

Traversing Shattered Identities: A Postcolonial Analysis of Cultural Outlook in Chaker Khazaal's *Ouch!*"

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Abstract:

This study analyses the multicultural identity of Palestinian-Canadian author Chaker Khazaal, focusing on his memoir, *Ouch!*, and its portrayal of displacement and identity reconstruction. Khazaal's narrative is rooted in his Palestinian heritage, experiences growing up in a Lebanese refugee camp, and his accepted identity to the world as a Canadian citizen. The research identifies a gap in the existing literature on the intersection of Palestinian refugee experiences in Lebanon and the first-ever paper identity of Canada, particularly in the context of storytelling as a means of reclaiming identity. Using postcolonial theory and refugee studies as their foundation, the study examines how Khazaal's experiences in the camp influence his portrayal of survival, community bonds, and cultural memory. This research involves a close textual analysis of *Ouch!*, focusing on exile, assimilation, and the duality of belonging and discord. The findings highlight the unique narrative approach Khazaal employs to express cross-cultural experiences and the tension between longing for a homeland and adapting to a new cultural reality. The study offers insights into how fragmented identities in refugee literature serve as a platform for navigating cultural dislocation and reclaiming narratives of home and belonging. This investigation thus contributes to a deeper understanding of multiculturalism, identity, and the dynamics of diaspora within postcolonial frameworks, providing a bridge between refugee experiences in Lebanon and Canadian multicultural contexts.

Keywords:

Multicultural identity, Palestinian diaspora, Postcolonial Theory, Refugee studies, Chaker Khazaal

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The study explores a critical and timely discussion of the identity fragmentation of a Palestinian refugee who grew up in a Lebanon refugee camp and achieved a Canadian passport in adulthood in a postcolonial context. In the world of war and conflict, migration, displacement, and cultural intersectionality have become burning questions, and the exploration of identity and belonging takes on new implications. Chaker Khazaal's *Ouch!* is a novel that projects the complexities of refugee life, sense of displacement, and shattered identities and initiates the thought of examining postcolonial individuals' navigation of fractured cultural belongings when the protagonist's words touch the heart of the researcher,

"No child deserves to be born and raised in a refugee camp. No child's dream ought to be to escape a prison into which he was born. No child should know the helplessness of living statelessness" (Khazaal, 2020, pg. 10).

The study's significance is to uphold a lesser-explored area of postcolonial literature from a Middle Eastern writer's point of view. Most postcolonial theory has focused on canonical writers and themes, whereas Khazaal's novel centres on the experiences of the refugees and long-time displaced generations, who have been the third generation of Palestinian outcasts in Lebanon. The perspective offers a contemporary and nuanced aspect of the present twenty-first-century world. By examining Khazaal's memoir about tormented identities, this research pursues the ongoing relevance of postcolonial theory in exploring modern identity crises resulting from war, displacement, and migration.

Moreover, the novel *Ouch!* is a literary representation of the present refugee crisis, impacting the academic domain and broader socio-political contexts. Through the postcolonial lens, this write-up will contribute to the scholarly world by portraying Khazaal's characters as representing the ongoing search for belonging and identity reconstruction in the aftermath of dislocation; as he says,

"I was looking for my history, identity, and for the reason of my existence. I was looking at the place that was supposed to be my home, my destiny if my grandparents hadn't been forced to flee" (pg. 77).

The study's justification lies in examining contemporary postcolonial literature that speaks to the identity crisis in diverse cultural hybridity and

displacement in the twenty-first century. Through Khazaal's memoir, the work contributes to the explicit understanding of how literature mirrors the fragmented realities of the millions of refugees worldwide and how postcolonial identities continue contributing to the world's globalised yet diverse cultural outlook.

Despite the growing prominence of refugee literature, Khazaal's novel has not yet been implicitly studied from a postcolonial perspective. The study notices the gap by exploring how Khazaal's narrative knits the thread of fragmented identities of the Palestinian refugees regarding their cultural dislocation in Lebanon and identity reconstruction by ensuring Canadian passport, as the novel presents,

"For me, Palestine was my love affair with Tarisha. There, I could be the Chaker without displacement, without fear. That's the Chaker I'm supposed to be. Chaker of the Camp, Chaker of the World. Why so many Chakers?" (pg. 83).

