



## Otherness and the Question of Identity in Mohammad Moufleh's Novel "The Ghost of the Caldonian"

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**Abstract** : This research aims to explore the interplay of history and identity in Mohammad Moufleh's novel "*The Ghost of the Caldonian*," focusing on how personal and collective histories influence the formation of identity. The narrative centers around protagonist Mohammad Chaaban, who confronts his family legacy as the descendant of Sheikh Mohammad the Exiled, banished to Caledonia during colonial rule. The novel's intricate structure juxtaposes Chaaban's modern-day identity crisis with historical reflections, revealing how past injustices continue to shape present experiences and perceptions. Through a detailed analysis of the protagonist's journey and the societal implications of his discoveries, this study examines the broader themes of memory, historical silence, and the ongoing impact of colonialism. The research highlights the novel's critique of historical erasure and its portrayal of identity as a dynamic construct, influenced by both historical events and contemporary global forces.

**Keywords:** Otherness, Identity, Novel, Mohammad Moufleh, Historical Events, Contemporary, Global Forces, "*The Ghost of the Caldonian*".

### Introduction

The postmodern novel ventures into redefining our perception of contemporary realities by probing deeply into the self, eliciting inquiries about personal dilemmas and tragedies, and unravelling the subtleties of its relationship with the homeland. This introspective journey raises pivotal questions about identity.

While the modern novel has developed its own interpretation of identity, the postmodern narrative introduces a novel paradigm and conceptualization of identity, reshaped by the evolving dynamics of the global stage. "The Ghost of the

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Caldonian" by Mohammad Moufleh exemplifies this postmodern inquiry into identity. The narrative is woven around the protagonist, Mohammad Chaaban, who embarks on a quest into the obscured annals of history to unearth the origins of his peculiar moniker, "The Exiled."

This quest traces back to one of his forebears, Sheikh Mohammad the Exiled, who was exiled to the island of Caledonia by French authorities during Mokrani's resistance. The novel intricately navigates between the immediacy of the present and the remoteness of the past, a duality vividly personified in Mohammad Chaaban's endeavours to transcend his current predicaments by embracing historical legacies to redefine his identity and alleviate his anguish. Although his struggle is personal, it conveys implicit messages to the entire nation, touching upon facets of Algerian history and the contemporary ruling system.

Furthermore, the novel spotlights the psychological conflict of the citizen, potentially stemming from a lack of historical awareness or other underlying causes. This conflict is vividly portrayed through the hero's character, who exhibits profound psychological turmoil and crises. Such depiction prompts the reader to ponder: Is Mohammad Chaaban's delve into his grandfather's history an attempt to emulate his ancestor, or merely a mirage of identity? What does the prominent portrayal of his grandfather, "The Exiled," signify within the narrative? How does this figure influence the unfolding events and the protagonist's own sense of self? And crucially, what role does this ancestral figure play in shaping identity across generations?

### **The Fragmentation of Identity in the Search for a Silenced History**

Discussing a nation's history involves exploring a crucial facet of its identity, indeed, one of its most defining elements. History is not merely a relic of the past but a lived experience that contributes to the construction and shaping of subsequent temporal realities. The present is not an isolated phenomenon but is inherently linked to and melded by the past. Alongside these temporal dimensions, there exists a third, equally vital component: society itself.

Identity and history are inextricably linked to specific individuals governed by a uniform set of social rules, thereby personalizing history. It encapsulates their past, represents their lived experiences, and chronicles their achievements. Given that identity is so tightly interwoven with history, any manipulation or distortion of



historical facts can lead to disturbances and instabilities in one's identity. "The foggy perception of history produces a very limited view of all cultures".<sup>2</sup>

A person's ignorance of their historical background can result in only a superficial understanding of their reality and the life they lead, pushing them towards societal isolation and the adoption of ideologies often at odds with prevailing social values and norms. This lack of historical awareness can also trigger introspective journeys, opening avenues to psychological crises that can debilitate an individual mentally.

This scenario is vividly illustrated through the character of Mohammad Chaaban in the novel. His ignorance about the history of his exiled grandfather, banished by the French colonizers to the island of Caledonia, has haunted him from his childhood, compelling him to question the origins of his unusual nickname, "The Exiled." A poignant scene unfolds when a teacher in a brown suit, with a distinct voice, proclaims, "The Exiled... The Exiled," prompting Mohammad Chaaban the Exiled to raise his right arm. From his earliest days in elementary school, he sensed the weight and peculiarity of his nickname, a label that piqued the curiosity of all who heard it for the first time and faced his classmates' smiles with immense patience. When queried about the secret of the nickname, his response was always prompt yet shrouded in uncertainty: "I don't know".<sup>3</sup>

Mohammad Chaaban's oblivion regarding his origins plunged him into a profound identity crisis. This crisis is rooted in the political system's negligence of a crucial aspect of Algeria's history. The official history of Algeria fails to acknowledge the grievous acts committed by the French colonizer, which included the exile of numerous Algerian leaders who opposed his repressive policies and condemned his ruthless actions.

