JJMLL

"Things" and the Diasporic Self in Mahjoub's *The Carrier* and Hammad's *The Parisian*

Hayat Louati *
Department of Letters and English language, University of 8 Mai 1945, Guelma, Algeria

Yousef Abu Amrieh
Department of English Language and Literature, University of Jordan, Jordan

Abstract

The present article examines the impact of "things" on the self-concept of diasporic individuals in Anglophone Arab novelists Jamal Mahjoub's *The Carrier* (1998) and Isabella Hammad's *The Parisian* (2019). Particularly, it highlights how certain "things" help the protagonist in each novel to perceive himself and to define his life mission. For this, the current study is situated within the theoretical frameworks of "Thing Theory" and theories of self-concept. It argues that certain "things" are important factors in the development of each protagonist's identity and his understanding of his own self. Not only do these "things" influence the protagonist's character and substantially form his/her identity, but they also give the reader clues about the transformations that these protagonists undergo during their experiences in diaspora. By tracing the relationship between the protagonists and certain "things" in each novel, one may form a better idea of how diasporic experiences affect and inform an individual's self-concept.
Keywords: Jamal Mahjoub; Isabella Hammad; Thing Theory; Diaspora; Self-concept.

Introduction

It is an important part of one's growth to be able to form a clear image of one's self and identity; this includes a process of forming a self-identity and, most importantly, attaining knowledge of the self. There are varied ways through which individuals can be identified: their beliefs, belonging, and significantly, possessions. Throughout time, individuals were identified, and identified themselves with the communities of which they are part. Nevertheless, it is equally important for the individual to have an independent identity and a unique sense of the self which are different from that of the other members of his/her community. This can be achieved when one shifts one's attention from how people view him to how he views himself and maintains positive attitudes towards his self. In other words, s/he forms what

* Corresponding Author: **louatihayat@gmail.com**

this paper refers to as "self-concept." After this step, the individual learns how to deal with external, societal pressure and interactions, and environment.

Nevertheless, the situation is far more complex for people in diaspora; they are deprived of the privilege to lucidly articulate their individuality as mounting social and cultural pressures push them towards the more urgent issues of acculturation, integration and assimilation. Novelists, playwrights, and poets have vividly portrayed diasporic characters at cross-cultural junctures and showed how their bodies become sites over which discourses of sociopolitical, cultural and historical forces converge. Arab writers in diaspora are no exception: they have explored the theme of the individual vs. society in diasporic contexts, especially in historical novels. Some of the narratives take place solely in the past, while others are divided into two subplots: a historical plot and a contemporary one. This is true of both novels that this article discusses. The first one is Jamal Mahjoub's *the Carrier* (1998) and the second one is Isabella Hammad's well received debut novel *the Parisian* (2019). These two novels share yet another aspect that adds to their thematic development; in each novel there is a focus on certain objects that have a great bearing on the development of each protagonist's diasporic self-concept.

Jamal Mahjoub is a Sudanese British author who belongs to two different cultural backgrounds and has firsthand experience with displacement and life in diaspora. Throughout his life, he lived in different places, including Sudan, Britain, Denmark, Spain, and the Netherlands. Mahjoub's novels are divided into two groups based on the questions they address: the early ones deal with issues of identity and displacement, while the recent ones focus on the hybrid nature of the European identity and the impact of its encounter with the other identities, including those of Arabs in diaspora (Nyman 155). Among Mahjoub's renowned novels are *Navigation of a Rainmaker* (1989), *In the Hour of Signs* (1996), *Traveling with Djinns* (2003), *The Drift Latitudes* (2006), *The Fugitive* (2021), and *The Carrier* (1998), with which this study deals.

Isabella Hammad was born in London. She won the 2018 Plimpton Prize for Fiction and a 2019 O. Henry Prize. Her novel *the Parisian* (2019) adds her name to a long list of Arab authors living in diaspora, especially those of Palestinian descent, who are struggling with their hyphenated identities and cultures, and who attempt to come to terms with their situation through their fiction. In line with this argument, Awad (2012) states that Arab writers in diaspora "straddle two cultures" and that "[t]hey skillfully blend their Arab cultural heritage in their writings" (12). In this way, these authors adopt a position that promotes a common ground that bridges the gaps between cultures (Awad, 2012). In this common ground, these authors engage themselves in, and create, a dialogue between the conflicting concepts of self, identity, home, and belonging. This set of concepts is immensely influenced and shaped by the traumatic experiences of exile and displacement.

The literary works produced by Arab authors in diaspora are gaining a growing amount of critical attention due to their proliferation and thematic and stylistic diversity. This paper, then, attempts to further explore this burgeoning literature by focusing on the intricate relationship between "things" and self-concept in Mahjoub's *The Carrier* (1998) and Hammad's *The Parisian* (2019). By exploring this relationship, this article attempts to employ recent theoretical frameworks to contextualize and analyze

how diasporic experiences greatly influence the subject-object relationship between individuals, and how the latter contribute to the individual's identity and understanding his own self.

Diasporic Self, Self-concept, and Things

The focus on people's individuality has become a major part of modern theoretical thought. It shifts the attention from the notion of identity, which was more or less linked to collectivity and community, to other notions such as personal identity and the self. In line with this argument, Baumeister celebrates the Western modern valorization of the person's individuality, and what makes him different from others, explaining that:

> society came to treat each person as a unique, self-contained unit. People began to think of themselves as capable of changing roles, to search for their own unique traits and destiny, to campaign for individual rights and social equality, and to do other things that reflected this new sense of the individual. (1997, 683)

It is vitally important for the individual to realize his/her uniqueness. One has to know one's characteristics, traits, feelings, values…etc. and to come to terms with who s/he is, in other words, what comprises one's self.

The understanding of the self and what constitutes it is a central argument in the psychological theory, especially, the study of the self and its relationship with the outer, physical world. The association between the objects and the self is the defining feature of a sense of the self that Morris Rosenberg calls "the individual's ego-extension", through which he holds that "the self stretches out to encompass elements external to it" (1986, 54). This extension is driven, as Tuan (1980) argues, by a feeling of lack, and of insecurity in one's sense of self; possessing things is fortifying since "we are what we have and possess" (472). Consequently, the line that was traditionally drawn between a subject and a physical object is blurred and objects are given an important position in the development of the self.

