ACADEMIA International Journal for Social Sciences
Volume 4, Issue 3, 2025 ISSN-L (Online): 3006-6638

Cultural Belonging and Identity Crisis in Habayeb's Before the Queen Falls Asleep: A Palestinian Diaspora Study

Zargul
MPhil Scholar, Department of English, Riphah International University Faisalabad Campus Pakistan

Dr. Mazhar Hayat
dr.mazharhayat@riphahfsd.edu.pk
HOD DELL, Riphah International University, Faisalabad Campus, Pakistan
Corresponding Author: * Dr. Mazhar Hayat dr.mazharhayat@riphahfsd.edu.pk

Received: 10-06-2025 **Revised:** 25-07-2025 **Accepted:** 05-08-2025 **Published:** 16-08-2025

ABSTRACT:

This study explores the themes of cultural belonging and identity crisis in Habayeb's Before the Queen Falls Asleep within the broader context of the Palestinian diaspora. The novel offers a poignant narrative that captures the emotional and psychological struggles of displaced Palestinians, especially women, grappling with fragmented identities across generational and geographical boundaries. The protagonist's inner turmoil reflects the collective experience of exilic displacement, inherited memory, and a persistent longing for a homeland that exists more vividly in imagination than in physical reality. Habayeb weaves personal memory with national trauma, exposing how exile reshapes individual and communal identities, leading to a deep sense of unbelonging in both the host and the homeland. The crisis of identity is exacerbated by a cultural disconnect, where characters often feel alienated from the cultures they inhabit, yet struggle to fully connect with the Palestinian identity that has been shaped by nostalgia, loss, and resistance. Through a diasporic lens, the study analyzes how Habayeb articulates the tension between memory and present reality, tradition and modernity, and the persistent search for self in a world marked by exile. This paper ultimately argues that the novel powerfully illustrates the emotional costs of diaspora through the lens of cultural displacement.

***Keywords**: Cultural Belonging, Exile, Identity Crisis, Palestinian Diaspora*

INTRODUCTION:

Identity and belonging are important subject matters in Palestinian literature, specially when observed via the lens of diaspora. Huzama Habayeb's novel Before the Queen Falls Asleep affords a deeply intimate narrative that explores the complicated layers of displacement, reminiscence, and the fractured experience of cultural identification experienced by Palestinians in exile, As Homi K. Bhabha states "Cultural identity is neither singular nor fixed; it is always in process, constituted through hybridity, translation, and negotiation in the spaces between cultures" (p. 2). As a part of a broader culture of Palestinian females writing, Habayeb's work critiques political silences and cultural erasures through foregrounding private testimonies of loss, longing, and survival. Her novel specializes in the inner worlds of girls stuck among the inherited trauma of dispossession and alienation in foreign spaces.

In the context of the Palestinian diaspora, identification is not simply a static label but an ongoing negotiation moulded by historic trauma, generational reminiscence, and lived experiences in host societies. According to Avtar Brah (1996) "Diasporic identities are at once local and global, rooted in specific histories yet traversed by global processes, cultural belonging is constructed in the interstices of these complex personalities" (p. 208). Palestinians, denied a strong fatherland, convey often fragmented self as they can not go back to their land and a present they cannot fully inhabit.

Habayeb's protagonist embodies this liminality: she is haunted by the memories of her ancestors, the ache of exile, and the constant need to reconcile her inherited Palestinian identity with the alienating culture of her surroundings. This inner war exhibits itself in subtle ways, via reminiscence, silence, language, and even every day rituals, illustrating how identity may be both a shelter and a burden. The novel's importance lies in its potential to personalize the political. Rather than focusing totally on the situation of exile, Habayeb delves into the emotional and mental toll of displacement. The protagonist's crisis is not just about being away from Palestine; it is about not knowing who she is without it. Helena Lindholm Schulz (2003) states that "For Palestinians, identity is deeply embedded in collective memory, the experience of dispossession, and the ongoing attachment to a homeland from which they are physically separated but emotionally inseparable" (p. 5). Her fight for cultural belonging displays a deeper, existential query which lies in the hearts of many within the diaspora: Where do I belong when the place I am supposed to belong to exists only in stories? This question resonates with the intergenerational trauma experienced by Palestinians, where the homeland is not only a physical space but a symbolic one, constructed and preserved through memories, stories, and resistance. Furthermore, the novel highlights the gendered dimensions of exile and identity. Palestinian women in diaspora, often caught between conservative traditions and modern diasporic realities, face unique cultural pressures. Habayeb gives voice to these silent struggles, portraying how women navigate not only political exile but also cultural expectations and familial obligations. The protagonist's inner life reveals the quiet forms of resistance and resilience that define the diasporic female experience. This study aims to examine how Habayeb's Before the Queen Falls Asleep articulates the intricacies of cultural belonging and identity crisis within the Palestinian diaspora. Through literary analysis and diasporic theory, the paper investigates how the novel describes the emotional landscapes of displacement, and how identity is continually reconstructed amidst the tensions of memory, exile, and cultural hybridity. In doing so, it seeks to contribute to the understanding of Palestinian diasporic literature as a space of both mourning and meaning-making.