Most postcolonial studies discuss historical colonisation, while the complexities of neocolonialism and the worldwide Middle Eastern refugee crisis remain less explored. This research bridges the gap by offering insights into postcolonial identities shaped by modern turmoil, such as war and forced migration. It is narrated by a contemporary Palestinian-Canadian novelist who, like other refugees, navigates his shattered identity through his memoir in search of belonging.

The literature review on postcolonial analysis of refugee literature reflects concerns about displacement, identity, and power structure. Postcolonial and refugee literature navigate colonisation and migration's psychological, social, and cultural corollaries. Refugee literature often draws upon postcolonial themes, structures, and insights, creating a rich dialogue that enhances our understanding of displacement and resilience.

Postcolonial literature often seizes with the destabilization of identity caused by colonization. In the works of Chinua Achebe, the explorations of the imposed colonial power on foreign cultures and values to the Indigenous societies lead to identity crises; as Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* exemplifies:

"The white man is very clever. He came quietly and peaceably with his religion. We were amused at his foolishness and allowed him to stay. Now he has won our brothers, and our clan can no longer act like one" (Achebe, 1958, p. 176).

Again, refugee literature portrays the fragmentation of identity caused by forced migration. Viet Thanh Nguyen's *The Refugees* shows the characters' struggles to reconcile their pre-migration identities with their post-migration realities: "I am both grateful and suspicious of America. That is a refugee's mindset: grateful for the opportunities offered, but wary of the terms under which they are offered" (Nguyen, 2017, p. 43).

Postcolonial analysis of the refugee literature critiques the power dynamic and control established during colonization. In Edward Said's *Orientalism*, the colonial powers construct the "Orient" as an inferior Other to justify domination: "Orientalism is not only a positive doctrine about the Orient [...] but also an elaboration of a corporate institution for dealing with the Orient" (Said, 1978, p. 3). This critique resounds in refugee literature, where host countries and refugees echo colonial hierarchies due to the power dynamic. As Dina Nayeri states the imbalance in *The Ungrateful Refugee*, "A refugee must always be grateful. Grateful for safety, grateful for charity, grateful for not being left to die" (Nayeri, 2019, p. 91).

Cultural preservation and storytelling are signs of resistance and resilience in opposing colonial domination. Ngūgĩ wa Thiong'o, in his *Decolonising the Mind*, upholds that kind of resistance as a hallmark of postcolonial analysis of the colonised: "Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world" (Ngūgĩ, 1986, p. 16). However, by using storytelling to reclaim agency and counter stereotypes, refugee literature adopts this perspective, as Khaled Hosseini, in his *Sea Prayer*, voices the silenced experiences of refugees: "These are our last moments, my son, and I am terrified. I pray the sea knows this. Inshallah, you will remember this prayer when you are older" (Hosseini, 2018, p. 20). To resist erasure and assert humanity, the post-colonial analysis of the refugee literature highlights storytelling as an act of defiance.

By analysing refugee literature from postcolonial perspectives, the study focuses on thematic concerns, critiques power dynamics, and emphasises resistance. It establishes the legacies of postcolonial writing to articulate experiences of displacement and resilience in the Middle-Eastern refugee memoir. *Ouch!*

As a research methodology, the paper follows a textual analysis of Chaker Khazaal's *Ouch!* as a primary source. It discusses the postcolonial theories of Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Franz Fanon, and Gayatri Spivak to

identify fragmentation, displacement, and cultural hybridity as secondary sources.

