

رحلة الضياع والهوية المفقودة في رواية "حارس التبغ" لعلي بدر

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The Journey of Loss and Lost Identity in Ali Bader's The Tobacco Keeper

The Journey of Loss and Lost Identity in Ali Bader's The Tobacco Keeper

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ملخص: يتناول هذا البحث موضوع فقدان الهوية في رواية " حارس التبغ " للكاتب علي بدر. يستلهم الكاتب العراقي من اندماج نظري بين الأيديولوجيا ما بعد الحداثة والأيديولوجيا ما بعد الاستعمار، حيث يستخدم أعماله لإعطاء صوت للأشخاص الذين تم تهميشهم وتجاهلهم في المجتمع والثقافة والسياسة. يتمحور السرد حول كمال مدحت ، ملحن عراقي يلتقي بنهاية مأساوية عندما يتعرض للاختطاف والقتل بالقرب من منزله في مدينة المنصور من قبل مجموعة مسلحة. تستكشف رواية بدر كيفية دفع المشهد السياسي المضطرب في العراق كمال إلى خضوع تحول عميق، حيث يتخذ ثلاث هويات متميزة تغير مسار حياته وتترتب له تداعيات على من حوله. تصوّر هذا العمل الأدبي بوضوح مفهوم التحول من هوية إلى أخرى، والتي غالبًا ما تكون مستدعاة بواسطة التقلبات السياسية المتقلبة، ويظهر التداخل المعقد بين الهويات المستعارة والمخفية، والذي يمكن مشابهته بلعبة خطيرة من الهويات القاتلة

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Abstract: This paper delves into the theme of lost identity in Ali Bader's novel, *The Tobacco Keeper*. The Iraqi author draws inspiration from a theoretical fusion of post-modern and post-colonial ideologies, using his works to give voice to the silenced and marginalized in society, culture, and politics. The narrative centers on Kamal Medhat, an Iraqi composer who meets a tragic end when he is abducted and killed near his home in Al-Mansour city by an armed group. Bader's novel explores how the turbulent political landscape in Iraq compels Kamal to undergo a profound transformation, assuming three distinct identities that alter the course of his life and have ripple effects on those around him. This literary work vividly portrays the notion of transitioning from one identity to another, often necessitated by the fluctuating political tides, and demonstrates the complex interplay of borrowed and concealed identities, which can be likened to a perilous game of deadly identities. *The Tobacco Keeper* relentlessly emphasizes the significance of loss and lost identity, painting a poignant portrait of human existence caught in the turbulent maelstrom of history. It beckons readers to ponder the profound human experiences of individuals ensnared in the unpredictable tides of time. This narrative teaches us that, even amidst personal tragedies and the erasure of cultural and national identities, the human spirit finds ways to endure, redefine, and reflect upon the essence of self.

1. Introduction

“On 3 April 2006, less than one month after an armed group had kidnapped him near his home in Al-Mansour City, the body of the Iraqi composer Kamal Medhat was found near the Jumhuriya Bridge that crosses the River Tigris in Baghdad”. This haunting incident serves as a poignant reflection of the profound losses experienced by individuals and their identities during the tumultuous conflict in Iraq. Through the lens of literature, we can delve deeper into the themes of loss and lost identity, as vividly explored in Ali Bader's *The Tobacco Keeper*, where the characters grapple with their forms of disappearance and search for meaning amidst the chaos.

Ali Bader is an acclaimed Iraqi author, novelist, poet, poetry translator, Script writer and essayist known for his significant writer to emerge in Arabic world, in the last decade. His best-known works include *Papa Sartre*, *the Running after the Wolves Tobacco Keeper* and *the sinful Women*. He was born in Baghdad in 1964, where he studied western Philosophical and French literature. and has become a prominent voice in the literary world, both in the Arab-speaking region and





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internationally. Bader's works often delve into themes related to war, displacement, identity, and the human condition, reflecting the complex realities of life in Iraq and the broader Middle East.

Bader's writing has garnered critical acclaim and has received several prestigious literary awards throughout his career. His novels are celebrated for their depth, vivid storytelling, and the ability to capture the essence of historical and societal transformations in the region.