Continuing from the preliminary exploration, Before the Queen Falls Asleep may be visible as a literary embodiment of the Palestinian experiences in exile, in which identity is neither constant nor completely formed, however, continuously fashioned through dislocation, reminiscence, and the desire to belong. Edward Said (2000) narrates, Exile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience. It is the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; the essential sadness can never be surmounted (p. 173). Habayeb's narrative voice is powerful, drawing attention to the inner fragmentation that exile imposes on her characters. This fragmentation is not always geographical but psychological, in which the protagonist is stuck among narratives of the past and the present. She is forced to navigate the inherited memories of a homeland she never physically inhabited, while also attempting to build a coherent identity within a host culture that often denies her legitimacy.

The novel constructs a feel of belonging. Cultural traditions, language, food, and familial memories grow to be the handiest anchors of Palestinian identity in a foreign land. Yet, those anchors are themselves fragile, regularly distorted by time, nostalgia, and trauma. Habayeb delicately portrays how the protagonist clings to the recollections and memories handed down through older generations, but concurrently feels suffocated through them. This duality lies at the heart of the identity crisis: the desire to belong to a cultural legacy that feels distant and inaccessible, and the simultaneous urge to break free from it in order to forge an independent sense of self. Language performs a pivotal function within the novel, appearing both as a bridge and a barrier to cultural identity. The protagonist's interaction with Arabic, the language of her heritage, is intimate but strained. While it connects her to her roots, it

additionally incorporates the load of unstated grief and generational silence. In contrast, the languages of the host country represent both assimilation and alienation, vital for survival however without emotional depth. Habayeb makes use of this anxiety to focus on the diasporic individual's linguistic limbo, wherein language will become a site of identity negotiation. Moreover, the narrative underscores how exile influences not just people but also entire family structures. The older era reminiscences of Palestine as a misplaced paradise, idealized as a myth. Meanwhile, younger generations strive to relate to these memories, finding themselves trapped between reverence for the past and the realities of their own present lives. This generational gap contributes to identity crisis, as younger characters are expected to uphold cultural values they barely understand or feel connected to. Habayeb poignantly depicts these tensions within family settings, showing how cultural transmission can be both a gift and a burden.

In short, Habayeb's novel portrays a deeply human portrayal of what it means to stay in exile, to inherit loss, and to seek belongingness in a world that always reminds one of their displacement. Through the lens of cultural belonging and loss of identity, *Before the Queen Falls Asleep* becomes a collective narrative of humans searching for home.

LITERATURE REVIEW:

Palestinian diasporic literature highlights themes of belongingness and identity crisis. Rooted in exile, statelessness, and displacement, Palestinian literature serves as both a repository of collective memories and a site of resistance. This literature review consists of the relevant academic review of diasporic identity, cultural memory, and female subjectivity, particularly in relation to Huzama Habayeb's Before the Queen Falls Asleep (2016). By placing Habayeb's work in conversation with existing theoretical frameworks and related literary texts, the review demonstrates how her novel deepens our understanding of identity formation in the context of exile.

Diaspora and the Discourse of Displacement

Edward Said, in his seminal work Reflections on Exile, emphasizes that exile is not merely a geographical condition but a deeply emotional and intellectual one. Said (2000) argues that exile involves "the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place" (p. 173). Said's insight is foundational for reading Before the Queen Falls Asleep, where the protagonist experiences an acute sense of alienation, both from her cultural roots and from the host society she inhabits. Her exile is both psychological and physical which mirrors her fragmented sense of self.
Stuart Hall's theories on cultural identity, particularly in his essay "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990) narrate that Identity is a process of becoming, shaped by cultural belonging, collective memory, and the narrative through which communities understand themselves (pp. 222-237). Hall distinguishes between two definitions of identity: one that views identity as a stable essence rooted in a shared culture and history, and another that sees identity as a fluid, ever-changing process shaped by history, culture, and power. Habayeb's protagonist possesses the second form of identity, as her selfhood is constantly shaped by memories of a homeland she has never visited and the cultural expectations placed upon her as a diasporic Palestinian woman.

Memory, Nostalgia, and National Identity

The importance of memory in constructing cultural belonging is another key theme in Palestinian literature. As James E. Young and Marianne Hirsch (1993) suggest in their work on post memory, "Memory is not only an individual experience but a collective one that is transmitted across generations".

Post memory, as Hirsch defines it, is the relationship the "generation after" bears to the personal, collective, and cultural trauma of those who came before. In Habayeb's novel, the protagonist's memories are largely shaped by family narratives, stories, and traditions that aim to preserve a Palestinian identity in exile. This inherited memory functions as a double-edged weapon; it sustains a sense of belonging but also burdens the protagonist with emotional weight that she cannot reconcile with her lived reality. Ilan Pappé and Rashid Khalidi have both written extensively on how memory and narrative sustain Palestinian identity. They focus upon the role of cultural production, including literature, in resisting the elimination of Palestinian history and presence. Habayeb contributes to this effort through fiction that centers on emotional truth and domestic life, moving beyond overt political rhetoric to illuminate the subtler psychological impacts of dispossession.

Women in Exile: Gendered Dimensions of Belonging

Feminist scholars have emphasized the gendered dimensions of exile and identity. In the Palestinian context, women's experiences have often been marginalized in dominant nationalist narratives, which focus more on male heroism and public struggle. Miriam Cooke and Amal Amireh argue that Palestinian women's literature offers a counter-narrative that explores the private, emotional, and domestic impacts of political conflict. Habayeb, in line with these feminist critiques, centers her narrative on the internal world of a female protagonist who is deeply affected by cultural and familial pressures. Edward Said (1994) describes, "For women, exile often entails a double displacement; from the homeland and from the gendered spaces in which their identities were anchored, compelling them to renegotiate both cultural belonging and the meaning of home" (p. 179). Her identity crisis is shaped not only by exile but by gender norms, silences, and expectations passed down through generations.
Furthermore, the notion of "home" becomes more complex in the context of women's writing. While the homeland may be an object of longing and memory, the actual domestic spaces that women inhabit in exile can often be sites of confinement, surveillance, and repression. The protagonist in Before the Queen Falls Asleep embodies this paradox: she yearns for a homeland she never knew, yet also feels trapped within the domestic and cultural roles she is expected to fulfill in the diasporic setting.

Language and Cultural Transmission
Language plays a significant role in the formation and preservation of identity in diaspora. Scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Frantz Fanon disclose how language works to control a culture or to resist. In Palestinian diaspora literature, Arabic serves as a marker of identity, tradition, and resistance. However, the younger generations raised outside Palestine often experience linguistic dislocation. In Habayeb's novel, the protagonist's connection to Arabic is emotionally charged, while it ties her to her cultural roots, it also represents generational trauma and a history of suffering. The host language, by contrast, becomes a tool of survival but lacks emotional attachment. As C. Kramsch (1998) narrates that "Language is the principal means by which cultural knowledge is transmitted and preserved; it carries the values, histories, and identities of a people across generations" (p. 3). This linguistic duality underscores the complexity of identity in diaspora, where individuals must constantly switch between two languages and cultures. The inability to fully belong to either world creates a space of hybridity, as theorized by Homi Bhabha. Habayeb's work reflects this hybridity, portraying characters who live in the "in-between" space, emotionally and culturally suspended between homeland and host land.

Literary Comparisons and Contextualization

Before the Queen Falls Asleep shares thematic concerns with works by authors like Sahar Khalifeh, Liana Badr, and Susan Abul Hawa. These writers similarly explore the emotional interiority of women in the

diaspora, focusing on memory, trauma, effects of statelessness and exile. Habayeb's focus on lyrical prose, emotional depth, and psychological nuance places her within this tradition while also offering a distinct voice that emphasizes silent suffering and internal resistance.