Moreover, the material possessions that one renders dear and valuable "act as signs of the self that are essential in their own right for its continued cultivation, and hence the world of meaning that we create for ourselves, and that creates ourselves, extends literally into the objective surroundings" (Rochberg-Halton 1984, 335). Learning to separate oneself from the outer world might be an important stage in the child's early development of an ego; nevertheless, for the adult to keep developing one's self and identity, one needs to re-associate oneself with certain objects.

In this regard, a number of studies were conducted in an attempt to come to terms with what kind of objects are considered part of the self, or important to its development. The majority of these studies concluded that the greater a person can control the objects, the more he can associate them with himself. Nevertheless, there are certain objects that may exert control over humans, and due to this, they can also be regarded as a part of the self, or as Belk (1988) succinctly puts it, "we may impose our identities on possessions and possessions may impose their identities on us" (141). This is an assertion of the significant position that the objects are capable of having, and which allows them to resist being possessed and to possess humans in the metaphysical sense of the word.

This view of the close association between the self and the physical objects is at the heart of the study of physical objects as "things" in Bill Brown's sense of the word. He bases his theory on the argument that a "thing, by which I will always mean the thingness of the constituted object, is the outcome of an interaction (beyond their mutual constitution) between subject and object" (2016, 22). This means that "things" are not there in the world; rather, they are created through forces innate in them and others that are relatively beyond them, and which originate from the interaction between the objects and the human subjects. It is an interaction that has occupied a distinguished position in the psychological endeavor.

In his pioneering article "Thing Theory" (2001), Bill Brown introduces a subtle definition of the thing as opposed to, or rather as different from the object. Brown builds his work upon, and situates it within, the already existing framework that was introduced by critics and theorists such as Martin Heidegger who focused on drawing a differentiating line between the object and the Thing. Heidegger explains that when an object becomes self-supporting and independent, it stops being considered an object and becomes a Thing (164). For Brown, this happens when the object exceeds its physicality and materiality to denote something else: "the thing seems to name the object just as it is even as it names something else" (5). This something else is what is referred to by him as well as by previous critics as the "thingness." Brown elaborates:

> You could imagine things […] as what is excessive in objects, as what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects - their force as a sensuous presence or as a metaphysical presence, the magic by which objects become values, fetishes, idols, and totems. Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). (2001, 5)

This thingness develops around the object when it interrupts the course of peoples' lives; only then do people start paying attention to its physicality and looking at what it discloses (4). So, the change of the naming as well as of the perspective regarding objects is a manifestation of "a changed relation to the human subject;" the thing, then, names "a particular subject-object relation" (4) that affects both the subject and the object.

As this article attempts to show, in both novels, the relationship between the protagonist and certain objects is a subject-object relation, which reveals individual's anxieties, hopes and fears. It deals with the close association between the diasporic subjects and things and investigates the consequences that these things have on the way the diasporic individuals view themselves. Isabella Hammad shows the change in her Palestinian protagonist's view of his self and identity through his close association with his father's watch and his own tarbush, which he takes with him to Paris.

It is worth noting as well that literature employs and depicts the symbolic value of objects and how they stand for different ideas than their utilitarian function. In other words, literary works recognize and use this value to draw the reader's attention towards social, psychological, political, and cultural aspects.

This is an excess that the Thing theory realizes and expands through approaching the creation of things in literary works through the interaction of these objects with human subjects.

It is the purpose of this article, then, to argue that the creation of "things" by means of personal and subjective interaction with the objects serves as a means for the person to gain insight about, and to influence, one's inner workings. Attempts to come to terms with what constitutes the human self resulted in the introduction of many self-related concepts, on top of which is self-concept. This article, then, suggests that the relation between humans and Things is not merely important in the continuous development of the self, but also, in the preservation of the person's self-concept, which can be said to be at the heart of the individual's sense of uniqueness and individuality.

This notion has its roots back in the early theorizations of the self in the work of William James and started gaining prominence later in the field of psychology after WWII (Burns and Dobson 1984, 476). Lowe, for instance, argues that this notion originated in the work of Raimy who defines it as an acquired system responsible for the person's perception and, at the same time, an organizing principle that governs and organizes his/her ongoing experiences (325). It is defined as "the set of attitudes a person holds towards himself" (Burns and Dobson 1984, 473). In other words, it is the sum of the thoughts and feelings that an individual has "with reference to himself as an object" (Rosenberg 1986, ix). It is how and what the person thinks and feels about one's self. It is better summed up as "an organization (structure) of various identities and attributes, and their evaluations, developed out of the individual's reflexive, social, and symbolic activities" (Gecas 1982, 4). The self-concept, then, comprises the concept of identity, or identities as it is generally argued. That is, identity is not a distinct entity; rather, it is a part of the self-concept since the term identity no longer has specifically social dimensions such as roles, communities…etc., it has also personal ones such as personality traits. The variety of these dimensions generates a set of different identities: role identities, cultural identities, personal identities, and many others. The different identities, that one person might have, "make up one's *self-concept*" (Oyserman et al. 2012, 69). Certainly, having an identity becomes relevant when one thinks about and evaluates one's self.

The contents of the self-concept can be divided into two components: the first is one's self-image, which is a picture of the self that the individual constructs about himself or herself and which results from societal experiences and other people's feedback. This constructed image, then, becomes a primary generator of his/her behavior (Burns and Dobson 1984, 473). The second component of self-concept is self-esteem, which can be summed up as the person's evaluation and valuation of the self (Gecas 1982, 4). Other theorists split the self-concept into three perspectives: the Self as I am which refers to the self-concept as seen by the person himself; the Other Self, i. e. the person's self-concept as one believes others see it, and the ideal self which means the version of the self that one aspires to become (Burns and Dobson 1984, 473). What one may deduce from this argument is that society has an influence on the individual's self-concept, especially on the dimension of the Other Self.