Homi Bhaba's (1994) concept of cultural hybridity helps to understand individuals' postcolonial or diasporic situations that consult multiple cultural identities. He believes hybridity is "the third space" that creates new identities by interacting with different cultures (p.37). The novelist portrays the characters struggling to reconcile their native cultures with the place they stay as outlanders. From childhood, Chaker acts on stage as the voice of the refugee children. Since then, he has never missed any event or theatre production to share the stories of Palestinian refugees. He develops the expertise of telling stories of his homeland by his grandfather Habibi Jeddo. He almost practices filming the stories of Tarisha and Palestine to his grandson, who was born in Lebanon as a refugee (Khazaal, 2020, p. 25). The worst part of Habibi Jeddo, Chaker's grandfather, and his generation of people is that they fled from Palestine in 1948 and were not allowed to return. Also, they were not allowed to visit their homeland for a while, "It is how displacement imprisons and oppresses refugees" (p. 29). Chaker always carries the feelings transmitted to him by his forefathers, which is the "sense of imprisonment" (p. 29). The refugee camp is as overpopulated as the other camps and makes them feel caged as Khazaal describes, "Rather than the open blue skies and whispering green leaves, our canopy was composed of snarled tangles of wires, pipes, and exposed rebar jutting out from the tops of makeshift high-rise apartment buildings" (p.29). The grandeur of Beirut city makes him feel "entering another world-a much bigger world, a world with endless possibilities" (p.29) that accelerates the vision of placing the displaced self in the 'bigger world.' Staying in Lebanon, imparting the stories of his ancestors' homeland speaks about the concept of hybridity, which is central to post-colonial theory and is particularly relevant to refugee literature. This sense of hybridity navigates the tension between retaining the protagonist's cultural heritage and acculturating into the host environment. Thus, the postcolonial theory illuminates the dynamics of hybridity that can be both empowering and destabilising.

He wants to be heard, and the people in Lebanon and Canada finally listen to him with the Palestinian stories he receives from his grandfather and other family members. In Lebanon, he participated in the screening of Hisham Kayed's film *Sugar Of Jaffa*: "I felt heard. I was beginning to be recognised by the camp's community, by my school, and even by some media in Lebanon" (p. 33). In 2003, he went to Canada to talk about his Palestinian experience, participating in a student exchange program called the Palestinian Friendship and Leadership Exchange Program (PFLEP).

Moreover, Bhabha (1994) suggests that “hybrid identities are formed in the space where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other” (p.54), which is prominent in *Ouch!* as Khazaal reveals his grapple with the trauma of displacement that he has inherited being the third generation of the Palestinian refugee camp at Lebanon. Simultaneously, he is trying to establish a new sense of self. His identity, for instance, is not stable but in a constant state of mediation, which illustrates Bhabha’s idea of hybridity as an ongoing process rather than a fixed state of being. When the ‘mukhtar’ (p. 34), who prepares the Tavel Document for the Palestinian refugees, asks him to write his name in English, he seizes the opportunity to change the spelling from the original ‘Shaker’ to ‘Chaker’ to sound more ‘tropical’ or ‘nicer’. He also adds another ‘a’ to his last name ‘, Khazaal’, to make it seem more Spanish. He develops the notion of his hybrid identity, initially by changing the spelling of his name, getting blue colour contact lenses, and growing hair because while in Canada, his “seventeen-year-old self was seeking ways to differentiate Chaker of the Camp from a new Chaker, the budding new incarnation, Chaker of the World” (p. 37).

With the post-colonial mentality, Chaker is similar to being part of the West (Occident). Here, being a 21st-century refugee, Chaker perceives Edward Said’s concept of Orientalism in grabbing the idea of how the West looks at the ‘Exoticization of the East (Orient),’ particularly in literature and media. To the West, Chaker’s world is ‘haunting memories and landscapes’, considered ‘remarkable experiences’ (Said, 1978, p.1). During the first visit to New York in 2013, Chaker got the best exposure. On a dinner invitation with Rula Jebreal, a Palestinian journalist, author, foreign policy analyst, professor, and networking master, Chaker was overwhelmed with Western celebrities, politicians, royals, and rock stars. Especially, “I, a stateless Palestinian, was at the same table as the world’s most influential woman of that year, Hilary Clinton” (Khazaal, 2020, p.63).