Moreover, Habayeb's decision to explore identity through the lens of storytelling and oral literature connects her work to the tradition of using narrative as a form of resistance. As theorized by Gayatri Spivak and others, the act of telling one's story in the face of erasure is itself a political gesture. In Before the Queen Falls Asleep, the protagonist's relationship with storytelling, both as a listener and as a bearer of memory, becomes a means of negotiating her identity and affirming her existence. From the lenses of postcolonial theory, feminist critique, and trauma studies, the novel can be seen as a powerful articulation of the cultural and psychological dimensions of Palestinian exile.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK:

Helena Lindholm Schulz has written significantly about fluid and dynamic nature of Palestinian identity during displacement and statelessness. Her work The Reconstruction of Palestinian Nationalism: Between Revolution and Statehood (1999) offers a critical theoretical framework on the political, social, and emotional dimensions of Palestinian identity. Applying Schulz's theories to Huzama Habayeb's Before the Queen Falls Asleep helps us understand the crisis of cultural identity that plagues characters toiling in exile, memory, and inherited trauma.

Identity as a Constructed and Contested Concept:

One of Helena Lindholm Schulz's valuable arguments is that identity is not an essentialist concept, however it is a socially built and contested concept. In the context of the Palestinian people, Schulz asserts that identity has been shaped through a dialectical link among internal self-definition and external labeling by dominant powers, colonial regimes, Israeli occupation, Arab host countries, and international institutions. This understanding of identity is crucial when analyzing Before the Queen Falls Asleep. The protagonist is not born in Palestine; instead, her entire sense of being Palestinian is built on stories, myths, silences, and trauma passed down through generations. Stuart Hall (1990) narrates that "Cultural identity is not a fixed essence, but a positioning; it is always constructed through memory, fantasy, narrative, and myth and is subjected to the continuous play of history, culture and power" (p. 226). Her identity is neither fully authentic nor entirely imagined. Schulz's theory highlights this ambiguity, noting that Palestinian identity has developed in response to continual exclusion, displacement, and political denial. The protagonist's identity crisis mirrors this ambiguous and contested space.

Collective Memory and the National Narrative

Schulz emphasises on the role of collective memory in the construction of Palestinian identity. According to her, in the absence of a recognized nation-state and due to forced displacement, Palestinians have relied on shared memory, oral history, and cultural symbols to sustain a coherent sense of national identity. This collective memory is often rooted in the 1948 Nakba (catastrophe), the 1967 war, and subsequent waves of refugee experiences, which form the moral and emotional bedrock of Palestinian national consciousness.

In Before the Queen Falls Asleep, the protagonist inherits memory rather than direct experience. The stories she hears from older generations, particularly women, create a symbolic, idealized, distant, and sacred Palestine. Schulz argues that collective memory in the diaspora acts as both an instrument of unity and a source of identity confusion. This duality is sharply portrayed in the novel, where memory is

simultaneously a source of cultural richness and psychological entrapment. The protagonist feels compelled to carry the weight of a homeland she never touched, often at the cost of forging her own independent identity.

Diaspora and Nationalism: Identity Beyond Borders

A key element of Schulz's framework is the concept of borderless nationalism. Palestinian nationalism, unlike traditional nationalism, is not tied to a specific territorial state but to an imagined and remembered homeland. Schulz explains that Palestinian nationalism has evolved in the diaspora through cultural practices, community life, and political activism that transcend borders. This idea resonates deeply with the narrative world of Habayeb's novel. The protagonist's identity is shaped not by a national territory but by the emotional, symbolic, and cultural constructions of Palestine transmitted by her family and community. Habayeb, through fiction, reinforces what Schulz outlines in theory that Palestinian identity in diaspora is maintained not through land but through emotional continuity, cultural performance, and a shared sense of historical injustice. John B. Anderson (1992) narrates "Diasporas often sustain nationalist sentiments through the preservation of cultural practices, the remembrance of homeland, and the political mobilization for its liberation, even when geographically distant" (p. 12).

However, this kind of nationalism can also intensify personal identity crises as without a homeland, identity becomes an abstract ideal, often in tension with the lived experiences of individuals growing up in foreign societies. In Before the Queen Falls Asleep, this tension is visible through the protagonist's emotional attachment to Palestine often isolates her from her surrounding environment, creating a deep sense of unbelonging in both worlds.