In line with this argument, Rosenberg (1986) maintains that others' perceptions of, and attitudes towards, the individual affect his/her own self-concept (261). The endeavor of the present study then, is to show that societal interactions are not the only factor for the development and maintenance of the novels'

protagonists' self-concepts; rather, their interactions with the physical objects from home has a great influence on how they come to think of themselves, and how they react to social situations. In other words, the "thing" becomes a part of the established dialogue between the different perceptions of the self: how one perceives oneself and how s/he is perceived by others. Examining novels written by diasporic Arab writers, as Awad (2012) remarks, "enriches our understanding of Arab identity in diaspora as it intersects with issues of immigration, settlement, citizenship and cultural hybridity" (16). The argument of this article is that the objects presented in Mahjoub's *The Carrier* and Hammad's *The Parisian* influence the protagonists' self-image and self-esteem; hence, they influence their self-concepts.

Things, Self, and Self-Identification in Mahjoub's *The Carrier*

Jamal Mahjoub's *The Carrier* is a historical novel that is divided into two plots: one plot is historical and the other is contemporary. The first plot revolves around a telescope that a certain learned Arab in the seventeenth century, Rashid al-Kenzi, is required to bring from Denmark to the Dey of Algiers; however, he is faced with racist, inhumane treatment by the ignorant Dane masses. The second plot is set almost four hundred years later and tells the story of an Arab scholar living in Denmark named Hassan who is summoned to an archaeological digging site to decipher the Arabic engraving on a brass case that was found with some human remains. These remains are later identified to be those of Verner Heinesen, the Dane scholar who offered Rashid al-Kenzi protection and was later condemned and killed by the masses due to this decision. The brass case is none other than the gift that was given to Rashid al-Kenzi when he was in Cyprus and which he carried with him. These findings drive Hassan to become obsessed with unveiling the story behind the presence of the brass case in a foreign land and the destiny of its original owner, Rashid al-Kenzi.

Jamal Mahjoub is no stranger to displacement and identity-related questions due to his background. In the contemporary plot of his novel *The Carrier*, he presents the reader with a man of whose origins little is known. His name is suggestive of an Arab person; however, nothing else is exposed of his "origins" or belonging other than the fact that he is a man of science, an archeologist who is pushing through what appears to be a xenophobic society. Hassan is sent by the museum he works for to investigate an archeological site where human remains and an unidentified object is discovered. Hassan's selection for the task was a mere coincidence; however, it was a significant one since the object dug out is a brass case that contains an unidentified device, and which has Arabic inscriptions on it that he was supposed to decipher.

Although by the time he brought the brass case home with him he did not have enough time to inspect it, he began unconsciously to romanticize about it, comparing its position on the table and with regard to the lamp light to the penumbra, which he explained that it occurs either before or after complete darkness (44). He was afraid of what will come out of this object: an end to his loneliness, or whether it will throw him in turmoil, revealing fearful things by raising questions he no longer wishes to answer. This case has a device that is designed for the Muslim traveller to direct him to Mecca for his prayers; however, after being buried for hundreds of years it stopped serving its original function and entered the realm of new significations.

This is thoroughly discussed in the recent theorizations about the object whereby the most significant episode in the physical object's lifespan is the object's re-appearance after the end of its use. It is at the point when it can no longer serve its original utilitarian function and is set aside that it becomes even more important. At this point it acquires a set of new meanings and significations, and serves a widened range of roles. Hahn and Weiss, for instance, are of the view that when objects appear after the supposed end of their lives in different temporal and spatial contexts they serve a totally different function (2013, 3). Historians of objects argue that the things' meanings and perceptions are dynamic and changeable even if it is only in humans' perception (Stockhammer 2020, 39). For this reason, objects are to acquire as much meanings as the social and temporal contexts that they are placed within, and hence, they acquire the state of Things through this excess in meaning and signification.

In line with this argument, Brown (2003) stresses that things gain meaning and value through the series of dislocations and displacements they go or are put through (195). The journey of an object, then, can be said to echo the journey of the displaced person; due to dislocation, people experience changes in their identities and perception of the self. This change can be manifested through their relationship with objects either their cherished ones, or the ones that appear in their lives under certain circumstances. The thingness of these objects forces individuals to reconsider their identities and self-concept.

Thus, in Mahjoub's novel, the indifference with which the brass case is treated resonates with Hassan's feelings of inferiority despite his position as a man of science, and made him sensitive to other people's perceptions of him. The brass case offers a new meaning of displacement for Hassan, and Hassan's displacement reshapes the significance of the brass case. In other words, not only does it become an archaeological finding that will be placed in a museum, but also, a reminder for Hassan of his position and situation. When describing the state of the remains, Okkings, the digging site leading archeologist, denies the case and the device their due recognition by telling Hassan that the discovered man "was in a coffin and there are no unusual signs, artifacts, items of any significance" (41). Certainly, a strange device that contained writing from an unidentified language should not be as easily dismissed by a man of science who is supposed to be driven by mere scientific curiosity to examine it. At least, he is expected to wonder about the origin and story of such a strange archaeological finding. Instead, Okking seems to be impatient to get rid of it since he introduces Hassan as "the man they sent to read that gobbledygook we found" (42). Besides, describing the Arabic engraving on the brass case as "gobbledygook" is not an encouraging sign for a scientist of Arab origins.

From the beginning of the novel, Hassan is introduced as an unhappy man; he has marital issues and he has been struggling to melt into the Danish society and not be seen as an outsider. This is unattainable in a rural area; he laments, where "he felt his presence magnified" (108). He feels more at home in the city, no matter where, due to its being a "preoccupied tangle of race, tongues and creeds" (108). He does not want to be asked questions regarding his race or origins so that he does not find himself obliged to "regurgitate the details of his life" as he was "tired of the constant need to describe and explain" (109). This shows Hassan's pain and struggle as a person in diaspora who is tired of being marginalized and disenfranchised. In a way, the brass case reflects Hassan's position in society as a stranger.

Mahjoub introduces Hassan by his first name, an Arab name to signify his difference and displacement. And both Hassan and society will only pay attention to this aspect of his identity and identify him with the established image of the non-Westerner. This is bluntly shown towards the end of the novel when a stuffed monkey toy was pinned to his house and his windows were smudged. Yet, Hassan's mood changes considerably when he reads the name of an Arab man on the brass case. He becomes obsessed with the presence of such a religiously specific device in this northern land. Surely, an Islamic device designated for religious purposes will be of no functional use to a Christian astronomer; yet, it was buried with him while holding the name of its original owner. Hassan's attachment to the device and his efforts to know its story constitutes its thingness.

