

# Identity, Borders and Liminality in *The Tobacco Keeper*

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**Abstract** Ali Bader's *The Tobacco Keeper* is one of the first texts which deal with Iraqi Jews. It is the story of exclusion, confiscation, deportation and physical extermination. Taking into account the socio-political, historical and cultural circumstances that Iraqi Jews experienced up to their final departure to The Promised Land, this article investigates the process of identity transformation that the protagonist undergoes. Deploying postcolonial theory and theories of identity, and a close reading of the novel, this study shows how politics problematizes and destabilizes notions of identity construction, sense of belonging and life in the third space. Further, it sheds light on the motivations of Iraqi Jews to live behind Islamic masks and cross religious boundaries, the role of host society in shaping one's identity and the active role of the subject in the process of transformation. Moreover, the article seeks to ascertain the impact of assumed conversion and forged documents on the deconstruction and reconstruction of the Iraqi Jewish identity.

**Keywords** Iraqi Jews, identity, borders, mask, liminality, Farhud

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## Introduction

Ali Bader's *Tobacco Keeper* (2008), originally written in Arabic, was translated into English by Amira Nowaira in 2011. It is the first work of fiction in Iraq to deal with Iraqi Jews. Due its controversial theme, the novel is a groundbreaking work in

the field of Arab fiction. *The Tobacco Keeper* narrates the life story of Yousef Sami Saleh and the reader discovers that he has three names and three identities. Yousef's story begins with his childhood. He was born on November 3, 1926 in a middle-class Jewish-Iraqi Qujman family which lived on Al-Rashid Street in the Al-Torah quarter, one of Baghdad's oldest quarters which had been a home to many Jewish families. His father, Sami Saleh worked at Juri pharmacy in Al-Karradah and his mother was Huri bint Rahamin Dalal. In 1948, the State of Israel was declared and the war between Arabs and Israelis initiated. In that same year, he had become a famous violist and was awarded the King Faisal Prize for the violin. In 1950, he was forcibly expelled to Israel during Operation Ezra and Nehemiah. In 1958, to return to Iraq, he assumed a new name and managed to go back on a forged passport and a new Muslim Shia name, Haidar Salman. During the Iraqi-Iranian war in the 1980s, and due to the Iraqi Shia affiliation with Iran, he was expelled from Iraq for the second time. Again he went back to Iraq using a new forged passport and a new Muslim Sunni name, Kamal Medhat. It is within this framework that Bader introduces the problematic and ambiguous issue of identity, mask, boundaries and survival. The novel attempts to answer a number of questions: What does compel an individual to change his identity? How much one's self is tied to religious, cultural and political identity? Can one's identity be shed and exchanged like a mask? What happens to the individual behind the mask? What vestiges remain from his first identity?

Bader puts a special emphasis on anti-semitic violence as he re-narrates the anti-Semitic pogrom of the 1441, known as the Farhud, in which 179 Jews were murdered and about 2,000 wounded. Yousef identity crisis started during this horrendous event, in which his aunt was burnt alive before his eyes. The incident has a tremendous effect on Yousef and formed a turning point not only in Yousef's life but also in the history of the Jews of Iraq, jeopardizing their very existence and position within Iraq. The persecutions and the national tide against the Jews intensified after the declaration of the State of Israel in 1948; new laws were issued that barred them from their national identities and removed their citizen rights and were legislatively defined as 'others'. Hence, the Jews began to flee from Iraq in search of a safe haven. By visiting those incidents, the novel gives readers a complete portrayal of the life of Jews as a minority among the larger Muslim community sketching their fears, hopes and dreams. Changing identity, therefore, is not undertaken by Jewish individuals out of conviction but rather as a practical means of protection and survival. Being a target of Muslim violence and discrimination, these individuals attempt to hide behind the mask of Islamic religion

to avoid annihilation.

Focusing on the atrocities of 1941, the Farhud in particular, and final departure of the Iraqi Jews after 1948, the novel demonstrates how some Jews empowered by determination and hope, even in the worst possible situations, have been able to survive. They utilized various mechanisms for survival and one of these mechanisms is forging a new identity. It is suffused with shifting identities and unstable dualities as the major character leads a double, in fact a triple, life and easily slips in and out of ostensibly incompatible categorizations. According to the author, it is the story of “assumed names and blurred identities” (Bader 17).

Positioned as the ethnic other, and being a potential target for anti-Jewish violence, Yousef feels suffocated by his Jewish identity, which becomes a burden on him. He spends nearly one decade of his life—between 19401 and 1950—under the threat of annihilation just for being a Jew. He expresses his suffocation with the Jewish identity: “Yousef in those days was haunted by a single obsession, an obsession that said: ‘Do not put me in a tight corner, do not place me in a little box. When you treat me like a Jew, you suffocate me’” (Bader 105). His Jewish identity becomes a source of trouble to the point that he fears leaving his house. Yousef’s life was steeped in the identity conflicts of Iraq and the Middle East in general. Under such circumstances, Yousef “longed to dissolve and vanish into the ethereal. The weight of his identity was too heavy for him to bear. It pushed him towards the past, to vanish into forgetfulness. He wanted to get rid of his identity by fading away, by escaping or hiding. If it wasn’t possible to do that, he had to hide behind another character, a new name and a whole new life” (Bader 106). It is clear that during times of severe violence, Jewish identity was a burden and, therefore, Iraqi Jews have to devised a way of survival through altering their real identities and adapting new multiple and distinct identities or ‘masks’ which are called on depending on the need and the situation.

The article argues that *The Tobacco Keeper* not only provides insights into Yousef’s identity crisis and his invention of means of survival, but also invites readers to reflect critically upon Jewish identity dilemma in Iraq during the 1940s and 1950s. In this article, I propose that Bader critiques the discourses of Jewish identity by presenting a Jewish protagonist who successfully tries to resolve his anxieties about identity, religion and ethnicity through adaptation of multiple identities and crossing the boundary zone of religion and ethnicity. I draw on the postcolonial theory to explore the impact of political, religious, and racial forces in Iraq on Jews’ sense of self and their responses to face such powers through constructing new and multiple identities. It attempts to demonstrate that Bader’s *The*

*Tobacco Keeper* explores the concept of identities as masks as well as the conscious act of masking itself.

## **Identity**

Many theorists have developed the concept of a fluid identity. Hall (1990) observes: “identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, unlike everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation. Far from being eternally fixed in some essentialised past, they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (225). Hall continues “identities are the names we give to the different ways we are positioned by, and position ourselves within” (225). According to Hall, identities are subject to social, political and cultural surroundings. An individual’s encounter with a new political, cultural, and social ideas results in the destabilization of an individual’s previous identity and self. Hence, identity, as a process, is “constantly changing, in flux, ambiguous and fragile” (Pullen 1). It is formed and shaped by culture and historical experience. A fluid identity is one which is not rigid or fixed and is liable to change and is influenced by external dynamics. According to Schiltermandl and Toplu (2010), “identities are not unified or stable, but are fluid entities which constantly push at the boundaries of the nation-state, thereby re-defining themselves and the nation-state simultaneously” (11). Though Schiltermandl and Toplu have confined their statement to nation boundaries, it can be applied to other boundaries such as religious, ethnic and class. Anca (2012) argues that “Identities are multiple and in constant movement. They change because of the need for self-development, the desire to act in the multiple communities we all belong to, or aspire to be a part of” (xv). The fluidity of identity often raises questions regarding belonging and boundaries of difference. The struggle over membership and belonging to a certain group becomes ever more politicized during political crises. Such moments always witness the flow of people between boundaries and relocations of various types sometimes not related to migration but rather to class, religion, gender and other social categories. Political crises bring a permanent dilemma for individuals, a constant need to make decisions and choices to cross borders and avoid crisp barriers, and find where to belong.

Identity has become a remarkably contested concept in the interaction between the choice of how an individual imagines him and the global power relations which highly affect one’s social, cultural and material realities. In other words, it is impossible to assume that identity is solely based on one’s choice and overlook the social and political surroundings and their impositions on individuals. Further, it cannot be assumed that identity is purely inscribed or imposed by society on

individuals because this will overlook the self-determination and agency of the individual. In other words, identity is a blend of the intrinsic self and the contextual identity, one that individuals adapt to in reaction to the ever-changing situation and which can be referred to as the survival tactic because individuals always resort to adapting it for survival purposes. This code-switching tactic is seen as a defensive mechanism. Living during those changes—political, social or economic—requires a balance between these two identities. The challenges that one encounters can be attributed to one's failure to understand and integrate the two. It is this dialectics between the ascribed and the chosen identities which lies at the heart of Bader's novel and which the present article attempts to investigate. Furthermore, if an individual identity is too rigid and fixed, s/he might lose the ability to grow and change. In this sense, fixed identity could mean death for an individual. In contemporary world which is changing so rapidly, a stable and consistent identity, though still relatively important, is less important than a flexible and multiple identity.

In a society like the Iraqi one and during a time of political and social unrest, Jews felt unsecure. This fact of being vulnerable and the target of fanatics, forced them to reformulate their identities. In ordinary circumstances, it is possible for one's identity to be something fixed, solid, and stable. One maybe be born and die as a member of one's community, tribe or clan, with a fixed kinship system. Identity may not be subject to change and reformation and is never problematical. Such individuals never undergo any identity crises and never attempt to radically modify their identities. However, under certain circumstance, one's identity becomes problematical. In this case, they try to mask their identities and live in disguise. Here, identity becomes more multiple, mobile and subject to innovation and change.

Changing one identity is not something wrong. This has been one of the main trends in postmodern studies. Kellner (1992), for example, discusses the notion of multiple and freely chosen and easily disposed identities for numerous occasions and circumstances in postmodern era:

It appears that postmodern identity [...] tends to be more unstable and subject to change. Both modern and postmodern identity contain a level of reflexivity, an awareness that identity is chosen and constructed. In contemporary society, however, it may be more 'natural' to change identities, to switch with the changing winds of fashion. While this produces an erosion of individuality and increased social conformity, there are some positive potentials of this postmodern portrayal of identity as an artificial construct. For such a notion

of identity suggests that one can always change one's life, that identity can always be reconstructed, that one is free to change and produce oneself as one chooses. (153-4)

However, there is a remarkable difference between the identity construction of postmodern times and that of Iraqi Jews: while the former is motivated by a horror of being bound and fixed, the latter is motivated by the horror of being exterminated and annihilated. Kellner's statement and Bader's novel show that identities are never unified; they are increasingly fragmented and fractured, as well as never singular. They are constantly in the process of change and transformation. They can be shaped and reshaped according to one's needs. This, however, creates a kind of ambiguity. Though Yousef, with each personality, "develops a deeper and broader sense of identity [...] ultimately we are left with the true ambiguity of identity... Suddenly we find ourselves confronted by a game à-trois or a 3D Cubist image of a single face" (Bader 8). The three dimensional form of the à-trois or the 3D Cubist image here is very illustrative.

### **Crossing the Borders**

Crossing borders has been always associated with diaspora, immigration and national or geographic borders. However, there may be a crossing which is associated with other borders such as religion, gender, social and class borders. When an individual moves (crosses the borders) to live in a new place, there is a potential that his original identity may be at risk; it may disappear altogether. This transformation of identity is the outcome of one's contact with foreign cultures. However, sometimes an individual has a tendency to change his identity and crosses not geographical borders but religious and social borders for political, social or some other reasons. That is, the dynamics of political, social and cultural interaction produce various paradoxes that transmute the ways identity is created and developed. Hence, borders signify more than geographical delimitations and the experience of borders "can happen whenever and wherever two or more cultures meet peacefully or violently" (Gómez-Peña 55). Here borders far "from being concrete, crisp markers of different countries, national cultures, languages, become virtual, symbolic and therefore mobile" (Coronado 113).

For Yousef, the transition from one identity to another is not something irritating or inconvenient but seems to be familiar and easy; he has no difficulty at all in his movement between the spaces or crossing of boundaries. Yousef's metamorphosis from a Jew to a Shia Muslim and then a Sunni Muslim is

sophisticatedly drawn in a simple way, just getting a passport with a new name. This simplicity indicates that the borderline between different religions are not fixed. This easiness of moving cross boundaries could be attributed to the shared language, culture and national and historical identity among Iraqi Muslims and Jews and the common values and traditions which bind all Iraqis together as one people who have lived through for millenniums.

In spite of being a Muslim, at least officially, Yousef never rejects his past or breaks off relations with his Jewish community. Until his death at the end of the novel, he continues his correspondence with his Jewish wife, Farida, and once he writes to her: "We must not forget ourselves entirely, even if we surrender to a role that we've invented, even when it is incompatible with our personalities" (Bader 162). It can be assumed that Yousef remains ethnically and religiously Jewish but officially Muslim. In other words, there should be a differentiation between ethnic identity and official identity, which adds the complexity of the situation. Yousef continues to identify himself ethnically and culturally as Jewish and continues to feel Jewish; however, he does not publically share the religious and political views of his former community. That is, Yousef's original identity does not disappear; rather, it is redefined and reconstructed. His identity becomes a "freely chosen game, a theatrical presentation of the self, in which one is able to present oneself in a variety of roles, images and activities, relatively unconcerned about shifts, transformations and dramatic changes" (Kellner 158). At the same time, he does not feel as part of the new community. Though he tries to identify himself, at least apparently, as a Muslim, he fails, because internally he cannot feel as a Muslim. He has acquired his Muslim identity not out of conviction but rather to avoid violence and annihilation. The narrator himself wonders if Yousef, after changing his religion and becomes a Muslim, believes in Islam inside him or just he embraces Islam to live a better life: "But the question that perplexed me was whether Haidar Salman became a true Muslim in his heart. Or was he just a Ricardo Reis, who believed in Greek gods despite living in Christian Europe?" (Bader 123). Bader is not concerned with demonstrating the formation or the process of identity transition of the protagonist or finding an effective way of negotiating a new identity, but rather, the focus is on the protagonist's ability to cross the boundaries, have a hybrid identity and live in a liminal space that belongs to neither of the two religions. Here a distinction between beliefs and religious practices has to be clearly stated. Yousef may practice all religious practices of the new religion but still hold on his former belief which is clearly seen in his identification, sympathy and empathy with his former community. Hence, whatever its outward expressions, Yousef's identity is

still linked to his past.

For Yousef, fake documents provide him with more than just a religiously or ethnically different name. Under the new identity, he has to acquire a cultural, religious or ethnic identity which is entirely new to him and which has never been part of his life before. Assuming a new identity requires some strategies that get him be identified easily in harmony with his new identity. In other words, he has to show the larger community that he belongs to it and that he is part of mainstream society. Hence, he has to change his usual behavior, appearance and to get rid of any exterior identifying marks that may show his affiliation with the Jews. He needs to look Muslim and to blend with the non-Jewish Iraqis around him. In his attempt to pass as a non-Jew, he has to behave just like Muslims ethnically and religiously; he simulates Muslim ways of life (imitates the appearance or the character of Muslims). His success of dissimulation depends on his ability in mimicking aspects of the Muslim identity. He visits Muslim holy places and shrines. Yousef's new identity is not only supported by the forged documents, but by adapting his behavior.

Yousef's new identity can be described as 'resistance identity' used to fight for survival against the risk of persecution and extermination by larger hostile powers. Yousef, finding himself in an alien and hostile environment, tries to find spaces which are common to communicate, in order to feel safe inside the borders of such unsafe environment. Sharing meanings with the larger hostile communities greatly helps make the process of disappearance of differences easier. Sharing others' beliefs and faiths reduces the risks of othering and alienation. The more he shares, the more he feels part of the larger community; he devices these strategies to belong, although this belonging is superficial and not genuine.

### **Liminality**

The novel narrates Yousef's experience of constantly moving in-between religions and cultures, which makes his story an essential signifier in representing the transcultural discourses or the creation of a new person in a hybrid space. Since he is a subject of multiple influences, he struggles to form a personal identity. Motivated by uncontrollable desire to return to Iraq, he is pushed from his faith/identity. He must adapt and adjust to a new life. Hence, he creates special social settings that might help him adopt, comprehend and appreciate the new life and deals with traumas of the past in an unfamiliar environment, accepting a newly manufactured/ reconstructed identity.

Yousef's liminality is seen in his belief in all Gods. He reminds the reader of the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, who writes: "In every corner of his soul, there

was an altar to a different God” (Bader 174). The readers are told that Yousef

felt drawn to abstractions that were, nonetheless, strongly present and palpable. This was faith, no doubt. It was a belief that reconciled the different religions inside him: Judaism, which he had absorbed as a child, Christianity, which had seeped into his soul through classical music, and Islam, which became part and parcel of his inner self after his marriage to Tahira. God was One, although He appeared in various texts. (Bader 144-5)

One day, Yousef, while talking to Ada, he informs her that “he was trying to reconcile the various strands and tonalities of the three religions” (Bader 145). Yousef represents the frontier, the hybrid, Arab Jewish-Muslim identity. The novel is preoccupied with liminality as a modernist trait, helping in an exploration of “crises of identity encapsulated in moments or interludes of transition” (Drewery 1). Yousef treads different worlds, becoming stranded in more than one place.

Yousef’s liminality is consolidated by his view of things which has always been “profound but neutral” (Bader 75). He is drawn to the in-between, irreligious space; though it can be seen as a space of necessity, it is also a space of privilege as it gives an individual the freedom not to belong and perceive things without preconceived beliefs or ideas. In other words, being unbound by the religious standards of settled spaces, this neutral space allows for transformation through its neutrality and un-belongingness, providing Yousef not only with a shelter but also with comfort. Undoubtedly, this liminal space, existing outside of the constructs of religion, and providing the subject with a free and detached outlook can help in deconstructing religious notions held to be stable.

Though equipped with false-identity documents, Yousef finds life estranged and marked by unbelonging and alienation. In other words, changing one’s identity during political unrests and conflicts—something imposed or enforced on individuals by circumstances against their will—is not an easy task. He is robbed of his name, religion, culture and people. And due to all these losses, he goes through a lot throughout his life—physically, emotionally and mentally. In other words, Yousef becomes increasingly embittered and estranged in his own homeland. It is this emotional and mental displacement/relocation that the novel tries to explore. According to Bhabha (1998), relocation disturbs personal identity causes insecurity and stress; Bhabha refers to this stress “anxiety of displacement” (34). He confirms that “the anxiety of displacement that troubles national rootedness transforms ethnicity or cultural difference into an ethical relation that serves as a subtle

corrective to valiant attempts to achieve representativeness and moral equivalence in the matter of minorities” (38). He argues that both cultural and/or ethnical difference, as well as dislocation are reasons for causing unease and stress in confirming one’s identity. Bhabha argues that discomfort constitutes a passage and a place of uneasiness and anxiety adjudicating distinction and cultural boundaries: an anxiety constructed in “a transition where strangeness and contradiction cannot be negated and must be constantly negotiated and worked through” (35). You are disconnected from your own culture yet not integrated into your host’s. Your identity is caught in between; always expected to be a participating part, however, still regarded and located on the outside of society. Yousef finds himself in a state of in-betweenness, where he is neither a Jew nor a Muslim.

Though the concepts of hybridity and in-betweenness, introduced by Homi Bhabha, have been discussed in relation to transnationalism, diasporic writings and in relation to identity formation and cultural transition, it can be deployed in discussing trans-religion as well. The trans-religious, like transnational, flow of subjects beyond delineated religious borders and religiously defined spaces will lead to the questioning of religious identity. Hybridity here results from crossing the religious and cultural boundaries. Further, there are many other borders in the novel. Throughout the novel, many different borders—geographical, social and religious—are being crossed making the question of identity entangled and layered. Yousef’s identity in this work is figured as a third space, in which the converted characters are living between their original identity and their desired one. Because of the pressure he encounters, Yousef devices various coping strategies including the constant switch between various religions and communities; he is unable to associate himself completely with one community or the other and, finally, finding a synthesis through the creation of a third space which blends the different cultures, faiths and identities. It seems that staying in between the different sides is the most sustainable and reliable solution.

This act of being in the liminal shows that Yousef has a genius for improvising to fit their surroundings. He refuses to be labelled and fixed in certain designation:

Yousef refused to wear a specific uniform or to have a specific label stuck to him. He wanted to be neither one type nor another. He wanted to become whatever circumstances required him to be. He wanted to be one individual or another, to be ‘here’ or ‘there’, at the same time. (Bader 106)

By presenting the readers with a protagonist whose identity is liminal and fluid,

the novel demonstrates the fluid boundaries of religious identity and validates that the crossing of religious borders is undertaken as a means of survival in a hostile environment.