The Role of Women and Family Structures

Schulz pays attention to the role of social institutions, especially the family, in transmitting and preserving Palestinian identity. She argues that in the absence of formal state structures, family units become the primary vessels for cultural continuity, national memory, and emotional belonging. Women, in particular, are central to this process, as they are often the storytellers, caretakers, and moral anchors of the family. Deniz Kandiyoti (1988) describes that "Women's role within the family are central to the reproduction of cultural values, social norms and collective identity, making them key agents in the preservation and transformation of family structures" (p.275).

In Habayeb's novel, this theory comes alive through the character of the mother and other female figures who pass down stories, customs, and silent grief. Yet, Schulz also notes the limitations of this dynamic, women are expected to preserve culture, often at the expense of their own agency and modern aspirations as the protagonist's inner conflict, between loyalty to her inherited identity and her desire for autonomy, is a direct reflection of Schulz's observation.

The Emotional Dimension of Identity

Schulz argues that identity is not just rational or political but deeply emotiona. Emotions such as grief, nostalgia, anger, and longing are not merely by-products of exile, they actively shape the construction of Palestinian identity. In Before the Queen Falls Asleep, the protagonist's identity is built through longing for a homeland. Her sense of self is shaped by emotional fragments: her mother's sadness, her grandmother's silence, the rituals of remembrance. These emotional inheritances echo Schulz's assertion that emotions are fundamental in shaping the diasporic Palestinian identity. The novel does not merely narrate the political loss of homeland; it reveals the emotional and psychological aftershocks that persist across generations.

Helena Lindholm Schulz's theoretical framework provides essential tools for understanding the complexities of cultural belonging and identity crisis in Palestinian diaspora narratives. Her concepts, identity as constructed and contested, the role of collective memory, borderless nationalism, the importance of family structures, and the emotional dimension of exile, are all deeply relevant to the world of Before the Queen Falls Asleep. Huzama Habayeb's novel serves as a powerful fictional representation of these theoretical concerns. By applying Schulz's framework to the novel, one gains a deeper understanding of how Palestinian identity is formed, transmitted, and troubled in the context of exile.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS:

Huzama Habayeb's Before the Queen Falls Asleep presents a profound exploration of cultural belonging and identity crisis in the Palestinian diaspora. The novel, although diffused in its political commentary, is deeply charged with emotional and cultural tensions stemming from exile. The Palestinian diasporic protagonist has a fragmented identity and inherited trauma that Helena Lindholm Schulz theorizes in her work on Palestinian nationalism and reminiscence. This textual evaluation draws on of the novel which tell us how Habayeb weaves the personal and political, the familial and historical, into a rich tapestry of diasporic identity.

The Inherited Identity and Burden of Memory

From the opening chapters, Habayeb situates the protagonist in a world of inherited recollections and silent grief. The protagonist's mother and grandmother are vital figures in transmitting Palestinian identityto younger generation through emotional expression, rituals, and storytelling. One of the most poignant moments occurs when the grandmother recounts the story of their displacement during the Nakba. Though the protagonist herself has never seen Palestine, yet her grandmother's fragmented narratives shape her internal world:

"She never spoke of Palestine without tears in her eyes, as though each memory were too heavy for her body to carry. It was not a story; it was a wound retold." (p. 10)

This passage reflects upon Helena Lindholm Schulz's notion of collective memory as a tool of identity formation. The grandmother's emotional storytelling functions not merely as recollection but also as a reenactment of loss, meant to imprint Palestine on the next generation. However, for the protagonist, these stories do not instill clarity but confusion, she becomes burdened by memories that are not hers yet deeply affect her. Her identity is shaped by inherited trauma, a central aspect of Schulz's concept of post-memory in diaspora.

The Ambiguity of Belonging

Throughout the novel, Habayeb skillfully depicts the protagonist's feeling of not truly belonging to her host country nor the imagined Palestine of her elders. She is caught in a cultural and emotional in-betweenness where her surroundings feel alien, yet her roots are invisible:

"She wore the name of Palestine like a garment two sizes too big, ill-fitting and always slipping off her shoulders." (p. 282)

This metaphor poignantly illustrates the protagonist's identity crisis. Her association with Palestine is imposed upon her rather than her feeling of attachment naturally. This aligns with Schulz's idea of identity as constructed and contested, not a natural inheritance but a social and political imposition, negotiated through memory, family, and society.