It is this grasping effect that the device has on Hassan that constitutes it as a thing, as Brown (2016) argues, its thingness is stemming from "what captivates you, however minor or inadvertent the detail" (22-3). What captivates Hassan is the device's displacement. The device slips his grasp; he cannot understand what its use was for a Christian scientist in a Christian country, and what sort of relationship he has had with its original owner, Rashid al-Kenzi. Its dislocation prevents him from understanding the story it embeds, a story with which he became obsessed and "couldn't let go of [it]; it wasn't finished with him yet" and which makes his investigation "depart[s] from any kind of logical procedure" and "become something akin to an obsession" despite the scarcity of the evidence to prove the presence of Rashid in the country (114). It is a story of displacement and changed value and the device is the only remaining witness. In the beginning of its lifespan, the device is treated as a valuable object that is suitable to be given as a gift to show gratitude; however, when the Danes find it with a man whom they view as the incarnation of the devil, they treat it with disdain and fear. Hassan's determination to know the story behind its presence in a foreign land shows his latent awareness of, and unease with, his status as a displaced person.

Brown (2003) recognizes this complicated human-thing relation and studies the slippage "between having (possessing a particular object) and being (the identification of one's self with that object)" (13). Hassan identifies himself and his position with the state of the device. At the same time, the device would have gone unidentified if it was not for the presence of an interpreter who shares with the object the same circumstances and condition, at least theoretically. That is, the Arabic inscriptions on the device strongly attach Hassan to it since, just like him, the device has fallen prey to displacement and neglect. Only an Arab scholar can decipher the engravings on the device and understand its function. Similarly, Hassan would have not investigated his origins if it was not for the appearance of the device. The similar circumstances that he shares with the brass case and the device lead him to re-evaluate his self and with what, and with whom, he identifies himself.

Cooper (2008) argues that Mahjoub is creating "a chain of connectedness" between physical objects and history (68). She maintains that "the brass case is a transcultural object, a metonym for Rashid, and through its mediation Hassan is attempting to translate himself into his own time and place with more ease and certainty" (69). In this context, Prown holds that "human made objects reflect, consciously or unconsciously, directly or indirectly, the beliefs of the individuals who commissioned, fabricated, purchased, or used them" (1). The object becomes a meeting point between all the people who came in

contact with it. That is, these objects provide insights into the lives and personal histories of the individuals who were part of their production, use, and exchange. It is the device that triggers Hassan's insistence to bring to light an unknown displaced Arab person who falls outside the Western stereotypes of the Oriental in order to align himself with him.

The device pushes forward the entire plot; if it was not found, no one would have known about it, or about Rashid al-Kenzi. Hassan is an accomplished man, at least professionally speaking, and he is treated as such. His self and self-esteem, however, needed reassurance and although he does not show it through the novel, his obsession with Rashid al-Kenzi shows that he cares to prove his Arab-Islamic culture's superiority in order for him to identify himself as a Muslim Arab. This is what Baumeister (1986) calls roots obsession; he claims it to be "a misguided attempt to gain self-knowledge by reviving an obsolete feature of identity" (6). For Hassan, it is important to prove that he is linked to a man of high standing in order to boost his self-esteem in a society that looks at him with suspicion and distaste. This is strongly manifested through the scene with the old farmer who, as Hassan thinks, makes a point of sending him a distasteful message through insisting on standing right next to the stack of tabloid newspapers, which report the arrest and deportation of a Gambian drug dealer (107). Hassan knows that the general atmosphere in Denmark is full of hostility towards immigrants, and he feels that he is a target of this hostility despite his position as a scientist.

For this reason, a relationship of affinity is established between him and the device. It connects him to another Eastern figure that used to own it and whose learned identity he wishes to reconstruct. The device sparks many questions regarding the presence of Rashid al-Kenzi in Denmark. Certainly, he was someone of worth because the case was a gift given to him. It does not, however, provide an insight into his history and how it ended up being buried with another man. Although Baumeister's argument might be right for any other person, it certainly does not apply to a man in diaspora, as the mainstream society will not be able to see him in isolation from his origins, or rather, from their views on his origins. So, if he cannot avoid being linked to his roots, it will be better for his self-esteem that these roots are different from the established stereotypes about him and people of his ilk.

Hassan knows that the device allows him to peer into some portions of the past (44); however, the man he is after was belittled and rejected since the only record that mentions him addresses him as "the devious Turk" (113). However, the device will always be present. It survived, and so did its journey and what it signifies: displacement, neglect, and denial of proper scientific attention. It is a journey that Hassan can identify with. At the same time, it stands as a proof and a reminder of the technological advancement of the Islamic and Arabic world. It resists re-writing and distortion; even if it is neglected, it will carry its significance and thingness within itself. This is the meaning of the thing in Heidegger's theory as the object that stands on its own and is independent of the subject (1971, 164). However, its interaction with a human who can bring it to light gives it the opportunity to acquire even more meanings and significations. This allows it to gain an active position in its interaction with humans; it makes them obsessed with it and forces them to recognize it and to make more effort to discover its significance, and hence, its thingness. That is, the thingness of an object will remain obscure until a human comes and interacts with this object.

Hassan, then, is trying to establish this narrative of the past, and to identify and position himself within it; as Stuart Hall argues, "identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within, the narratives of the past" (1990, 225). Hassan starts a process of self-identification with the past, with the device, and with Rashid al-Kenzi. Nevertheless, the past is partial and Rashid al-Kenzi is unrecognizable; he only has the device left. So, it is not Rashid al-Kenzi, it is the device that Hassan can relate himself to; it is a proof of the superiority of his culture. It comes as no surprise, then, that he laments the end of his official work (1990, 251) and is reluctant to leave this historical inquiry that he has started ever since the device was introduced to him and provided him with a sense of purpose as well as comfort. It is more of an inquiry about the self and his current situation than about the past for pure historiographical reasons.

Hassan and Rashid have one thing in common that the device proves: both are travelers; on the point of departing; both with no sense of fixed home. The device is a traveler's device that allowed him to keep track of his identity in whatever place in the world he was to go. The device is designed for travel and for one to keep track with a certain fixed place; nevertheless, it was taken away from its owner and was buried in an unforgiving society. The device is designed to remind the traveler of whom he is; that is his identity, which is a constituting part of his self-concept.