Perhaps Sheikh the Exiled is among these unsung heroes, absent from official records yet immortalized in the memory of his descendants through the nickname bestowed upon him. This moniker ignited questions in the minds of his grandson and all first-time hearers, prompting Mohammad Chaaban to beseech his father, Abdel Kawi, for a name change. His father, with a reassuring pat on his frail shoulder and the calm demeanor of a wise man, advised patience: "Wait a little, and

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<sup>2</sup> Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*, translated by Sahar Tawfiq, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Kuwait, no edition stated, p. 68.

<sup>3</sup> Mohammad Moufleh, *The Ghost of the Caldonian*, Dar Al-Muntaha, Algeria, 2015, 1st edition, p. 6.



you will know the secrets of this glorious nickname. It belongs to my grandfather who was exiled to New Caledonia. Have you heard of this island? I doubt it, as the Ministry of Education will not teach you about it. They have forgotten the scars left by the exiled during the colonial era. Wait until you grow up, my son".<sup>4</sup>

Historically, many conflicts among humans have arisen from an excessive pride in their identities, often at the cost of other groups. Yet, the narrative of this novel presents a stark contradiction to the typical human inclination towards self-love. We observe Mohammad Chaaban attempting to dissociate himself from his nickname, which symbolizes his heritage and sense of belonging. This is evidenced by his plea to his father to change his nickname, a request his father denies, instead urging his son to appreciate the significance of this ancestral label. He seeks to imbue his son with the heroic tales of his grandfather, hoping to connect him with a history that, though obscured, remains integral to their family's legacy.

Within the novel, there exists an implicit critique of historians who have overlooked pivotal events and figures in Algerian history, the subject of the novel being one such neglected truth. Mohammad Moufleh subtly draws attention to the fact that the forgotten or ignored history has not disappeared but persists within the community's collective memory, circulating and retaining its significance despite official neglect.

Ideally, knowing one's true history should bolster confidence and strengthen a sense of belonging. However, this has not been the case for Mohammad Chaaban. His sense of alienation is compounded by the governing regime's deliberate concealment of his grandfather's history, resulting in feelings of disappointment, loss, frustration, and a diminished sense of belonging. "Identity becomes alienation; the self divides against itself and transforms from what it should be into what it is, from the possibility of internal freedom to the necessity of submitting to external circumstances after being hit by frustration. Frustration, the opposite of fulfilment, weakens the will and leads to disappointment, relinquishing freedom, feeling sadness without reason, and experiencing despair and misery".<sup>5</sup>

In his isolation, Mohammad Chaaban withdrew from societal connections, distancing himself from friends, loved ones, and even his family. This

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<sup>4</sup> The novel, p. 6.

<sup>5</sup> Hassan Hanafi, *Identity*, Supreme Council for Culture, Cairo, 2012, no edition stated, p. 24.



disconnection led to depression and loneliness, culminating in his contemplation of suicide. "In moments of terrible boredom, he longs for his gloomy room, his only refuge that protects him, if only for a while, from a mysterious world that has shattered all his naive dreams and illusory projects, a world occupied by terrifying obsessions that sometimes drove him to contemplate suicide. Oh, the times of sorrow and gloom".<sup>6</sup>

His suffering began in his childhood. In fact, it was inherent from birth within a family burdened with a legacy that evoked persistent inquiries. Mohammad Chaaban's journey to uncover his identity led him to forgo his own ego. At times, he finds himself compelled to delve into the annals of history associated with his exiled grandfather. On other occasions, he turns to modern means of connection, reaching out to residents of the island of Caledonia via Facebook. This digital exploration serves dual purposes: uncovering his grandfather's past and providing an escape from his own grim reality.

