



The Stranger in the Mirror: Female Identity Crisis, Dissociation and Self-Fragmentation in Kafa Al-Zubi's Novel X

Sally Karmi*

Department of English Language and Literature,
Arab Open University,
Amman, Jordan

Abstract: The study aimed to identify the crisis of female identity, dissociation disorder, and self-fragmentation in Kafa Al-Zubi's novel X (Al-Zubi, 2014). The novel portrays the female protagonist, X, with a dissociative identity disorder and a sense of self-fragmentation, a generic case of many women struggling to define their identities in patriarchal societies. X's dissociative identity forces her to live a fragmented life. She demonstrates signs of loss of interest, a manifestation of self-fragmentation, relational difficulties, and a desire for death. The novel is analyzed through psychoanalytic and postcolonial theories to define concepts of identity, dissociative identity disorder, and self-fragmentation. The textual analysis reveals that, within the socio-religious fabric of a patriarchal society, a female's social/personal identity structure is restricted and psychologically confused. The dominant patriarchal system is destructive to the female's personal identity and her quest for achieving selfhood and independence. The female protagonist's attempt to balance her social/personal identities becomes fluid. She negotiates her social spaces in her attempt to resist a socially bound and labeled identity that stigmatizes a woman's existence as a self.

Keywords: *Dissociation, identity crisis, Jordanian women writers, self-fragmentation, social/personal identity*

Received: 19 November 2020; **Accepted:** 23 February 2021 ; **Published:** 29 March 2021

INTRODUCTION

The question of female identity and its subsequent sister term self has been a central concern in contemporary literary criticism, psychoanalytic discourse and postcolonial theories (Butler, 1988; McEwan, 2001; Gilbert & Gubar, 2020; Showalter, 1986). Identity, a "paradoxical term," is often associated with "sameness and distinctiveness," yet it has its "contradictions" (Gardner, 2004). Sarup (1996) defines identity as the way a person thinks of him/herself, what one believes in and what one does. He states that identity is not a "homogenous" body. As individuals, we have our differences and our "contradictory selves." Therefore, identity is a "heterogeneous" process (Sarup, 1996).

Conversely, the term "identity crisis", which was coined by Erikson (1980) refers to a psychological conflict that entails social confusion, a sense of detachment and a loss of oneself. A female identity crisis and its subsequent psychological disorders have been among the integral tenets of psychoanalysis and postcolonial feminist theories. A female identity crisis has been conceptualized to delve into the boundaries of the self and move beyond the social dynamics through which the female subject explores and questions her identity.

The concepts of female identity crisis and dissociative identity disorder have been constantly redefined, revisited and restructured in the literary works of many women writers (Maiese, 2017). A woman's quest for identity, along

*Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed Sally Karmi, Department of English Language and Literature, Arab Open University, Amman, Jordan. E-mail: Sally_karmi@hotmail.com

with her emotional and psychological struggles to create a balanced sense of self, have been prominent themes in the writings of Kafa Al-Zubi. Al-Zubi is a Jordanian woman writer whose novel X (Al-Zubi, 2014) is the literary focus of this research paper. The choice of examining this novel by Al-Zubi, in particular, is because of the interwoven themes that are intricately relevant to 21st-century consciousness: gender roles, women's inner experiences, psychological tension between males and females, women's search for identity, and philosophical questions about one's existence.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A female identity crisis and the subsequent psychological disorders that result from special demand concern. Many psychological, feminist and postcolonial studies have focused on the question of a woman's identity crisis. For Butler, the theory of gender performativity, which was influenced by Michel Foucault's theory of power, challenges the notion of gender and identity as fixed structures (Nayak & Kehily, 2006). She contends that gender and identity are socially constructed. It is a repeated structural pattern that determines a set of discursive performances, thus controlling the behavioural attitudes of what a subject says or does. According to Butler, power relations shape a person's identity. However, knowing how the dynamics of power operate allows the subject to challenge these dynamics. She states that discourse is established before one's identity. In other words, identity is bound by language, and in this, the subject's existence is conditioned by his/her gender. The subject constantly interrogates his/her conventional account of the culture around him/her and how it influences one's identity.

In psychoanalysis, the [American Psychiatric Association \(2013\)](#) defines a dissociative identity disorder as the "disruption of identity characterized by two or more distinct personality states, which may be described in some cultures as an experience of possession." In other words, a dissociated identity entails a pattern where a person thinks and interacts differently about the position of the social identity (the outer self) within the social environment to that of the personal identity (the inner self) that isolates itself from that same environment. This causes confusion that usually leads to identity dissociation and self-fragmentation. A person finds it hard to locate the self within two opposing entities. Dissociative identity disorder is characterized by a "disruption of identity" that leaves a person in a state marked by "discontinuities in the sense of self and agency" (Tyrer, 2019).

Dissociative identity disorder causes a disturbance in a person's consciousness, memory, and identity and his/her interaction with the environment. A dissociative identity disorder is commonly defined as "a process where a person mentally separates oneself from reality" (Gardner, 2004). [Wortman, Loftus, and Marshal \(1992\)](#) studied how a dissociative identity disorder affects a person's psychological functions. They stated: "As part of the self is split off, or dissociated so that personal memory or identity is disturbed". It is often associated with traumatic events of physical, sexual, or emotional nature and childhood experiences. The dissociation process becomes a self-mechanism where a person separates him/herself from his/her surrounding in a self-preservation attempt to avoid emotional pain.