Furthermore, in her host society, she experiences subtle and overt forms of alienation. Her name, her food, her customs mark her as different. Yet, her attempts to connect with her Palestinian heritage often leave her feeling like an outsider there as well. The protagonist confesses at one point:
"They told me to remember Palestine, but no one taught me how to be Palestinian."
The core of her crisis is encapsulated in the above-mentioned sentence.. While she is surrounded by symbols of Palestine, embroidered dresses, stories of olives and keys, and ancestral homes, she lacks a grounded, lived connection to the place. The emotional and symbolic overload of identity, inherited rather than experienced, results in a hollow form of cultural belonging that Schulz identifies as common among second-generation diaspora Palestinians.

The Role of Women in Cultural Transmission

The domestic space in Habayeb's novel is not politically neutral. It turns into an important area for identity construction, mainly for ladies. As Schulz notes, with the absence of state institutions, the family, and particularly women, are considered to be the primary agents of cultural preservation in exile. It is illustrated through the protagonist's relationship with her mother who insists on preserving customs, language, and moral codes, often invoking Palestine as a source of discipline and identity:
"You are a Palestinian girl," her mother would say, "you must not forget who you are."
However, this invocation becomes a source of conflict rather than comfort. The protagonist questions this imposed identity, asking internally:
"If being Palestinian means silence and sorrow, who would want to remember?"
Here, Habayeb brings forth a gendered reading of cultural belonging. The protagonist's struggle is not merely national but deeply personal. Her womanhood is shaped within the constraints of a cultural identity built on loss and nostalgia. She is expected to embody an idealized version of Palestinian femininity, modest, resilient, loyal to memory, but she longs for autonomy and expression. This tension mirrors Schulz's discussion of how cultural identity in diaspora can become rigid and burdensome, especially for women expected to bear its full weight.

Language and the Identity Divide

Language in Before the Queen Falls Asleep becomes a marker of identity, belonging, and disconnection. Arabic, at the same time as the mo tongue, is related to mourning, command, and emotional weight. The protagonist is stuck among Arabic, the language of her own circle of relatives and history, and the language of her host land which gives access to freedom but alienates her from her roots. In one scene, she displays:

"Arabic turned into the sound of lullabies and warnings. It cradled and managed me."

This duality demonstrates how language functions as a bridge and a boundary. Arabic connects her to Palestine emotionally, but it also becomes the language of repression, tied to familial control and cultural expectations. On the other hand, the host country's language provides a means of escape and self-expression, yet it marks her as assimilated, betraying her heritage. This conflict echoes Schulz's idea that identity in exile is shaped by linguistic and emotional negotiations. Language becomes a space where belonging is both possible and denied, further deepening the protagonist's crisis.

Symbolism and Objects of Memory

Habayeb frequently uses embroidered dresses, heirloom jewelry, and traditional food as carriers of cultural memory. These objects are emotionally charged and reinforce identity. In one instance, the protagonist finds an old scarf belonging to her grandmother:
"It smelled of dust and jasmine, like Palestine, they said. But to me, it only smelled like things I didn't understand."
Here, Habayeb subtly critiques the romanticization of heritage. While these symbols are revered by older generations, the protagonist struggles to form genuine connections with them. Her identity, therefore, is mediated through objects that mean more to others than to herself. This dynamic ties directly into Schulz's theory of symbolic identity construction, where cultural identity is often preserved through artifacts and rituals rather than direct national experience.