One pivotal connection he forms is with Halima Tayeb, a girl of Algerian descent, "He communicated with her every night until their relationship grew strong. He shared stories of Sheikh the Exiled, and she encouraged him to visit the labor camp and explore some of its remnants in the Noumea Museum. She introduced herself as 'Halima Tayeb.' Her mother hails from the Keldush, descended from French exiles post the Paris Commune revolution, and her father was an Algerian exiled during the Mokrani Revolt in 1871".<sup>7</sup>

The narrative encapsulates the protagonist's "fragmented self," struggling to reconcile its pieces, entrapped by a past that both captivates and confines. His reality hosts merely his body, while his most fervent aspiration, a migration to the dreamlike island, represents a future he hopes will reunite his ideologically rich past with his corporeal existence, currently shackled by a dismal present.

## **2. Presence of Absence and Absence of Presence**

From the outset, the world of the novel immerses us in the duality of presence and absence. However, what is remarkable and distinctive in the novel is the transformation of the absent into the present, and the present into the absent. Through this element, we will attempt to examine this transformation and observe

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<sup>6</sup> The novel, p. 17.

<sup>7</sup> The novel, p. 15.



the mechanisms of its occurrence. But first, we need to clarify who is the absent present? And who is the present absent, how did someone whose presence was established become absent? And how did someone whose absence was confirmed become present?

Mohammad Mufleh in his novel has resorted to a new postmodern narrative technique, which involves personifying the inanimate. He did not stop there but gave the inert character a role that allowed it to surpass the secondary characters in the novel and rival the protagonist in driving the plot. This resulted in an indirect conflict between the character who is truly present (the protagonist) and the character who is virtually present (the exiled grandfather).

If we consider that the latter did not participate actively in the events of the novel, as his participation was indirect. Yet, his presence was influential in it, as he is the primary subject of the novel in addition to remaining present throughout the events of the novel from beginning to end in the memory of his family, and the memory of all his descendants, especially at Mohammad Shaaban. To the extent that the latter abandoned his real personality and began to impersonate his grandfather's persona. He was present in body but absent in his touch and personality that express his self.

Thus, Mohammad Shaaban was the present absent in the events of the novel, but his personality was contained in the persona of his exiled grandfather. "Mohammad Shaaban did not hide his obsession with searching for the past of his ancestors, he felt that this new world he had entered trembling would grant him the pleasure to live in peace with the spirits of the exiled dead".<sup>8</sup>

Mohammad Chaaban has forsaken the present to embrace a past replete with his ancestors' valor, seeking solace and answers to the tormenting questions that disturb his peace. His current era, marred by conflicts, suffering, and economic strife, has seen him endure the darkest decade, witnessing atrocities and the loss of innocents, including his friend, "He has felt a sense of alienation since the dark decade, as some politicians call it, after it was red and will change after a while to gray, and why not become white? God have mercy on you, my murdered neighbor and friend Abdel Halim the Fascinating".<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> The novel, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> The novel, p. 13.



In this manner, Mohammad Chaaban epitomizes the contemporary era, an era riddled with contradictions where the novelist deliberately obfuscates the true nature of the hero, portraying him as a prisoner of his own illusions. This character symbolizes the lived reality of today. The politicians, who have deliberately obscured the true history of Algeria, govern this reality. The epoch of Mokrani's resistance is depicted as merely a fleeting moment in the extensive history of Algeria. Mohammad Moufleh strategically elevates the character of the Exiled, a historical symbol of that period, to a role pivotal to the narrative, almost rivalling the protagonist, despite its virtual presence.

Thus, the novel aims to direct the reader's gaze towards the official history, urging a meticulous and critical re-evaluation. Such scrutiny is essential to unearth the veiled narratives of Algeria's history, narratives not officially acknowledged but deeply ingrained in the people's memory and passed down orally through generations, as exemplified by the moniker 'The Exiled' in the novel. This unrecorded history, alive in the collective consciousness of society, demands to be documented.

4Although the novelist Mohammad Moufleh references a historical event that has been largely overlooked, we must acknowledge that his novel cannot be regarded as an official document for recording history. As articulated, "the novelist does not write history as it should be, but rather, he integrates his artistic vision into something that bears the imprint of novelistic historicity. Indeed, the creative novelistic effort stems from an interpretation of history, an element deemed essential".<sup>10</sup> The novel acts as a catalyst or a reminder, urging the collective memory to reassess the historical facts that have been omitted by Algerian historians. This reevaluation could have a significant impact on the identity of the Algerian individual, potentially boosting their self-assurance and strengthening their societal bonds.