The work of Ali Bader is the bridge that allows the reader to move between past and present, West and East, through the relationship of the fictional universe of an Iraqi character and his connection to the heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa. The book, published in Arabic with translations in French and English, narrates the investigations of a ghostwriter hired by an international newspaper to write about the life of a renowned violinist who was murdered in Baghdad in 2006, in the context of the years following the invasion of Iraq. The novel is structured around four axes in which the connections established at the beginning of the work between the musician, the main character, the heteronyms of Fernando Pessoa, and the ghostwriter himself are developed.

The novel introduces readers to characters deeply affected by Iraq's changing political and social landscape. At the heart of the narrative is the journey of individuals who grapple with the profound sense of loss in terms of personal tragedies and the loss of cultural and national identity. As the characters navigate the challenges of their time, they undergo transformations, question their identities, and seek meaning amidst the chaos. Bader's masterful storytelling and evocative prose make *The Tobacco Keeper* a compelling and thought-provoking read, offering readers a glimpse into the human experiences and emotional landscapes of those living through a period of profound change in Iraq. In this article, we will delve deeper into the themes of loss and lost identity in *The Tobacco Keeper*, exploring how Ali Bader's storytelling provides a unique perspective on the journey of his characters as they grapple with the challenges of their era.

In the novel, the narrative is a profound exploration of the interconnected themes of loss and lost identity, vividly depicting the impact of historical turmoil on individuals and their sense of self. Through the characters' journeys, the novel showcases how the experience of loss, be it personal, cultural, or national, intertwines with the struggle to preserve and redefine one's identity amidst the chaos of war and upheaval. This article delves into the multifaceted layers of loss and identity crisis portrayed in the novel, highlighting how Bader's



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storytelling skillfully captures the complex human experiences of those caught in the crosscurrents of history.”

2. A fictional trajectory

The novel draws its inspiration from the poems of Fernando Pessoa, particularly the poem “Tobacco Shop.” It is described as one of the most profound novels in the Middle East, characterized by its intriguing transformations and astonishing events. Ali Bader supports his argument through a fictional character, a victim of the often-tragic upheavals in Middle Eastern history who will owe his survival only to his metamorphoses.

The story centers around the murder of Iraqi composer Kamal Medhat, whose lifeless body is discovered near the Jumhuriya Bridge in Baghdad. The protagonist, a journalist, is assigned to investigate the murder, which leads to the revelation of covert political gangs and mafias and an exploration of diverse worlds within Baghdad. Kamal was abducted by an unidentified armed group near his residence in Mansour City. The challenging political situation in Baghdad compels the hero of this novel to assume various personas. The story's events are set in Baghdad, where a journalist is tasked with probing the composer's murder. Through this inquiry, he unearths hidden political factions and underworld networks while delving into other realms. The novel falls within the realm of post-colonial literature, challenging narratives of identity and colonial discourse and being a part of travel literature.

The character's trajectory begins in 1926 when he is born into a Jewish family in Baghdad. In this city, Youssef Sami Salih lives with the consequences of the Great War, the wounds left by the fight on a population without resources, and English dominance. The situation in Iraq during this period deteriorated until the Second World War, but worse than the conflict itself was what happened afterward with the creation of the state of Israel. This fact is decisive for the deterioration of life throughout the region.

Youssef, in turn, sees the situation in Baghdad becoming unsustainable, and as a Jew, even if reluctant, he finds himself forced to migrate to Tel Aviv. Life in Israel is equally unbearable for Youssef. With the help of friends, he leaves for Moscow, forges a false identity, and returns to Baghdad as Haydar Salman, Iraqi but Shiite. Salman lived in Iraq until the mid-1980s, when a revolution expelled many Shiites, including the characters we follow. Again, the character's desire to live in Baghdad makes him forge a new identity to return to the city. This time, as a refugee in Prague, the identity that takes him back to his homeland is





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Kamal Medhat, a Sunni. Under this persona, he lived in Baghdad until 2006, when he was mysteriously kidnapped and murdered.

The character's trajectory is intricately woven into the unfolding of history and the events of the century itself, making it possible to notice a strong interaction between history and literature, in which literary discourse appropriates historical events to provide the backdrop against which the fictional plot develops. Hence, we find ourselves pondering: What is the underlying purpose of such a mindset? Furthermore, considering the chaos that unfolded throughout the century, what story is intended to be conveyed, and with what level of legitimacy and aspiration?