Dreams, Imagination, and the "Queen" Motif

The recurring motif of the "Queen" in the title refers to the protagonist's imaginary refuge, an internal world where she can escape the weight of expectations and memory. This escape serves as a metaphor for psychological resistance. In her dreams, she is not a daughter, not a refugee, not a Palestinian girl bound by silence. She is free:
"In my dreams, I was a queen with no borders, no memories, no exile. I belonged to nothing, and that was freedom."
This passage is important as it shows that true cultural belonging, in the protagonist's case, may only be possible in the realm of imagination. Schulz notes that for many in the diaspora, identity becomes a negotiation between memory and imagination, a fantasy of return, of unity, of home. Habayeb uses this motif to underline the protagonist's internal rebellion against the burdensome inheritance of identity. Through rich symbolism, emotional depth, and careful attention to memory and language, Huzama Habayeb's Before the Queen Falls Asleep provides a literary embodiment of the cultural belonging and identity crisis faced by Palestinians in exile. The protagonist's struggle is not only with loss of homeland but with the complex, layered identity imposed by history, family, and politics. Textual moments in the novel resonate powerfully with Helena Lindholm Schulz's theoretical insights, especially her views on collective memory, emotional identity, and the contested nature of diasporic selfhood. Habayeb's fiction, therefore, becomes both a mirror and a critique of the diasporic condition, a poignant reflection of what it means to carry a homeland in one's heart but nowhere else.

FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION:

This study, grounded in Helena Lindholm Schulz's theoretical framework of Palestinian identity formation in diaspora, draws significant conclusions regarding the themes of cultural belonging and identity crisis in Huzama Habayeb's Before the Queen Falls Asleep. Through a close reading of the novel and its embedded symbols, emotional landscapes, and intergenerational narratives, several key findings emerge that deepen our understanding of the Palestinian diasporic experience, especially from a gendered, psychological, and cultural perspective.

Key Findings

Identity as an Inherited and Contested Construct

The compelling finding is that the protagonist's identity is not organically formed, but inherited through emotional, familial, and symbolic channels. Echoing Schulz's theory that Palestinian identity in diaspora is both socially constructed and historically contested, the novel reflects how the younger generation often struggles with an identity that is both sacred and alienating. The protagonist herself has not experienced

life at Palestine, but her identity is constructed from stories, rituals, and grief passed down by her elders. However, these symbols are not internalized without resistance. Her crisis lies in her inability to reconcile this inherited identity with her lived experiences in a foreign land that refuses to accept her fully.

Memory as Both a Connector and a Divider

Following Schulz's emphasis on collective memory, the novel affirms that memory is a primary force in constructing cultural belonging. Yet, it also becomes a source of emotional division. The protagonist is surrounded by memory, her grandmother's tales, her mother's rules, symbolic artifacts, but she experiences a disconnect between these representations and her own internal sense of self. The burden of memory becomes more oppressive than liberating. Instead of creating unity, the inherited trauma often isolates her from the cultural narrative she is expected to uphold. This finding reflects the fragility and complexity of memory in sustaining identity within exile.

Emotional Identity and the Internalization of Exile

Schulz focuses on the emotional dimension of identity, particularly in stateless and displaced communities. Habayeb's novel substantiates this claim with nuance and literary sensitivity. The protagonist's crisis is not primarily political, it is deeply emotional, reflected in her sense of alienation, anxiety, and longing. Identity is not framed through nationalist rhetoric but through private emotions, shame, silence, yearning, and fear. The findings reveal that cultural identity, when shaped by exile, is less about ideology and more about inner dissonance. Habayeb's subtle prose captures this emotional exile, reinforcing Schulz's assertion that the emotional weight of statelessness often precedes political articulation.

Gendered Transmission of Cultural Belonging

Another significant finding is the gendered nature of cultural identity transmission. In Schulz's framework, women, especially mothers and grandmothers, play a pivotal role in preserving and transmitting national identity in the absence of a state. Habayeb portrays this vividly. The protagonist's mother insists on discipline, silence, and cultural continuity. However, this maternal authority becomes a source of emotional conflict, where the protagonist feels emotionally confined rather than culturally enriched. The novel reflects that it is the duty of Palestinian women in exile to preserve their culture, but it often comes at the cost of personal freedom. This adds complexity to Schulz's claim, showing how the family can simultaneously nurture and oppress cultural identity.

The Symbolic vs. Experiential Gap

The novel highlights a significant gap between symbolic and experiential identity. Cultural practices such as wearing the keffiyeh, preparing traditional food, telling ancestral stories etc are portrayed as symbolic acts that the younger generation may not have experienced. This reflects Schulz's idea that the symbolic construction of identity may lose its effectiveness when it is disconnected from lived reality.

Language and Cultural Displacement

Language in the novel emerges as a contesting ground of cultural representations, consistent with Schulz's identification of language as both a carrier of memory and a potential alienating force. Arabic, the language of tradition, is emotionally loaded and tied to generational expectations, while the host

language offers freedom but dislocation. The protagonist's linguistic conflict symbolizes her cultural dislocation, a powerful reflection of Schulz's notion of the internal conflict of identity formation in exile.

