



## **bitig Edebiyat Fakültesi Dergisi**

*bitig Journal of Faculty of Letters*

(Cilt/Volume: 4, Sayı/Issue: 8, Aralık/December 2024)

### **Female Bicultural Identity in Michelle Cliff's Novel *Abeng*: A Postcolonial Study**


**Michelle Cliff'in *Abeng* Romanında İki Kültürlü Kadın Kimliği:  
Sömürge Sonrası Bir Araştırma**

#### **Ghazal Mansoor Al-sakkaf**

PhD Student

Karabuk University  
Department of Western Languages and  
Literature

ms\_saqqaf@yahoo.com


 0000-0001-8978-0485

#### **Sameer Mohammed**

Asst. Prof.

Taiz University  
Department of English Language and  
Literature

sameer.samadi2@gmail.com

 0000-0003-0382-9159

#### **Araştırma makalesi/Research article**

Geliş Tarihi/Received: 28.05.2024

Kabul Tarihi/Accepted: 31.07.2024

#### **Atıf/Citation**

Alsakkaf, Ghazal Mansoor & Sameer Mohammed (2024), "Female Bicultural Identity in Michelle Cliff's Novel *Abeng*: A Postcolonial Study", *bitig Journal of Faculty of Letters*, 4 (8), 209-219.



Bu makale iThenticate, turnitin, intihal.net programlarından biriyle taranmıştır

**Abstract** This study aims to investigate the issue of the female identity crisis that appeared as a result of the intersection of two distinct cultures during the postcolonial era. To accomplish this objective, the renowned novel *Abeng*, authored by the American-Jamaican writer Michelle Cliff, has been chosen for analysis. The sample undergoes postcolonial analysis with a focus on biculturalism as a postcolonial phenomenon. The study is a descriptive one, which aims to qualitatively follow the behavior of the main protagonist in the novel *Abeng*, Clare Savage. It attempts to determine to what extent her character can be considered an example of a woman who loses her identity as a result of the colonial legacy of bicultural identity. According to the analysis, Clare has become a victim of biculturalism. This means that she is constantly searching for her identity without being able to identify with any specific culture. Throughout the texts, Clare is portrayed as being lost, which leads her to embrace two different cultures and go with the flow.

**Keywords:** postcolonial literature, biculturalism, bicultural identity, *Abeng*

**Öz** Bu çalışma, postkolonyal dönemde iki farklı kültürün kesişmesi sonucu ortaya çıkan kadın kimliği krizini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır ve Amerikalı-Jamaikalı yazar Michelle Cliff'in yazdığı ünlü roman *Abeng* analiz için seçilmiştir. Örneklem, postkolonyal bir olgu olarak iki kültürlülüğe odaklanan postkolonyal analize tabi tutulmaktadır. Çalışma, *Abeng* romanının baş kahramanı Clare Savage'ın davranışlarını niteliksel olarak takip etmeyi amaçlayan tanımlayıcı bir çalışmadır. Onun karakterinin, iki kültürlü kimliğin sömürge mirasının bir sonucu olarak kimliğini kaybeden bir kadına ne ölçüde örnek olarak görülebileceğini belirlemeye çalışmaktadır. Analize göre Clare iki kültürlülüğün kurbanı olur. Bu onun herhangi bir kültürle özdeşleşmeden sürekli olarak kimliğini aradığı anlamına gelir. Metinler boyunca Clare'in kaybolmuş bir kişi olarak tasvir edilmesi onun iki farklı kültürü kucaklamasına ve akışına bırakmasına neden olur.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** postkolonyal edebiyat, iki kültürlülük, iki kültürlü kimlik, *Abeng*

## Introduction

The study of female issues in literature received notable attention with the emergence of feminist literary theory and criticism in the 1960s and 1970s. During this time, many feminist literary scholars such as Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert, Susan Gubar, Toni Morrison, bell hooks, and others devoted their academic careers to studying how literature challenges the marginalization of women. Elaine Showalter, for example, is known for her influential work *A Literature of Their Own* (1977) in which she traces the history of British women novelists from the Brontës to Doris Lessing to prove that English literature is rich with great canonical female writings and to construct a female framework for the analysis of literature by women based on the study of female experience. She calls it gynocriticism. In the same line of advocating female experiences in literature, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, who are known for their collaborative work *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979) also examine how women are represented in literature and how female writers of the 19th century were influenced by and resisted the dominant literary traditions of their time.