Ali Bader invokes Fernando Pessoa and his heteronyms to decipher the influences of a change in name, religion, and geography on the personality of the same individual. He joins forces with a narrator tasked with investigating the musician's life as a "ghostwriter," allowing for enlightening back-and-forth between Iraq, Iran, and Syria of yesterday and today. The rise of Arab nationalism, the growth of anti-Semitism, the assertion of identity particularities, the Islamic revolution in Persia, coups, coups d'état, dictatorships up to the current chaos, Kamal Medhat finds himself at the heart of events that have fuelled hatred between communities for decades.

Through his exoduses, travels, encounters, wives, and lovers, the cartography of the cultural, ethnic, and political transformations of the region takes shape.

"Identity is nothing but a story in which it becomes possible to live, a biography among all those we might embody," Ali Bader asserts, pondering the level of determinism within each of us. In three chapters with titles borrowed from the famous Portuguese poet, "The Keeper of Flocks," "The Protected Man at the Tobacconist's," and "The Tobacco Keeper," he assembles the components of his hero's personality. Through this, he condemns the myths "fabricated and designed to deny the diversity and independence of identities." Claiming only one and entering into conflict with others does not amount to making war on oneself.

The questions raised are fascinating. Ali Bader answers them with beautiful passages of art that transcend divisions, strip the being of its historical trace, and reveal its true self. At once an echo of nostalgia and a quest for the origin of sectarian violence, this novel expresses its despair in the face of the lost beauty of a land whose cultural richness was irreplaceable.

The story of this novel is well organized and so realistic that we sometimes have the impression that this violinist existed. Fans of



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Fernando Pessoa will also be delighted to find a touch of poetic interest in this literary meditation on identity. It also allows us to see the chaos that the Middle East has represented since the creation of Israel and the death of Nasser. The Islamic revolution in Iran, the wars in Iraq and Kuwait, dictatorships, American interventions, and aggressions on both sides have led to the current threat from the Islamic State armed group.

A repetition of attacks that the humanist hero of the novel would not have been surprised to see—he who thought he would unite souls with his music and hoped to see the past luster of this region reborn where the cohesion of diversity seems decidedly inaccessible

3. The novel as the frame for identity-building

In “What is Literature?” Sartre argues that prose, par excellence, is the art in which engagement is allowed by employing naturally significant reasoning to convey its story: “The art of prose is employed in discourse; its substance is *by nature significative*”. And he further explains: what matters is that words are “designations for objects” and, as such, “whether they correctly indicate a certain thing or a certain notion” (Sartre, 1988, p. 35). In other art forms, Sartre does not see engagement as possible, as in poetry, a medium in which words are not mere conveyors of meaning but also exist for their form, resembling sculpture, painting, and music.

However, there is another author whose reasoning we rely on. In “On Lyric Poetry and Society,” Adorno defends a viewpoint that goes beyond what Sartre advocates. The Frankfurt theorist criticizes both extremes, including the proponents of pure art and the advocates of propagandistic engaged art. According to Adorno, not striking a balance between these opposites compromises the appreciation of any work of art, regardless of its nature, with the purists exhibiting naivety and their counterparts instrumentalization. Adorno argues that we can only gain a deeper insight into the observed object through a comprehensive understanding of a work of art, considering the social context in which it was created. He posits that the social reference “should lead not away from the work of art but deeper into it.” (Adorno, 1991, p. 38). Though primarily addressing poetry, Adorno’s approach applies to the social interpretation of all art forms. He emphasizes the need for it to establish itself as an integral part of a society, a contradictory entity unto itself, to demonstrate how a work of art adheres to and transcends its societal influences.

From this perspective, we must inquire into the relationship between diverse individuals: a metaphysical atheist and a non-Zionist Jew from the pre-and post-Second World War who refuses to reside in Israel; a bucolic monarchist who emigrates to a colony and a Shiite from an affluent





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family, a composer and conductor trained at the Moscow Conservatory, with performances in New York, Paris, and Prague; an opium-consuming nihilistic futurist and a star in the world of symphonic music, renowned for performances of Bach's fantasies and fugues, whose magnum opus, his final composition, is titled 'Opium Symphony.'

Further comparisons and questions arise from this presentation, as all these individuals converge into two figures: a poet and a musician, a Portuguese and an Iraqi, who symbolize a fraction of the West and East's diversity and are nothing more than ordinary individuals of the same humanity. How does the engagement through their distinct artistic perspectives contribute to our understanding of the world as readers and explorers of humanity from our unique vantage point?