Furthermore, self-fragmentation has often been associated with an identity crisis and a quality dominating our contemporary world. It has usually been linked to the contradictions of the modern world. [Brown, 1989](#) defines it as a "decentred self". In other words, it is a self that lacks unity and, thus, fragmented. As a result of that split between the social and the personal self, the subject suffers from dissociation, inconsistency and self-fragmentation. A fragmented identity is characterized by a "shifting view of oneself, with sharp discontinuities, rapidly changing roles and relationships and an underlying feeling of inner emptiness" (Fuchs, 2007).

METHODOLOGY

This study is qualitative in scope. It is based on a critical analysis of the question of dissociative identity disorder and self-fragmentation through which Al-Zubi unveils her protagonist's psychological state. The study aims at identifying the crisis of female identity as questioned in both psychoanalytical and postcolonial theories. It will explore the concept of identity in postcolonial discourse and examine the psychoanalytical dissociative identity disorder as experienced by the protagonist in the novel. More importantly, the study argues that the female protagonist, X, struggles with two contradictory yet connected social/personal identities. She suffers from an identity crisis that keeps her torn between a social identity (outer self) imposed by the constraining patriarchal system and personal identity (inner self) that she tries to redefine for herself. The study will further examine the social and religious forces that have shaped the protagonist's identity and, thus, witness her sense of dissociation and alienation due to her personal/social identity crisis. However, the aim is not to reduce identity to two dichotomous and separate processes but to examine how the "self" negotiates different spaces of identities, mainly the outer and inner selves. Contrary to the traditional view of seeing her identity

as "coherent, unified and fixed (Sarup, 1996), the protagonist's identity is rather perceived as fluid; fluctuating between a social self that has long been defined by cultural traditions, religious values and a resisting personal self which aspires to live outside social codes.

The overarching questions posed by this study are: Do X's identity crisis and her sense of dissociation spring from the separation of her social and personal identity? How does X respond to her childhood trauma? Is she able to negotiate spaces of both her outer and inner selves? And would she be able to break free from the social restraints imposed on her? This study benefits from both psychoanalysis and postcolonial theories to analyze X's psychological, social and religious identity crises. The study's importance stems from the fact that this is the first critical/literary analysis of the novel. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, the novel has been discussed in the form of reviews, referred to in the section of the analysis and discussion hereunder. However, no previous literary discussions have explored the theme of identity crisis in any critical studies of the novel.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Dissociative Identity Crisis and Self-Fragmentation

Most of the literature that has been written about the novel, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, is in the form of online book reviews. Khawaldeh (2015) states that the novel is acclaimed for its use of the meta-narrative that intertwines the novelist's life with that of the protagonist in a real/ fictionalized narrative mode. To Fawwaz (2015), X is a novel that is haunted by "the hermeneutics of history, narrative, social and religious awareness, and neurosis". It is preoccupied with paradigms of "masculinity, femininity, fanaticism, and identity". Mamdouh (2015) discusses the meta-narrative techniques and the protagonist's struggles against social marginalization in the novel. Similarly, Khader (2014) maintains that X, the protagonist, is a woman who is chained, not only by society but by the narrative as well. It is worth noting that this double sense of entrapment reveals Al-Zubi's deliberate attempt to overemphasize X's dilemma. She questions the situation of many Arab women who live a similar life like that of X, as the name itself suggests being the unknown variable in any mathematical problem.

Daher (2015) claims that X questions the sense of aversion that haunts her life: "She lives the tragedy of alienation where there is no hope of escape". Furthermore, Allam (2016) describes the novel as a "storm" that awakens certain concerns about the lives of Arab women which we socially accept and take for". To Allam, Al-Zubi takes us through a journey into Amman streets. This journey reveals the face of a timid city, which turns out to be dreadful for X. Amman seems vicious, revealing many tragic and frightful experiences in her life. Mur (2014) discusses the quest for identity in her review of the novel. She states that Al-Zubi brings to the foreground the subject of the feminist novel and how the situation of some Arab women is still governed by patriarchal forces that fluctuate between social oppression and religious fundamentalism.

Al-Zubi uses the meta-narrative technique and powerfully engages her readers with the socio-religious debates that control women's lives in patriarchal societies. She determinedly questions the status-quo of women and contributes to the "new feminist literature within the ongoing sociopolitical changes" in Jordanian society (Al-Hamarneh, 2017). Reading Kafa Al-Zubi's novels, one can notice the emergence of a feminist voice that pushes the boundaries of social spaces designed for women. She invites readers to envisage women's existing reality and challenges them to seek a new reality that is more just and liberating for women.

X greatly draws on women's inner experiences and their attempts to depart from their unsatisfactory reality. The story is set in modern-day Amman, where the writer herself roams downtown the streets of the capital city searching for a protagonist for her new novel. When Al-Zubi sees X, she decides that this woman is her main female protagonist in the narrative. The events then develop around the miserable life of X. She is a mysterious woman in her forties. X is unmarried, heavily veiled and lives alone in a conservative neighbourhood that watches over her behaviour and outgoings. She is left with no other alternative than to live with her brothers, who work in the Gulf, especially after the death of their parents. However, upon hearing complaints from her brothers wives, being annoyed for having X living with them, she decides to live alone in her parents house. The chapters that follow delve into X's personal life, where readers meet the teacher by day and the woman who escapes to the privacy of her room to drink, smoke and read books by night. Weary of social roles she has internalized as a woman, X tries to find peace in the space she tries to create for herself. In her attempt to balance her social identity with that of her personal one, the novel takes us into an inner journey of X's self, as many of the conflicts she encounters leave her questioning her fragmented identity. She continually asks herself: "This is not me. Who is that woman standing in front of the mirror? This is not me?" (Al-Zubi

(2014), p.15).

