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The Problematics of Identity & Identity Erasure in Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel*

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to highlight the different layers of identity - religious, physical, spiritual, or divine - the process of rethinking and reshaping identity, its concomitant process of labelling and the desire for identity erasure in Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel* using mainly postcolonial theory. The symbols in the text are analysed using the Psychological and the Archetypal approaches, and Derridian insights are utilised in dealing with the theme of 'uncertainty' which permeates the novel. Textual analysis reveals that counter to the traditional thought of identity as an absolute metaphysical essence and an irrefutably inherited tradition, identity is seen here as limiting, clashing with individual happiness and is thus, dynamic i.e. constantly rethought and reshaped, evolutionary, dangerous – even deadly when it arouses hatred and violence. The process of rethinking identity appears as a necessary step towards selfhood. Hence, the protagonist, Hypa, who is lost in uncertainty, struggles to understand his identity and exhibits a strong desire for erasing it to escape labelling and eventually live in freedom.

Keywords: Identity, erasure, labelling, religious violence, Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel*.

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1.0 Introduction

Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel* won the International Prize for Arabic fiction in 2009 in recognition of the author's creative talent and the engaging literary style of the significant debates it communicates.

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Azazeel is grounded on reality-related imagination. Ziedan creates the illusion that it is merely an Arabic translation of an archaeological discovery in an abandoned monastery near Aleppo, where an archaeologist found thirty autobiographical scrolls, written in Aramaic, by Hypa in his quest for selfhood in the early Christian era, 431. Its events revolve around the wretched Hypa who is preoccupied by doubt, rejection of institutionalized religion and cultural norms that racially label and objectify human beings. His story painfully starts with a forcible departure from his native village, Naga Hammadi, in Upper Egypt, after his non-Christian father is murdered over faith, and his mother, who converted to Christianity, married one of the murderers (50).

Most literature about *Azazeel*, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, is in book review form. Maya Jaggi asserts that it "follows the picaresque passage through faith, doubt, temptation and torment of Hypa", the protagonist, an Egyptian monk who is a "reluctant witness to the age's terrors" (Jaggi, 2012). To Ben East, *Azazeel* presents a "universal tale of a man, racked with doubt and temptation, on a journey to find himself" (East, 2012). Similarly, George Care maintains that Hypa "is undergoing an inner and outer journey" and is "writing to be free of troubles and seemingly tormented to write these scrolls by a being called Azazeel within his imagination and within his spirit" (Care). Tom Little, as well, describes Hypa as "a doubt-wracked monk" who is "torn between his faith and the temptations of the flesh" (Little). Further, Andreas Pflitsch claims that Hypa is "someone who wrestles with himself as he goes on his moral and ethical search", who "moves between piety and rebellion, certainty of faith and the naggings of doubt." To him, Ziedan "shows that there is no truth – except in the arduous search for truth" (Pflitsch, 2012).

On the other hand, East claims that Ziedan "merely underlines how ridiculous – and yet dangerous – squabbles between religious sects can be" (East, 2012). Further, Saba Mahmood highlights "the Christological controversy at the heart of the novel" as a cause of religious violence (Mahmood, 2013), and Peter Clark asserts that *Azazeel's* message, if any, is "the absurdity of religious beliefs that spill over into violence" (Clark, 2013). C. Jeynes claims that *Azazeel* is about significant issues: "how we read history, and how different readings affect our view of the current situation; also questions of how to treat fanaticism, and the struggle between truth and one's own false beliefs" (Jeynes, 2012, 1) and about "the interplay between learning and faith, between demagoguery and virtue, between power and doctrine" (Jeynes, 2012, 3).

In light of the aforementioned review of literature, this article, which aims to highlight the different layers of identity - religious, physical, spiritual, or divine - the process of rethinking and reshaping identity, its concomitant process of labelling and the desire for identity erasure in Youssef Ziedan's *Azazeel* is, hence, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, the first in-depth critical analysis of the question of identity in the novel since the only available critical article on Literary Reference Center (powered by EBSCO host) is Saba Mahmood's "Azazeel and the Politics of Historical Fiction in Egypt" published in *Comparative Literature Journal* Vol. 65/3 in the Summer of 2013. As for applied methodology, postcolonial theory is mainly used in analyzing the question of identity in the text. In addition, the symbols are analysed using the Psychological and the Archetypal approaches, and Derridian insights are utilised in dealing with the theme of 'uncertainty' which permeates the novel. Textual analysis reveals that counter to the traditional thought of identity as an absolute metaphysical essence and an irrefutably inherited tradition, identity is seen here as limiting, clashing with individual happiness and is thus, dynamic i.e. constantly rethought and reshaped, evolutionary, dangerous – even deadly when it arouses hatred and violence. The process of rethinking identity appears as a necessary step towards selfhood. Hence, the protagonist, Hypa, who is lost in uncertainty, struggles to understand his identity and exhibits a strong desire for erasing it to escape labelling and eventually live in freedom. The article begins by highlighting 'uncertainty' as a theme and the preoccupation with identity, moves to discuss the process of rethinking identity and its problematics, Hypa's spiritual death and rebirth, and the desire for identity erasure to escape labelling and live in a state of bliss.

2.0 Uncertainty & the Preoccupation with Identity

Azazeel is permeated with binary oppositions such as White/Dark Brown (For instance, Hypa describes the priests and deacons from the north as having “faultless pale complexions and ... beards [that] were bright white or blond” and feels “embarrassed” for being “so brown and sallow” (17) and is “quite astonished” when he describes Octavia’s white skin; “Her ample breasts, white. Her skin, everything, white” (62). Us (Christians)/Them (Pagans), Nestorians (followers of Bishop Nestorius)/Cyrilians (followers of Bishop Cyril, i.e. Lovers of the Passion group), and Reality/Dream, Imagination, Hallucination; Hypa asserts, “Today I awoke from a sleep full of dreams so strong they seemed like reality, or perhaps it is my reality that has collapsed and faded until it has turned into dreams” (35-36) i.e. the dividing line/slash between reality and dream is removed. Indeed, the dream atmosphere seems to pervade *Azazeel*. Hypa describes his days in Jerusalem as a “dream” (10), “the big church” as a “dream” (24), Hypatia as a “dream” (108, 112), his affair with Octavia as a “delusion” (75) and an “indecent dream” (93). Further, he suffers from internal conflicts about Martha, falls sick with a “fever” for “a full twenty days” (294), meets with Azazeel, a manifestation of the Devil and wonders if he threw himself “into the bottom of the pit of madness” (298). In effect, his memory and his reliability are questioned since he could be delusional or mad.

Using the documentary method, Hypa narrates his story in the form of confessions stimulated by “the accursed Azazeel” who “does not cease demanding” that Hypa “record[s] all” he has “witnessed in [his] life” (5). Jeynes explains that “*Azazeel* in Aramaic means the *strong one against God*, and in the Hebrew Bible is the *scapegoat* of Lev.16:8f; it is a rather obscure alternative name for the devil.” To Jeynes, in *Azazeel* “this ambiguity is maintained: the narrator identifies Azazeel with Satan” though “the reader is left with the impression that Azazeel’s is a voice of sanity, or of honour; he seems to be the narrator’s conscience more than anything else” (Jeynes, 2012, 1). Hypa’s story could be, therefore, a diabolical hallucination similar to the one in Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” or that of a super-ego nagging Hypa to confess his sins since he claims that Azazeel “looked like me and the voice was my voice. This is another me, other than me, trapped inside me” (287-88), and Azazeel informs him, “I don’t exist independently of you. I am you, Hypa, and I can only be in you” (302).

In addition, Hypa is lost in uncertainty and doubt. He maintains, “I asked the Lord to purge me of the effects of drowning in seas of doubt, to bring tranquility to my soul ... and to bestow upon my heart ... the light of certitude” (12) and informs Chariton, the monk, of his “need for certainty and how [he] lacked it” (149). Hence, his reliability is questioned and is, therefore, erased – a matter that leaves the reader caught within the net of uncertainty that encapsulates *Azazeel*. In Derridian terms, reality and imagination are allowed ‘play’ since they are decentralized and deconstructed, i.e. the slash separating this binary opposition is erased/removed. Further, Hypa is uncertain about his Baptism although he is a monk. Nestorius wonders, “how did you become a monk when you had doubts about your baptism?” (34). Hypa’s authoritative presence as a monk is then decentralised and questioned.

Hypa’s uncertainty is further emphasized when he wonders if Octavia’s pagan beliefs are right and his Christian ones are wrong. He reflects:

She is a pagan woman and believes in the foolish myths about the Greek gods, the gods who trick each other, wage war on mankind, marry often and betray their wives Octavia, who believes that the sea god Poseidon sent me to her. But the sea has no god and nobody sent me, yet how can I know for sure that she is wrong and I am right? The Old Testament, which we believe in, is also full of deceptions, wars and betrayals, and the Gospel of the Egyptians, which we read although it’s banned, contains material which contradicts the four orthodox Gospels. Are the two of them *fantasies*? Or does it mean that God is secretly present behind all religious beliefs? (76, my italics)

Hypa’s Christian identity and beliefs which are supposed to be fixed are questioned in this dialogue which reflects his preoccupation with his religious identity.

The story of Christ, in the words of the man from Ansina (Samalout), causes Hypa more uncertainty. He informs Hypa that “the Church of the Palm” acquired its name because “Jesus the Messiah ... during the Holy Family’s journey to Egypt ... left the impression of the palm of his hand on a stone which turned soft for him”. Hypa protests, “Jesus the Messiah came to Egypt only as an infant”. However, the man insists that “Jesus the Messiah lived his whole life and died in Egypt” (49). The supposedly fixed life of Jesus is now thrown into a gray area of uncertainty especially when Hypa maintains that “the man knew nothing, or perhaps he knew something I did not know, or perhaps the two of us *dreamt up what we thought we knew*” (49, *my italics*).

Mercer claims that “identity only becomes an issue when it is in *crisis*, when something *assumed to be fixed, coherent and stable is displaced by the experience of doubt and uncertainty*” (Mercer, 1990, 43, *my italics*). Hypa, therefore, is expected to suffer from an identity crisis. As a Christian monk, his identity is supposed to be “fixed” and “coherent” but is totally “displaced” by “doubt and uncertainty” about his baptism, his fundamental knowledge of Christ’s life, even about the divinity of Christ which is questioned in a similar manner to Dan Brown’s *The Da Vinci Code*. Indeed, the reference to the hot debates over the divinity of Christ, to “the Council of Nicaea at which Arius was excommunicated for saying the Messiah is human rather than divine and that God is One, unaccompanied and undiluted in his divinity” (34-5) and Bishop Nestorius’ affirmation that “Arius was a man full of love, honesty and spiritual power. The events of his life, his asceticism and self-denial, all confirm that” (39) function to question the divinity of Christ.