Identity is a relation between the individual and his home. That represents the concept of "citizenship" and the relationship of belonging, which is determined by rights and duties (Salih 2011). On the other hand, the notion of identity, characterized by its fluidity, polysemy, and the richness of its connotations, is challenging to define from the outset. However, this difficulty is not purely linguistic because to define and analyze identity, we must take a position on such problems and engage in ideological or sometimes political debates. Therefore, isolating what belongs to politics in the concept of identity seems vain. On the contrary, we admit that identity phenomena are intrinsically political. Any political discourse on building or seeking a collective identity in Iraq, often called national, necessarily involves considering the linguistic and cultural issues linked to this question of identity.

Identity is multifaceted and elusive, characterized by its fluidity, polysemy, and the richness of its connotations. Attempting to provide a concrete definition of identity from the outset is challenging, for identity is more than just a linguistic issue. One must navigate complex ideological and often political debates to define and analyze identity. Identity, as a concept, becomes inextricably intertwined with politics, making it difficult to isolate and disentangle the political aspects from the concept itself. Instead, we must acknowledge that identity phenomena are inherently political.

In contemporary Iraq, this interplay between identity and politics is particularly pronounced. Any political discourse surrounding the construction or pursuit of a collective identity in Iraq, often called a national identity, is inexorably linked to linguistic and cultural issues. The quest for a unified national identity is not just an intellectual or cultural pursuit but also a profoundly political one. The very idea of defining and



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shaping a collective identity necessitates grappling with the intricate and sensitive matters tied to language, culture, and history.

In this intricate context, the political dimension of identity takes center stage as leaders, policymakers, and citizens become active participants in dialogues and negotiations that encompass the multifaceted aspects of Iraq's national identity. These debates stretch across a spectrum of critical issues, from the role of language to the preservation of cultural heritage and from the historical narratives that influence collective memory to the very heart of these discussions.

As a result, the conception of identity in Iraq evolved into a complex dance that intertwines both the cultural and the political. This intricate interplay reflects the profound complexities of identity formation within a nation as diverse and historically rich as Iraq. The fusion of cultural and political influences manifests as a vivid and intricate tapestry, revealing a nation's continuous evolution of identity that grapples with its past while shaping its future. In essence, attempting to delineate a clear boundary between the concept of identity and the realm of politics is a futile endeavor. Identity, particularly in the context of a nation like Iraq, is an inherently political phenomenon deeply intertwined with the cultural, historical, and linguistic intricacies of the nation's diverse population. Understanding identity in such a context necessitates embracing its political nature and recognizing that the quest for a collective identity is not only an academic or cultural pursuit but a political discourse with profound implications for the nation's future.

The Tobacco Keeper offers a vibrant tapestry of characters, historical events, and the essence of Iraq, all intricately woven through literary fiction. The connection between history and fiction is pivotal, preventing a complete detachment between reality and imagination. The literary genre is another link in this intricate chain within this novel.

Ali Bader's novel is a particular example of a Bildungsroman closely associated with modern nationalism. It weaves tales of its protagonist's spiritual and intellectual maturation. It portrays an idealized citizen and mirrors the collective quest of the social group to which the protagonist belongs. One must recognize the social intent embedded in the Bildungsroman as it engages with society and its readers, enabling narratives of specific historical periods to yield fresh interpretations. The conflicts within this genre often underscore our inability to define the collective experience, embodying a subtle resistance to conformity.

The novel's central character, Youssef Sami Salih and his other identities (Haydar Salman and Kamal Medhat), are the remarkable embodiment of both hero and anti-hero. They artfully navigate the





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intricate balance between their actions and intentions, capturing the essence of their people while simultaneously embodying the very antithesis of idealized unity. Kamal Medhat, in particular, emerges as a foreign yet unifying element, bridging the chasms between the diverse communities he encounters.

In Ali Bader's literary tapestry, these characters are exemplars inhabiting the crossroads of fictional narratives and collective identities, reflecting a society in constant flux. Their existence is a testament to their ability to affirm their presence by challenging the predetermined life models thrust upon them. In this ceaseless exploration and redefinition of self, they find their equilibrium, not in stasis, but in perpetual motion.

