

Manifestations of Cultural Interaction and Hybridity in the Modern Novel: *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan* by Amir Tag Elsir as a Model

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Abstract

Cultural hybridity is a central concept in contemporary cultural studies, as it expresses the interaction and mutual influence among diverse cultural components, leading to the emergence of new formations characterized by diversity and interconnectedness within the framework of cultural hybridization. In this process, the conventional boundaries of original cultures are transcended. This phenomenon has become a prominent feature of many contemporary literary and artistic works, reflecting various forms of cultural cross-fertilization and integration, as well as the new identities and representations that arise from them.

This study aims to examine *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan* by the Sudanese novelist Amir Tag Elsir, with the objective of identifying the major manifestations of cultural hybridity and investigating how they are embodied through the novel's characters.

Keywords

Cultural hybridity; Novel; *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan*; Amir Tag Elsir.

Introduction

Contemporary fiction has undergone profound transformations affecting both its structures and themes, particularly in light of the changes experienced by modern human beings in their various dimensions. These transformations have reshaped the function of the novel, which has evolved from being merely an artistic medium for storytelling into a broad space that expresses cultural plurality, especially within the postcolonial context. In this framework, several problematic issues have occupied a central position in contemporary critical studies, most notably questions of identity and belonging, migration, and exile. These themes have constituted a focal point of scholarly inquiry.

Amid this context, the concept of **cultural hybridity** emerged as one of the most significant notions employed to understand the complexities of identity and culture in an era characterized by continuous intercultural encounters. Cultural hybridity generally refers to the fusion and intermingling of cultures within a single structure, producing composite forms that resist rigid classification. This phenomenon manifests itself clearly in narrative discourse, particularly through material cultural

elements associated with identity and memory.

Accordingly, the following questions may be raised: **What is meant by cultural hybridity? And how is it manifested in the novel *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan*?**

Conceptual Framework

1. The Concept of Cultural Hybridity

In light of the transformations and changes experienced by many societies under colonial rule, postcolonial studies emerged with a particular focus on identities, especially in the context of migration and exile. These phenomena have profoundly affected identities, rendering them characterized by multiple affiliations. Identity, in this context, is no longer perceived as a fixed entity; rather, it has become a social and cultural construct shaped through interaction with the Other. Identity consists of a set of fundamental common characteristics shared by individuals, such as language, customs, traditions, and a common geographical space. However, ongoing interactions have brought about significant changes, making identity increasingly open to various external influences and endowing it with a dynamic character.

Within this framework, several concepts have emerged, among which **hybridity** occupies a central position. This concept gained prominence through postcolonial studies as a means of describing the realities of identities in contemporary societies by addressing human subjectivities that result

from their interaction and blending with different groups.¹

The notion of hybridity is closely associated with the Indian theorist **Homi Bhabha**, who employed it to examine identity formation within the postcolonial context, particularly when the cultures of the colonizer and the colonized intersect within a common space. According to Bhabha, hybridity "splits identity and turns it into a complex form of intersection and negotiation among spatial locations, historical temporalities, and multiple positions of the self, placing us not before, but within what is neither this nor that, but something else alongside them, and within what is less than one and yet doubled."² Thus, hybridity does not preserve the original culture intact; rather, it deconstructs it, producing an unstable, composite, and divided entity. Identity in this sense is linked to subjects who inhabit more than one space and who are simultaneously influenced by and exert influence upon those spaces, directly or indirectly. Consequently, such identities belong fully to neither space but rather consist of overlapping and intertwined fragments.

These identities, which emerge through the intermingling of cultures, often lead to the marginalization of national culture and those who inhabit it, while elevating the migrant intellectual as the possessor of truth and the embodiment of multiple cultures, regardless of constraints imposed by gender, race, class, or political and cultural positioning.³ In this sense, hybridity tends to relegate local culture to a secondary status, presenting it as unequal to and incapable of

producing an authentic consciousness in comparison with the incoming culture. As a result, the culturally hybrid Other is frequently glorified.