X problematizes the relationship between her social and personal identities, of which the writer skillfully demonstrates the forces operating against women's conflicting identities. Al-Zubi focuses on the internal conflicts of the protagonist's identity, her sense of helplessness, and emotional confusion. Mercer (1990) argues that "identity only becomes an issue when it is in crisis, when something is assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty". X leaves the reader preoccupied with the protagonist's dissociated sense of uncertainty and identity crisis. The novel's power is perceived through the confrontations of the protagonist with the repressive social forces operating against her.

The subjectivity of the individual is considered a main concern in the field of psychoanalysis. According to Frosh (1991), a conscious available 'I' is part of a person's identity and subjectivity. However, there are "obscure and contradictory segments of a hidden self" where the power of the social environment "holds over our lives, [and] resides in the way it enters unbidden and unnoticed into the foundation stones of our psychic structure" which forms the 'I' / the self. Individuals are not structured systematically, but rather "full of fluidity, contradiction, impulse, and frustration". Al-Zubi demonstrates that sense of identity confusion in the novel. X questions her existence in a social environment that she has grown up in and is supposed to feel a reasonable harmony with. However, she feels estranged from her social identity and manifests a sense of self-fragmentation. She contemplates:

"However, what about a person who is not a stranger to that familiar world? A person who is born here, lives here, and consents to the laws of here? What about a person who feels different in this world and does not belong mentally to it, yet still a person of that world which cannot be escaped? What about me?" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 9)

X's attempt to adapt within her social environment triggers her in the form of an identity crisis. As Butler (2010) states that "the effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practice of gender coherence". Any sense of incoherence in this pattern of performance results in a disorder in the subject's perception of gender and identity. X's feeling of being socially torn, not knowing who she is and where she belongs, confirms Du Bois's idea of "double-consciousness". Bois (2019) states that the concept of a coherent, unified identity is not compatible with one's social reality. He argues:

"It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."

Although Bois (2019) was referring to the question of identity in the lives of African Americans who were historically devalued, the same concept of double consciousness can be applied to the position of Arab women who are debased because of their gender, the case of X in the novel.

According to Sarup (1996), identity can be hybrid or multiple; it could be "constituted through community: family, region, and nation-state". He further explains that a more modern view of identity contrasts with the traditional one in which identity is "fabricated [and] constructed" and that sociological and psychological aspects need to be considered in constructing one's identity. Identities are "fragmented, full of contradictions and ambiguities". The question of identity, as a process of construction and deconstruction of the female self, is a preoccupation in Al-Zubi's novel. From the novel's onset, the reader is asserted that X has a fragmented self. She is a woman who suffers from a dissociative identity disorder, a sense of loss and uncertainty. A manifestation of X's dissociative identity disorder is perceived through Al-Zubi's use of the mirror as a symbol in the novel. X's fear of fragmentation is intensified when she sees her face in the mirror changing into a "defeated, pale face that is wrapped by a veil and a slender body covered with a long jilbab (dress). She was disturbed by the intrusive image of the woman she has become: "a woman in the mirror [who is] a stranger seeing herself for the first time in her life" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 14). Instead of providing X with access to a harmonious reflection of both her social (outer) and personal (inner) self, the mirror intensifies X's dissociated identity crisis and her sense of self-fragmentation, reflecting a disturbed outer self only, with no access to a personal inner counterpart. The mirror becomes an agent that aggravates her anxiety towards the unwanted outer self that has been imposed upon her. The negative vision of her outer self triggers her dissociative sense of separation of the self through a self-sabotaging behaviour and suicide attempts. According to Hagman (2020), "every human being is ineluctably embedded in his or her environment, especially the social environment". In X's case, this sense of embeddedness in her social identity leaves her feeling enslaved. X is sceptical about whether she would be able to reveal her personal identity or achieve a harmonious balance between both.

Motherhood, Childhood and Gender Identity Crisis

Al-Zubi carefully creates a woman whose emotional intimate needs are not met at an early childhood stage, thus resulting in X's struggle with another layer of an identity crisis with her mother. The questioning of her identity and her sense of uncertainty has been deeply rooted in her traumatic childhood experiences. Pioneers in the field of dissociative identity disorder and trauma, such as Bessel Van der Kolk, and Onno Van der Hart, argue that a dissociative identity disorder usually begins in childhood. The child's reaction to survive traumatic experiences manifested in emotional abuse, neglect, and sexual or physical abuse. As a result of early psychological trauma, dissociative symptoms occur (Bichescu-Brian, Steyer, Steinert, Greib, & Tschoke, 2017). Trauma, dominantly present in today's discourse, is generally used to describe acute suffering and the dynamics of individuals with overt psychopathology revealing many increasingly present psychological symptoms such as depression, melancholia, anxiety, dissociation, and paranoia (Pinto, Hyde, Good, & Good, 2008). X's identity confusion has its roots embedded in her traumatic childhood experiences, which shook the basis of her relationship with her mother and later affected her social relations with others as an adult.