Further, Nestorius claims Arius was trying “to purge our religion from the beliefs of the ancient Egyptians about their gods ... [who] believed in a holy trinity, made up of Isis, her son Horus and her husband Osiris, by whom she conceived without intercourse” (39). He wonders:

Are we reviving the old religion? No, and it is not right to say of God that He is the third of three. God ... is One, unaccompanied in His divinity. Arius wanted our religion to worship God alone. But he sang a song which was unfamiliar in his time, recognizing the mystery of God’s manifestation in Christ but not admitting Christ’s divinity, recognizing Jesus the son of Mary, a gift to mankind, but not recognizing any divinity other than the one God.’ (39)

Such a discourse, coming from Bishop Nestorius, the good Bishop who is in sharp contrast with Bishop Cyril, depicted as an evil blood-thirsty fanatic, will instil into the reader the feeling that Christ is likely to be human after all.

The question of identity, not just divine identity, is a fundamental issue in *Azazeel*. The identity of the place comes to play, for instance, when Hypa explains that the “Caesarian church ... had been a temple, then became a church, and later reverted to a temple for pagans” (105), and that “[i]n the town of Esna”, he “saw ordinary Christians destroying the pictures drawn on the great temple by scratching the surface of the walls. They tried to erase the pictures at the top of the columns” and “turned the temple into a huge monastery” (190-91). Further, the arguments about names, highlight the preoccupation with identity. The most problematic preoccupation with a name is that of Virgin Mary; to Bishop Nestorius, she “was the mother of Christ, or Christotokos” whereas to other priests she “was Theotokos, or the mother of God” (185) Indeed, Nestorius argues:

‘Does it make sense,’ he asked, ‘to believe that God suckled at the breast of the Virgin, and grew day by day until he was two months old, then three months, then four. The Lord is perfect, as it is written, so how could he take the form of a child, when the Virgin Mary was a human who gave birth from her immaculate womb by a divine miracle, and after that her son became a manifestation of God and a saviour for mankind. He was like a hole through which we have been able to see the light of God, or like a signet ring on which a divine message appeared. The fact that the sun shines through a hole does not make the hole a sun, just as the appearance of the message on the signet ring does not make the ring a message. Hypa, these people have gone quite mad, and have made God one of three.’ 203

This preoccupation with Virgin Mary's identity unsettles the belief in Christ's divinity.

Names of languages also reveal this preoccupation. Nestorius, for example, explains they do not use the word "Aramaic, but Syriac, to distinguish the blessed Christian era of the language from the earlier pagan and Hebrew era" (24). The name given to the language is, therefore, associated with its religious identity. The name given to the city of Jerusalem also reflects its identity. Hypa comments, "Jerusalem, Salem, Yerushalayim, Urusalim, Ilya, al-Quds, the House of the Lord. Many names has this holy city borne" (9). Furthermore, Octavia decides to name Hypa "Theodoros Poseidonios ... which in Greek meant 'divine gift from Poseidon'" or "Theophrastos, which literally means 'divine speech'", however, Hypa "reacted angrily" probably because he sees these names as imposing a new identity upon him, another artificial and alien (being Greek) We-identity with its concomitant prejudices and labelling effect as shall be explained later. He protests, "[t]hese are all Greek names, but I have an Egyptian name" (77) which is, nevertheless, suppressed in the novel. The reader only gets to know the name "Hypa", a Greek name which he adopts after Hypatia's murder (134) and is derived from her name – a matter that reveals Hypa's contradictory nature.

3.0 Rethinking identity & its problematics

Azazel invalidates the relation between identity (as an absolute metaphysical essence, and an irrefutably inherited tradition), and selfhood. Raised by his uncle, Hypa is appropriated to become a monk, and then, urged to travel to Alexandria to study theology and medicine. In Alexandria, he goes through a profound transformation in which he evolves new ways of seeing himself and substantiates a real growth towards independence. He skillfully deconstructs his allegiance to the institutionalized religion and racial cultural constraints on the one hand, and articulates a deep discourse of self-erasure, as shall be explained later, to designate the traumatic impact of the past upon his sense of self and personal identity on the other.

Hypa rejects racism, prejudice, and all forms of epistemological and physical violence in the name of God. The religious violent practices against minorities of other religions like damaging temples on worshipers (54), torturing and burning Hypatia (128-29), "daughter of the scholar Theon, the Pythagorean professor" (88), together with the murder of Octavia (127) foreclose Hypa's expectations of multicultural and religious life in Alexandria. He shares Nestorius' belief that "Killing people in the name of religion does not make it religious" (151). Consequently, he flees from Alexandria eastward in a new quest to find himself in a progressive society. He gets to Jerusalem, and then, to a monastery near Aleppo, where he writes his memoir of the twenty-year quest for selfhood – an arduous task since Hypa declares himself similar to the room he will stay in at the Church of Resurrection, which is "halfway between the city and the church, neither here nor there, like me: betwixt and between" (14) and admits, "Everything about me is ambiguous – my baptism, my being a monk, my faith, my poems, my medical knowledge, my love for Martha. I am one ambiguity after another, and ambiguity is the opposite of faith, just as Satan is the opposite of God" (283).