Consequently, the narrative unfolds a conflict between two characters: one existing in the current milieu and the other from a bygone era. This setup introduces a temporal conflict that is evident first through the theme of the novel, which revisits a historical period experienced by Algeria, notably during the resistance led by Mokrani. The narrative begins in the contemporary era and then harkens back to

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<sup>10</sup> Abdel Malik Mortad, *In the Theory of the Novel: Research in Narrative Techniques*, National Council for Culture, Arts and Letters, Kuwait, 1998, no edition stated, p. 35.



the past as a form of escape from the oppressive realities of the present. This inclination towards the past is not unique to writers; it is a general human condition. Historically, humans have looked back at the past as a repository of cherished memories, whereas the present is often viewed as a source of distress, sorrow, and affliction.

The pre-Islamic poets exemplify this sentiment well. Concurrently, the fear of an uncertain future dominates human thought, instigating a retreat from current adversities. Thus, individuals often find themselves yearning for the past while expressing discontent with their present circumstances. This dichotomy gives rise to a psychological conflict where individuals are torn between an inaccessible past and an unwelcoming present, constantly grappling with existential questions and uncertainties about their destiny, as exemplified by the protagonist, Mohammad Chaaban.

#### **From Identity-to-Identity Crisis**

In the previous discussion, we highlighted a conflict between the characters Mohammad Chaaban and his grandfather, Sheikh the Exiled, focusing on themes of presence and absence. In this segment, we delve into the identity dynamics of these characters within their societal contexts. We travel back approximately a century and a half to the year 1871 to explore the identity of Sheikh the Exiled through three letters preserved by Mohammad Chaaban's father. Meanwhile, Mohammad Chaaban is temporally connected to the novel's publication year, 2015. This exploration prompts us to consider whether the passage of time could influence one's identity and whether environmental factors might shape one's self-concept, especially considering that Sheikh Mohammad Chaaban spent the majority of his life in exile.

In the novel, there is an intricate interlacing of literary genres, yet our focus will be drawn more toward the temporal intertwining depicted within the narrative. The novel transports us from the contemporary year of 2015 back to a distant 1871, endeavoring to juxtapose these two periods. It idealizes the past as a time resplendent with heroics and accomplishments, in stark contrast to the present, which is portrayed as a period marked by misery and other disdainful attributes.

Haj Abdel Kawi epitomizes this perspective when he laments to his son Mohammad Chaaban, "This era of yours is 'nonsense upon nonsense', my son, damn the era of



crimes and all sins. The end of the world is near. This is what I tell you. The Resurrection is close, and here are its signs as the Master of Creation, peace be upon him, informed us".<sup>11</sup> This bleak view of the current era fosters a sense of hatred and disdain for the fluctuating realities of today within the son's psyche, leading to a discord between him and society. Mohammad Chaaban finds himself grappling with obsession: "He said to himself that he had become a victim of compulsive obsessions. How could he trust this foolish time that abounded with calamities?".<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, while the father's and son's perspectives are shrouded in gloom and pessimism about the reality they inhabit, their view of the past, particularly the era lived by their grandfather, Sheikh the Exiled, is regarded as a model of perfection. This romanticization prompts Mohammad Chaaban to disconnect from his own ego and seek to merge with the persona of his grandfather, the Exiled. This introspection raises the question: What was the nature of the grandfather's perception of his own present, which now serves as the past for the son and father?

Through an analysis of the three letters penned by Sheikh Mohammad the Exiled, which vividly express his 'ego,' we gain insight into the conditions of his life and his exile on the island of Caledonia. Furthermore, these letters recount his daring escape from Caledonia to the city of Jeddah in Saudi Arabia. It is important to note that the letters reveal the Exiled's profound connection to his homeland, his family, and his community, a bond so strong that he refers to the island of Caledonia as a desolate place. He articulates this sentiment in one of the letters: "From the weak slave Mohammad bin Adah bin Lazraq bin Sidi Al-Raji, sends his brothers and cousins greetings and pure salutations from the land of desolation".<sup>13</sup> Simultaneously, the letters encapsulate Sheikh the Exiled's intense yearning for his homeland. He conveys this longing through his words: "Dear brothers, pray for me and all the exiles to return home, for my soul longs to see you and wishes to embrace you in the presence of my sheikhs."

I miss the smell of the country, especially the Green Mountain and Wadi Minah, and the horses and knights and the weapons of Sidi Mohammad bin Ouda, and to spend one day with you at the shrine, recite a chain of the Holy Quran, and attend

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<sup>11</sup> The novel, p. 29.

<sup>12</sup> The novel, p. 19.

<sup>13</sup> The novel, p. 39.



the hearing of the greatness"<sup>14</sup>. The references to Green Mountain and Wadi Minah, among other places, underscore the profound connection between Sheikh the Exiled and his homeland, a bond that remains unbroken despite the vast geographical distance.