Chodorow's psychoanalytical feminist theory (Chodorow, 1978) claims that a young girl's sense of identity is based on her "relationality" with her mother. Thus, a complete separation from the mother does not exist in a mother-daughter relationship. A strong female identity is established within that solid bond between the mother and her daughter. In the novel, Al-Zubi demonstrates the opposite of that discourse. As a little girl, X was rather confused about her mother's lack of intimacy and warmth. She remembers how her mother used to beat her forcefully, which left X with childhood psychological trauma. Growing up without receiving emotional fulfilment makes her feel unwanted. Thus, a sense of abandonment develops within her. X grows up without a clear understanding of why her mother was widely spreading her arms to engulf her husband and three sons in a family photo. Yet, her only daughter was excluded from that same familial circle. X, a woman in her forties now, remembers that teenage girl she once was fourteen years ago in that family photo. She recalls how she felt abandoned standing at the back of that photo: "She felt strange, unwanted, a sort of a surplus ... with a confused, defeated look in her eyes" Al-Zubi (2014). Her longing for her mother's intimacy left her in a state of despair. Although the family photo was taken in the living room twenty-six years ago, the vivid memory of the pains of discrimination and motherly detachment still haunt her mind. That pairing between X's adult image reflected on the mirror, discussed earlier, with that of her young teenage image in the family photo embodies her feelings of a growing sense of dissociation of the self and a continuous feeling of alienation that keeps haunting her life. As a young girl, she could not fight her mother's rejection and lack of intimacy. Consequently, she grew up without having a role model for nurturing her emotional needs. This lack of emotional fulfilment has grown into an increased sense of separation from the self. In effect, X develops a sort of numbness as a coping mechanism towards her mother's detachment, which later in life is replaced by silence and withdrawal from any interaction with her social environment.

In psychoanalysis, Winnicott (1963) refers to the "mirroring function" where a mother passes on to her child his/her sense of security and actual needs. The more accurate and accepting the mirroring process is, the more a child develops a "true self". X's relationship with her mother leaves her with a distorted sense of self and a scar that aggravates her sense of dissociation. The lack of intimacy makes her feel less privileged than her brothers and increases her sense of isolation. When her friend, Hanan, questions her mother's unexplained attitude of not holding her daughter in the same manner as she is holding other family members, X felt that the question was "like a scalpel that sharply and without a prior notice opened a blood-filled fester in her memory" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 24). Hanan's comment throws X in a vortex of confusion that leaves her voiceless, fighting back a sudden burst of tears. X's inability to explain her mother's behaviour further dissociates her from her "true self, as well as from that distant past with its inhabitants and concurrent pain. X's identity confusion is intensified with her sense of hidden trauma. She wonders how marginalized and rejected she was within her family when she was a young girl. Furthermore, how that sense of marginalization has further been intensified through the eyes of her neighbourhood when she has become a grown-up woman, while that childhood experience has long been isolated in X's mind, it still haunts her present and affects how she struggles with a broken image of personal identity.

Part of the protagonist's dissociative identity crisis and sense of self-fragmentation then result from her mother's discriminatory behaviour, a concern which Al-Zubi questions as it is rather confusing, coming from a mother to her daughter. Through her mother, X grows up lacking a sense of belonging to her family. She realizes that because she is a girl, she is unwanted and socially unappreciated. She remembers: How her mother used to consider every act that she does as a sinful act that deserves punishment. I think she even considered my whole existence as a sin that I need to be

punished for" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 27). Within these recalled traumatic memories, X is unable to voice out her protest. She becomes further confused about her gendered identity in a society that does not appreciate girls and discriminates against them even as grown-up women. She remembers her friend's words saying: that world despises me because I am a woman, and I despise it back because it sees in me a woman only" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 51). Living within a disadvantaged conservative neighbourhood, X realizes that women there are not appreciated as independent entities, as individuals who are capable of having a "true" self. Instead, she is reduced to a demeaning position by a patriarchal society that would not tolerate a woman's deviation. This society imposes on her how to behave and what to wear.

Religious Identity Crisis and Self-Fragmentation

This social positioning of women is further questioned by Al-Zubi, who believes that through X's character, readers do not only witness the suffering of one woman. Instead, the protagonist incorporates every woman in that type of society. Al-Zubi's narrative echoes what Showalter (1986) calls a "double-voiced discourse" where women writers base their female experiences on a complex negotiation between "women's culture and the general culture". This duality level leads women to live "as members of the general culture and as partakers of women's culture". X shows how a woman's life gets inscribed by the society she lives in and explores the fragmentation between the self/identity and between women and society. X, like any other woman living in a conservative society, is doomed to be perceived as "deficient in intelligence and religion" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 11); an "Other" who is denied subjectivity and autonomy. Al-Zubi voices out her opposition to a collective religious mentality that considers women lacking in common sense. She resists this misinterpretation of Prophet Mohammed's Hadith: I have not seen anyone more deficient in reason and logic and who is capable of removing the understanding of a prudent man than you" (Prophet Mohammed's hadith) as ontological to women's lives. The novelist believes that with such a fixed religious mentality, women are denied self-actualization. While observing the veiled faces of many women walking downtown Amman streets, Al-Zubi is confused about accepting the linearity of time moving forward. She believes that most of those women conform to past restrictive ideologies. Hence, a woman's social identity is only defined by male dominance through which a woman is perceived as a sex object, that needs to be covered and controlled. Al-Zubi, a surrogate writer in the novel, tells her husband:

"How would you explain the number of heavily veiled women on the streets? I feel insulted. That's an insult to humanity at large. Is not that dress code an insult to you as well? Do not you think that a woman cannot reveal parts of her hair and body because she thinks you might rape her? Dont you think that this is insulting for you to be perceived as a man whose existence is demeaned to that of sex? Does not that insult your humanity, civilization, opinions, philosophical and scientific beliefs towards the world? We live in Africa's jungles where wild animals roam, and we, women, are only the preys. Are you a savaged man? Am I just a prey?" (Al-Zubi (2014), pp. 53-4)

Here, the novelist's concern is about the prevailing patriarchal traditions and their negative physical and psychological impact on women's lives. The social class depicted in the narrative shows how women in more conservative social classes are not given opportunities to discover their identities, nor are they allowed to break social constraints. Instead, the women Al-Zubi observes while walking downtown Amman live a life that is characterized by enforced codes of behaviours. Al-Zubi criticizes the socio-religious traditions of a segment of women living under its pressures. She questions women's internalization of patriarchal ideologies and their transformation to passive entities. She seems to be reflecting her protagonist's conscience. In one incident, X struggles with religious and gender-based restrictions placed on women. She sees her neighbour, Um Khaled, wearing a niqab (face cover), and thinks:

"Does Um Khaled believe that she is a deficient human being? How would a woman be able to live with such a mindset? What is worse even is that this woman consents along with other women about their demeaning, inferior looks and internalize such a mindset. How would a woman believe that she is imperfect just because of her gender?" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 17)

The question of women's gendered inferiority aggravates women's sense of dissociation, self-fragmentation and fear. X's confusion about the situation of women in her society mirrors her own. For instance, she thinks about how much she feels isolated and how she is unable to break free from the cycle of social fear surrounding her. Fear obliterates her sense of self-realization, an unpleasant emotion that determines the behaviour of not just X but those women in her neighbourhood too. The fear of being selfish, being judged and criticized by others is part of a woman's renunciation of her personal identity. She translates this situation of fear in seeing those around her living in a "social trap, a trap that despises her presence as a woman and robs her personal identity. X thinks: "Isn't it a dilemma to be

despised by others just because you are a woman, and you, in turn, despise them back because of feelings of hate for being a woman" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 161).

Upon comparing her conservative upbringing that demands a strict dress code to that of her friend's liberal upbringing, X felt mesmerized when she saw Hanan wearing a neat, knee-length school uniform, short socks, and neat black shoes. Hanan's hairstyle, school bag and shoulder wrap show that she is from a different social class that does not practice any form of oppression over her' (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 25), contrary to X, who has no control over what she wears. A dress code is imposed on her by her mother when she starts showing signs of puberty:

"X used to wear a dress that has nothing to do with codes of fashion. What was important is that it needs to be wide, long, cheap and covers her knees. Underneath, she wore cheap, wide black trousers, and covered her hair in a veil that her mother imposed on her." (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 25)

Al-Zubi's dramatization of that scene further complicates the question of a woman's social identity. According to Tajfel (1982), social identity is defined as part of an individual's self-concept based on how this individual creates and defines his/her place in society and how members of that society perceive that individual. The description of X dressed up in a long jilbab (gown) and her hair locked under a veil becomes an emblem of her socio-religious identity. Women living in that same neighbourhood need to adhere to that dress code. X's strict veiling reflects the essence of society's ideology where socio-religious practices form a layer of identity which signifies a suppression of women's individuality.

X's social/personal identity crisis operates within the paradigm of what is socially acceptable. In the public sphere, she is trapped in a communally based notion of a woman's selfhood that is socially constructed. She is forced to veil and ordered to behave under the social norms of society. X remembers her mother's allowing her to study at the university only if she is to wear a veil and a jilbab. Through this tough act, X perceives herself as a woman who is sentenced to a life of imprisonment: If there is no alternative but to experience the outer world, then it must be as a prisoner" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 83). She grows up with a dress code that defines her social identity that does not cope with her personal identity. This incident explains why whenever X is alone in her bedroom, taking off her veil and long jilbab and letting them fall on the floor becomes a matter of questioning her identity (who she is). While standing in the middle of the pile, she "feels that she has become void" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 16). What is questioned here is the compulsory act of veiling, which Al-Zubi considers an act of intrusion on a woman's personal choice and identity construction. In this sense, a woman's identity is defined on a social, religious level, not on a personal one, thus, condoning X to a submissive social positioning. The feeling of being void, which the protagonist experiences once she takes off her veil and jilbab, makes her invisible, not recognizing her personal self even when alone: She felt that this veil did not only cover her hair and body. It also closed a door to her sense of beauty, freedom, voice, and opinions. She keeps telling herself: This is not me (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 84). This incident reminds us of the previous section when X was facing the mirror discussed earlier in the chapter, and how she felt the same sense of void inside. Her life is a constant reminder of her inadequacies as a woman and of what she has to be in the eyes of her society.

What intensifies X's self-fragmentation and her sense of dissociation is how she is forced to feel unwanted, unacceptable, and unwelcomed by her society. She questions the meaning of her existence and her value as a human being. When her father was alive, she believed that there is a good reason to live. She is needed to look after him. After his death, she was left alone and was only perceived as a sort of "dilemma" by her conservative neighbourhood. As it is socially unacceptable for a woman to live independently, her neighbours start gossiping about how inappropriate her behaviours are. Accepting a marriage proposal would be the only solution to silence these voices and be perceived as a respectable woman in the eyes of her neighbours. To guarantee a sense of male protection, X needs to have a husband who will care for her, even if this man does not meet her martial expectations. Reaching middle age, for any woman without marriage, means that she is a "social burden". X's commitment to balance her personal identity with that of her social one leaves her in a crisis to which identity she is to adhere. The burden of being socially stigmatized is revealed in the following quotation where X comments on her existence:

"One word defines the insignificance of her existence as "a dilemma". What is the reason for being seen as a "dilemma"? What is the reason for her existence even if she is alive but does not have a man in her life? It is an existence that is characterized by diminution as if she is the real void of life. It is a void in the form of a dilemma. A dilemma in the shape of a body; a lonely body of a woman like a deserted, arid land on a map, one who needs to be enshrouded in front of the eyes of God." (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 81)

X is forced to believe that she is leading a worthless life, one that can never fulfil the emptiness inside without

having a husband to protect her. Being perceived as a dilemma has another traumatic impact on X's identity crisis. Since there is no personal space for the self to grow, X is only allowed to live within a social space that determines her social identity. However, as this space has no legitimate function in her life as she is not married and does not have a family of her own, she is pushed further into self-dissociation. At school where X works, her colleagues consider her "awkward, complicated, especially because she is a spinster" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 39). They exclude her from their social gatherings, where they celebrate wedding (Allaire, 2014)s or the birth of a newborn.

Al-Zubi dramatizes identity as dynamic and constantly evolving, thus agreeing with Allaire's argument that "Our identity is a tricky and highly complex thing. It's fluid, dynamic, and ever-changing, and it is difficult for us to conceptualize more than a handful of our identities at any given moment" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 35). Socially, X is expected to be silenced and bound in marital servitude to a polygamous man, Al-Shaykh Mahmoud. She is expected to have her social identity defined through having a husband and her acceptance of the domestic role to be emotionally satisfying. She is seen guilty to refuse the marriage proposal and challenge the social structure. As a result, she is socially stigmatized and is labelled a "whore" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 225). However, Al-Zubi's description of X's change and the awakening of a visible personal identity is clear in her rejection of seeing her self-worth as complete only through marriage. Her refusal of Al-Shaykh Mahmoud's proposal is an outcry against the repressive patriarchal society that he represents. She strongly opposes the idea of being the fulfilment of a man's desires at the expense of her own. She is willing to die a virgin for the sake of being true to her newly evolving personal identity, then being socially identified by a husband and marriage.

Sarup (1996) argues that "Identities are not free-floating; they are limited by borders and boundaries". The crisis of X's social and personal identities encapsulates the narrative and creates identity confusion. Is she to live the life of a woman who abides by the constraining social system or the life she chooses for herself? As a middle-aged woman, X has been socially trained to accept society's norms. However, when she tries to live a more visible personal identity, she is placed under the scrutiny of patriarchal dominance. No one in her neighbourhood approves of a woman living by herself and refusing a marriage proposal. X becomes the centre of suspicion, and her behaviours are considered immoral. In one incident, X challenges the constraints of her society by buying a pack of cigarettes from Abu-Ibrahim's store near her house. In a state of dismay, Abu-Ibrahim stared at her in disbelief: He finally found the evidence for her condemnation as someone committing a crime in the dark" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 11). His interrogations made her feel suffocated as someone admitting serious confessions in a courtroom. Her social identity is supposed to conform to roles rigidly assigned to women. When she breaks the boundaries of that social system, she becomes a threat, especially because she is unmarried and lives alone. As she tries to separate herself from that social system, X feels alienated, develops a psychological state of depression and invokes a death wish as part of her conversion process to a harmonious personal identity.

Rebirth of a Personal Identity

X is led to despair due to her realization that she cannot make a balance between her two conflicting social and personal identities. Due to that imbalance, she suffers from a depressive mood and a self-inflicted death wish which becomes her means of escape. She is led to despair by assuming that she cannot find a space for her personal identity to evolve without being socially stigmatized. In several incidents in the novel, X's state of despair is represented through the fallen image. She states:

"I have always wished to fall while standing on my weak feet; to collapse like a heavy sandbag and to announce my surrender to the whole world; to admit my weakness. But I wonder if I am standing on my feet even. Am I not that same woman who is destroyed and surrendered?" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 18)

Her wish to fall derives from her feeling of being trapped and from her inability to break free from the restrictions imposed on her. She can no longer tolerate the deadly effect of the social structure upon her personal identity. Her fear of continuing to live in this sense of entrapment further isolates her into a state of grief. Al-Zubi captures this in another terrible image of a distressed cat in the novel. In one incident, X witnesses the death of a cat being knocked over by a car. By comparing herself to the dismembered body of the cat, she plunges into thinking: While observing the cat with its crushed bones on the asphalt, a thought crossed my mind that I was run over like that cat and my limbs and bones would be scattered on the streets, and someone would be looking at my severed parts in disdain" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 18). The striking resemblance between X and the cat's situation suggests the feeling of dissociation she feels. X believes that she lives under the scrutiny of the social eye that unmercifully reminds her of her multi-conflicted layers

of women's agency which increases their sense of social alienation and self-fragmentation; a matter that leaves the reader caught in the net of confusion encapsulating the narrative about the fate of X. When she refuses her neighbour, Um Qassem's advice to either live with her brothers or accept Shaykh Mahmoud's marriage proposal again, X becomes confused and tells Um Qassem: "What shall I do? Shall I die? Shall I commit suicide because living alone annoys my neighbours" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 188). When Um Qassem leaves, X's mind triggers existential questions about the purpose of her life: "Why am I living among those people? Why was I born here in this place? Why am I different from them? Isn't it better to be like them if I am forced to live among them?" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 189). The link between X's recent sense of rejection by her neighbours and her early childhood rejection of her mother is central to the novel. This pairing leaves X on the verge of explosion. Loss, despair and alienation lead her to contemplate suicide, her only release from the repression of society. It is through death that X would recognize her personal identity; the self that she cannot maintain when living.