Chaker’s second visit to New York opened up his feathers with more exposure to his book *Confessions of a War Child*, which put the Orient in Said’s coinage “exoticisation of the East.” Once the person wanted to drop off the ‘Chaker of the camp’ identity, now at the Western set up becomes part of the refugees of the East with that ‘haunting memories and landscapes.’ He wrote for the *Huffington Post* (p.66) focusing on the topics centred around refugees:

"There is where I felt I was giving back to Chaker of the Camp. He was no longer living in the shadows of my identity. He was there. People related to my story, and New York was the best setting for a refugee to find success. The American Dream. The Dream overall." (p.67)

It seems that Chaker develops a sense of reclamation and empowerment by reflecting on 'giving back to Chaker of the Camp' and signals a reconciliation with his identity as a refugee in Lebanon. He exemplifies the ideal of the American dream, like self-determination and transformation, by bringing his past self 'out of the shadows' and allowing them to coexist with his 'Chaker of the World' identity after receiving citizenship in Canada and sharing his refugee stories with the world. His fragmented identity gets a different dimension in the concept of the American Dream, which helps him transcend any national borders and acts as a metaphor for achieving personal integrity, cultural belonging, and global purpose.

By connecting the refugee experience to the Occident, he ties the American Dream to themes of resilience and opportunity, as he says, 'a refugee to find success.' By achieving his dream success of making the West listen to "a vast audience and raise awareness of refugee issues" (Khazaal, 2020, p.66), he embodies the promise of the American Dream. As an individual, Chaker rises above the circumstances through effort and perseverance, embodying the promise of the American Dream:

Throughout those New York years, Chaker of the Camp was part of the show. He was center stage, with Chaker of the World right by him, showcasing him around, his story, his everything. I travelled a lot those years for events, book signings, speaking engagements, and parties." (p. 67)

In the text, implications of the Western gaze are prominent as Said mentions that through the concept of Orientalism, the West develops its narratives on the East, which is called cultural imperialism; he states, "Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, render its mysterious plan for and to the West" (Said, 1978, p.20). Speaking for the Orient creates narratives that the Occident wants to establish as their voices and perspectives by providing a platform to reveal the refugee status to the world.

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon vitally portrays the psychological effects of colonialism to analyse shattered identities, which is also prominent in Khazaal's *Ouch!* There is always a deep scar in individuals, which Fanon refers to as a 'psychological scar,' leading to feelings of alienation. After the citizenship ceremony, he decides to take his first trip to his homeland, Palestine. His overwhelmed feelings utter so many unborn words, "Chaker of the world was able to visit his homeland, unlike Chaker of the Camp" (Khazaal, 2020, p. 69). Yet, as Fanon argues, the colonisers impose dehumanising views on the colonised individual that result in fractured identities:

"The trip was meant to be. It was a rite of passage...I would be gathering fragments of my grandfather's tales. I would also be meeting *The Other: The Israelis*, those people I grew up to fear" (p.69).

When he finally reaches his 'home' that his grandfather has painted on the canvas of his imagination, he has not only been crossing a land border but "the fine line separating imagination from reality" (p.70). He undergoes "All sorts of internal conflict was going on" because he is approaching Palestine, yet he cannot see her flag, "It was the Israeli flag instead right at that gate as we approached" (p. 70-71). As a third-generation refugee, his "divided self" (Fanon, 1952, p. 8) suffers to see the other nation's flag on his homeland, which signifies the colonizing attitude of Israel toward Palestine.

However, Fanon also emphasizes the importance of resistance and self-construction in overcoming the psychological scar of the colonised. In his memoir, *Ouch!* Khazzal portrays himself through acts of resistance. Chaker's journey of discovery from the imagination to reality reflects Fanon's call for the "decolonization of the mind" (p.52), where he can control the sense of identity by overlooking the colonizer's infliction by refusing to be defined by the oppressor, "How could I only look at a flag or stories of conflict when I was reliving the tale of my grandfather?" (p.71).