2. The Concept of Identity

Identity is a concept that has occupied scholars in psychology, sociology, and anthropology, making it difficult to define with precision. Identity presents itself through change and transformation, which implies that the question of identity is fundamentally linked to processes of civilizational change and self-affirmation. It constitutes the gateway to understanding the individual and determining his or her affiliations, being composed of referential, material, and subjective elements.⁴ Accordingly, identity is a dynamic concept associated with transformation and change; it manifests itself through the shifts affecting individuals and societies, generating cultural and even civilizational disruptions. Such transformations may arise from colonialism, globalization, or geographical displacement through migration. Hence, questions of identity are particularly significant in moments of crisis and civilizational transition, when the self seeks affirmation in response to changes that have rendered its former self-image insufficient or incompatible with new realities. This disturbance does not imply the disappearance of identity, but rather its reconstruction.

Another perspective defines identity as "the conscious awareness of individual personality and the unconscious drive to preserve it, serving as a measure of the ego's attempts to maintain internal cohesion with

the ideals of the group."⁵ In this sense, identity is not merely related to outward collective belonging but also represents an unconscious condition that compels individuals to preserve and defend it in order to avoid feelings of alienation and estrangement from the group. Accordingly, identity has been described as "the essential truth of a thing or a person, encompassing its intrinsic attributes."⁶ Thus, identity refers to the essence and fundamental dimensions of a person or object rather than to superficial appearances, expressing what remains constant despite temporal and external changes.

Similarly, **Majda Hammoud**, in her work *The Problematic of the Self and the Other*, defines identity as "that which endures within human beings over time, accompanying them in the formation of their personality and determining its stable features, thereby granting their creativity a distinctive character rather than making it a mere imitation of others. Identity is therefore an indispensable condition for the individual, influencing the community and endowing it with its unique characteristics. The self cannot be separated from the collective 'we,' because identity generates a profound sense of belonging and identification with the group, creating a reciprocal process of recognition. Consequently, identity cannot be reduced to a simple and clear-cut definition."⁷

You're right. Since the Arabic text contains citations that correspond to footnotes, the translated text should preserve them with superscript numbering. Below is the same

section with superscript references inserted at the appropriate locations.

2. Cultural Hybridity in *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan*

Transformations of Names and the Significance of Cultural Interpenetration

Names constitute one of the most important markers of an individual's affiliation and even beliefs, as they reflect identity in all its manifestations. They reveal not only outward identity but also the cultural and civilizational interactions experienced by the individual. Consequently, names themselves have become subject to the phenomenon of hybridity, especially in the postcolonial context, where identities are exposed to fragmentation and intersection.

This phenomenon is evident throughout the novel under study, particularly through the protagonist, who travels to Sudan as a migrant seeking discovery. As a result of his interaction with the land and its culture, his name undergoes transformation through the addition of an Arabic name to his English one. This is reflected in his statement:

“I am Gilbert Osman, or Osman the Englishman, as Saif al-Qabila, the eccentric camel trader, used to call me.”⁸

Here, two names are combined: one English, associated with his original identity and culture, and the other Arabic, linked to the new environment. This combination reflects the protagonist's integration into the Sudanese cultural space, where his friendships with local inhabitants led to the

attribution of this new designation. He is no longer perceived as entirely English nor entirely Sudanese, but rather as a synthesis of both identities, indicating cultural interaction and identity transformation. Thus, the name ceases to function merely as a means of identification and becomes an indicator of the character's relationship with the Other and with the new cultural space.

Elsewhere in the narrative, the protagonist explains the origins and significance of his name:

“The first name is the Arabic equivalent of my family name, Osman; the second is derived from that blessed Hijazi well from which prophets and messengers drank and through which impurities have been washed away, and continue to be washed away to this day. I chose it carefully from among several suggestive names that were proposed to me, including the names of prophets, Sufi figures, and famous merchants.”⁹

The first name reflects the protagonist's Western background and English origins, whereas the second symbolizes his integration into and influence by the surrounding culture. Significantly, the protagonist exercises agency in selecting the name that best suits him, despite being offered names carrying religious, spiritual, and social connotations. His choice of “Osman” demonstrates that hybridity is neither random nor imposed, but rather connected to individual consciousness and decision-making. Furthermore, the religious significance of the name suggests a desire to approach and understand Islam.