The passport as a means for crossing geographical borders is also used for crossing religious borders. The transition from one country to another is accompanied by transition from one identity to another. The simplicity of this transition, using just a passport, is a manifestation of the fragility of identity. In addition to questioning the problematic issues of identity boundary-crossing, the novel also crosses the geographical borders of home and diaspora. Yousef, throughout the novel, is seen wondering between Iraq, Iran, Israel, Syria, Moscow etc. Yousef becomes a transnational citizen. In this sense, *The Tobacco Keeper* is a story of enforced displacement and constant dislocation.

### **Identity as a Mask**

A classic trope that prompts critics to interrogate the complexity and intricacy of identity is the use of masks. Human beings have associated mask with the transformation of identity. Certain identity markers can be manipulated for openly engaging in desired group or community; the mask also can be used as a method for dissimulating or hiding a perceived marker in one's private self. The mask facilitates one's belonging and unbelonging. During political turmoil and conflicts people are required to change their masks and wear the appropriate one in the appropriate time. In other words, politics forces people to change their identities and wear masks and Yousef, as a Jew, is required to wear the Jewish mask and play the role of a Jew when it is safe and, at the same time, he has to wear the mask of a Muslim and play the role of a Muslim when it is safe. Like a chameleon, he has to change his mask/identity/color to survive. "Masks," the narrator assures us, "made it easy for individuals to live in society" (Bader 106). Bader's reference to masks, roles and plays draws attention to the fact that life is just a play and humans are actors on the life stage. Hence, Yousef wonders: "How can I possibly take part in this human farce?" (Bader 106). In spite of his understanding that all this is a play, or something false, he has no other option but to act: "He had the overwhelming feeling that he didn't belong to this world at all. But he had to wear a mask, because the mask made it possible for him to regain his self-confidence. It calmed his fears, expelled his demons and quelled the violent cries in the depths of his heart, the depths that told of hell" (Bader 106). Referring to life as a play and humans as actors, changing their roles according to the director's suggestions, empowers the role of mask which the author uses in this novel. Further, Bader refers to the fact that this game is beyond

Yousef's control or ability to handle: "Whose decision was it, then? The authorities decided. The director of the play decided. Life was a huge stage where form was often confused with content. Life as he knew it was made up of actors performing roles" (Bader 161). Playing a role and changing the mask according to the need seem an easy act for Yousef. His complete identification with new characters seems genius, for it shows that he is able to discover himself almost totally and completely every time he adopts a new character. And through the "constant training and continued creativity, he was no longer playing a part but had become the new persona" (Bader 128). Although Yousef has "chosen to play that role" (Bader 162), he seems to be unhappy with such a game: "I wish I could find myself another role and stop playing myself. We often imagine that we control the game, unaware that it actually controls us" (Bader 162).

Bader's association of masks and survival shows that the use of masks is "related to 'insecure' self-feelings" (Kaiser xiv). Further, his reference to masks and identity suggests that there is no single or true identity and adds ambiguity to the notion of identities, partial identities, or potential identities. What is remarkable about a mask is that it defies order, introduces ambiguity and problematizes the concept of belonging and unbelonging and suggests lack of commitment. The mask in the novel has a role; it is protective and empowering. Displaying of a Muslim identity, Yousef is masking a lack or a weakness by removing otherness. Further, placing himself as masked means giving himself a resistive position, challenging the established order along with its defined categories. The construction of multiple identities displays subversive features among the Jews who refuse to be classified. Yousef is empowered enough by the mask to overcome his sense of helplessness and weakness. In other words, masking transforms him into a fearless 'other' and provides him with freedom. He is able to move freely everywhere. Masking is used by Yousef as vehicle for expressing resistance; it is also a means of release of social and identity tensions.

Yousef proves to be a good actor; he is able to adopt new and very different identities in accordance to his needs. He is a good actor in the sense that he has an unlimited repertoire of roles to play; he plays different parts on different occasions and manages to segregate parts of his life which he does not need. In addition to changing his religious affiliation, he also succeeds in changing his speech pattern, manners and general behavior. This is not an easy task; he should have, and be able to employ, the skill and the stratagem to lead a reasonably smooth transition/transformation, persuade others and create a new self out of nothing. This is because of his vulnerability and the uncertainty in which he lives and the danger that awaits

him. The attitudes and behavior of the larger community towards him will change evidently for the worse if his real identity is disclosed.

Gergen (1972) argues that those with multiple identities are healthier and happier. He writes: “Taken together our experiments document the remarkable flexibility of the self. We are made of soft plastic, and molded by social circumstances” (65). This, Gergen argues, does not mean that we should think of ourselves as fakes, for “Once donned, mask becomes reality” (65). He advises us: “we should learn to play more roles, to adopt any role that feels enjoyable [...] the mask may not be the symbol of superficiality that we have thought it was, but the means of realizing our potential” (Gergen 65–66). Gergen in *The Saturated Self* (1991) argues that multiple identity is not only a fact but also a value and that it is normal as well as desirable for people to wear many masks. Further, Gergen observes that in postmodern era, multiple identities are more adaptive and adjustable than are fixed ones.

*The Tobacco Keeper* demonstrates “the possibility of exchanging identities” and that “the notion of an essential ‘identity’ is false” (Bader 9). Yousef’s story

shows that identity is a process of adaptation; no sooner has it located itself in one particular historical moment than it changes into a different moment. All these imaginary communities begin with a fabricated, invented narrative which denies that identities blend and overlap, but which at a certain point in time reveals such boundaries to be imaginary, constructed and fabricated, nothing but narrative concoctions. (Bader 9)

At this point we arrive at the game of assumed names, masks and blurred identities. Bader suggests that it is up to individuals to move from one category to another (be re-categorized) as a consequence of any personal decision. This fact causes Yousef to laugh at “the deadly struggle of identities [...] fake personalities and false masks” (Bader 9).

Yousef represents all Iraqi Jews who were characterized by flexible citizenship. They responded to the Iraqi setting and negotiated its culture and space in accordance with their political and economic needs. Aihwa Ong (1999) defines the term ‘flexible citizenship’ as “the cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel, and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (6). Yousef has responded ‘fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions’ dictated by the political and cultural logics. In the face of severe discrimination and life-threatening contexts, Jews have concealed or dissimulated their identity for the purpose of survival.

Dissimulation has been reduced by some policy-oriented writers to its negative connotations such as faking and deception (Campbell 2006). However, some studies reveal that dissimulation is not exclusive to a particular religion and that members of various religious groups may have dissimulated in one way or another (Clark 2006; Ibrahim 2008; Nissimi 2004; Rosa-Rodriguez 2010; Ward 2004). Sözer (2014) argues that “dissimulation is the last resort for extremely marginalized communities that cannot utilize other collective tactics” (12). She adds that marginalized groups use dissimulation “in order to obscure their identity and to pretend to be members of a majority group, for the immediate survival of individuals and the long term survival of the group as well as of the group’s identity” (42).

Yousef’s tripartite identity is reflected in his sons. After a seemingly endless journey across religions and beliefs, the novel ends with the protagonist looking at his three sons—Meir, Hussein and Omar—who represent the three facets of his own identity. Meir, born of Yousef Sami Saleh, the Jew; Hussein, the offspring of Haidar Salman, the Shia Muslim; and Omar, the son of Kamal Medhat, the Sunni Muslim. They are “his three names and his three cases of impersonation. Each of their faces corresponded to one of his assumed identities [...] Through their characters he discovered the essential answer to the problem of identity” (Bader 224). Yousef “realized that each one of them was a faithful reflection of his own ego. Through their characters he discovered the essential answer to the problem of identity. Each one of them was a facet of his personality, a single entity that was split and multiple at the same time. They were a three dimensional Cubist painting of a single face” (Bader 328) The fractions of his identity can be read politically as the shattering of the oneness of Iraqi identity and its tragic shattering into many different identities, culturally, religiously and politically.

### **Iraqi Jews and National Identity**

Unsettled and disturbed by the premonition of catastrophe embodied his fear of being annihilated, Yousef challenges the circumstances and unfair laws imposed by the new ruling power. He hides himself behind a new mask that saves his life. His catastrophe culminates in his unbearable shock of “getting lost” among forged selves in his own homeland where he was born and has been living since his birth. The struggle that Yousef undergoes throughout his life is the outcome of his being a Jew and his love for his native land. Yousef’s love for Iraq is so obsessive that it dominates his inner world. The moment he leaves Iraq for reasons beyond his reach, he starts planning how to go back. Iraqi Jews have been subjected to mounting pressures to transform, to change and to transfer what they were just

before the Farhud into new forms of relation. The novel does not only celebrate Iraqi Jews and their catastrophic exclusion by the larger society but also questions Iraq ethnic nationalism and expresses the authors' discontent with the larger issue of collective identity of Iraq. Bader's novel highlights Yousef's search for identity within religious, national and ideological contexts. From the perspective of his original religion as a Jew to his embracing of Shia and Sunni Islam and the ability to adopt to the new life, Yousef questions the bases of Iraqi identity in its numerous politicized incarnations. In this sense, it is better to understand this novel in this way and not to turn its provocative tone and thorny issue and these intricate literary expressions into a clean-cut political manifesto showing the author's sympathy with Zionism or the state of Israel. Bader, rather, expresses his dissatisfaction and displeasure in what happened to the Iraqi Jews as citizens of Iraq. In other words, in his novel *The Tobacco Keeper*, in which he depicts Baghdad as a city suffering havoc caused by political conflicts, Bader voices his anxiety over strained ethnic relations among the different religious sects and the shrinkage of political as well as cultural tolerance that plagued both the private and public spheres of Iraq during the surge of nationalism after World War I when Iraq started on the road towards independence. The novel is a melancholic and relentless critique of the deteriorating situation especially for the Jewish minority. This is clearly apparent in the case of protagonist who could survive the disastrous situation caused by the prevailing political inferno only through pretending to be an insider; that is to belong to the larger mainstream.

The novel overwhelms the reader with an omnipresent feeling of catastrophic vulnerability which portraying the misery experienced by the Jewish minority living in Iraq in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the surge of nationalism spares no effort exclude certain ethnic groups who are doomed to be seen as foreigners without any emotional or national bonding to their living space. The novel laments the destruction of the sectarian relationships among people of different religious and ethnic backgrounds during the Farhud. It also critiques the Iraqi national elite of the time who, instead of promoting peace and coexistence, promoted an undemocratic and racialized vision that was exclusivist. Exploring the change wrought in Iraqi Jews' life by anti-Semitic fanatics in the 1940s, Bader's novel is a plea for the world not to forget such barbarity and savagery against any minorities all over the world irrespective of their faith or race.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the main argument in the novel is the construction of contraries.

Bader juxtaposes the opposites just to diminish the significance of their differences by suggesting that their differences are irrelevant. The novel's foundation of contrary identities implies that opposites or what apparently looks different may be undistinguishable, as Bader eliminates their contradictory characteristics. This irrelevance of distinguishing between various identities is seen in the character of Yousef, who is able to move between identities without any difficulties. Bader presents a single character with three names and faiths and involving three cases of assumed identity. Each one of identities, has different faiths, convictions, traits and ideas, represents a facet of Yousef's own personality. With each one, Bader develops a broader and deeper sense of identity, border-crossing and survival.

*The Tobacco Keeper* is a sophisticated response to many of Iraqi Jews' concerns of the time, from debates over their belonging and immigration to Israel and the on-going conflict between Arabs and Israelis. The novel approaches the experience of liminality, as a basically involuntary crossing of religious borders necessitated by outside powers beyond the concerned individuals. At the same time, Bader attempts to distinguish between voluntary and involuntary border-crossing: voluntary may result in a fixed identity while involuntary always results in fluid and liminal identity as one's roots are not entirely broken. Bader's novel employs a traditional and clear plotline in which the line between the various identities becomes increasingly blurred. While Yousef crosses actual geopolitical borders, the novel also questions the religious borders between Judaism, Sunni Islam and Shi Islam, the distinctions between being an Israel Jew or an Iraqi Jew living in motherland, and being a Jewish Muslim. The novel thus offers a thought-provoking commentaries on identity and life in the liminal space as well as the anxieties connected involuntary conversions that recalls the darkest chapters of Iraqi Jews during the 1940s and 1950s.

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