The field of feminist literary criticism, however, cannot ignore Toni Morrison's contributions that enriched the field with her unique perspectives on race, gender, and identity. While she is primarily known as a novelist, her work has significantly impacted on feminist theory and criticism. Through her novel *Beloved* (1987), for instance, Morrison brings the trauma of slavery and its lingering effects on the psyche and identity of African American women to the surface. She illustrates the compounded struggles of race and gender of females. Morrison's contemporary feminist critic, bell hooks, also significantly contributed

to feminist thought and literary criticism. Her work emphasized the importance of understanding the interconnectedness of these social categories and their impact on the lived experiences of marginalized groups. In *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism* (1981), she explores how racism and sexism together shape the experiences of Black women, critiquing both the feminist movement for its racial biases and the civil rights movement for its gender biases.

All the abovementioned female critics could prove that female experiences and perspectives in literature had the same importance as males. Moreover, it could be argued that female works represent female perspectives in a way that male literature does not due to the patriarchal viewpoint from which male authors traditionally approached their works. During this period, however, the third wave of feminism emerged to mainly focus on the representation of black women in society and literature as well, particularly on those who suffered from the negative legacies of colonialism, such as racism, hybridity, biculturalism, and so on. Therefore, it can be said that both postcolonial literature and the third feminist wave reinforce each other through their dedication to bringing the black female problems to the surface.

Postcolonial literature is an important genre and a literary movement that emerged during the mid-twentieth century. It was created and spearheaded by African writers who experienced racism, biculturalism, and the duality of identity. These authors crafted their works incomparably as writing was their primary means of expressing a variety of challenges and injustices that occurred after colonialization. As a result, their works were well-received by readers and publishers alike. The term postcolonial literature, however, has evolved to include a wide variety of literary works, from poignant reflections by authors who experienced colonialism to insightful explorations of the continuing impact of European imperialism on countries classified as Third World. Among those prominent figures of postcolonial literature is Chinua Achebe who is well-known for his distinguished literary mosaic *Things Fall Apart* (1958) which depicted the struggle of its hero to maintain his identity in the face of colonialism. Another figure is Ngugi Wa Thiong'o whose profound novel *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) sheds light on the legacy of colonialism in Africa and other countries.

Postcolonial literature forms a precious resource for postcolonial studies. It inspires scholars to share their theories and perspectives on the oppression and inequality experienced by colonized peoples. Three particularly influential studies that significantly impacted the field of postcolonial literature are (1) Edward Said's study *Orientalism* (1977), in which he provides a detailed analysis of the Western world's negative perception of Third World countries and regions that were previously subject to European colonialism. Said summarizes these views through binary opposites such as strong/weak, white/black, educated/ignorant, etc., where the adjectives on the left refer to Western people, and those on the right refer to Eastern people. (2) Homi K. Bhabha's *Location of Culture* is another important work in postcolonial theory, published in 1994. The book delves into various colonial legacies that have a negative impact on the self-perception of colonized individuals, particularly those who were forced to leave their homes in search of justice and equal treatment that they had lost in their homelands. (3) Gayatr Spivak's work in 1988 *Can the Subaltern Speak?* is a significant work that shows how marginalized groups, such as colonized people, were silenced and excluded from dominant discourses. Unfortunately, that silence was taken as acceptance of the colonizer's hegemony and used to spread their culture and establish new perspectives in the dominated areas.