This phenomenon does not affect only the protagonist; he himself reproduces it in relation to others. Referring to his fiancée, he states:

“Without much thought, I named her Sharafiyya A'id, and it happened that among the disciples of the revered Sheikh Mawlana, who transformed souls, there was a man of about sixty or sixty-five years old named A'id Salalib.”¹⁰

Gilbert, despite his English origins, practices hybridity through naming. Instead of choosing an English second name for his fiancée, he assigns her an Arabic one inspired by a spiritual figure from Sudan. This act reflects profound changes in his cultural references, as he attempts to shape the Sudanese woman according to values and meanings rooted in her own cultural environment.

From another perspective, this act can be interpreted as a form of reproducing the host culture. The latter succeeds, without coercion, in imposing its values and embedding itself within the Western Other, who gradually becomes immersed in and influenced by Arab culture.

Hybridity in naming is not restricted to major characters but extends to secondary figures as well. Gilbert remarks:

“I found an English middle-aged woman named Gloria. Now she is Nasā'im, and she used to be a somewhat well-known archaeologist in London.”¹¹

This woman carries two names: one Western, reflecting her English identity, and another Arabic—Nasā'im (“Breezes”)—

which evokes delicacy and femininity. Such a transformation represents a shift in identity, whereby the woman adopts a name associated with Arab culture. Hybridity here goes beyond the simple addition of another name; it influences the self and leads to the adoption of an alternative identity.

Another example appears in Gilbert's description:

“I stopped by the German Heinrich, at the tailoring shop he managed in the same market... The name of the shop was ‘Bremen Tailoring,’ undoubtedly named after the German city from which he came, and written in both Arabic and English.”¹²

Here, hybridity manifests not through personal names but through place names. The shop does not bear a local designation but rather retains the name of its owner's German hometown, producing a hybrid identity that is neither wholly local nor entirely foreign. Moreover, the name is transliterated and written in both Arabic and English, reflecting linguistic plurality and cultural interpenetration.

Religious Diversity

Religion represents a system of beliefs and practices that provides human beings with explanations of existence. In other words, it is “a psychological, intellectual, and emotional state characterizing a particular individual, or a set of principles and values embraced by a nation or community in belief and practice, manifested in books, references, narratives, customs, and social effects.”¹³ Thus, religion extends beyond rituals to encompass the mind, behavior, and

emotions, becoming an integral part of collective identity and culture.

This type of hybridity appears in the novel through the protagonist, who becomes deeply affected by Islamic rituals. He states:

“Whenever I passed by the mud mosques during lesson hours, I savored the recitation of the Qur'an, and shivers would run through my body.”¹⁴

Although the character does not profess Islam, his remarks reveal a state of spiritual interaction with it. He is profoundly moved by the Qur'anic recitation and experiences a hybrid emotional response despite his limited understanding of the religion. The atmosphere of the mud mosques and their spiritual ambiance repeatedly affect him.

In this context, the Qur'an is not merely a religious text but also an aesthetic and acoustic element capable of evoking tranquility, contemplation, and comfort, even in a non-believer. This demonstrates the aesthetic dimension of sacred discourse and its ability to transcend doctrinal boundaries. The protagonist does not convert to Islam but engages with its symbolic aspects from a sensory and aesthetic perspective without entering its doctrinal structure.

This idea recurs elsewhere in the novel:

“I left Mastaka's house that night, and the others left as well. Dawn was about to break. I passed by the mud mosque, illuminated by lanterns, and a voice of profound reverence was chanting. I could not understand it clearly, but I trembled violently—so violently that I nearly fell off my horse.”¹⁵

This narrative moment portrays the protagonist's physical trembling upon encountering a space charged with symbolic significance. It is as though he confronts a force beyond his capacity to explain or comprehend. His reaction is not one of negative fear but rather one of awe and spiritual astonishment, which manifests itself physically. Such an experience reveals the profound emotional and aesthetic influence of the religious atmosphere and demonstrates another aspect of cultural hybridity, whereby individuals interact with spiritual traditions beyond their own cultural and religious backgrounds.