Khazaal's characters often feel lost and disoriented amidst the colonial set-up, though they are not refugees. Chaker finds Abu Naser, an almost a century-old man who was twenties in 1948 when Chaker's grandfather "Ragheb Kiblawi" left Palestine. Naser affirms Chaker, saying, "It was war. People didn't just leave. They escaped for their lives" (p.79). The 'psychological scar' of the old man defines the position of war-trodden people and the forced leaving of the motherland, "In a man, war separates. War never brings people together. Like an explosion, families, communities...they are shattered, throwing people in all directions" (p. 79). Once left, the inhabitants can never be part of his motherland. The people of Tarisha were not welcoming to Chaker. They probably feared that he was coming to reclaim the land or home where the intruders were living now. He even has to prove when and where my grandfather was and whether it was after or before the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948.

On his very first night in Jerusalem, his Canadian passport put him in the position of a foreigner in the homeland. When he is abruptly walking, crying, remaining silent, and running the streets of his ancestor's place, he calls his childhood friend from the camp, Mohammad el Chawli, who gets married to a Palestinian-American and moves to New York. Chaker wants to share that moment with him because Mohammad intends to return to Beirut to help his father, but life forces him to go to New York. Chaker thinks seeing him in his homeland may encourage him "to work on the Palestinian dream of belonging to a nation" as "Life is unmanageable when you are stateless" (p. 74). If Mohammad becomes an American citizen, he will gain access to the fundamental rights of claiming cultural, social, and political identity while staying as a refugee outside the homeland, which is "Complicated" (p. 74), as Chaker mentions. Both Chaker and Mohammad experience the identity crisis by culminating the dream of going back to their ancestors' places as they find themselves unrecognizable to the place they live in, as Fanon (1952) discusses, "unrecognizable to themselves and others" (p.18).

Like Fanon, Gayatri Spivak discusses how trauma shapes identities and influences storytelling. In refugee literature, fragmented narratives and non-linear structures mirror the disjointed nature of memory, which immensely impacts the third-generation refugee. For example, Chaker's association and dissociation with Tarisha, where his grandfather belongs in person, and his one is ideological:

“I was looking for my history, identity, and the reason for my existence. I was looking at the place that was supposed to be my home, my destiny, if my grandparents hadn’t been forced to flee. It didn’t take long to find what I was looking for. The world was no longer my home, Tarisha was and was where I found myself. I felt a sense of belonging almost instantly” (p.77).

While visiting the homeland as a tourist, having a passport to another country, Chaker, through the narrative, resists dehumanising and asserts his dignity against the so-called colonial narratives of leaving him as a refugee. By focusing on the notion of survival and resilience, the Palestinian-Canadian author challenges the marginalisation of his experiences as an outlander to the homeland, asserting the right to belong to Palestine. Here, the postcolonial perspective encourages reading refugee literature as acts of defiance against global attitudes of forever abandoning the sense of homelessness to the refugee from the homeland.

According to Spivak, Subalterns cannot speak for themselves due to power dynamics amidst the colonial structure. As subalterns are unable to talk because they are divided up by gender, class, and religion, different is Chaker, a refugee yet a strong voice of the 21st century. Spivak’s assertion that “the subaltern cannot speak” is poignant in refugee literature, where the challenge lies in conveying the experiences without distorting the voices of the refugees. In Khazaal’s story, the experiences of a refugee migrant reclaim humanity by resisting objectification. Chaker becomes a strong humanistic mouthpiece for the subaltern people, identifying a fate similar to that of the colonizers he encounters in Tarisha.

His first visit to Tarisha was not welcoming, yet he narrates his feelings, “I had been to so many places by then, but I realized that I had just arrived *home*, for the first time in my life. I was in Tarisha, I was at home” (p.80). Though the readers know it is just a short visit, they can feel the intensity of the feelings for the homeland of a refugee soul. He connects with the citizens of Israel, who are inhabitants of Palestine due to the war of 1948, which seems unusual. Hence, his abandoned soul from his homeland has been found. However, the residents of Tarisha are citizens of Israel and belong to the Arab world; they are not allowed in many Arab countries because of their Israeli nationality. Their brutality toward the people of Palestine are paying the price of conflict “by being isolated from their roots, just like me, on the other side of the border”; and here, his humanistic self utters, “Everyone instantly felt like family. I felt like I belonged-like I had a deep connection to the place and people” (P.81).