The Creation of Things and the Ideal Self in Hammad's *The Parisian*

Isabella Hammad is a British-Palestinian author who made her debut in the literary scene with her novel *the Parisian* in 2019. The novel received great critical acclaim. Similar to other Arab writers in diaspora, Hammad explores in her novel the theme of displacement. It is a historical novel that revolves around the life of a Palestinian young man, Midhat who travels to France to study medicine. It also depicts his journey to find himself in a time when Palestine is struggling to stand as an independent nation in the wake of the British Mandate. In this historical novel, Hammad weaves a plot that depicts the Palestinian crisis in the early years of the twentieth century. Residing temporarily in France, Midhat explores the changed politics of the Middle East from, at first, a distanced position, and when he returns home, he becomes an eyewitness of a turbulent period of the Palestinian history.

The author, however, manages to merge the pivotal historical upheavals that Palestine went through in the early twentieth century with the personal turbulences that Midhat went through during his life in France and Nablus without "generalisations or making" him, or the other characters, "mouthpieces for the march of history" (Williams 2019, par. 2). Although the general background of the events is of a national importance and significance for the Middle East, Hammad contrasts this to the personal histories of her novel's characters, especially Midhat and his journey to find and establish the best version of his self.

As mentioned in the previous section, the ideal self is one of the perspectives of the self-concept; however, knowledge about the actual self may endanger this vision. Being a member of a minority group, with what this entails of being faced with racism and pejorative stereotyping, is a hindrance for the person in diaspora to achieve, or even to aspire for, this ideal image of the self, that is, the best version s/he can become. In this regard, there are objects that remind one of one's inferiority, while there are others that one uses to empower one's self-esteem and resist the pressure of the mainstream society. In the case of

Midhat, in Isabella Hammad's novel *the Parisian*, his knowledge of his self involves awareness of his difference and inferior state compared to the Europeans he is to settle among, especially with the decay of the Ottoman Empire. This is manifested through the anxiety attack he had on the ship and the moment of metamorphosis in which he feels his body changing into that of a freak of some sort when he thinks he is the only Arab onboard:

> [H]e became conscious of his back against the bench, a sensation that was bizarrely painful. He was aware of his legs extending from his pelvis. His nose, usually invisible, doubled and intruded on his vision. The outline of his body weighed on him as a hard, sore shape, and his heart beat very fast. He assumed the feeling would pass. But it did not, and that evening simple interactions with the quartermaster, dining attendants, other passengers, took on a strained and breathless quality. (6)

Midhat is so anxious that he is certain that the others too can see the change in his skin and appearance. He is relieved only when he meets Faruq, an Arab immigrant, like himself, who works as a language teacher in the University of Sorbonne. Hammad's representation of Midhat at this stage is a reminder of how diaspora complicates the process of identity construction since it is a site where nation, religion and language converge. In this journey, there were two specifically important objects that accompanied Midhat's adventure in France: his father's watch, and his own tarbush. Both objects attain the status of Things as Midhat holds them dear, for different reasons, and they embody the changes in his self-concept.

The watch makes its first appearance when Midhat was having the anxiety attack. He kept checking the time "compulsively", due to his nervous state, hoping that these painful moments in which he began to see "the spasms of something monstrous" (6) in his twitching body would disappear. Later on, the reader learns that this is not just a device that he bought for himself; it was a gift from his father with whom he never had a close relationship as the latter remarried after his wife's death and left Midhat for his grandmother to raise. The gifting of the watch, that even his father cherished, establishes an intimate relationship between the father and his son. It shows the father's confidence that his son will have a brilliant future. For Midhat, on the other hand, the watch is a first motivation to see himself as a praiseworthy person. Also, the scene where the father shows Midhat the mechanics of the watch denotes a rare and an intimate moment in the father-son relationship since he knows that if it was to break, Midhat would not know how to fix it. The watch, then, acquires a new significance; it becomes an embodiment of this relationship between Midhat and his father.

The other significance of this watch has to do with its material characteristics and their implications for Midhat. Since it is Turkish and has Arabic ciphers, it changes from a devise that is used to tell time to be an epithet of Midhat's origins. This watch itself is the epitome of cultural hybridity and the politics of the Middle East during the reign of the Ottoman Empire. It introduces the already ambivalent origins of Midhat, and the additional fluctuation he is to face in Paris. One may argue that watch represents Midhat's first encounter with modernity which he is yet to experience, albeit in a more aggressive and sinister form, in the diasporic spaces of France.

His ambivalence regarding these origins is manifested when he "cradled" the watch in both hands to give away as a gift to his rival, Laurent, assuring him that, although, it is Turkish "it does tell the time" (61). At this point in the novel, Midhat is in a process of merging himself in the Parisian culture and of repressing his own culture. This repression symbolizes Midhat's attempt to deny this aspect of his identity, and by extension, his diasporic self. This exposes his low self-esteem which results from his state as a displaced person. The only hope that he envisions is professional success through which he can achieve a better version of his self and, consequently, a higher self-esteem.

Baumeister (1997) holds that the social recognition that a person "is reaching one's ideal self" is essential for him to claim it (687). In Midhat's case, this need manifests itself in the early stages of the novel. He creates three fantasies in which he is acclaimed and celebrated by others for three different acts. The first is a linguistic capability that allowed him to save a French woman from being lost in Jerusalem; the second is an artistic skill, specifically singing, that aroused people's emotions beyond their control, and the third one is a heroic deed of saving a passenger from falling "with the grace of a dancer" while the "onlookers applauded" (10). In all these daydreams, he makes himself the center of other people's appraisal. These daydreams bestowed confidence on Midhat through which he carried himself onboard; that is why he keeps going back to them whenever his anxiety hits back. It is no surprise then that he wanted the approval and recognition of a man of knowledge such as Molineu.