Complete Religious Transformation

Subsequently, the narrative depicts a complete religious transformation and immersion into the aesthetics of Islam, as exemplified by the English woman:

“I found an English middle-aged woman named Gloria. Now she is Nasā'im. She was a somewhat renowned archaeologist in London. She came to the Land of Sudan on a work visit six years ago and never returned to her country, devoting herself to her new religion.”¹⁶

She chose to settle in Sudan because of its prevailing Islamic character, a spiritual environment rich in religious dimensions. This transformation may be understood as the outcome of a process of hybridity, beginning with initial interaction and culminating in complete transformation through the adoption of a new religious identity.

Linguistic Interpenetration

Language constitutes the vessel of identity and serves as a means of communication and expression of belonging. It operates in multiple cultural and linguistic contexts. However, as a result of colonial experiences that affected most identities, language itself became subject to interaction and overlap, leading to the emergence of linguistic hybridity, which refers to:

“A linguistic situation in which speakers are compelled to employ linguistic choices according to contexts and places, making use of two different languages simultaneously to express a particular situation.”¹⁷

The first manifestation of linguistic hybridity in the novel appears when Gilbert arrives in Egypt, specifically at the port of Alexandria:

“I told them in clear Arabic that I was merely passing through on my way to another country, and I slipped away from the crowded harbor.”¹⁸

Although English is associated with his original identity, Gilbert learned Arabic in preparation for his journey to Sudan. Faced with difficulties in Egypt, he resorted to Arabic for communication despite his mastery of English. One would expect him to use English, yet he consciously employed the language of the cultural space in which he found himself. This reflects his awareness of and familiarity with that identity. Thus, the character embodies a hybrid linguistic identity.

Another example appears in Gilbert's account:

“I approached the Frenchman Bartlett, whispered in his ear, and soon heard his voice speaking clearly and forcefully, with an accent that strove as much as possible to approximate the local dialect.”¹⁹

Bartlett gradually shifts from his native English to the local Sudanese dialect. In doing so, he distances himself from his original language and attempts to adopt the voice of the local Other, illustrating linguistic hybridity through adaptation and interaction with the indigenous culture.

Clothing and Representations of Cultural Westernization

Clothing refers to the material elements used by human beings to cover their bodies and provide protection. It often expresses heritage and culture, with each society possessing distinctive attire that reflects its social, cultural, and even religious dimensions. In the novel, clothing occupies a unique position, albeit in a hybrid form.

This hybridity is evident in several passages, particularly in Gilbert's transformation after meeting Saif al-Qabila, who becomes his friend:

“Within a few minutes, Saif al-Qabila transformed me from a neatly dressed Englishman in European clothes into an ordinary traveler whom even camels might mistake for one of their own and carry without resentment. I removed the gold chain from my neck and put on a white robe, a white turban, sandals made of goat leather with scattered fur, and held in my hand a brown mahogany stick that completed the new attire.”²⁰

Gilbert experiences a rapid change in outward appearance, shifting from a Western style to a local Arab one characterized by the robe, turban, and sandals. Yet this transformation does not imply complete assimilation into the Other. External identity may change according to circumstances and may even be simulated, while the individual preserves his original identity, thereby producing a fusion between both cultures. The passage thus illustrates the flexibility and coexistence of two cultural traditions.

Local characters are likewise influenced by Gilbert's culture, particularly his fiancée Sharafiyya:

"Sharafiyya came adorned by my brush and by Eleanor Heinrich's brush, together with other touches I had borrowed from my old culture and my knowledge of the arts of beauty."²¹

Here, decorative elements derived from Gilbert's cultural background are incorporated into Sharafiyya's appearance. Her adornment transcends mere aesthetics and becomes a manifestation of multiple identities. Since these elements are not rooted in local culture, they transform her attire into a multicultural space and deprive it of its original specificity. Symbolically, this hybridity may also reflect masculine dominance, as Gilbert attempts to impose aspects of his own culture upon his fiancée.