Ziedan dramatizes identity as changeable, dynamic, and ever evolving thus sharing Allaire's view of the flexible and evolutionary nature of identity. Allaire asserts: "identity is a tricky and highly complex thing. It's fluid, dynamic, and ever changing" (Allaire, 2014, 35). One important conceptualization of the term, then, rests on the idea that identity is not, in Maalouf's terms "given once and for all" (Maalouf, 2000, 20). More to the point, Madan Sarup gives two models of identity: "a 'traditional' view that all dynamics (such as class, gender, 'race') operate simultaneously to produce a coherent, unified, fixed identity" and "[t]he more recent view ... that identity is fabricated, constructed, in process, and that we have to consider both psychological and sociological factors" (Sarup, 1996, 14) which is exhibited in *Azazel*. Although the individual's identity is shaped by historical, cultural, and institutional determining components, he/she somewhat remains resistant to an absolute submission to their categorizing and identifying impact, especially when one sees that the dictates of identity contrast with his/her intrinsic or extrinsic rewards and expectations.

This resistance partly accounts for Hypa's dilemma. He gets into the world of the novel troubled by identification: "I am . . . the perplexed, Hypa the monk, Hypa the physician, Hypa the stranger as people call me in my land of exile" (5). Elbaz and Helly maintain that "mass migration and market globalization have produced a vast array of transformations in civil society, the state and the nation; citizens have to rewrite and rethink their identities" (Elbaz & Helly, 1995, *my italics*). Thus, in this case, Hypa who left his small village, Naga Hammadi in Upper Egypt, migrated to Alexandria, Palestine then to Syria is rethinking and rewriting his identity because he is feeling the effect of migration in "the land of exile" and is met in his travels with different, yet powerful ideologies that influence his identity in a similar way globalization affects our identities nowadays.

Sarup considers identity as "fragmented full of contradictions and ambiguities" (Sarup, 1996, 14) like Hypa who has to lead a double life as a saint/sinner. Hypa prays, "My merciful Lord, take me to you now, and save me from my ephemeral body" (32) which causes him to sin by following its desires. Further, he reflects upon his affair with Octavia, "I am not deceptive by nature and I had never lied in my life. So why had I been misleading her, and going astray with her, since the moment I saw her?" (75) He, in addition, informs Martha that as a monk, he is "forbidden to marry" and that "[a]nyone who marries a divorced woman commits adultery." Shocked with this discourse, Martha comments, "So what did we do in the cottage yesterday? Did we not commit adultery there?" (279) Sarup differentiates between "public" identity, "[t]he 'outside' of our concept of self" (in Hypa's case, his social self as a Christian monk), and "private" identity, "the 'inside' of our identity" (14) (Hypa's troubled self as a man of doubts and a sinner that leads him to develop a death-wish: "Would that I had never been born, or that I had perished in my childhood without sin" (5)).

Hypa lives during the ancient ideological struggle that followed the establishment of Christianity against Greek-Pharaoh dogma in Egypt – a period characterized by exerting physical and structural violence against non-Christians to convert them to Christianity. He defines his early experience of that traumatic period as a sort of forcible skepticism and submission. Under the shell of the uncle's urge to have Hypa join the church after his father's murder lies the individual struggle for his nephew's survival and assimilation: "I wonder if he wanted me to become a monk to make me forget what my father's killers did" (73). To the uncle, probably such an affiliation with Christianity and its agencies, which appears to provide its followers with an opportunity of healing through love and forgiveness, is an essential ingredient for Hypa's identity that enables him to continue his life without getting involved in the traditional trend of revenge against his father's killers. His uncle's intention is also evident in his "advice" to Hypa not eat "salt fish" (45) which became associated with the murder of Hypa's father whose "blood and flesh, and the fish, mingled with the dust of the earth" (29); he wants to erase this memory from Hypa's imagination. Hypa obeys his uncle and does not eat fish again until he baptizes himself as "Hypa". He explains, "that day I took to it [i.e. fish] as though the person who once did not eat it was someone other than me" (135). He acknowledges the impact of his affiliation to Christianity and is expected to "love [his] enemies and do good to those who have done [him] ill, to be truly Christian, and truly loving" (115).

Hypa submits to the We-identity of his society because of fear. As Burke and Stets put it, people under certain circumstances make "decisions ... on the basis of self-interest, fear, love, cowardice, or some combination of these other motives" (Burke & Stets, 2009, 6). Also, Césaire refers to "millions of men in whom fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair and behave like flunkies" before their oppressors and colonisers (Williams & Chrisman, 1994, 178). Hypa is mentally colonised by the dominant Christian group and fear is instilled in him as a child when he witnesses the murder of his father. He admits, "What should I do about these worries, when I am the prisoner of my fear...?" (100) and "[f]ear now comes naturally to me, from the day they killed my father in front of me" (160). He also hopes "the ecclesiastical name Hypa" would "conceal" him "from the gaze of the church of St Mark and the claws of the lion" (211).

Fear often leads to suppression of selfhood, and abandonment of one's personal values, aspirations, and beliefs for the We-identity. As such, Hypa is expected to wear a certain uniform that labels him as

an accepted member of a certain church. For instance, he was “wearing the cassock of a Jerusalem monk, which the goodly priest” gave him “as a sign” of being “accepted among them” (17), and in contrast “a man wearing a tight ecclesiastical cassock” from the “Caesarian church” is “disposed” to “despise” Hypa because of his “clothes” (105). Hypa is also expected “to sleep seated, in the manner of Egyptian monks” (8). Hence, being a follower of a group imposes certain limitations upon individual freedom at least in terms of what to wear or how to sleep.

Further, having a We-identity means that one’s thoughts on what is permitted and what is not are monitored and policed. For example, when Hypa goes to Alexandria, he decides “to spend days wandering around the city before going to the church to see first everything [he] wanted to see” before they show him “what they wanted [him] to see” (48). In addition, he owns books forbidden by the church such as “the Gospel of the Egyptians, and the Gospel of Judas, and the Book of Secrets” (24). He, as well, decides to hide his confessions “along with the proscribed gospels and other forbidden books, and bury it under the loose marble slab at the monastery gate” (8). In effect, he is forced to have a double nature, that of a saint, when he follows the demands of the We-identity, and that of a sinner when he follows his individual desires.

Regulated by the made-up identity dictates, Hypa is not himself, nor is he able to endure the pain of depersonalization. He is anxious about the imposition of the so-called made-up identity, and the sense of loss/estrangement it generates and painfully recollects the invented construction of his identity with dissatisfaction: “I realized that I did not even know myself . . . I felt that everything that had happened to me and everything I had seen in the past days and years were nothing to do with me. I was someone else, not the person that once was and now was no more” (133). His identity is far from being associated with individuality. It is, then, tantamount to non-identity. To Derrida, “the absence of play and différance [is] another name for death” (Derrida, 1978, 297). Hypa’s fixed identity as a monk is a form of death in Derridian terms as it stops the ‘play’, happiness and living in this case. Indeed, the freedom, feeling alive and the paradise-like atmosphere Hypa gets with Octavia as if they are Adam and Eve in “the Garden of Eden . . . [d]riven by . . . forbidden lust” (63) and indulge in “forbidden pleasures which brought Adam out of Paradise” (69) is only possible when he erased his identity by hiding his “monk’s cassock and the wooden cross” (75) and admits, “I denied myself for three days with Octavia, because I was afraid” (160) which is a form of identity erasure, and when he reveals his identity as a priest, “she cruelly threw [him] out of her paradise” (100).

According to Bauman, identity involves “an absence of identity, the effacement or denial of individuality” once it is “constructed, evaluated, confirmed or refuted” by societal lords/ power structures (Bauman, 2004, 39). The defining characteristic of Hypa’s identity is that it is culturally invented. The narration unfolds the dynamics which shape his identity which are about the ‘ought’ rather than the ‘is’ of his true self. The formation of his ‘ought’ identity, nonetheless, can be considered as a set of imposed beliefs, views, attitudes, aspirations, fears of the consequences of affiliation or non-affiliation with the dominant collective identity of his society. The point here might not be so much to identify Hypa as it is to express resistance to “labelling” and resentment of its limitations. Sarup calls the process of categorising people “labelling”. “People attach certain labels to others, and labels often (but not always) begin to have an effect” upon the way people think of others (Sarup, 1996, 14). Hypa has no sense of himself as an entity suffocated by the professional ethics of a physician, strict religious constraints of a monk, or prejudice exerted on a stranger.

Being labelled as a follower of a certain religious group could be dangerous, even deadly. Hypa’s father is brutally murdered when the Christians “dragged him across the rocks to stab him to death with rusty knives” as he was bringing some fish to the trapped priests inside “the temple of the god Khanum” near Aswan (28). Hypatia and Octavia are also brutally murdered over religion (127-29), i.e. for being followers of another group or for having a different We-identity. More to the point, the owner of a boat advises Hypa not enter Alexandria wearing his “monk’s cassock” because he does not have any idea “in that troubled town” who he is “going to meet first” and gives him “some of his clothes” (45). Hypa erases his identity as a monk to escape labelling and its dangerous effects by being “dressed in a gown”

similar to what people “wear in the south of the valley” and by hiding his “cassock and the distinctive cap ... at the bottom of [his] bag, under the books, with the old wooden cross between them” (45). He explains, “my best *protection* is to mix in with the flock of the Lord and take *refuge* among them” (48, my italics) – a statement that reflects his awareness of the danger of labelling in addition to his awareness of his weakness and fear of being by himself.

Hypa’s realization that he becomes alone and unsupported determines him to internalize his allegiance to the church. This is a basic ingredient of his We-identity, which he clearly points out during the time of his expatriation, while identifying himself with his co-religionists: “Should I leave the church forever? But I am safe in the church, after I was homeless, and the men of faith are my real family, since I have no earthly family except my uncle who is weakened by Aa disease and who I doubt will still be alive when I return” (115). To him, the act of binding himself to the church becomes an essential act of safety. Doing so, he creates an intimate family bond with his co-religionists, though most, if not all of them by far, do not know that he made it by force not by choice. On the other hand, the traumatic memory of his father’s murder remains a source of fear preventing him from daring to assert his opposing individual ‘I’ to the religious We-ness. He brings to the foreground the element of fear as a factor of the process of his religious identity formation: “if I leave the church, and leave it when they knew who I am, they will see me as an apostate and they will persecute me ... I would meet the same fate as my father” (116). Release from an affiliation with the religious We-ness seems to be impossible, and it is in this context a threat to Hypa’s life. His instinct for life is so intense that it suppresses any aspect of his individual identity at this phase of his life.

Further, Hypa’s fear is evident in his submission to everything Life/Destiny throws at him. He simply surrenders, walks away from any conflict he faces and never fights to retain the love of Octavia or that of Martha. He reflects, “Martha slipped away from my side, as the soul slips out of an emaciated body weakened by chronic ailments. I did not look towards her as she walked away to the cottage” (278). Similarly, when Octavia discovers he is a Christian monk and asks him to leave (98), he feels as if he is “falling into a void”, and as if his “soul had been wrenched from [his] body”. Nevertheless, he just “rushed out of the door and crossed the garden to the half-open gate” (99), did not even try to explain his actions or his reason for hiding his identity from her though he knows how much she loved him. His sense of unworthiness and submission is clearly evident in his confession; “I am but a feather tossed upon the wind” (6). Obviously, he never overcomes the post traumatic disorder of his father’s death and the betrayal of his mother which psychologically cripple him with fear and abandonment i.e. he is unconsciously re-enacting the loss of his mother by losing these women for fear of being betrayed. He wonders, “who can be sure [Octavia] won’t betray me one day as my mother betrayed my father? ... she could turn against me as women always turn against their husbands, for women are fickle by nature” (87) and later, “What if she betrays me? For women are by nature false” (94). Further, the post traumatic disorder caused by his father’s death prevents him from finding the courage to fight to keep them.

“External events can,” nonetheless, writes Turner, “erode commitments to an identity. When this occurs, people are likely to adopt new identities . . . As individuals begin to seek new identities, change is likely to move in the directions of those identities that reflect their values” (Turner, 2012, 334). Owing to the unjust physical and structural violence enacted by institutionalized Christianity against non-Christians in Alexandria, Hypa gets engaged in an evolutionary activity to develop individual values and a sense of self, and then, begins to wear away an affiliation with the dictates of religious We-ness. He begins to see in fairly sophisticated ways the connection between the use of religion and the enactment of religious violence that implicitly demands destruction and expulsion of non-Christians. This level of consciousness is strongly suggested by Hypa’s description of Bishop Cyril while delivering violence-oriented sermons to members of “the Lovers of the Passion” group (116), the military wing of Alexandria’s church.

Hypa’s portrait of Cyril invites us to sense ambiguity and hypocrisy in this religious character. Cyril’s “embroidered robe . . . with gold thread all over . . . the bright gold crown”, together with “a scepter

made of gold” (117) act as a manifestation of his desire for earthly materialistic possessions that should be beneath him than tools expressing his devotion to Christ, whose statue above the pulpit is carefully made to contrast with the image of Cyril. Jesus’ “clothes,” as the statue shows, “were old rags . . . Jesus’s hands were free of the baubles of our world . . . On his head Jesus had his crown of thorns” (117). Rooted in Hypa’s thoroughly contrasting image of Christ with Cyril lies a flagrant allusion to the latter’s insatiable desire for power in the name of religion. While “Jesus seemed resigned as he assented to sacrifice himself on the cross of redemption” claims Hypa, “Cyril seemed intent on imposing his will on the heavens and the earth” (117). It should come as no surprise, then, that Cyril uses Christianity to settle an account with his non-Christian enemies.

Cyril’s fabricated sermons promote, especially among Lovers of the Passion group, violence against non-Christians as an expression of God’s will. He preaches:

‘Children of God This city of yours is the city of the Almighty Lord We have purged it of the Jews ... they want to bring the Jews back to the quarter where they used to live Know that our Lord Jesus Christ spoke to us his children in all times when he said: ‘Think not that I am come to send peace on earth: I came not to send peace, but a sword.’ (122-23)

Such a view paradoxically voids Christianity of love, peace, and tolerance by making religion-based violence and/or structural violence against non-Christians sound like a requirement of faith. Christ, the epitome of peace and love, is erroneously evoked as violent, threatening and destructive. Further, discrimination against Jews becomes a natural phenomenon sanctioned by divine providence – a matter that Hypa completely denounces.

Opposed to the fanatic appropriation of institutionalized Christianity that Cyril creates, Hypa develops explicit personal values to establish an individual identity in terms of religion. “Individual or personal identity,” write Seth Schwartz, Luyckx, and Vignoles, “refers to aspects of self-definition at the level of the individual person . . . [which] include goals, values, and beliefs” (Schwartz, Luyckx & Vignoles, 2011, 1). Hypa defines himself as a critical thinker of the notion that Christianity incites violence. He deconstructs Cyril’s attempt to justify religious violence when he reflects that “Christ at the start of his mission forbade the Jews from stoning the harlot” (121). If tolerance, then, was the message of this religion, Hypa would be naturally repulsed by Cyril’s and his fanatics’ violence against the liberal philosopher and mathematician, Hypatia, who was cruelly murdered for her beliefs.

Hypatia’s advocacy of multi-ethnic and tolerant religious society in Alexandria, her interest in philosophy and astrology result in her catastrophic demise. Cyril’s fanatics drag her completely naked by a “rope tied to her wrist” on the sharp edged paved “streets of Alexandria”, “scraped her skin off her flesh” with shells (128), and “when she was dead they set fire to” her body (129). Her brutal murder brings the idea of liberal thought against the very idea of homogenous religious society and its consequential ills into Hypa’s consciousness. In its immediate aftermath, Hypa launches into a series of actions that bring to the surface his rejection of the hideous extremity of enacting a pure religious community. He “stood, broken and ashamed” as “the tongues of flame from the wood around Hypatia’s dead body were dying down”, refusing to “go back to the Church of St Mark” to join the mob’s “celebrations of conquest and victory over the last symbol of a dying paganism” (130). If he does not acknowledge the brutality of cleansing the Alexandrian community of non-Christians, he declares a complete disassociation with its measures/agencies: “The woman caught in adultery did not ask Jesus for help but he saved her from the hard-hearted people who wanted to stone her. And me, I did not save the sister of Jesus from the hands of my brothers in Christ, *but they are not my brothers, and I am not one of them, nor am I my old self*” (130-31, my italics). This episode, pointing as it does to denounce violence in the name of religion, would seem, as well, to speak for the conception of identity in a more individualistic direction. It also reflects Hypa’s crippling fear that stops him from doing anything to help Hypatia.