Midhat stops thinking about the watch after giving it to Laurent; nevertheless, when he hears about Laurent's death he becomes obsessed with it:

> The gold watch occurred to him in the middle of the night. He woke to the sound of the windowpane rattling in its frame, and as he brought his cold arms under the warm covers his brain flicked awake. The watch. Lost, undoubtedly. He saw it in his mind's eye, ticking away in the mud. The fragile casing blown off like the wings of a beetle, the heartbeat exposed. (119-20)

Midhat is only relieved when he remembers that Laurent was not killed in the battlefield, but in a bar, which means that the watch did not have such a violent end. Nevertheless, during the funeral, all he could think about was its destiny, and what would be thought of a Turkish watch owned by a European man: "Perhaps that Laurent had stolen it from a dead Turk; that he was a hero, and this was his booty" (120). Midhat contemplates how the watch and Laurent constitute each other. The dislocation of the watch makes it open to various new significations and meanings; at the same time, the person having it becomes subject, as well, to different identifications and speculations.

Even years later when he goes back to Nablus and is hospitalized for a mental breakdown, he nearly kills a patient mistaking his watch for his own, the one he gifted to Laurent in Paris. Whether it really was his or not, the reader cannot know for sure, but Midhat is inconsolably screaming, while four nurses are struggling to hold him: "'I killed him, I killed Laurent.'" He gulped the air. "'For nothing. I killed him for nothing'" (475). This strong scene shows Midhat lamenting the compromise he wanted to make by giving away a part of himself to be embraced by a society that would not have accepted him anyway and was skeptical about his humanity. It is a society that shattered his efforts to becoming his ideal-self.

The second "thing" that is even more important in Midhat's journey of establishing his ideal self is his tarbush. The tarbush was first introduced to the Middle East through the Ottoman Empire and it served as a unified and unifying piece of clothes for people from different religions; it was not until the 1930s that it became solely used by Arab Muslims and Christians, excluding Jews (Kahlenberg 2018, 1213). Midhat created the thingness of his tarbush when he started a close relationship with it. He wore it with pride and was not going to give it up no matter how many frowns he was to get. The tarbush needed Midhat's recognition; otherwise, it would have become just a piece of clothes that went out of fashion, an object that has no significance beyond its utilitarian use. Midhat's later close association with it creates its thingness, which is, as argues Bill Brown, "the result of subjective response" (2016: 22). In addition, the condition of displacement contributed immensely to the change and intensification of Midhat's relationship with the tarbush, and consequently allowing this thingness to occur.

The line between subject-object is once again blurred when Midhat finds out that he becomes the object of study and inquiry, just like his tarbush has become a curiosity for the displeased French onlooker. Midhat becomes Dr. Molineu's Oriental (83), possession, which is a quality that was traditionally given to objects. According to Baudrillard (1994), the term is used to refer to an object that is stripped of its function and "made relative to a subject" becoming "a system on the basis of which the subject seeks to piece together his world, his personal microcosm" (7). In the novel, through examining Midhat's humanity, Molineu establishes a subject-object dichotomy whereby he posits himself as the subject and objectifies Midhat. This is shown in the notes of his research project that has Midhat's name in its title. In this study, Molineu is taking notes on Midhat's Arabic proverbs and their meanings. It is a study, as he later tells Midhat when he confronts him, to "humanise" him (134). For a person who made many efforts to be recognized as a respected man of science, questioning such a basic aspect as his humanity is a shattering experience.

Gordon Allport (1961) maintains that "if we are to hold to the theory of multiple drives at all, we must at least admit that the ego drive (or pride, or desire for approval- call it what you will) takes precedence over all other drives" (155-6). Seen from Allport's perspective, Midhat's pride was hurt, and as a reaction, he left the house and brought his tarbush with him; not to hide it away, but to wear it. From his first moments in Montpellier, Midhat captures the attention of people; or rather more accurately, his tarbush does. The unkindly expression that Midhat has noticed on the Frenchman's face when he saw the tarbush was followed by the act of touching the brim of his hat, as is the usual sign of showing respect; nevertheless, the incident has made Midhat pay attention to the material difference of his own "hat" which lacked that brim, a recognition that he was unhappy with (11).

Nevertheless, this time when he was leaving Molineu's house he wears it, and although he realizes that "he could not have marked his difference more obviously", and that "[t]here were some frowns of confusion and clear distaste […] he would not take the tarbush off" (153). Although, initially, he wears it because there is no room for it in the suitcase, when he is faced with the same attitudes as when he first arrived, his reaction to the present situation is totally different. This is a turning point in Midhat's life. He no longer seeks assimilation; rather, he becomes a man who is keen to preserve his cultural identity and

resist the disdaining gazes of the Europeans. The tarbush acquires a thingness that clearly manifests Midhat's self-recognition and epiphany.

Through its interaction with Midhat, the tarbush escapes the subject/object opposition in which it is the human subject that grants the object meaning. Rather, it becomes a Thing that exerts meaning, provides reassurance for Midhat, and conveys, as Brown (2001) holds, a story "of a changed relation to the human subject" (4). It is mainly with the tarbush that Midhat is able to show his resistance, and to confront the French gazes and perceptions. It is this incident with the tarbush that reminds him of the aspect of his identity that he has abandoned when he gave away his father's watch. It is not Midhat; it is the tarbush that interacts with people; it acts up for Midhat. If it was not for the meaning embedded in the tarbush, Midhat would not have had any other use for it other than the one it was created for, a simple hat. It represents Arabs, but for Midhat, it represents him as he "had fallen so easily into the compromise available in Paris, this type, by an embrace of otherness that at first he had admired in Faruq but which now appeared in his mind a skewed, performed version of what it was really like to be in a place but not of it" (161). He laments the wasted efforts to merge himself in a place that is not ready to perceive him beyond his otherness and objectification.

With the tarbush, Midhat was close to becoming a "self-fulfill[ed] human being" (1986, 7) in Maslow's sense as "the one in whom all his potentialities are coming to full development, the one whose inner nature expresses itself freely, rather than being warped, suppressed, or denied" (1968, 7). This produces the tarbush as a thing: "Producing a thing—effecting thingness—depends […] on an irregular if not unreasonable reobjectifiation of the object that dislodges it from the circuits through which it is what it typically is. Thingness is precipitated as a kind of misuse value" (Brown 2016, 51). Brown uses the expression "misuse value" to refer to the aspects of the object that stand out, be they "sensuous, aesthetic, semiotic" and which turns it into "another thing" (51). In the case of the tarbush, it is the sensuous and semiotic aspects that were focused on; the tarbush's difference from European hats and its Arab cultural connotations have become Midhat's focus points. Indeed, it has become Midhat's weapon to empower himself against the belittling gazes of the French people.