Identity building implies a journey. Hydra's journey coincides at many points with violent conflicts that directly affect his life and the entire region's population, which is impossible to ignore. Arriving in Iran while still at immigration, the Iranian officer took his passport and asked him to wait. All he had in his pocket was some change his friends had given him—a pair of gloves, his passport, and a violin—a gift from the Czech musician and friend Karl Baruch when he was in Prague during his escape. Anxiously, he looked up at the airport ceiling and saw the Nazi swastika decorating its center, a legacy of the war, the fruit of the close relationship between Hitler and Reza Shah, monarch of Iran until 1944 (Bader, 2011, pp. 153–154). He was held at the airport in a closed room to check his identity until he was released the following morning.

Haydar received much more than a passport, a name, or an identity in the short time he spent in Moscow and Prague after leaving Israel. After passing immigration and being allowed to enter Tehran, "Overwhelmed with unspeakable joy, he felt that he'd been born anew. He had a new personality that had erased the old one and its history." (Bader, 2011, p. 154). Haydar Salman was born in Baghdad in 1924. The son of a merchant, he was sent by his family to Moscow to study, but instead of medicine, they would have liked music. When he arrived in the Iranian capital, he had directions to visit a wealthy Iraqi merchant with known left-wing sympathies who was on his way between Iran and Iraq, Ismail al-Tabtabaei (Bader, 2011, p. 151), whose daughter Tahera would marry later.

Haydar spent some time in Tehran without being able to contact Ismail, who was out of town nursing his daughter Tahera back to health. In the meantime, the musician frequented a few friends he had met in Baghdad and also attended a few meetings, known as "café conspiracies," with his fellow exiles, whom the capital's right-wing newspapers referred to as "kids of the left" (Bader, 2011, p.157). "During the fifties, Iraqis

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lived the fever of revolution. Revolutionary parties swarmed with young men and women who dreamed of change and hoped to repeat the revolution of Lenin and his bearded men in their own country” (Bader, 2011, p.157). The dream of these young people, however utopian it may seem today in retrospect, was the desire of a section of the population that cared about the direction taken by their equally young homeland and sought to act to build a better future.

Within *The Tobacco Keeper*, we encounter prejudice endured by various groups, including Arab Jews, Arab Shiites, and Arab Sunnis. For instance, Youssef, an Arab Jew, grapples with this distinction after losing his Iraqi identity shortly following the establishment of Israel. When the plane carrying Iraqi exiles landed in Israel, “all the passengers shouted, ‘Shalom Haber!’. But the Ashkenazim didn’t respond, they just sprayed them with DDT to prevent them from carrying their Iraqi germs into the Promised Land” (Bader, 2011, p. 144). “Shalom Haber” is Hebrew for “hello, friends,” while the Ashkenazi is a group of Jews from Germanic lands, southern Russia, and northern Iran.

Years later, Haydar, an Arab Shiite, was once more expelled from Iraq due to being labeled an Iranian citizen amidst the backdrop of the 1979 Iranian Revolution and the subsequent Iran-Iraq War. He and his family were roused from sleep in the dead of night by Iraqi military personnel who, in response to Youssef’s inquiry about the cause of their arrest, curtly declared, ‘You’re Iranian subjects. You have to leave for Iran now’ (Bader, 2011, p. 211)

Amid these adverse circumstances steeped in violence, Kamal embarks on a remarkable journey of continuous rebirth, adapting to a myriad of identities, each uniquely distinct yet bound together by a shared Arab heritage. This voyage is characterized by audacity that teeters on the precipice of insanity, as the compulsion of necessity stands steadfast in opposition to obedience and conformity. Against all odds, Kamal leverages the art of identity metamorphosis, allowing himself to conjure a semblance of self-determination, an intricate construct that shifts with the nations he temporarily inhabits. Furthermore, he boldly challenges the norms imposed by Western imperialism by appropriating its concepts and references as tools for self-affirmation through his art, as eloquently conveyed in the words of Bader: "he desired to infuse Western or classical music with the essence of Arab culture" (Bader, 2011, p. 192).

Kamal’s performances of Bach’s compositions and his connection with Pessoa do not signify assimilation into Western European culture. Instead, through his art, he strives to infuse Arab culture into Western or





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classical music, challenging the preconceived boundaries of musical expression.

4. Shifting identities – identity dissolution

It is essential to remember that the main character is an Iraqi Jewish violinist forced to leave his country but decides to live in his hometown and forges an identity to fulfill his desire. The Old and the New style caused a lot of changes and led to the loss of the original identity and identification in Ideologies and from a Geographical point of view (Pope, 2012) The assumed identity is that of a Shiite Muslim, and in this way, he lives for two decades until new social upheavals expel him again. Once again, the character assumes another identity, such as a Sunni Muslim. As if the paradoxes of the assumed identities were not enough, the character of the violinist, at a certain point in his life, acquires a book of poetry by Fernando Pessoa with poems by the heteronyms Alberto Cairo, Ricardo Reis, and Álvaro de Campos, to whom, respectively, the musician himself relates their identities, establishing identity pairs of poets and musicians. The characters are initially close to heteronyms due to the plurality of identities. However, the musician follows paths that remain unexplored despite being indicated by poets. The modernist defies reason by reinventing himself in different personalities. However, these materialize in absolute arteritis, thus not achieving a complete break with Cartesian logic, since not only the self – Person – remains well defined, but also the objects – the heteronyms – end up defined and delimited with the support of the questioned reason itself. The musician, a contrapuntal composer, composes a schizophrenic symphony on his own, using a single body as a polyphonic instrument. In this process, arteritis complement each other in the constitution of a single individual but multiple perspectives. This attitude represents a step beyond the Cartesian conception of identity, subverting or imploding the ordered discourse of reason that delimits the spaces occupied by the pre-conceived parameters of self and other. Considering the context of violence, absurdities, and deprivations experienced by the characters in the novel in question, we understand the structuring of identities and the establishment of parallels with heteronyms as a strategy for surviving the adversities faced through the crumbling of the subject and his identity dissolution. It is justified by the fact that there is no longer just one individual capable of facing the multifaceted reality, but its division into plural identities that constitute a new being capable of facing the challenges of what is understood as reality.



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According to Stuart Hall, “Identity is always, in that sense, a structured representation which only achieves its positive through the narrow eye of the negative” (Hall, 1997, p. 174). In Ali Bader’s novel, the multi-faced musician constructs his identity close to the others—Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, Russian—wherever his adventurous and tragic existence takes him.

Stuart Hall’s concept of identity as a “structured representation” seen through the lens of the “negative” suggests that individuals define themselves not only by what they are but also by what they are not. In Ali Bader’s, this concept is vividly exemplified in the character of Kamal Medhat. Kamal’s identity is intricately connected to the diverse cultures and experiences he encounters throughout his adventurous and tragic life. Whether Iranian, Iraqi, Syrian, or Russian, Kamal’s identity is a mosaic that takes shape in response to these various external influences, emphasizing his ability to adapt and evolve as he navigates different cultural contexts.

Kamal Medhat’s identity is dynamic and ever-evolving. His experiences in various countries and interactions with people from different backgrounds constantly force him to adapt and redefine his sense of self. For instance, when he resides in Iran, he becomes part of the Iranian society and culture, adopting certain aspects of their traditions and lifestyle. However, his identity remains constantly tense with the “negative,” as he retains elements of his Iraqi and Syrian roots. This dynamic interplay between his own identity and the identities of others is a central theme in the novel, demonstrating how identity, for Kamal, is indeed a “structured representation.”

Debra Kalinin Armstrong states, “One of the sources of conflict is the ethnic tensions that implant deep rooted distrust between the varied religious groups that form the Iraqi society, Muslims, and Jews in this stage. Primarily, this plays a crucial role in precluding the formation of the Iraqi identity” (Armstrong, 2016, p. 16). Kamal Medhat’s existence is marked by adventure and tragedy. In turn, it shapes his sense of self. His encounters with diverse cultures and the challenges on his journey provide both the “positive” and the “negative” through which his identity is constructed. Each experience leaves an indelible mark on his identity, whether it is the rich cultural tapestry of Iraq, the tumultuous history of Syria, or the enigmatic allure of Russia. Kamal’s identity becomes a testament to the resilience of the human spirit in the face of adversity, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of identity itself. There is a close connection between Ali Bader’s construction of identity and the concept put forward by Stuart Hall. Like a structured representation, his





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identity is continually shaped and reshaped through encounters with various cultures and experiences he faces throughout his life.

Kamal's existence embodies Hall's assertion that identity is achieved through the "narrow eye of the negative," as his identity is inextricably linked to the other cultures he encounters. Bader's portrayal of Kamal's journey is a powerful illustration of identity as a complex interplay between oneself and the many external influences that shape and define it.

Mary Whipple's 2012 review of the novel underscores the profound intertextuality woven into the narrative. One of the central elements of this intertextuality is the writer's adept usage of the violinist's three personas, each with distinct personalities, and their striking parallel to the personas employed by Fernando Pessoa in "The Tobacco Shop." Pessoa's concept, as illuminated in his poetry book, introduces the notion that men can embody one of three personality types: the keeper of flocks, represented in "The Tobacco Shop" as Alberto Cairo; the protected man, known as Ricardo Reis; and the tobacconist, characterized as Alvaro de Campos. This complexity of personas gives lie to the idea of an essential, unchanging "identity," as all these personas are integral facets of Fernando Pessoa's identity.

In *Reflections on Exile*, Edward Said discriminates between four types of migrants. They are exiles, refugees, expatriates, and emigrants. Exiles are those banished from their lands; refugees result from the last century and have a strong political connotation: "Exile originated in the age-old practice of banishment. Once banished, the exile lives an anomalous and miserable life, with the stigma of being an outsider. [...] The word "refugee" has become a political one, suggesting large herds of innocent and bewildered people requiring urgent international assistance, whereas "exile" carries with it, I think, a touch of solitude and spirituality. (Said, 2003, p. 181)

Expatriates move voluntarily, and emigrants are those who emigrate. However, the boundaries between these categories are highly tenuous, generating significant ambiguity. Youssef moved by choice, despite it being against his will, and because the political situation in his country was unfavorable. Of course, he could have decided to stay, but dealing with the consequences could be disastrous.

Intriguingly, the violinist's sons in the novel, despite growing up in different countries far from their father's influence, resonate with Pessoa's characters in "The Tobacco Shop." Each son uniquely embodies one of these personas, making them a reflection of the violinist and the multifaceted nature of human identity. This parallel further underscores the intricate interplay between individuals and their diverse personas,



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highlighting that one's identity is an ever-evolving composition of various facets and influences.

The intertextuality that weaves together the novel and Pessoa's literary oeuvre transcends the realm of mere homage; instead, it plunges the reader into a profound exploration of the intricate layers of identity and its subtleties. This connection urges us to contemplate identity's dynamic and multifaceted nature, showcasing the myriad roles that individuals assume in the complex drama of their lives. It is a testament to the enduring influence of Pessoa's profound ideas and the author's masterful skill in employing these ideas to infuse vitality into the characters populating the novel. In doing so, it bestows upon the narrative a wealth of complexity and depth that enriches the reading experience. Through this literary connection, readers are beckoned to embark on a journey that delves into the profound examination of identity, an ever-changing tapestry woven from the diverse threads of human experience.

The author extends the metaphysical parallels by suggesting that within the complex geopolitical landscape of the Middle East, there exists a dynamic interplay of multiple and often overlapping national identities. With their historical, cultural, and religious complexities, Iraq, Iran, and Syria possess distinct characteristics and identity markers. These identities sometimes intersect and interact, leading to longstanding regional tensions and conflicts. Furthermore, including Israel in this constellation adds another layer of complexity, representing an entirely different set of characteristics and a unique national identity among its neighboring nations.

One of the author's central arguments is that these competing and overlapping ideas of national identity are crucial factors in the wars and conflicts that have plagued the Middle East. These wars are not simply a result of external influences, such as the involvement of the United States, but rather, they are deeply rooted in the internal struggles for self-definition and identity. The author contends that these competing identity narratives have sometimes exacerbated divisions and catalyzed regional hostilities.

The author's perspective is multifaceted regarding the Third Gulf War in Iraq. While acknowledging that the U.S. is sometimes viewed as responsible for the war, the author offers an alternative viewpoint. By the time of this war, Iran and Iraq had experienced significant internal upheavals, including revolutions and the rise of clerical leadership. These changes had a profound impact on societal dynamics. The disappearance of class distinctions and the emergence of easily manipulable groups created a volatile environment where mob mentalities could take hold. It





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is a destructive force devoid of boundaries, indicating that it was not solely the result of external influences but rather the product of complex internal dynamics and shifts in identity and power structures.