The Imaginative Space as a Form of Liberation

The protagonist's creation of internal, imaginative spaces, dreams, metaphors, symbols like "the queen" is a strategy to escape from the burden of her inherited identity. This suggests that the only true freedom available to exilic individuals is within the imagination. This supports Schulz's idea that identity in diaspora is a process of continual negotiation, not resolution. The internal world becomes a site of rebellion and reconstruction, a space where belonging may finally be possible, even if only temporarily

CONCLUSION

Huzama Habayeb's Before the Queen Falls Asleep presents Palestinian identity crisis and a search for cultural belongingness in diaspora with Helena Lindholm Schulz's theoretical insights. Palestinian identity in exile is an emotional, symbolic, and inherited construct, frequently lacking immediate experience but carrying deep psychological and cultural significance. The process of remembering becomes both a political act and an emotional burden for those born outside the homeland, revealing the dual nature of collective memory as both empowering and imprisoning. Diasporic individuals, especially women, navigate cultural identity through constrained roles within family structures, facing the challenge of upholding tradition while seeking individual autonomy. The symbolic enactment of culture cannot replace authentic emotional or experiential connections, resulting in a growing sense of alienation for younger generations in exile. Language becomes a battleground for identity, where the tension between heritage and assimilation underscores the psychological complexities of living between cultures. Imagination becomes a refuge, a space where freedom from memory, loss, and obligation is briefly possible, suggesting that identity may ultimately be more fluid, personal, and evolving than rigidly nationalistic.

Ultimately, Habayeb's novel, when viewed through Schulz's lens, reveals that the Palestinian diaspora identity is not merely a reaction to exile but a layered, emotional journey through memory, gender, silence, and longing. Identity here is not a possession, but a process, a continuous negotiation between who one is told to be and who one wishes to become. This study contributes to the growing scholarship on Palestinian literature by emphasizing upon the subjective realities of identity in exile, and by demonstrating how fiction like Habayeb's can deepen theoretical understandings of diaspora.

REFERENCES

Anderson, B. (1992). Long-distance nationalism: World capitalism and the rise of identity politics. Amsterdam, Netherlands: Centre for Asian Studies Amsterdam.

Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2007). Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Brah, A. (1996). Cartographies of diaspora: Contesting identities. Routledge.

Clifford, J. (1994). Diasporas. Cultural Anthropology, 9(3), 302–338.

Damrosch, D. (2003). What is world literature? Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Ghandour, Z. (2009). A Discourse on Domination in Mandate Palestine: Imperialism, Property and Insurgency. Routledge.

Habayeb, H. (2017). Before the Queen Falls Asleep (K. M. Yacoub, Trans.). Hoopoe Fiction.

Hall, S. (1990). Cultural identity and diaspora. In J. Rutherford (Ed.), Identity: Community, culture, difference (pp. 222–237). Lawrence & Wishart.

Hassan, W. S. (2011). Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature. Oxford University Press.

Jayyusi, S. K. (Ed.). (1992). Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature. Columbia University Press.

Kramsch, C. (1998). Language and culture. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Kanaaneh, R. A. (2002). Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel. University of California Press.

Kandiyoti, D. (1988). Bargaining with patriarchy. Gender & Society, 2(3), 274–290.

Khalidi, R. (1997). Palestinian identity: The construction of modern national consciousness. Columbia University Press.

Matar, D. & Dakwar, R. (Eds.). (2011). Narrating Conflict in the Middle East: Discourse, Image and Communications Practices in Lebanon and Palestine. I.B. Tauris.

Safran, W. (1991). Diasporas in modern societies: Myths of homeland and return. Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies, 1(1), 83–99.

Said, E. W. (1979). The Question of Palestine. Vintage.

Said, E. W. (1994). Culture and imperialism. New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Scheff, T. J. (1994). Bloody revenge: Emotions, nationalism and war. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.

Schulz, H. L., & Hammer, J. (2003). The Palestinian Diaspora: Formation of Identities and Politics of Homeland. Routledge.

Vertovec, S. (1999). Conceiving and researching transnationalism. Ethnic and Racial Studies, 22(2), 447–462.