Knowing oneself occupies a great position in the psychological endeavor. Oyserman et al. (2012), for instance, hold that "feeling that one knows oneself facilitates using the self to make sense and make choices, using the self as an important perceptual, motivational and self-regulatory tool" (69). Throughout life, an important source of self-knowledge is the social feedback people receive from each other (Baumeister 1997, 685-6). For Midhat, the belittling gazes and treatment with which he is met makes him afraid of confronting and embracing the aspects of his identity that were used to single him out in the first place, that is his Arab origins. However, this knowledge is similarly dependent on the objects the person surrounds oneself with and especially the ones that s/he turns into Things. The danger of this knowledge is that the person may discover elements and aspects that threaten his or her self-esteem and self-image which creates a sense of fear from attempting to know oneself. For this reason, Midhat hides his tarbush, in the beginning, and gives away his father's watch.

In other words, this fear of knowing oneself is of a defensive nature, as Maslow (1968) argues, "in the sense that it is a protection of our self-esteem, of our love and respect for ourselves. We tend to be

afraid of any knowledge that could cause us to despise ourselves or to make us feel inferior, weak, worthless, evil, shameful" (71). The encounters and interaction with certain "things" force people to turn inwardly to face what they fear this knowledge to bring to light about themselves and to unveil more things that were repressed. In Midhat's case, through his changed relationship with the watch and the tarbush, he expresses his acceptance of the aspects of his identity that he has repressed in order to be assimilated in the French society.

In line with this idea, Csikszentmihalyi and Halton (1981) argue that "things also tell us who we are, not in words, but by embodying our intentions. In our everyday traffic of existence, we can also learn about ourselves from objects, almost as much as from people" (91). Midhat has not received positive feedback, neither for his initial appearance nor for his later attempts to prove his worth and capabilities. Nevertheless, he does not adhere to the way that Molineu has perceived him; he has acted up for himself. His self then is what Baumeister (1997) describes as the active self that "tends to take an aggressive and critical response to feedback so as to measure it against what it already knows. By responding actively to feedback, people can maintain their views of themselves despite contrary evidence" (686). For this, then, Baumeister holds that building a self-concept is actually engaging in an act of mediation between this external, social feedback, and one's own favored beliefs of himself (686). Midhat rejects the feedback he has received as a worthless Other whose cognitive capacities are questioned with the help of his tarbush; as it is explained above. It is true that the tarbush embodies meaning; however, Midhat's insistence on it creates its thingness, turning it into a weapon to confront western frowns and defend his self-concept. This idea is fortified through Midhat's lamentation of giving away his father's watch, an act which represented his readiness to abandon his identity in order to be accepted in the French society.

Conclusion

The connectedness of humans and things is a driving force in human societies and relations. Through this connectedness, the "thing" may gain new significations due to human's obsession with it, as it may push the person to think about him/herself, his/her internal drives, and societal relations. The meaning of the object is reshaped as is that of the human's sense of the self and the Other. As this article has shown, a character's relationship with a certain "thing" within diasporic spaces helps understand his/her feelings, hopes and anxieties. Hall reminds us that diasporic identities "produc[e] and reproduc[e] themselves anew, through transformation and difference" (1990, 235). Certainly, in diaspora "things" are catalysts for identity metamorphosis and mutation, especially, how one perceives one's self, i.e. one's self-concept.

This condition is even magnified when humans and objects go through the experience of displacement, and face neglect, stereotyping, and prejudice. The objects that a person in diaspora keeps and cherishes allow him or her, as well as others, to understand more about his or her position and how one views oneself. Arab writers in diaspora, like Mahjoub and Hammad, have vividly depicted how "things" crucially influence a character's identity which is an important component of his/her self-concept. This is no surprise since the works of Arab writers in diaspora, as Awad (2012) illustrates, present identities as tentative products of the intersectionality of class, gender, race, religion, political affiliation, and ideological stances; identities become "racialized historical processes" where different

geo-political contexts have great effects on them (39). The novels discussed in this paper portray how "Things" are important elements that shape one's diasporic identity and sense of self.

This is shown through the experiences of Hassan with the brass case and the astrological device in Mahjoub's novel. It is also vividly depicted in Hammad's novel as Midhat's interaction with his father's watch and his own tarbush indicates. Hassan's obsession with the brass case and the astrological device exposes his unease with his situation in Denmark and motivates him to identify with another Arab figure that was present there four hundred years earlier than him. For Midhat, the changed position of both the watch and the tarbush shows the change in his image of his ideal-self, from someone who wished to be separated from his origins, to a person who embraces his cultural heritage along with his otherness. These two examples show that humans and objects are inseparable. Their connectedness is even more empowered when they are put through similar circumstances, especially displacement and dislocation.

The close association between the novel's protagonists and the objects they have come across is what creates the thingness of these objects. Simultaneously, these "things" capture the protagonists' attention and affect their self-concepts and the way they handle their displacement and diasporic realities. At the same time, the authors' representations of the "things" and their relationship with the protagonists reveal the struggles that a person in diaspora goes through. Similarly, they represent the person's diasporic experience as a deciding factor in the kind of objects one associates oneself with and their subsequent thingness.

"الأشياء" والذات المهجرية في رواية *(الحامل)* للكاتب جمال محجوب ورواية *(الباريسي)* للكاتبة إيزابيلا حماد

حياة اللواتي، يوسف أبو عامرية
قسم اللغة الإنجليزيّة وآدابها، الجامعة الأردنية، الأردن

الملخص

تتناول هذه المقالة تأثير "الأشياء" على المفهوم الذاتي للأفراد المغتربين في روايات الكتاب العرب الذين يكتبون باللغة الإنجليزيّة، وبخاصة رواية *(الناقل)* (1998) للروائي جمال محجوب، ورواية *(الباريسي)* (2019) للروائية إيزابيلا حمّاد. ويلقي هذا المقال الضوء على أهمية "أشياء" معينة في الروايتين، وكيفية فهم البطل لهويته وتحديد موقعه في الحياة من خلال "أشياء" معينة. ولذلك، فإن الدراسة تقع ضمن الأطر النظرية لـ "نظرية الشيء" ونظريات مفهوم الذات. ويبيّن هذا المقال بأن بعض "الأشياء" هي عوامل مهمة في تطوير هوية كل من بطلي الروايتين وفهمه لذاته حيث إنّ هذه "الأشياء" لا تؤثر في شخصية البطل وتشكل هويته بصورة كبيرة فحسب، بل إنها تقدم أيضًا أدلة للقارئ حول التغيرات التي يمر بها البطلان خلال تجربتهما في الشتات. ومن خلال تتبع العلاقة بين البطلين و"الأشياء" المذكورة أعلاه في كل رواية، تتكون لدى القارئ فكرة جيدة عن كيفية تأثير تجارب الشتات على مفهوم الذات للفرد.