Chaker makes the world from Palestine listen to him with the help of Bassel, the Sherlock Homes of Tarisha. After checking the authenticity of Chaker's real-life story as a refugee, Bassel helps him to film a documentary about his return, interviewing and taking videos, "The camera rolled, I talked. I loved the camera, and I loved Tarisha," and as Chaker says, "It was a powerful realization for me to have found a place that felt like home. Against all odds, a third generation refugee, I was in my homeland" (p. 82).

Social media allows the suppressed voice of a homeland to be heard loudly by a global audience because, with a few videos on Facebook, the news is out that he is in Tarisha, his homeland, as a third-generation refugee in the eyes of the world. Through the speech to the world from the place where his ancestors were outcasts, his fragmented identity from his very birth here presents him as an actual single Chaker, removing all other identities:

"For me, Palestine was my love affair with Tarisha. There I could be the Chaker without displacement, without fear. That's the Chaker I'm supposed to be. Chaker of the camp, Chaker of the World. Why so many Chakers? In Palestine, there is only one. There is a young boy who grew up with no pain. There is a boy who has a home. There is a boy who doesn't fear what tomorrow will bring" (p.83).

The story can end here with a pleasant feeling, yet it doesn't. Every refugee's heart wants to go back to the homeland, but the reality comes up differently. The answers to the question "What is Palestine to them?" might be:

"For Chaker, it is the imaginary dream turned into a real home.

For Mohammad, an American-Palestinian, it is a dream awaited to be seen.

For Daniel, an Arab-Israeli, it is the nation he is part of" (p.83).

As a Palestinian refugee, he loves to talk about his refugee life. He always mentions some of the awards he has achieved worldwide, such as being a refugee spokesman. In 2015, he achieved American magazine for men *Esquire's* 'Man of the Year' award that he dedicated to Aylan Kurdi, a two-year-old Syrian refugee who drowned on the shores of Turkey. In his speech, he requests all to stand and observe a moment of silence for the young refugee. He achieves his next award, 'Most Influential Arab Under 40', for advocacy for the refugee crisis as a "former Palestinian Refugee's success story" (p. 86). Chaker is that Palestinian Canadian who makes his path with all his struggles of displacement, cultural hybridity, psychological scars, and colonial trauma by establishing his voice to the world, sharing experiences, and celebrating successes with his people and the people of the world, "I could feel it-I had gained admiration and respect. countless people were hearing me" (p. 88). Chaker of the camp becomes a writer who loves to tell stories, a business person, an advocate for humanitarian issues, a consultant to politicians and public figures, and a positive energy to the refugees in every corner of the people. All these make a Chaker of the Camp to the Chaker of the world. With all the fragmented identities, distorted feelings, and also success stories in his basket, he says,

"I am the Palestinian writer. I am the Canadian author. I am the New Yorker. I am the Lebanese. ...It took me a long time, a lot of mentoring, and a lot of networking. My network, with its diversity and empowerment to my story, made me realize that my identity is meant to be eclectic, like my adventures and friends" (p.104).

By applying the theories of Bhaba, Said, Fanon, and Spivak, the study highlights how Chaker represents the ongoing struggles of displaced individuals to navigate cultural hybridity, resist Oriental narratives, overcome colonial trauma, and establish his subaltern words to the world. Additionally, the text introduces the idea of identity reconstruction as a form of resilience, portraying a more achieving and hopeful perspective on the refugee experiences of the protagonist, Chaker. This analysis will open up new avenues for research in both postcolonial and refugee studies from the 21st Century techno-based connectivity to the world with the refugee talents, particularly in exploring the psychological and cultural dimensions of displacement, hybridity, psychological scars, reverse oriental mindset and establishing subaltern voice.

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