Space and Its Transformations

Space may be defined as the physical expanse or environment containing various elements and shaped through human

interaction with the surrounding world. Consequently, it forms an integral component of identity. Yet space itself is subject to hybridity, becoming:

"A place where different cultures meet, clash, and struggle with one another, often within highly unequal relations of domination and subordination."²²

Hybridity emerges through the interaction between local and foreign elements within a single environment. In the novel, this is particularly evident in public places such as the popular market described by Gilbert:

"Under the sun and without umbrellas, it was crowded with locals and foreigners alike, and from time to time soft voices could be heard... At that very moment, soldiers were flogging a local man who had been tied up."²³

Although the market reflects the local Sudanese environment and its simplicity, it is far from being a static space. Owing to the presence of multiple cultures, it becomes a hybrid environment—a place shaped not only by Sudanese identity but also by the interaction, confrontation, and coexistence of diverse identities and values, producing a complex and composite image.

The coexistence of different identities within Sudan is further illustrated by Gilbert's observation:

"There was an old Turk whose origins no one knew. He had lived for years in his tin shack beside one of the excavation sites."²⁴

The presence of the foreign Other within the social fabric—even in marginalized

spaces—reveals Sudan as a site rich in hybrid elements. It is a multicultural space that transcends the local and evolves into a complex fabric capable of accommodating incoming identities, such as that of the elderly Turkish man.

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, several conclusions may be drawn:

- Religious hybridity results from interaction and overlap among different cultures within the same space.
- In *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan*, hybridity manifests itself on multiple levels, including names, language, religion, clothing, and space.
- The novel contains numerous dual names that reflect a division of identity between the foreign and the local.
- Religious hybridity arises from individuals' engagement with diverse religious manifestations and from their assimilation of symbolic elements without necessarily embracing complete doctrinal affiliation.
- The novel portrays a process of religious hybridity that begins with interaction with the beliefs of the Other and eventually leads to actual conversion.
- In the novel, clothing transcends its external function and becomes a

marker of cultural and social interaction, as well as a symbol associated with masculine dominance.

- Space is not presented as pure or homogeneous; rather, it is itself characterized by hybridity as a result of the coexistence of multiple cultures and identities.

List of Footnotes

¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, trans. Thaer Deeb, Arab Cultural Center, Casablanca, Morocco, 1st ed., 2006, p. 44.

² Ibid., p. 12.

³ Ismail Mhenana, *Edward Said: Hybridity, Narrative, and Imperial Space*, Ibn al-Nadim Publishing and Distribution, Algeria, 1st ed., 2013, p. 172.

⁴ Samir Al-Khalil, *A Dictionary of Cultural Studies and Cultural Criticism Terminology*, rev. Samir Al-Sheikh, Dar Al-Kutub Al-Ilmiyyah, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 1971, p. 15.

⁵ Ibid., p. 16.

⁶ Ghalib Al-Furaijat, *Globalization and Identity in Culture*, Jordanian National Library, 1st ed., 2016, p. 54.

⁷ Majda Hammoud, *The Problematic of the Self and the Other: Models from the Arabic Novel*, Alam Al-Ma'rifa Series, Kuwait, 1st ed., 2013, p. 15.

⁸ Amir Tag Elsir, *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan*, Arab Scientific Publishers, Beirut, Lebanon, 1st ed., 2012, p. 9.

⁹ Amir Tag Elsir, *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan*, p. 183.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 183.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 188.

¹² Amir Tag Elsir, *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan*, p. 113.

¹³ Mohammed Al-Ruhaili, *The Function of Religion in Life and People's Need for It*, World Islamic Call Society, Damascus, Syria, 1st ed., 1991, p. 19.

¹⁴ Amir Tag Elsir, *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan*, p. 134.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 171.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁷ See: Habiba Elzaar, "Linguistic Hybridity from the Perspective of Saleh Belaid," *Al-*

Ta'allumiyyah Journal, Algeria, Vol. 5, No. 15, September 2018, p. 156.

¹⁸ Amir Tag Elsir, *Sweet and Bitter Land of Sudan*, p. 44.

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 106–107.

²⁰ Ibid., p. 51.

²¹ Ibid., p. 16.

²² Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, trans. Mohammed Abdel Ghani Ghanoum, Dar Hiwar, Syria, 1st ed., 2007, p. 77.

²³ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁴ Ibid., p