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Cultural Sustainability and Identity in Olga Grjasnowa's *City of Jasmine*: A Study Through the Eyes of Amal

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Abstract

Olga Grjasnowa's *City of Jasmine* presents a poignant narrative that captures the socio-political and cultural disintegration caused by the Syrian civil war, particularly through the lens of displacement and exile. This paper examines the novel through the experiences of its central character, Amal, a Syrian woman whose journey from Damascus to various European countries encapsulates the tensions between loss and continuity, identity and transformation. The analysis foregrounds the theme of cultural sustainability, investigating how Amal strives to preserve her cultural heritage while adapting to new and often alien sociopolitical contexts. Employing Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity and Marianne Hirsch's framework of post memory, the paper explores how personal and collective memories shape Amal's evolving identity. The study also considers the psychological impact of political trauma, the disruption of cultural transmission, and the emergence of a diasporic consciousness that redefines belonging. Ultimately, the paper argues that Amal's journey reflects the resilience of cultural identity amidst displacement, and illustrates how literature can serve as a space for negotiating fragmented yet enduring cultural narratives.

Keywords: City of Jasmine, Olga Grjasnowa, cultural sustainability, hybridity, identity, exile, displacement, cultural memory, postmemory, political trauma, Syrian civil war, diaspora, Homi Bhabha, Marianne Hirsch

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Cultural Sustainability and Identity in Olga Grjasnowa's *City of Jasmine*: A Study Through the Eyes of Amal

The Syrian civil war has disrupted not only the physical infrastructure of the nation but also the cultural foundations that tie individuals to their collective past. In *City of Jasmine*, Olga Grjasnowa dramatizes the war's psychological and cultural impact through Amal, a Syrian actress whose life is turned upside down by violence and exile. Amal's personal narrative becomes a microcosm for understanding broader questions of cultural sustainability defined as a community's capacity to preserve its values, traditions, and memory despite displacement (Kofer 202). Using the lens of Homi Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity and Marianne Hirsch's concept of post memory, this paper explores how Amal sustains and reshapes her identity as she migrates westward, transforming trauma into cultural resilience. Grjasnowa's novel contributes to a broader canon of diasporic and refugee literature that interrogates static notions of identity, home, and nationhood. Through characters caught in transnational liminality, the narrative critiques not only the devastation caused by authoritarian violence, but also the alienating structures of asylum and integration in Europe. Amal's journey is not simply a physical escape from conflict but a continual negotiation of cultural memory and belonging in unfamiliar contexts. Her story reflects the challenges and possibilities of preserving identity amid displacement, illustrating how trauma can be rearticulated into a resilient, adaptive cultural self.

Before the outbreak of war, Amal inhabits a cosmopolitan space in Damascus. The daughter of a Russian mother and a wealthy Syrian businessman, her upbringing reflects an already hybrid identity that straddles two cultural heritages. Amal's enrolment in the Institute of Dramatic Arts demonstrates her commitment to cultivating Syrian cultural forms. This period in her life represents a pre-war state where cultural identity is relatively stable and nourished by artistic and familial continuity (Grjasnowa 15). Yet, even within this privileged background, Amal becomes increasingly aware of the creeping authoritarianism that limits genuine cultural freedom. Her early experiences illustrate what Homi Bhabha calls "the liminal space" a zone of cultural ambiguity and negotiation (Bhabha 2), where her dual heritage positions her within a dynamic but fragile identity framework. Amal's identity is further shaped by her engagement with the arts, which serve not only as a personal passion but also as a subtle form of political and cultural affirmation. Her work as an actress allows her to participate in a national dialogue about identity, tradition, and modernity, even as it exists under the watchful eye of the state. The artistic realm becomes a microcosm of Syria itself rich in cultural expression, yet constantly under the threat of ideological regulation. This delicate balance underscores the inherent tensions in her early life, where cultural sustainability is already precarious. The interplay of familial heritage, creative expression, and subtle state control foreshadows the deeper rupture that the civil war will soon impose, setting the stage for Amal's eventual displacement and transformation.

The trauma of Amal's arrest and torture by the secret police marks a violent break in her cultural continuity. She experiences firsthand the mechanisms of a state that erases personal and collective memory, employing violence as a tool of cultural suppression. As Kofer notes, women in exile literature often endure "gendered violence that functions as both personal trauma and political silencing" (Kofer 207). Amal's physical violation is compounded by the attempted erasure of her cultural voice as both an actress and a citizen, illustrating how authoritarian regimes target individual identity as a means of undermining collective resilience. Trauma here becomes a disruptive force, threatening the transmission of cultural memory and dislocating her from the creative spaces that once affirmed her identity. Following her release, Amal is forced into exile, where the rupture extends beyond the physical to encompass a deep existential disorientation. Separated from the cultural landscape that once anchored her, she struggles to reconcile her past with an unfamiliar present. As Hirsch explains, memory

particularly postmemory serves as a vital means of sustaining identity in the face of catastrophe (Hirsch 6). Yet for Amal, the exile experience complicates this process, as her trauma is met with misunderstanding or silence in her new environment. The refugee identity is reduced to a form of otherness, culminating in the perception of refugees as belonging to a "new race," marking their exclusion from broader society.

Amal hates moving around the city as a refugee – hesitant and frightened. She hates her entire existence. She hates not being able to speak German and the way no one in the municipal authorities other than the security guards are capable of speaking even basic English. She hates being seen as a Muslim and a scrounger and she hates herself. The world has invented a new race – the race of refugees, Flüchtlinge, Muslims or newcomers. The condescension is palpable in every breath (Grjasnowa 217).

The absence of shared cultural references and the lack of recognition from host societies intensify her sense of isolation. Amal's journey thus reveals how political trauma not only fragments identity but also obstructs the pathways through which cultural continuity might otherwise be restored.

After fleeing Syria, Amal's odyssey through Lebanon, Turkey, and eventually Europe is fraught with psychological and cultural dislocation. She carries with her fragments of identity that often feel insufficient in the face of her new reality. Cultural sustainability maintaining one's practices, language, and values becomes a daily struggle (Rutherford). In Europe, Amal is exposed to humanitarian bureaucracy, subtle racism, and a pressure to assimilate. Her participation in the German cooking show "Refugees Can Cook Too" becomes a metaphor for cultural commodification. Her identity is reduced to an exotic flavour rather than understood as part of a living cultural continuum (Grjasnowa 112).

The cultural memory she tries to preserve is often simplified, mistranslated, or consumed for entertainment. This reduction of Amal's culture to a consumable spectacle reflects a broader challenge faced by displaced individuals: the risk of cultural identities being exoticized or tokenized in host societies. Rather than engaging with the complexities of her history and trauma, the public often prefers simplified narratives that fit preconceived ideas about refugees. This dynamic not only undermines Amal's personal sense of identity but also threatens the integrity of the cultural memory she seeks to sustain. In this context, cultural sustainability becomes precarious, as it requires recognition and respect from others elements often denied to those living in exile. Amal's experience illustrates how maintaining cultural identity in displacement demands continuous negotiation against forces that seek to commodify or erase it.

Despite these challenges, Amal begins to reconstruct her identity by embracing hybridization. Bhabha's theory of hybridity emphasizes that new cultural forms emerge in the interstices of displacement and migration (Bhabha 3). Amal's relationship with Hammoudi and her adoption of a war orphan symbolize this hybridity not only biologically but culturally. She is no longer solely Syrian, nor is she European. Her identity becomes diasporic a negotiation between past and present. Moreover, Amal's storytelling, both literal and performative, becomes a means of cultural transmission. By narrating her journey and participating in communal acts like cooking, she keeps alive what Hirsch terms "affiliative memory" a way of forming memory not just from direct experience but from affective and narrative transmission (Hirsch 12).

Through these acts of hybrid self-making, Amal learns to inhabit what Bhabha calls the "third space" a space of negotiation where fixed identities give way to fluid, evolving subjectivities. Rather than viewing her fragmented past as a deficit, Amal begins to reinterpret it as a foundation for a new kind of cultural agency. Her diasporic identity, forged through trauma and adaptation, becomes a space of creativity rather than mere survival. This process

allows her not only to preserve elements of her Syrian heritage but to fuse them meaningfully with the experiences and influences of her life in exile, creating a cultural identity that is both rooted and responsive.

Additionally, her reconstructed identity challenges monolithic definitions of nationality and belonging. Amal's hybrid identity resists the binaries of East and West, insider and outsider, and instead asserts the legitimacy of in-between spaces. She exemplifies how displaced individuals can form multifaceted cultural identities that transcend traditional boundaries. In doing so, she reclaims narrative control over her own story, refusing to be defined solely by victimhood or marginalization. Her identity reconstruction is not a return to a lost past, but a dynamic, forward-looking process one that transforms dislocation into a platform for cultural innovation and resilience.

In exile, memory becomes an act of resistance for Amal. By remembering Syria's cultural richness, by mourning its loss, and by transmitting these stories to others (especially to the child she adopts), Amal actively participates in sustaining her heritage. As Bhabha argues, "narration is the sign of the hybrid," a space where the past is continually reshaped to meet the needs of the present (Bhabha 5). Grjasnowa's narrative does not idealize the past, nor does it offer a simple solution to trauma. But through Amal's choices, it illustrates how cultural sustainability can function not as the preservation of static traditions, but as a living process of adaptation and resilience. Amal's memories, however painful, serve as tools for reclaiming agency in a world that has tried to silence her. In the face of bureaucratic systems and cultural erasure, memory offers her a form of self-definition. Through storytelling, language, and everyday rituals, she resists the invisibility often imposed on refugees. This aligns with Marianne Hirsch's concept of "post memory," wherein the transmission of cultural trauma and remembrance across generations becomes a means of preserving identity and resisting historical amnesia (Hirsch 6). For Amal, memory is not just an emotional burden it is a method of asserting continuity and meaning in a disrupted life.

Furthermore, Amal's commitment to remembering and retelling her story becomes an ethical act, not just a personal one. In sharing her past with the child she adopts, she ensures that cultural loss does not lead to complete erasure. Her memory becomes intergenerational a legacy passed not through monuments or institutions, but through lived experience and intimate connection. In this way, memory serves both as resistance and renewal, enabling the creation of a cultural lineage that survives exile, even as it transforms. Amal embodies how the act of remembering of choosing to narrate rather than forget can be a quiet but powerful form of cultural survival.

Olga Grjasnowa's *City of Jasmine* is a compelling meditation on cultural sustainability in the context of war, displacement, and trauma. Through Amal's journey, the novel reveals how individuals can preserve cultural identity through hybridization, storytelling, and memory. The novel affirms that cultural sustainability in exile is not the replication of an old way of life but the reimagining of identity in response to new realities. Amal embodies the complexities of diaspora: she mourns what is lost but also builds what is possible. In doing so, she becomes both the bearer and creator of culture a living testament to the resilience of identity. Additionally, *City of Jasmine* underscores that cultural sustainability is not a solitary endeavour but a relational and communal process. Amal's interactions with fellow refugees, with her adopted child, and with European institutions illustrate how identity is constantly negotiated within social contexts. These relationships shape the contours of her evolving self, revealing how displaced individuals co-construct meaning and continuity through shared experience and mutual recognition. In this way, the novel emphasizes that resilience emerges not only from personal strength but from the networks of memory, care, and solidarity that enable individuals like Amal to sustain and reinvent cultural identity in the face of profound upheaval.

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