4.0 Hypa’s Spiritual Death & Rebirth

One can also deduce that Hypa's traumatic violent experiences caused by religious identity make him go through spiritual death and rebirth, as suggested by the reference to the archetypal number three in "the past three years" (130) and the reference to the archetypal water symbol in "I felt my heart melt like water" as well as in the reference to the "sea" (131) that both stand for death and rebirth in addition to the fact that Hypa "fainted" thus suggesting his spiritual death at the time of "sunset" (131), also symbolic of death.

In fact, Hypa regains consciousness after "three" people throw water at him (131). Number three is an archetypal symbol suggesting spiritual transformation in addition to the water symbols that permeate the following quotation thus suggesting death and rebirth with the "gate" and "sea" functioning as female wombs. Hypa recollects:

I grabbed the cross hanging on my chest and yanked it, and the thread around my neck broke I felt a sudden relief when I pulled the cross from around my neck and dropped it to the ground to the amazement of the three I moved away, fleeing them, escaping everything As soon as I went through the gate I ripped my cassock at the front and it hung down at my sides.... I met no one along the way, neither Jews nor non-Jews, as though not a living soul remained in the whole world, neither human or jinn, angel or devil. The Lord was not with me, or was resting after a new creation which he had made in another six days. Alone I wandered over mud and sand, along the edges of sea, lakes and salt flats... away from Alexandria. (131-32, my italics).

In this iconic scene, Hypa feels reborn and free after he liberates himself from the limiting religious symbols (the cross and the cassock) and feels "relieved of a burden" (133). His actions also foreshadow his rejection of this violent version of Christianity and his desire to erase his identity as a Christian monk which always clashes with his desire for happiness.

Moreover, Hypa goes through a process of initiation; the blood of his father was Hypa's initiation into Christianity, whereas Octavia's and Hypatia's blood was his second initiation away from Christianity and into the isolation that leads to his abandoning the monastery and what it stands for. His assertion that the people who killed Hypatia are not his brothers, and that he is neither "one of them" nor his "old self" (130-31) suggest that he feels like he is someone else, and that he experienced death and rebirth. To him, Hypatia is "the sister of Jesus", "the Savante of the Age, the pure and holy, the lady who suffered the torments of martyrdom and in her agony transcended all agonies" (127). In fact, he names himself "Hypa" (134) upon leaving Alexandria, a "non-Egyptian name" (21) derived from her name thus announcing his bonding with Hypatia, the *alleged* enemy of Christianity, as well as the initiation of a new phase of his life. He baptizes himself as "Hypa" and "felt like the other person ... latent inside [him]." He declares, "Now I am Hypa the monk, not that boy whose father was betrayed by his mother and killed in front of his eyes. I am not the adolescent who was brought up by his uncle in Naga Hammadi, nor the young man who once studied in Akhmim." At this moment, he declares, "I am the twice-born" (135).

5.0 Desire for Identity Erasure

Hypa's desire for erasing his identity – enacted by the oppressive religious, cultural, and racial parameters – creates a dynamic reality that displays the significance of reconsidering such a sense of identity and developing it to become more interactive and capable of tackling emotional, cultural, social, and human situations with open-mindedness, flexibility, and critical response. This desire for erasure is evident in Hypa's prayer, "Grant me, God, a new birth through which I may live without memory" (41). The "new birth" will erase his old identity and living "without memory" will warrant constant erasure – also evident in his desire to "tear up the parchments" or "wash them in water" (125) and in his claim that "[t]o recover would be disastrous. To be oblivious is more pleasant, an oblivion illuminated by the many suns and moons that fill the red twilight sky within me" (289) – as well as make

him forget the traumatic experiences he has been through and which make him suffer “terrors” in his “sleep” (12) because of his “Alexandrian memories” (41). To him, “Everything in the universe sleeps, wakes up and sleeps again, except our sins and our memories, which have never slept and will never subside” (35). Moreover, he feels, “cooped up with [his] memories” (100). Living with a fixed identity and a memory that causes him “endless sufferings [that] are unbearable” (41) mean death to him. Hence, he prays, “have mercy and take me unto Thyself, far from this world” (41).

In addition, Hypa tries to erase what happened between him and Octavia by returning to the cave “to ask God’s forgiveness and await His mercy, in the place where [he] disobeyed Him for the first time” (100). The “cave”, being a concave image, functions according to Freudian interpretation as a female womb thus suggesting death and rebirth to erase his sins with Octavia that also symbolically takes place when he falls asleep there (101). He also desires “to become a tree ... that gave abundant shade but did not fruit, so that no one would *throw stones at it*, but that people would love for its shade” (31-32, my italics) and come to him as “a refuge for the weary, not a *temptation* to those seeking *fruit*” (my italics). To him, “[t]rees are purer than mankind, and love God more” (32). This wish reflects his desire to erase his human identity in order to lose his freedom of will which makes him accountable for his sins, escape the temptation of the forbidden fruit of the Tree of Knowledge to become consequently closer to God, and escape the violence, i.e. being stoned like a harlot.

