based on religious identity and they do not want to have the same apply in Paris (p. 66). The father says: "Your blood will not be contaminated with that of a Muslim" (p. 66) (66) "دمك لن يلوث قط بدم مسلم." His logic apparently defines identity in terms of blood purity, honor, and taint. In contrast, she retaliates: "We have not come here to choose friends based on identity. In Lebanon killing was carried out on the basis of identity. . And we fled that hell, not to pass it on" (p. 66).



"ما جننا الى هنا لأختار صديقاً على الهوية. في لبنان كان القتل يتم على الهوية. و نحن هربنا من ذلك الجحيم. لا لنقله معنا." (66)

She reasons that war is to blame for killing and destruction. It is the war that made religious identity negate our innocence and purity as human beings per se. Her anti-violence stance continues in this vein, advocating a return to pre-war harmony:

"الحرب هي التي قتلت أُمي. حرب بشعة قذرة. قتلت الجميع. دمرت الجميع مسلمين و مسيحيين. ونحن هنا لننسى كل ذلك. لنعود الى براءتنا الأولى و الى طهرنا و نظافتنا الأولى. التي عرفناها قبل تلك الحرب." (67)

Religion, instead of being a sign of love and tolerance, is treated as a marker of difference. Mawla's mother does not want to hear Hala's name or know its meaning just because she is Christian and because Christian Serbs raped and killed her own daughter (p. 70). For the mother, Hala becomes "the Christian" (p. 70), which indicates how religious identity consumes one's humanity and nulls names or titles. His mother asserts that Hala's guilt is established since she is a Christian. The mother says: "Her guilt is that she is Christian. Isn't that enough?" (p. 71).

"ذنبها , أنها مسيحية. ألا يكفي." (71)

Just like Hala, Mawla insists that it is the war to blame for hatred, but she insists that Christian Serbs killed and raped his sister (p. 71). However, the son insists that their love has nothing to do with being Muslim or Christian (p. 72). However, the mother takes Christianity to be an adequate guilt and evil for rejection (p. 71). The mother takes this relationship as an adequate reason to cut off her relationship with her son and return to Sarajevo saying: "A hellish life there is better than what you put me through" (p. 72).

"الجحيم هناك أرحم من الجحيم الذي ترميني فيه." (72)

Hala also thinks that certain values of existence are crumbling in her life because of her clash with her family and the hatred in their lives (p. 75). Both families follow the religious barrier and ignore the personal preference of the lovers. Again, the collective is privileged over the personal.

And because France is Christian, a Muslim man is expected to leave as the father reasons (p. 76). For the father, place and religion combine to make some people in and others out. For him, France is a Christian country and a Muslim should not be allowed in (p. 76). For him, Muslims are enemies and a source of contamination (pp. 77-78). If her blood gets contaminated in this relationship, he thinks, she would incur death and shame on the whole family (p. 78). Hala defiantly sees Mawla as her choice and justification for life. She refuses to allow malice take away the innocence of her being (p. 79). She says:

"قد فكرت بلأمر .. ولن أنهي علاقتي به. صارت علاقتي به معبرا علاقتي بالحياة كلها. انه اختياري. اختياري لهذا الوجود. لن أسمح لهذا العالم, لهذا الحقد في العالم أن يغتصب مني براءة الوجود." (79).

This ideological rift leads to the violent end of the novella. The brothers and the father plot her murder. The youngest one stabs her with a knife to cleanse the family from the supposed shame of an inter-religion relationship. At the hospital, she complains about hatred, bigotry, dogmatism (p. 93). The violence she is submitted to is intra-ethnic violence at the hands of her brother and family. But it is done in the name of religious identity. It is significant to note that

the debates about religion Hala and Mawla have with their families are almost identical in the sense that Hala and Mawla use a similar logic of tolerance and anti-violence. This in itself signifies unity at the personal level between them in terms of emotions and reasoning. However, as individuals they remain weak before the driving forces of religion and traditionalism.

Ultimately, Mawla and Hala both view themselves as victims of an ugly heritage of war (p. 56). War, they think, has no God and no religion. It knows nothing but killing and destruction (p. 56). He becomes a surrogate Adam and she a surrogate Eve (p. 61)—two principles, the self and its counterpart, two parts of the same entity, a soul and a body (p. 61). At the end of the novella, she still accuses war, hatred, and bigotry as the cause of her suffering, as the victimizer (p. 93). Separation wins over union. The individual is defeated, and the communal will wins. In this tragic love relationship, the family wins over the family member. The individual self makes a sacrifice (i.e. becomes selfless) in favor of the group.

### **Coda: Religion in a Global Context**

In searching for Hala, Mawla is looking for himself, for his lost self (p. 69). The novella shows how personal love and tolerance can momentarily, but not ultimately, transcend bigotry and provinciality. When in the hospital, Hala asserts that Mawla has to do with life and not death (p. 93). She refuses to press charges on her family or Mawla. Who is to blame, she asserts, is war, politics, hatred, and history (p. 93). Hala exonerates religion from negative projections coming from her family. While love is defeated, the romantic relationship of Mawla and Hala is still touching and meaningful. It delivers a clear message against religious prejudice and intolerance.

Mawla takes his dead mother back to Sarajevo, and Hala will go to Beirut after the hospital (p. 96). The blood line in the form of religious identity separates them, and place fails to unite them or dry this bloody past (p. 96). Real integration between them is on paper through their diaries. The parallel diaries they write and in which they express their pain, i.e. their individual identities, show that paper and ink, rather than blood, can unify disparate identities. Each returns home as they have no option (p. 97). As an Adam and Eve, they remain ethereal and too much for this world (p. 98). This is no paradise, and they have to separate to avoid further death among their progeny (p. 98). In this regard, identity emerges as a fate we cannot escape.

The novella acquires particular importance these days because of the sensitivity of its topic and theme. Jamal abu Hamdan successfully denounces religious bigotry in this novella without sacrificing the beauty of language and without reducing his work to explicit propaganda on behalf of Christianity or Islam. Nowadays, religious differences are used by politicians as subtle grounds for political action. Difference in religion is viewed as a sign of not belonging, of being ideologically different. Therefore, religion is used in a process of or as a justification for othering. The attacks on the World Trade Center in the USA in 2001 initiated a chain of negative reactions against Muslims inside and outside America. Islam began to be more explicitly associated with terrorism in western media, and the USA launched its so-called "War on Terror." Nowadays, Arab countries witnessing "the Arab Spring" suffer from religious clashes among members of differing religious sects within Islam. Christians in some Arab and Islamic countries have also suffered varying degrees of persecution and marginalization. Violence triggered by

religious bigotry can be observed in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt. As in the novel, identity in real life scenarios is being judged dominantly from the viewpoint of religion. When religion becomes the decisive factor for identity definition, what is negated is our essential and shared humanity, a humanity that is being argued and advocated in the novella by Mawla and Hala. It is needless to say that the novella's presentation of religious bigotry in this negative light of killing (whether in the form of ending a life or ending a love relationship) simultaneously preaches religious tolerance as a virtue and yet as a difficult choice that can come at a heavy price. In the novella, Mawla loses his mother through sudden death and apparently loses his love, Hala, through departure.

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