Ali Bader's exploration of metaphysical parallels in Middle Eastern countries emphasizes the intricate web of competing national identities that often intertwine and clash. These identity struggles and geopolitical complexities have played a significant role in the region's history of wars and conflicts. The author's perspective on the Third Gulf War underscores the importance of considering internal factors, such as revolutionary movements and shifts in identity, when analyzing the causes and consequences of conflicts in the Middle East. This multifaceted perspective challenges simplistic narratives and encourages a more nuanced understanding of the region's complex dynamics.

5. Conclusions

In *The Tobacco Keeper*, the succession of events experienced by the musician's personas, accompanied by the poet's heteronyms, engenders a profound coexistence of these lives in a present fraught with questions but lacking clear answers. The experiences, despite their austerity and dramatic nature, do not necessarily lead to a better understanding of reality; instead, they function as mere crutches for navigating the unreality of life – cast aside and jettisoned. This critique of society finds its materialization in the dematerialization of the subject. The characters in Ali Bader's novel sacrifice the logic of Cartesian existence, which presumes a coherent, singular identity, in favor of a multiplicity that offers the minimum conditions of existence.

Once the obligation of maintaining a unified identity is shattered, a new landscape emerges, where fresh connections become possible. What was once perceived as opposition and incongruity transforms into a pathway, a viable alternative to the chaotic maelstrom of contemporary reality. In this newfound perspective, the human experience emerges as an absolute, multifaceted, and comprehensive entity, encompassing myriad facets of identity within a single existence.

This perspective offered by *The Tobacco Keeper* underscores the idea that, in a world marked by turbulence and shifting landscapes, embracing the complexity and multiplicity of identity becomes a means to navigate the intricate tapestry of life. It invites readers to consider that unity and coherence may not always be prerequisites for understanding or for forging a path forward, but that, paradoxically, it is within the myriad facets of identity that one may discover the possibility of unity in diversity.



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In conclusion, this article delves deep into the captivating themes of loss and lost identity within Ali Bader's masterful novel, *The Tobacco Keeper*. Throughout our exploration, we have unearthed several key points:

The narrative's evocative opening, marked by the discovery of Kamal Medhat's lifeless body near the meandering River Tigris, serves as a poignant threshold into the profound exploration of loss and identity within the tale.

Ali Bader, a distinguished Iraqi author, adroitly wields his pen to vividly etch the far-reaching impact of historical tumult on individuals and their sense of self. His narrative adeptly captures the multifaceted layers of loss, ranging from personal tragedies to the heart-wrenching loss of cultural and national identity.

At the core of this article lies the central thesis: an intricate examination of how the characters in *The Tobacco Keeper* navigate the labyrinthine corridors of loss and lost identity, all against the tumultuous backdrop of historical upheaval.

We have dissected various elements encompassing the characters' odysseys through loss and identity, the recurring symbols and motifs, the rich tapestry of cultural and historical context, Ali Bader's signature writing style, and the invaluable insights literary critics offer. Collectively, these components weave together to offer a nuanced understanding of the novel's profound exploration of these themes.

Throughout the narrative, key characters grapple with personal losses, cultural erasure, and identity crises. Each character traverses transformative moments that mold their responses to the ever-shifting world surrounding them.

The Tobacco Keeper relentlessly emphasizes the significance of loss and lost identity, painting a poignant portrait of human existence caught in the turbulent maelstrom of history. It beckons readers to ponder the profound human experiences of individuals ensnared in the unpredictable tides of time. This narrative teaches us that, even amidst personal tragedies and the erasure of cultural and national identities, the human spirit finds ways to endure, redefine, and reflect upon the essence of self.

As we contemplate the themes presented in this novel, we are reminded of the remarkable resilience of the human spirit when faced with adversity. *The Tobacco Keeper* serves as an eloquent testament to the enduring capacity of humans for introspection, adaptation, and survival, even during times of profound loss and identity crisis.

In conclusion, the themes of loss and lost identity, as skillfully portrayed within Ali Bader's literary canvas, remain profoundly relevant





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in literature. These themes beckon us to embark on a ceaseless journey of discovery. This journey leads us to explore the intricate tapestry of narratives illuminating the universal and deeply human experiences embedded within the pages of great literature.

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