الكلمات المفتاحية: جمال محجوب؛ إيزابيلا حمّاد؛ نظرية الشيء؛ الشتات؛ مفهوم الذات.

References

Al_Maleh, Layla. 2009. *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*. New Delhi: Rodopi.

Allport, Gordon W. 1961. *Pattern and Growth in Personality*. London: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.

Awad, Yousef. 2012. *The Arab Atlantic: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers*. Saarbrücken: LAP Lambert Academic Publishing.

Awad, Yousef. 2015. Displacement, Belonging and Identity in Susan Muaddi Darraj's The Inheritance of Exile. *Studies in Literature and Language* 10 (2): 1-10. https://doi.org/10.3968/5959.

Awad, Yousef. 2020. Sea Imagery in Hala Alyan's Salt Houses. *American, British and Canadian Studies* 35 (1): 23–43. https://doi.org/10.2478/abcsj-2020-0015.

Baudrillard, Jean. 1994. The System of Collecting. In Elsner, John and Cardinal, Roger (eds.) *The Cultures of Collecting*. London: Reaktion Books Ltd., 7–24.

Baumeister, Roy F. 1986. *Identity: Cultural Change and the Struggle for Self*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Baumeister, Roy F. 1997. Identity, Self-Concept, and Self-Esteem: the Self Lost and Found. Essay. In Hogan, Robert; Johnson, John, and Briggs, Stephen (eds.) *Handbook of Personality Psychology*. London: Academic Press, 681–710.

Belk, Russell W. 1988. Possessions and the Extended Self. *Journal of Consumer Research* 15 (2): 139–68. https://doi.org/10.1086/209154.

Brown, Bill. 2001. Thing Theory. *Critical Inquiry* 28 (1): 1–22. https://doi.org/10.1086/449030.

Brown, Bill. 2003. *A Sense of Things: the Object Matter of American Literature*. Chicago, IL: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Brown, Bill. 2016. *Other Things*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Burns, Robert B and Clifford B Dobson. 1984. *Introductory Psychology*. MTP Press Limited.

Cooper, Brenda. 2008. *A New Generation of African Writers: Migration, Material Culture & Language*. Woodbridge: James Currey.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly and Eugene Halton. 2012. *The Meaning of Things Domestic Symbols and the Self*. Cambridge England: Cambridge University Press.

Gecas, Victor. 1982. The Self-Concept. *Annual Review of Sociology* (8): 1-33. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.so.08.080182.000245.

Hahn, Hans Peter and Hadas Weiss. (eds.). 2013. Biographies, Travels and Itineraries of Things. In *Mobility, Meaning and the Transformations of Things Shifting Contexts of Material Culture through Time and Space*, ed. Hahn, Hans Peter, and Hadas Weiss, 1–14. Oxford, UK: Oxbow Books.

Hall, Stuart. 1990. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora". In *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford, 222–37. London: Lawrence & Wishart.

Hammad, Isabella. 2019. *The Parisian*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Heidegger, Martin. 1971. *Poetry, Language, Thought*. New York, N.Y: Harper and Row.

Kahlenberg, Caroline R. 2018. The Tarbush Transformation: Oriental Jewish Men and the Significance of Headgear in Ottoman and British Mandate Palestine. *Journal of Social History* 52 (4): 1212–49. https://doi.org/10.1093/jsh/shx164.

Lowe, C. Marshall. 1961. The Self-Concept: Fact or Artifact. *Psychological Bulletin* 58 (4): 325–36. https://doi.org/10.1037/h0048771.

Mahjoub, Jamal. 1999. *The Carrier*. London: Phoenix.

Maslow, Abraham H. 1968. *Toward a Psychology of Being*. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold Company.

Nyman, Jopi. 2017. *Displacement, Memory, and Travel in Contemporary Migrant Writing*. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV.

Oyserman, Daphna, Kristen Elmore and George Smith. 2012. "Self, Self-Concept, and Identity." In Leary, Mark R. and Tangney, June Price (eds.) *Handbook of Self and Identity*. New York: Guilford Press, 69–104.

Prown, Jules David. 1982. Mind in Matter: An Introduction to Material Culture Theory and Method. *Winterthur Portfolio* 17 (1): 1–19. https://doi.org/10.1086/496065.

Rochberg-Halton, Eugene. 1984. "Object Relations, Role Models, and Cultivation of the Self." *Environment and Behavior* 16 (3): 335–68. https://doi.org/10.1177/0013916584163003.

Rosenberg, Morris. 1986. *Conceiving the Self*. Malabar: Krieger publishing company.

Said, E. W. 1986. *After the Last Sky: Palestine Lives*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Stockhammer, Philipp W. 2020. Doing/Changing Things/Us. In *Exploring Materiality and Connectivity in Anthropology and Beyond,* ed. Philipp Schorch, Martin Saxer, and Marlen Elders, 36-50. London: UCL Press.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. 1980. The Significance of the Artifact. *Geographical Review* 70 (4): 462–72. https://doi.org/10.2307/214079.

Williams, Holly. 2019. The Parisian by Isabella Hammad, Review: Highly Personal, Often Striking. The Independent. Independent Digital News and Media, April 13, 2019. https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/reviews/parisian-isabella-hammad-review-novel-book-themes-ottoman-empire-a8866871.html.

Zantingh, Matthew. 2013. When Things Act Up: Thing Theory, Actor-Network Theory, and Toxic Discourse in Rita Wong's Poetry. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 622-646. https://doi:10.1093/isle/ist074.