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**A Cognitive Linguistic Reading of Some  
Counterfactual Examples in Leila  
Aboulela's Minaret**

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## A Cognitive Linguistic Reading of Some Counterfactual Examples in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*

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### Abstract

This research seizes the interdisciplinary nature of cognitive linguistics, for the field offers a shared ground with psychology on different topics including counter-factuality. Cognitive linguistics is utilized to analyze counterfactual examples from the context of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* hinting the psychological status of Najwa, the main female character. As the analysis goes, conceptual blending appears to form the core of counterfactual thinking, for it reinforces humans' automatic propensity of creating alternative scenarios. The blending theory depends on what is already known and stored in humans' minds, and from that point counter-factuality helps imaginatively alternate reality to satisfy the humans' propensity, which is uncontrollable.

**Keywords:** Cognitive linguistics, counter-factuality, conceptual blending, mental spaces

### المستخلص

يهدف هذا البحث إلى تحليل بعض أمثلة التفكير المعاكس للواقع متبنياً في ذلك اللغويات المعرفية وطبيعتها ثنائية التخصص؛ حيث تتشارك مع مجال علم النفس في تناول موضوعات مختلفة منها التفكير المعاكس. يستخدم البحث اللغويات المعرفية في تحليل أمثلة مخالفة للحقيقة من رواية المؤنذة للكاتبة ليلى أبو العلا مشيراً إلى الحالة النفسية لنجوى الشخصية النسائية الرئيسية. وبتحليل الأمثلة يتضح أن عملية الدمج المعرفي أساس التفكير المعاكس للحقيقة، كما أنها تؤكد ميل البشر التلقائي لخلق سيناريوهات بديلة. تعتمد نظرية الدمج على ما هو معروف و سبق تخزينه في العقل البشري، و من هذا المنطلق تساعد الأفكار المعاكسة للواقع على تغيير الواقع بشكل تخيلي مما يؤدي إلى إرضاء الميل البشري للتخيل، وهو أمر غير خاضع للتحكم.

**كلمات مفتاحية:** لغويات معارفية، حقيقة معاكسة للواقع، الدمج المفاهيمي، الحيز العقلي

### Introduction

Cognitive linguistics, which emerged as a distinct interdisciplinary field in the 1970s and 1980s, owes its foundations to the pioneering contributions of George Lakoff, Ronald W. Langacker, and Leonard Talmy. These scholars are credited with weaving the intricate tapestry of cognitive

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linguistics (CL). It posits that language serves as a revealing prism for the patterns of human thought, aptly termed "conceptualization," offering an entrée into the inner workings of human cognition (Evans & Green, 2006). At its core, cognitive linguistics furnishes a potent means to delve into the cognitive underpinnings of individuals who stand out for their linguistic prowess. Language, as the conduit of expression and comprehension, demands an intricate symphony of mental processes, encompassing categorization, conceptualization, comparison, identification, mapping, and imagination. It is through these dynamic mental operations that individuals discern and articulate the intricacies of linguistic expression and comprehension. These cognitive processes underscore the chasm that separates humans from other sentient beings, as they epitomize the remarkable tapestry of the human mind.

Counterfactual thinking, a pivotal cognitive process, entices individuals to fashion imaginative alternative scenarios based on the reservoir of knowledge and experiences stored within their cognitive repertoire. This process, characterized by its ability to conceive the opposite of factual occurrences, serves as a natural and innate cognitive tool that individuals deploy in their efforts to reinterpret and communicate their lived experiences. At its core, counterfactual thinking employs the "if...then" structure, which, in turn, acts as a scaffold for the construction of a blended mental space. This conceptual integration technique allows individuals to reimagine and reconstruct narratives by seamlessly fusing the elements of known mental spaces. Complementing counterfactuality is the concept of pre-factuality, a cognitive mechanism that fuels speculative ponderings concerning future occurrences. This too is articulated through conditional "if...then" propositions, in which the consequence (Y) is intricately bound to the performance of a particular action (X) (Epstude, Scholl & Roese, 2016, p.48).