As postcolonial literature forms a precious resource for postcolonial studies, it also provides feminist literary analysts with good samples of their research. The novels that are written by postcolonial writers enable lots of literary feminists to present a thorough discussion on how black women struggled a lot to fight both, male oppression and the oppression of some legacies that are left behind by colonialism, such as biculturalism. Bicultural women, unlike

others, suffered much from identity complexities and cultural negotiations. Their life in places swaying between two streams of cultures, native and dominant, let them face the challenges of biculturalism. As culture is a crucial phenomenon that distinguishes one nation from another, the postcolonial researchers focus on how colonizers' culture influenced colonized people and made them culturally followers, not independents.

Every society has a unique set of cultural norms and customs that serve as a foundation for the behavior of its members. These norms are built upon an acceptance by the members of society to follow and respect them. When an individual deviates from these cultural rules, he is often viewed as a dissident and may face social stigma. Culture shapes people's ways of living and thinking, and it can be recognized through a unique way of seeing the world that they acquire from their upbringing. Tomlinson (1999) argues that culture is a total pattern of human behavior that is embodied in speech, action, and artifacts. It is dependent on our capacity to learn and transmit knowledge to future generations. Essentially, the entire world is created by a collection of thoughts and beliefs that shape people's lives, including their way of talking, behaving, and influencing future generations. All those elements, in one way or another, play a key role in shaping one's identity because both culture and identity are interrelated to each other. Together, they form what is known as cultural identity which results in a self's feeling of belonging to a specific group shared with the same ethnicity, race, and religion. This interrelationship is further reinforced by the shared language, customs, and traditions of a particular cultural group. Samovar and Porter (1982) refer to this as "the center, or core, of cultural identity", which is an image of the self and the culture intertwined in the individual's total conception of reality. Thus, culture and identity are essential aspects of human life that shape individuals and communities.

Cultural identity has been a subject of negotiation, especially during the postcolonial period. This was due to the migration of indigenous people who moved from one place to another in search of stability, security, and other social necessities. They brought with them a different culture to their destination. The mixture of these cultures in multicultural social environments created what Bhabha calls cultural hybridity. It is mixing two cultures together, original culture and the newly acquired one. A person with a hybrid culture falls victim to confusion. They become unable to choose one suitable culture. This is what Meca (2019) defines as biculturalism: a person embracing at least one heritage culture and also another receiving culture. Therefore, bicultural identity can be considered one of the consequences of colonization in which half of one's identity is rooted in one's local culture, and the second half stems from an awareness of one's relation to community culture.

The current study, however, will focus on female bicultural identity as portrayed in the novel *Abeng* by American-Jamaican novelist Michelle Cliff. The researchers will only concentrate on the main female protagonist, Clara, who lives through the crisis of having two distinct cultures that she acquires from a white father and a black mother. The sample is subjected to a postcolonial analysis with a focus on the negative results that occur because of mixing two cultures together. The study attempts to determine to what extent the female protagonist, Clara, can be taken as an example of a woman who loses her identity because of the element of biculturalism and to what degree she is constantly searching for her identity without being able to identify any specific culture.

## Literature Review

The third wave of feminism, also known as postcolonial feminism, emerged in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. It played a crucial role in drawing attention to the challenges faced by women following the end of European colonization in the 1950s. This wave of feminism was not limited to addressing gender inequality but also focused on highlighting the negative impact of colonization on various aspects of women's lives. One of the most significant

effects of colonization was the silencing of women and their inability to speak up against the injustices they faced. In his analysis of J.M. Coetzee's book *Enemy* (1986), Shadi Neimneh (2013) discusses the impact that colonial ideology had on colonized societies from a postcolonial feminist perspective. Neimneh focuses on Foe's two main characters, Friday and Susan Patron. Neimneh points out that while Friday, an African slave to a white English master on an isolated island, is forced into silence, Susan also has no choice but to remain silent and is unable to share her story of finding her kidnapped daughter. Susan asks the original author to add her story and adventures to the novel, but the author refuses her request, fearing that her story will upset male readers. Here, Neimneh compares the patriarchal practices imposed on women with the practices of the colonizers on the indigenous people. For him, both Friday and Susan suffer from the same lack of power due to the colonial ideology represented by the white English master and its influence on the colonized society represented by the original author of the novel.