In her book, *Ethical Loneliness*, Stauffer (2015) argues that the absence of others in a person's life has its negative impact on one's sense of identity. A person's identity and self-formation are shaped through their interactions with others in their lives. Just at the moment when X faces the agonizing decision of giving it all up emotionally and psychologically, the nameless bookshop owner comes into her life. The only voice in the narrative that is tolerant of her social difference and understands her wish to achieve an authentic personal identity is for a bookshop owner, a man in his fifties. The heroine's passion for reading is what brought her close to the bookshop owner. Both lacking proper names and clear identities are probably the reasons behind X's feeling of intimacy towards him. Early in the novel, X wishes for a perfect intellect, a passerby, like Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. She hoped for a person in her life whom she opens her heart and understands her mentality without being socially judged. While absent during the first half of the novel, the bookshop owner appears in X's life in the second half of the book to give her a spark of hope that awakens in her a long-repressed personal identity. Despite given a brief glimpse into the bookshop owner's life, he has a positive impact on her understanding of her authentic self. During their long conversations, X and the man talk about sorrow, isolation, and hope. They discuss the contradictions of life, the reason behind waiting, the idea behind sorrow, and the value of love. When he confesses his love to her, she sees the social structure from a different perspective, to be "out of the text" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 238). This realization marks X's reconciliation with her personal identity. The metaphor of leaving the text behind is an act of rebellion where X realizes that the battle against her social identity that she has been fighting is the one that leaves her chained, imprisoned and demeans her to a life of victimhood and imprisonment (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 240). She realizes that she has become a woman subduing society's constraints and traditions. If she needs to change that role of victimhood, she has to break the ideological chain that has long confined her personal identity. She tells the bookshop owner: "Only those who are free can take decisions. I have spent my life without being able of taking any. I simply agree to the decisions of others taken on my behalf. And if I protest, I was forced to submit" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 243).

The last scene of the novel encapsulates the whole narrative where X gives space for her personal identity to evolve. She sees the city, the streets, the corners of houses, the trees as if she sees them for the first time in her life. X walks hand in hand with the bookshop owner in what seems to be more of a surrealistic scene. The wind takes off her veil and long jilbab and sets her free from a life condoned by social oppression. The whole scene seems more like a trance, a dream-like state in X's life to celebrate the triumph of her personal identity over her social counterpart. And even when imagining how her neighbours would react upon seeing her new liberated self: kicked out on the streets, insulted, humiliated, cursed, tortured and beaten" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 250), and dragged on the streets and stoned to death, receiving all forms of torture (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 251), this social horror does not intimidate her anymore. Instead, she embraces her personal identity that becomes congruent with her "true" self. As long as she chooses life, X is no longer afraid to step outside her imposed social identity to negotiate with a personal identity that is more authentic to her true nature.

LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study aims to highlight layers of identity crisis engulfing the life of X, a woman living in a conservative segment of Jordanian society, to investigate the injustices women in patriarchal societies go through. However, the study is limited only to one of Kafa Al-Zubi's novels. It is worth exploring other novels by the same writer; those can include: *Laila, the Snow and Ludmilla* (2007), *Come back Home*, Khalil (2007), *A Cold White Sun* (2019), and her latest, *My Father's City* (2020). The researcher recommends that additional literary studies to be conducted to examine

how Al-Zubi further explores the theme of identity crisis in her most recent literary works. The latest are *A Cold White Sun* (2019), listed for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction, and *My Father's City* (2020).

Moreover, it would be constructive to compare and contrast the theme of female identity crisis and dissociation as explored by other Jordanian women writers, such as Fadia Faqir, Samieha Khreis, Afaf Bataineh and Laila Al-Atrash in their novels. Besides, it would also be interesting to explore in details mother/daughter's negotiation of their spaces within the patriarchal authority and to question why, in some literary works, mothers have the upper hand of authority in the family. One further recommendation is that additional research needs to be conducted on literary works written by non-Arab women writers from Western backgrounds to examine how identity is negotiated within different cultural milieus.

CONCLUSION

In the search for her personal identity, X, at the end of the novel, states: "I decide to live, not to die" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 252). She realizes that all her life, she has been a prisoner of a social identity that is made up of past traumatic memories resulting from her mother's abusive treatment and from social constraints that kept on haunting her. She becomes aware that the life she has been leading is not the one she has chosen for herself. One of the main messages that X communicates is the belief that a woman's self-actualization is achieved once she finds reconciliation with her identity when a woman lives the life she aspires. She drowns in a life characterized by fear from society, trauma from childhood days, and violence from past memories and present social encounters. What X has been through causes her to suffer from feelings of dissociation and self-fragmentation until she feels suffocated and eventually developing a death wish. She decides to let go of all her burdens and bury her past. She confesses to the bookshop owner that she feels light as if: "The air cuddles her tightly" (Al-Zubi (2014), p. 252). As a symbol of a fresh beginning, the air makes X feel free to be herself, free from fear and social constraints. Socio-religious ideologies crippled her individuality and personal identity. Eventually, X will live to become a happy woman who can replace the complexities of her social identity with that of a more harmonious personal self.

Al-Zubi's warns against the brutal consequences of institutionalized socio-religious ideologies that beget hatred and violence against the female protagonist in the novel. Her message is of vital importance since many women worldwide are subjected to violence and suffer from abuse. Learning to appreciate, understand, and respect women, their beliefs and differences insinuate, as Al-Zubi demonstrates, the difference between life and death for women.

REFERENCES

- Al-Hamarneh, A. (2017). Spaces of liberation? Geo-hermeneutical reading of the new womens novels in Jordan. *Conjuntura Austral: Journal of the Global South*, 8(41), 4-11. doi:<https://doi.org/10.22456/2178-8839.70806>
- Allaire, F. (2014). Person of interest: The machine, gilles deleuze, and a thousand plateaus. In P. Brace & R. Arp (Eds.), *The philosophy of J.J. Abrams*. Lexington, Kentucky: The University Press of Kentucky.
- Allam, F. (2016). *Seen: A novel from Jordan*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3n5ULyZ>
- Al-Zubi, K. (2014). *Seen (X)*. Damascus, Syria: Dar Attakwin.
- American Psychiatric Association. (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders*. Washington, DC, WA: American Psychiatric Association.
- Bichescu-Brian, D., Steyer, J., Steinert, T., Greib, B., & Tschoke, S. (2017). Trauma-related dissociation: Psychological features and psychophysiological responses to script-driven imagery in borderline personality disorder. *Psychophysiology*, 54(3), 452-461. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1111/psyp.12795>
- Bois, W. E. B. D. (2019). *The souls of black folk*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3dC9XAL>
- Brown, D. (1989). *The modernist self in the twentieth century English literature: A study in self-fragmentation*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Butler, J. (1988). Performative acts and gender constitution: An essay in phenomenology and feminist theory. *Theatre Journal*, 40(4), 519-531. doi:<https://doi.org/10.2307/3207893>
- Butler, J. (2010). *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Chodorowo, N. (1978). *The reproduction of mothering: Psychoanalysis and the sociology of gender*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Daher, S. (2015). *Seen: A question about the self*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2QKLtMQ>
- Erikson, E. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York, NY: W.W. Norton.

- Fawwaz, A. (2015). *The Jordanian, Kafa Al-Zubi and codes of feminist writing*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3v7vZBf>
- Frosh, S. (1991). *Identity crisis: Modernity, psychoanalysis, and the self*. London, UK: Palgrave.
- Fuchs, T. (2007). Fragmented selves: Temporality and identity in borderline personality disorder. *Psychopathology*, 40(6), 379–387. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1159/000106468>
- Gardner, G. K. (2004). Dissociative identity disorder. In *Encyclopedia of womens health*. Boston, MA: Springer.
- Gilbert, S. M., & Gubar, S. (2020). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. London, England: Yale University Press.
- Hagman, G. (2020). Self-agency: Freedom and context in psychoanalysis. *Psychoanalysis, Self and Context*, 15(1), 33–39. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1080/24720038.2019.1652612>
- Khader, S. . (2014). *Belonging and the overlapping images between immediate consciousness and the difficulty of change: X by the Jordanian writer*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3n98x3J>
- Khawaldeh, A. (2015). *A seminar about Al-Zubis novel X*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/2RX6DYN>
- Maiese, M. (2017). Dissociative identity disorder, ambivalence, and responsibility. *European Journal of Philosophy*, 25(3), 764–784. doi:<https://doi.org.10.1111/ejop.12171>
- Mamdouh, M. (2015). *The meta-narrative techniques in Kafa Al-Zubis novel: A seminar about Al-Zubis novel X*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3sFNkQj>
- McEwan, C. (2001). Postcolonialism, feminism and development: Intersections and dilemmas. *Progress in Development Studies*, 1(2), 93–111. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1177/146499340100100201>
- Mercer, K. (1990). Welcome to the jungle: Identity and diversity in postmodern politics. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), *Identity: Community, culture, difference*. London, UK: Lawrence and Wishart.
- Mur, F. (2014). *The writer, the character, and the quest of identity in seen by Kafa Al-Zubi*. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/3aseuDK>
- Nayak, A., & Kehily, M. J. (2006). Gender undone: Subversion, regulation and embodiment in the work of Judith Butler. *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, 27(4), 459–472.
- Pinto, S., Hyde, S. T., Good, M.-J. D., & Good, B. J. (2008). Postcolonial disorders: Reflections on subjectivity in the contemporary world. In *Postcolonial disorders*. Berkley, CA: University of California Press.
- Sarup, M. (1996). *Identity, culture, and the postmodern world*. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburg University Press.
- Showalter, E. (1986). Feminist criticism in the wilderness. In E. Showalter (Ed.), *The new feminist criticism*. London, UK: Virago.
- Stauffer, J. (2015). *Ethical loneliness: The injustice of not being heard*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Tajfel, H. (1982). *Social identity and intergroup relations*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Tyrer, P. (2019). Dissociative identity disorder needs re-examination. *BJPpsych Advances*, 25(5), 294–295. doi:<https://doi.org/10.1192/bja.2019.39>
- Winnicott, D. (1963). Communicating and not communicating leading to a study of certain opposites. In D. Winnicott (Ed.), *The maturational process and the facilitating environment*. London, UK: Hogarth Press.
- Wortman, C., Loftus, E. F., & Marshal, M. E. (1992). *Psychology*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.