This distance does not diminish his sense of identity; rather, it appears to enhance it. This phenomenon is evident in the contrasting experiences of Sheikh the Exiled and his grandson, Mohammad Chaaban. The former, despite being physically removed from Algeria due to exile, feels a deep and almost sacred connection to his country.

In contrast, Mohammad Chaaban experiences a disconnection from his homeland and community to such an extent that he seeks to distance himself by any means possible, whether through thoughts of suicide, as previously mentioned, or by dreaming of migrating to what he calls the "island of dreams," or by contemplating a complete change of his nickname to sever ties with his identity: "He felt that he had freed himself from the constraints of the house and his mother's complaints, and in his determined walk, he wished he could change his nickname to the Caledonian, perhaps more eloquent than the nickname Exiled. And will he achieve his desire to see Halima Tayeb and live on the enchanting island?"<sup>15</sup>

In comparing the identities of Sheikh Mohammad the Exiled and his grandson Mohammad Chaaban, we observe a stark contrast. The former, despite his physical distance from his native environment of Algeria, steadfastly preserves his identity through all possible means, whereas the latter, despite residing within his cultural milieu, undergoes what is known as an identity crisis. This juxtaposition illustrates that neither place nor time fundamentally alters an individual's sense of self. Instead, it is the specific circumstances they encounter that have the most profound impact, and when discussing these circumstances, colonialism emerges as a significant factor.

Indeed, Sheikh Mohammad the Exiled lived during the era of colonization, but he remained deeply embedded in the culture, habits, and beliefs of Algerian society, as indicated by his earlier expressions. It is crucial to remember that Sheikh Mohammad the Exiled was a resister to the colonial forces that sought to obliterate

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<sup>14</sup> The novel, p. 39.

<sup>15</sup> The novel, p. 120.



the Algerians' beliefs and identity and impose their own. The resistance led by Sheikh Mohammad the Exiled and other mujahideen was fundamentally a defense of their freedom and their deeply held convictions.

This is what caused the exile of Mohammad the Exiled to the island of Caledonia. In addition, the presence of Sheikh the Exiled was during the early days of colonization, approximately 41 years from the entry of the French colonizer into Algeria. At that time, the Algerian citizen was saturated with national belonging, before the systematic destruction period that affected all fields, including Algerian culture and identity, which lasted about 132 years.

As for the current period, we are confronted with a fracture in identity, a consequence of the colonial policies pursued by the French colonizers, compounded by the impact of globalization which has blurred the distinctions between identities. "The individual's ability to adopt more options regarding their identity means that people who live close to each other and belong to the same class now have different identities. Thus, globalization has opened many possibilities".<sup>16</sup> Indeed, we exist in an era marked by independence and freedom, yet this era has been preceded by two significant epochs, colonization and globalization, that have profoundly influenced our sense of identity and belonging.

### Conclusion

The issue of identity is a recurrent theme explored in many contemporary Arab and Western novels. However, the unique contribution of Mohammad Moufleh's novel, "The Ghost of the Caldonian," lies in its integration of identity with history, and its examination of the impact of globalization. This dual focus invites us to contrast the notion of identity in past centuries with that of our current time, revealing that identity in earlier times, particularly in the eighteenth century, was stable and strongly linked to a person's connection to their environment.

In contrast, in our modern era, identity appears fragmented, largely due to a diminished sense of place and community, as exemplified by the protagonist, Mohammad Chaaban. The primary agents of this disintegration are the legacy of colonialism and, to a lesser extent, the forces of globalization. These dynamics have coerced individuals, especially in the developing world, into adopting a

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<sup>16</sup> Haralambos and Holborn, *Sociology of Culture and Identity*, translated by Hatem Hameed Mohsen, Dar Kiwan, Damascus, 2010, 1st edition, p. 98.



homogeneous global culture promulgated by the major powers. This cultural hegemony has become the standard to emulate, leading to the dilution of the identities of weaker nations into those of stronger ones.

In conclusion, while "The Ghost of the Caldonian" overtly tackles the issue of identity, it also subtly weaves in other significant themes and concerns. It critiques the historiography of Algeria and suggests potential new sources that could contribute to a revised narrative of the nation's past. Additionally, the novel enriches its narrative by blending various literary genres and incorporating elements of historical documentation alongside the art of letter writing. This multifaceted approach not only enriches the literary texture of the work but also broadens the scope of its discourse on identity, history, and globalization.

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