Colonization introduced countless challenges for women, one of which was the propagation of a negative portrayal of third-world women as passive within patriarchal societies. This misconception is explored by Saif and Shabinrad (2014) in their feminist postcolonial analysis of Khaled Hosseini's novel, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* (2007). Through this analysis, the authors trace the paths of the two main female characters, Maryam and Laila, and reveal them as models of resilience amid oppressive circumstances. The husband, Rashid, who represents male dominance, subjects his wives to hardships and imposes restrictive standards on them and their lives. To assert his authority, he forces his first wife to wear the veil (niqab), but she later uses this symbol of oppression to hide and escape from him. Maryam, his second wife, is constantly tortured by Rasheed, and he even punishes her for her mother's transgressions. However, both wives, Maryam and Laila, finally ally themselves, challenge Rashid's authority, and find strength in solidarity. When Rashid's violence against Laila increases, we notice that Maryam does not remain silent and intervenes decisively, hitting him with a shovel as an act of self-defense and liberation. In societies like these, where women's agency is often suppressed, rebellion like this is considered heinous and unforgivable. From the perspective of the marginalized and oppressed, however, it represents a profound assertion of strength and self-defense. In essence, this narrative challenges the idea of passive victimhood that is entrenched among Third World women and presents Maryam and Laila as empowered individuals who resist oppressive male authority and ultimately regain their independence and dignity.

Erdemir and Demirtaş (2020) explore African women's challenges, such as the fragmentation of their identity due to European colonialism and subsequent migration to America for settlement. This immigration often led to intermarriage with Americans and the emergence of offspring whose status as citizens was not recognized by American society, resulting in them being labeled "others." These children faced conflicting influences from two different cultures and identities - that of their African mothers and that of their American fathers - and were struggling to reconcile their dual cultural heritage. In their study of Toni Morrison's novel *The Bluest Eye*, Erdemir and Demirtaş draw on critical theories in postcolonial studies, including Edward Said's concept of the other, Homi Bhabha's concept of ambivalence, and Gayatri Spivak's exploration of subordination. Hence, they highlight the protagonist's fragmented identity, portraying her as a hybrid character struggling with the complexities of dual race and societal expectations. The analysis reveals how Morrison complexly conceptualizes her protagonist's experiences as a "hybrid girl" as she faces challenges in her school environment due to her racial identity and struggles to deal with cultural fragmentation and resist systemic injustice. Ultimately, Erdemir and Demirtaş emphasize the profound impact of colonialism and migration on female identity and highlight the double-sided challenges faced by individuals who belong to two cultures and identities simultaneously.

In 2021, Dube conducted a similar study highlighting the enormous difficulties faced by African women during the colonial period and beyond. It is unfortunate that in addition to the racial discrimination practiced by the colonizers on the colonized peoples, women in those peoples also faced another discrimination imposed on them by patriarchal society. This double discrimination was a real social shock for African women. However, Dube's study offers a glimmer of hope by focusing on how African women work in balance against these two streams of oppression. To do this, Dube analyzes *Beaulieu*, a Setswana novel (1990) by Olibile Gaborone, from a postcolonial feminist angle. In his analysis, he applies the approach of the 'First Things First Approach' that gives women the choice to stand with men against colonial oppression before struggling for their gender equality. Furthermore, he relates his analysis of *Boleo* to four other famous African works, namely *Mekabah: A Biography* by Miriam Makaba, *And They Did Not Die* (1990) by Loreta Ncgobo, *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) by Buchi Emecheta, and *Nervous Condition* (1988) by Tsitsi Dangaremba. By doing so, he concludes that the five main female characters of those novels, including the characters in *Boleo*, encourage the First Things First Approach, which could prove to be a viable solution to the difficulties faced by African women in terms of both colonial oppression and patriarchy. Those studies, however, are some of many. They are selected to support the discussion of female problems that originated due to the the negative legacy of colonialism.

### Michelle Cliff

Michelle Cliff is an American novelist of Jamaican origin. She was born in 1946 and passed away in 2016. Her first two novels, *Abeng* (1985) and *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), brought her fame. In the late 1970s, she wrote critical essays on colonial education that had left her unable to express herself as a light-skinned Jamaican. She completed her Ph.D. dissertation in 1974 and edited the first volume on the writings of Lillian Smith (1897-1966), a white writer who was an outspoken critic of segregation and racism, in 1978. That same year, she published a personal analysis of racial, gender, and sexual power.

*Abeng* is Cliff's first novel, published in the 1980s. The term "abeng" refers to a conch shell. It was used by the slaves as a tool of communication during the resistance against colonialism in Jamaica. The story focuses on the life of a mixed-race Jamaican girl named Clare Savage, growing up in the 1950s. The novel takes place during Jamaica's transition from colonial rule to independence during the 1950s and 1960s. The author skillfully navigates themes of identity, colonialism, resistance, slavery, and social injustice. Clare explores her cultural heritage and reveals many harsh facts about British imperialism, slavery, and injustice in Jamaican society. The novel also highlights the psychological and cultural repercussions of these facts as well as the racial hierarchy imposed by colonialism.

Clare faces a complex struggle with her mixed racial identity and conflicting societal expectations because she is biracial. Although she enjoys privileges linked to her father's whiteness, she, meanwhile, suffers from marginalization because of her mother's blackness. Hence, she fights for racial equality and social justice in Jamaica while wrestling with the notions of loyalty, identity, and self-discovery. In her portrayal of Jamaica's turbulent political past, Cliff skillfully highlights the resilience of resistance against British colonialism and offers an alternative perspective that questions and challenges the dominant historical narratives.

### Sample Analysis

Many postcolonial intellectuals examine the relationship between culture and identity. They conclude that both elements are inherently inseparable from each other, and that culture has a direct influence on a person's identity. For instance, a person who is born to parents from two different cultures may suffer from biculturality and have challenges in conforming



to their fragmented bicultural identity. They may spend their life split between their father's and mother's cultures. In other words, they may live with a sense of confusion between the two identities. This kind of sense, Bhabha (1994) calls it as "betweenness." Betweenness, therefore, is the feeling of confusion and bewilderment that biracial children, who grow up with multiple cultural influences, experience due to bicultural upbringing. Due to the confusion of biculturalism, they consequently become unsure of their culture and identity. The character of Clare Savage in *Abeng* is an excellent choice for studying the phenomenon of biculturalism and its effect on a female self's identity. Cliff skillfully addresses this issue by using the literary genre of bildungsroman, which traces the protagonist's life from childhood to maturity. *Abeng* is an autobiographical work with Clare, the protagonist, depicting Cliff's real-life experiences during her childhood.

Clare Savage, the main character in the novel *Abeng*, is introduced as the daughter of two biracial parents. Her father, Boy Savage, is a white man and a descendant of an English Earl while her mother, Kitty Savage, is a black woman and a descendant of a Jamaican Maroon. This means that Clare is a blend of two cultures: her father's English culture and her mother's Jamaican culture.

Each of the parents is created by the author to represent their culture. Boy is depicted as a biased white man who is proud of being white. Racism is evident in his way of raising Clare as he keeps constantly reminding her about the advantages of whiteness that she inherited from him, "You are my daughter. You're white." (Cliff 1984: 73). He does not show any care for the fact that his wife is a black woman, and that such kind of remarks on skin color may hurt her. Although she does counter him or rejects his racist views, Mrs. Savage prefers not to share any of her opinions just to keep peace in the family and to protect her daughter from the conflict that may arise between her parents.

Clare lives her everyday life as a young girl with light skin and receives her primary education in English schools where she is taught that the goal of European colonialism was to develop poor countries and help them escape poverty and ignorance and live a good life. At home, too, her father has no problem showing his approval of the white agenda in Africa in his conversation with his family. Even when Clare asks him about the causes of the Nazi Holocaust, which led to the killing of about six million Jews, he cannot acknowledge the injustice that befell them. He believes that "the Jews were smart people and should have known better than to antagonize Adolf Hitler," describing him as "a misguided genius in search of a scapegoat" (Cleave 1984: 6). Thus, here, he blames the victims themselves for an unknown guilt. This is how Clare grows up, and this is the way of thinking she has been raised since her childhood. It is not until the age of twelve when she is sent to spend her summer calling in Jamaica in 1958, that she realizes her complicated situation.

In Jamaica, Clare notices that people treat her and look at her differently than the other children around her. A strange feeling accompanies Clare for a while until she learns from her best friend Zeo that people in Jamaica do not like white people. They believe that white people are the reason for destroying life in Jamaica. Not only do the people outside think this way, but her grandmother, Miss Mitty, at home does, too. From the beginning, the grandmother did not approve of her daughter marrying a white man. She tells her daughter Kitty, "You know, you should never have married that man in the first place. Buckra [white] man is jus' no-good a-tall, a-tall" (Cleave 1984: 148). The repetition of the phrase "at all, at all" here reflects Mitty's negative feelings against white people. When Clare asks her about that, she answers that most of what Clare learns in school and what she learns at home from her father is not valid. She tells her that what she acquired during her first twelve years is a lie. Colonialism was not about helping people or educating them, but to oppress and divide them. Even after colonialism, imperialism did not liberate people. People were left attached to the culture and beliefs of white people. She adds, "All the forces which worked to keep these people slaves are now working to keep them poor" (Cleave 1984: 159). The image of

white supremacy left behind is a tool to keep people slaves. Clare understands this because she has experienced this feeling of being white in Jamaica.

Clare's grandmother plays a crucial role in Clare's realization of some facts. Those realities undoubtedly affect Clare's mind. She gradually becomes aware that she lives in a complex society where humans are placed in a hierarchy according to their skin color. Even brothers in the same home are not similar. She thinks about her sister, who is not white like her. She now understands why her father is more attached to her than her sister. He always says, "You are my daughter". He teaches her to behave like white people, leading her to question her position between the two cultures. She feels fractionated, puzzled, and incapable of deciding which side to take: her father's side and behave like whites or her mother's side and act like blacks. She is neither white to be an American nor totally black to be Jamaican.

Clare feels stuck between two worlds, and her sense of identity is in disarray. She finds herself divided between different aspects of her identity: her race, upbringing, education, and relationships. Thus, she feels divided into two parts due to this internal conflict and struggles to coordinate and harmonize the different parts of her identity. She is unable to choose between different versions of herself and decide which version she wants to be. The narrator highlights this dilemma, saying that she feels "split into two parts – white and not white, town and country, scholarship and privilege, Boy and Kitty" (Cliff 1984: 118). Here, Clare lives in a state of fragmentation where she cannot choose one side or identity over another. She begins a difficult journey to discover and select her true identity, hoping to find a sense of unity within herself and belonging to the world.

What makes Clare's situation even more difficult is the fact that she does not find any support from her parents, especially on her mother's side. From the start, her mother has been pushing her toward her father's culture and wants her to be influenced by it more than her own. She thinks that "if her daughter had to pick out a fault in her mother, it would be her sense that Kitty held herself back from any contact which was intimate [...]" (Cliff 1984: 50-51). Her mother believes that the present time is for white people and wants her daughters to have a successful life by following their father's path. She refrains from involving herself in her daughter's decisions and usually complies with her husband's judgment. "As far as her daughters were concerned, Kitty Freeman Savage usually complied with her husband's judgment" (Cliff 1984: 76). Clare, however, does not stand paralyzed. She begins asking questions and reading many books to find a way forward.

One book that hugely influences Clare is *The Diary of Anne Frank*. This book changes Clare's way of thinking and she begins to compare herself with Anne in order to find a solution to her own problems. Clare notes that she and Anne share similar experiences; they both suffer from similar persecutions that they cannot understand, and no one can explain their causes to them. Their mothers do not help them either. Like Anne's mother, Mrs. Frank, Clare's mother, Kitty, is also silent. She does not communicate with her daughter or instruct her on how to deal with life's difficulties. However, the most terrifying event that truly terrifies and shocks Clare is the end of Anne's life. In the end, Anne is killed, and no one knows who the murderer is or why she is murdered. Clare cannot find an explanation for this tragic ending. "It was hard for Clare to imagine someone, another girl, who was of her age or near to her age, dying—to imagine her dying as Anne Frank died was impossible" (Cliff 1984: 68).

After the death of Anne, Clare begins to question the white culture. Her inability to find justifications for the murder increases her doubt, and she remembers Mitte's talk about the aggression of colonizers on blacks, which further fuels her confusion. Clare is an intelligent girl who can distinguish between good and evil. Her confusion is proof of her good nature. She could have just chosen to be white and taken advantage of the privileges that come with it, but she is having second thoughts. In addition to this, Clare likes the simple life of



her mother's family. Her trip to Jamaica influences her decision. During her visit, she enjoys her time in Jamaica, the green nature, and the abundance of mangoes. Clare looks happy and enthusiastic about learning everything around her, especially when her grandmother starts narrating new stories that Clare has never heard about before. Her friendship with Zeo also influences Clare because she behaves spontaneously when she is with Zeo. For some time, she ignores that she is white and feels free to be herself.

Clare's friendship with Zeo even complicates her choice of identity. She loves Zeo, and they enjoy their time together in Jamaica, but Zeo has never encouraged Clare to choose her mother's side. Zeo, as a pure black girl, believes in the beauty of being a white girl and knows the advantages that white people have over blacks. She keeps telling Clare to forget her black identity and continue her life as a white person like her father. Zeo's words find their way to Clare's ears. She feels somewhat satisfied, mainly when she uses the power of her whiteness to protect Zeo from a man who tries to spy on her while sunbathing. Clare commands him, saying, "Get away, you hear. This is my grandmother's land" (Cliff 1984: 122). Clare's awareness of the advantages and disadvantages of both her races again puts her in a complicated situation. She finds it very difficult to choose an identity based on skin colour as all the characters and society want her to do. Clare is left with this confusion till the end of the novel. However, even though the novel's end is left open, the reader does know Clare's final decision. Perhaps Cliff intends to leave her story unfinished to show that the suffering of black people in this life is endless, even for those who have the chance to be white.

## Conclusion

In Michelle Cliff's novel *Abeng*, the protagonist, Clare Savage, navigates the complex and often painful reality of bicultural identity, shedding light on the challenges individuals sitting astride two distinct cultures face. Clare's journey serves as a sad reflection of the broader postcolonial experience, where the heritage of colonialism continues to shape personal and collective identities. Clare's experiences present the broader consequences of colonialism on individual identity. Her father's emphasis on the superiority of whiteness and her mother's silent submission to this ideology create a home environment that mirrors the colonial dynamic. Clare's education in English schools further reinforces these colonial values, presenting her with a crooked version of history that praises colonialism and silences the voices of the colonized.

Clare does not question the narrative that she has been fed by her father or her school but her visit to Jamaica, interactions with her grandmother, and friendship with Zoe are crucial in her awakening. Her grandmother's rejection of colonial narratives and candid discussions about the impact of colonialism on Jamaican society provide Clare with a new lens through which to view her own identity.

Clare's awakening is both liberating and problematic because she realizes that she does not fully belong to either cultural sphere. Her friendship with Zoe further complicates matters, showing her the advantages of whiteness but also revealing deep-rooted biases within both communities.

Clare's internal conflict represents the bicultural identity crisis experienced by many individuals in postcolonial societies. She is caught in a state of "betweenness," marked by confusion, fragmentation, and an endless search for a cohesive identity. Her struggle to reconcile her dual heritage reflects postcolonial societies' broader challenge in developing a new identity that acknowledges and integrates their complex histories.

In conclusion, *Abeng* is a compelling narrative that scrutinizes the complexities of bicultural identity in a postcolonial context. Michelle Cliff's portrayal of Clare Savage's journey vividly highlights the ongoing impact of colonialism on personal identity and the challenges of navigating a bicultural existence. Through Clare's story, Cliff highlights the individual's struggle for self-discovery and belonging. She invites readers to reflect on the broader

societal consequences of these personal battles. The novel is a reminder of the need for greater understanding and empathy in addressing the legacies of colonialism and supporting individuals in their search for a unified and authentic sense of self.

## References

- Al-Sakkaf, Ghazal Mansoor (2022). "Female Quest for Identity in D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers and Doris Lessing's The Golden Notebook", *Epiphany Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies*, 15(2), 36-51. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21533/epiphany.v15i2.407>.
- Al-Sakkaf, Ghazal Mansoor (2023). "Female Self-determination in Charlotte Bronte's Jane Eyre and Laila Aboulela's the Translator", *Epiphany Journal of Transdisciplinary Studies*, 16(1), 114-31. <http://dx.doi.org/10.21533/epiphany.v16i1.419.g291>.
- Bhabha, Homi K. (1994). *The location of Culture*. London, New York: Routledge.
- Cliff, Michelle (1996). *No telephone to heaven*. Penguin.
- Cliff, Michelle (1984). *Abeng*. New York: Plume.
- Dube, Musa W. (2021). "Boleo: A postcolonial feminist reading", *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 76(3).1-8. <https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v76i3.6174>.
- Kara Erdemir, Gökçen and Ege Demirtaş (2020). "A Postcolonial Feminist Approach to Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*". *Haliç Üniversitesi Sosyal Bilimler Dergisi*, 3(2), 199-212.
- Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Gubar (2020). *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale University Press.
- Grayman-Simpson, Nyasha (2017). "Cultural Identity", *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Abnormal and Clinical Psychology*, p. 934-935. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781483365817.n360>.
- Hooks, Bell (2015). *Ain't I a Woman: Black Women and Feminism*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- Meca, Alan et al. (2019). "Biculturalism and Bicultural Identity: A Relational Model of Bicultural Systems", *In Youth in superdiverse societies*, pp. 41-57, Routledge.
- Morrison, Toni (2007). *Beloved*. Vintage Classics.
- Neimneh, Shadi (2014). "Postcolonial Feminism: Silence and Storytelling in J. M. Coetzee's *Foe*", *Journal of Language and Literature*, 5(2), p. 49-55. <http://dx.doi.org/10.7813/jll.2014/5-2/>.

Said, Edward W. (1979). *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books

Samovar, Larry et al. (1982). *Intercultural communication: A reader*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company.

Schwartz, Seth J. et al. (2008). "Broadening the study of the self: Integrating the study of personal identity and cultural identity", *Social and Personality Psychology Compass*, 2(2), p. 635-651.

Showalter, Elaine (1999). *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing*. Princeton University Press.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty (2023). "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in *Imperialism*, pp. 171-219, Routledge.

Usborne, Esther (2014). "Understanding My Culture Means Understanding Myself: The Function of Cultural Identity Clarity for Personal Identity Clarity and Personal Psychological Well-Being", *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 44 (4), p. 436-458. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jtsb.12061>.