To escape his weakness before sexual temptation, Hypa desires to erase his sexual identity by castrating himself; he decides to “tie” his “testicles” using “a hair from a horse’s tail” until they “fell off” so that he “could relax for ever” and “not fall for the enticements of women” (103). His interest in the sexual freedom of animals “[a]t the age of eighteen” (73) and in the doves’ hyper-sexuality *without retribution* as a priest (220) reveals another sign of his desire for erasure. He observes that all doves “showed constant goodwill towards each other and did not lay special claim to one mate rather than any other”, and that they “copulate often and all day long never cease from courting and coupling” (220). The Pharisee, who feels Hypa’s interest and is probably reminded of his own former “erotic adventures” (181), throws stones at the doves because they “aroused the passions and induced people to commit sins” (220) – an action that represents the manner in which Hypa’s thoughts are policed by the We-identity. Hypa envies the doves apparently for their freedom to travel, to appear and disappear; “the doves ... left as suddenly as they had come” (220) thus escaping being monitored like him.

Arac makes it clear that identity “seems wholly ambivalent along the axis of necessity and freedom: it is used to name both what you can’t help being and what you choose to become”. Identity involves, asserts Arac, “transformation and reversal. Its fundamental sense is ‘sameness,’ but it is nowadays understood within a discourse of difference” (Arac, 2001, 294). Although Hypa has forcibly grown into a conformist to the dictates of institutionalized religion, he eventually becomes free of them after his double nature is apparently exposed to the priests in the monastery. The Pharisee informs him that all priests in the monastery in Aleppo knew his secret thoughts and explains, “when you had your fever attacks, you often called out a woman’s name – Martha. The fact that she is gone is a blessing from the Lord, for you and for us, because we, as you know, want only the best for you and that woman was something quite inappropriate” (300). The Pharisee’s words serve to remind the reader of the way the individual’s thoughts are policed as explained earlier.

Following his exposure, Hypa spends “forty days of seclusion” (8) in his room. Hall and du Gay claim that when people search for their identity they “tend to isolate themselves ... as if they are running to the desert.” They can also “make their homes the deserts they run into”. Hall and du Gay suggest that:

[T]he desert is thought of as nothingness waiting to become something, if only for a while; meaninglessness waiting to be given meaning if only a passing one; space without contours, ready to accept any contour offered if only until other contours are offered; space not scarred with past furrows, yet fertile with expectations of sharp blades; virgin land yet to be ploughed and tilled; the land of the perceptual beginning the place-no-place whose name and identity is not-yet.” (Hall & du Gay, 1997, 3)

Hypa's room in the monastery where he "take[s] refuge in ... loneliness" (41) functions as the desert he runs into in order to rethink and redefine his identity and to be like the desert without a fixed name or identity.

More to the point, Hypa escapes to Sinai desert following the death of Hypatia and his escape from Alexandria. He reflects, "I wandered like the Jews in the years of their great wandering in the Sinai desert to which I was heading" (132) – an action that confirms the aforementioned claims of Hall and du Guy. Tolerance shores up the power of his speech as a broad-minded man seeking to assure himself through liberal thought. He alleviates Hypatia to the status of Christ's sister; a highly symbolic indication that he accepts/lives comfortably with others' beliefs. Away from the dangerous illusion of superiority of one belief over another, He re-establishes himself to promote freedom of faith, reviving the loving concept of God that all people, "Christians and pagans, were children of the Lord" (52). For him, God is no longer conceived of as the exclusive father of Christians.

6.0 Conclusion

In conclusion, Hypa claims that "travel is just a revelation of the sacred element hidden in the essence of the spirit" (12). His pilgrimage helped him achieve self-realization, the sacred hidden element he has been seeking. He has been a prisoner of the past, of haunting memories and fear, of a We-identity that forced him to live a life he did not *really* believe in and failed to reach certainty about. He is forced to live his life in a gray area formed by a post-traumatic disorder resulting from the murder of his father and the betrayal of his mother. The murders of Octavia and Hypatia erode Hypa's fabricated, made-up We-identity. One of the messages that *Azazel* communicates is the Emersonian belief that Individual happiness can only be achieved when one does what he/she wants not what society wants. Hypa struggles through a bitter life of fear, is traumatised and whipped by terrible violent experiences and memories that torment him (asleep or awake) because of the dominant We-identity that suppresses his true self until it suffocates it making him develop a death-wish (*thanatos*). He confesses his sins in the scrolls to unburden his guilty ego, ease his conscience and feel the healing cathartic effect of writing. He buries his confessions "under the big rock at the monastery gate", like he used to bury them in his mind using suppression. He admits, "I will bury the fear I inherited and all my old delusions. Then I will depart, as the sun rises, free" (307). He is expected to start a new life as "the sun rises", symbolic of a new beginning, a fresh start that will make him "free" to be himself, free from the "fear" that was instilled into him by the dominant religious group and the We-identity that suffocated his true one. He will be free from ideologies, probably religious, which he now considers "delusions" and will, hopefully, live to be a happy man as he attempts to erase his old identity by burying it with all its complexities in that box under the big rock and becoming finally "free". The political message Ziedan tries to communicate in this novel is the catastrophic and dangerous consequences that religious violence brings about, and the role of institutionalized religion in arousing hatred and instigating violence among people. The message gains vital importance when one considers the current state of affairs and the religious upheavals that affected, and still affect, the contemporary Egyptian society following the Arab Spring and the fall of Hosni Mubarak's regime. Learning to accept, tolerate, and respect people whose beliefs are different from ours, and who are labelled as 'others,' mark, as Ziedan suggests here, the difference between life and death.

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