Embedded within the uncharted terrain of the human psyche, counterfactual thinking stands as a spontaneous and involuntary cognitive act, instinctively and unconsciously performed by individuals as they traverse the labyrinth of life. Leila Aboulela, an Egyptian-Sudanese author, astutely captures this intriguing cognitive process within the pages of her literary creations. In so doing, Aboulela transcends the surface of reality, crafting narratives that serve as poignant exemplars of the profound psychological complexities that individuals grapple with in their quotidian existence. Through her literary oeuvre, Aboulela undertakes a nuanced exploration of the diverse facets of the Muslim identity, seeking to portray

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Muslims as individuals whose faith both sustains and supports them in the face of life's myriad challenges. Her literary canvas extends beyond the mere veneer of 'Muslim' as a cultural or political identity, delving deep into the core of individuality, which transcends and yet does not negate the profound intersections of gender, nationality, class, and race.

Aboulela's writings constitute a powerful exploration of the intricate interplay between psychology, faith, and the human condition. Her prose emanates from a profound desire to explore the inner workings of the human psyche, to delve deeply into the minds and emotions of characters who grapple with matters of faith. In her own words, Aboulela seeks to probe the intrinsic depths, acknowledging that her characters are not idealized symbols or paragons of virtue but rather nuanced, flawed individuals who earnestly strive to practice their faith and make sense of the divine will within the crucible of challenging circumstances (British Council Literature, n.d.).

The narrative structure of *Minaret* is instrumental in unearthing the intricacies of the human psyche. It is narrated from a first-person perspective, affording readers an unobstructed view into Najwa's consciousness and her latent emotions. Throughout the course of the novel, Najwa embarks on a journey of counterfactual contemplation, deftly weaving scenarios in which she imaginatively revisits the possibilities of actions, utterances, and events taking a different course. This poignant exploration of Najwa's introspections lends an unmistakable air of authenticity to the narrative, underscoring the emotional and psychological resonance that characterizes *Minaret*.

The endeavor that follows unfolds as an exploration of the cognitive and linguistic dimensions that underpin the process of counterfactual reasoning as unveiled within the pages of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. Through the lens of cognitive linguistics, this analysis seeks to unravel the intricate cognitive tapestry that informs the human proclivity for counterfactual thinking, shedding light on the mechanisms that empower individuals to reconfigure reality in the crucible of their imaginative prowess. As we journey deeper into the heart of Aboulela's literary creation, we are poised to discern the myriad ways in which counterfactual thought intersects with the complex landscape of faith, identity, and the human experience.

### **Literature Review**

Aboulela's *Minaret* has been scrutinized from a literary stance. The notion of Islamic feminism has been dominating the analyses. Further,

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researchers have discussed the influence of religion in the novel and how it has trimmed the life path of the main female character. Al-Karawi and Bahar (2014) focus on the notion of veil and the struggles of Muslim women to put it on while living in Great Britain. Al-Karawi and Bahar show that the novel endorses a sympathetic approach to Muslims and their lifestyles. Hasan (2015) explores the case of immigrant Muslim women in *Minaret* and how the west provides a facilitating environment for them to observe their faith without being restricted. Hasan, also, says that Muslims construct their own space, in which they are liberated to practice their religion and reinterpret Islamic texts, and stresses that Aboulela presents Muslim females as enlightened. Zidan (2016) examines the Islamic feminism and the tendency of its proponents to have a re-reading of the holy Quran from a feminist lens. Zidan finds Africans, Arabs, and the West culpable of stereotyping Muslims, and Aboulela a pro-Muslim, for she reforms the assumed distortions about Islam and inspires Muslim women.

Roese (1997) argues that people are inclined to counter what happened and imagine an alternative reality in their minds mainly because of unpleasant emotional experiences, though their attempt may aggravate that unpleasantness. Furthermore, Roese (1997) stresses that counter-factuality helps individuals be prepared for future performances and reflect their emotions. Roese and Marrison (2009) provide an overview of the psychological status of counter-factuality stressing that part of reality forms the starting point of the counterfactual thinking which is often represented in the form of conditional statements that may focus on two types of alternatives: better scenario (upward counter-factuality), or worse scenario (downward counter-factuality) than reality. Byrne (2023) investigates the human capacity of grasping the possibilities as well as the impossibilities; humans depend on their knowledge of the world and their cognitive abilities to imagine counter scenarios what is already there in the world.

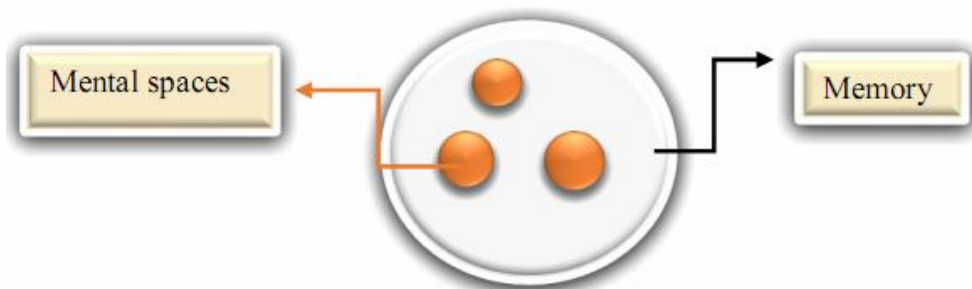
Fauconnier (1997, p.14) remarks that counterfactuals constitute a presupposed reality, an alternative scenario counter to fact, and they are not only used for the sake of imagination, but they are meant to inflict change on reality. Fauconnier (1997, p.100), additionally, proposes that the fundamental difference between reality and the imaginary situation lies in the protasis of the *if A then B* structure; linking the protasis with the apodosis depends on making the B true if it were not already true. Fauconnier and Turner (2002, p.89) asserts that conceptual integration is a pillar in imagination; it links input mental spaces, selectively projects to an integrated space, and constitutes an emergent structure via composition,

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completion, and elaboration in the blend. Hilpert (2011, p. 111) underscores that studying counterfactual thinking demonstrates that conceptual blending is a basic function of the human mind.

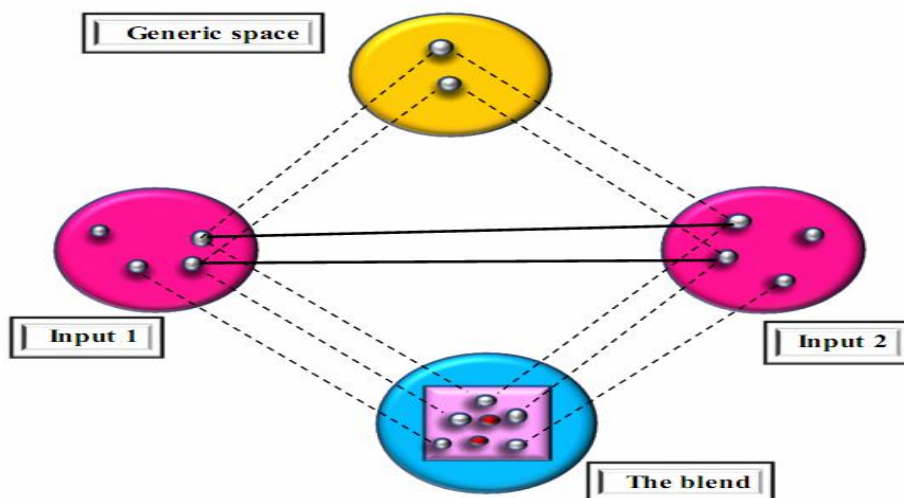
### **Theoretical Framework**

In cognitive linguistics, mental spaces are considered the basic tapestry, for they formulate the trajectory of thought. Mental spaces (MSs) are constructed as small packets of information during ongoing discourse for the sake of local understanding (Fauconnier, 1994, p. 16; Fauconnier and Turner, 2002, p. 40). MSs are, further, dynamic and drawn as circles in humans' working memory and activated throughout frames stored in the long-term memory (Fauconnier, 2007, p. 351). Oakley and Coulson (2008), on the other hand, define MSs as “representations of the scenes and situations in a given discourse scenario as perceived, imagined, remembered or otherwise understood by the speaker” (p.29).



**Figure 1 (mental spaces stored in memory)**

Humans' mind is prone to mixing mental spaces and creating new ones. Conceptual blending is a key component in human imagination and thought (Evans & Green, 2006). Conceptual integration or blending, fundamentally, regulates four spaces: two inputs that are attached by cross-mappings or connectors which refer to the matching process established between the spaces, the solid lines indicate the matching between the inputs, the dotted lines mark connections between the inputs and either generic space which contains what the inputs share; blended space where the elements from the inputs are mapped, and it is also highlighted by a novel, emergent conceptual structure that is different from the two inputs (Turner & Fauconnier, 2002, p.46; Turner, 2007, pp. 378-379; Ungerer & Schmid, 2006, p. 259).



**Figure 2 (adopted from Fauconnier and Turner, 2002, p. 46)**

The blended space rises from three processes (Turner, 2007, pp. 378-379):

- composition/ fusion: the blended mental space may constitute elements from the two inputs to establish links that are not detected in the inputs, structure counterpart elements separately, or project two elements as one.
- completion: it hinges on the background knowledge the mind can bring automatically into the blend. Pattern completion is an instance of such a process; figure (3) shows two lines along with a rectangle, once they are spotted, it is inferred that the two lines are, in fact, one line that runs straight behind the rectangle.



**Figure 3 (adopted from Fauconnier and Turner, 2002, p. 49)**

- elaboration: it is an open-ended process which provides the blend with imaginatively alternative scenarios based what readers see.

Turner and Fauconnier (1998, p.1) refer to blending as a counter-to-fact scenario, for the elements of the counterfactual, the antecedent and its consequence, are likely to appear in the blended space rather than either of the inputs. Interestingly, blended spaces may also be input spaces

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themselves, given the unconscious nature of blending that allows humans to employ knowledge and conceptual structure involuntarily (Turner & Fauconnier, 1998, p.3).

### **Methodology and Data collection**

This research builds its method on the use of cognitive linguistics as a theory that overlaps other theories including conceptual metaphor theory, mental spaces, and blending theory. The research relies as well on the notion of counter-factuality as a psychological status to sew alternative scenarios counter to reality and as a way to come up with conceptual blending providing that the first part of a counterfactual sentence works as a space builder that establishes the alternative scenario.

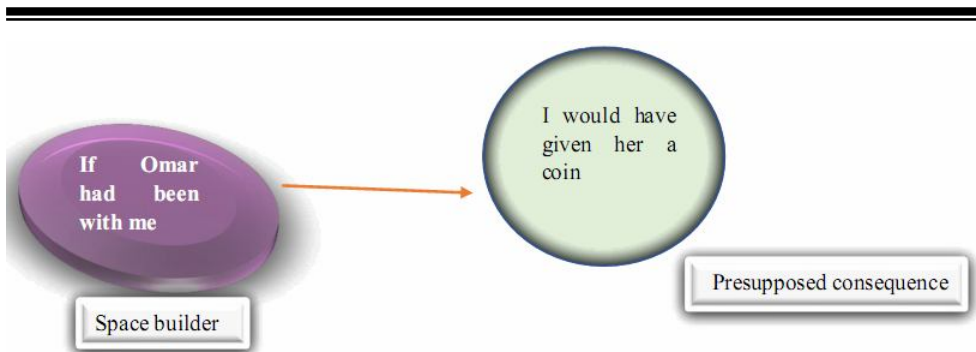
Examples of counterfactual sentences are collected from Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005) and analyzed through a cognitive stance to show the blending processes the mind creates based on already existing mental spaces. *Minaret* is, essentially, about a Sudanese well-off girl, Najwa, who, on the spur of the moment, loses her father, her prestigious life, and is forced to flee her country to London following a coup. In London, she undergoes some financial hardships beside her mother's death and her twin brother's arrest. Religion pitches in to be her shelter, as she becomes a hijabi, and works as a babysitter and a servant to secure a living.

### **Discussion**

A vivid example of counter-factuality appears in Najwa's behavior with a little beggar. Najwa, who is controlled by the ideas of the patriarchal society, cannot act freely in the presence of her twin brother because he does not like beggars, while she sympathizes with them. Her philanthropic nature urges her to give the little girl a note that would have plummeted to a coin in the presence of Omar. In that situation, Omar is not there with Najwa, but his influence is in her mind, which pushes her mind to sew an imaginatively conceptual blending using a conditional.

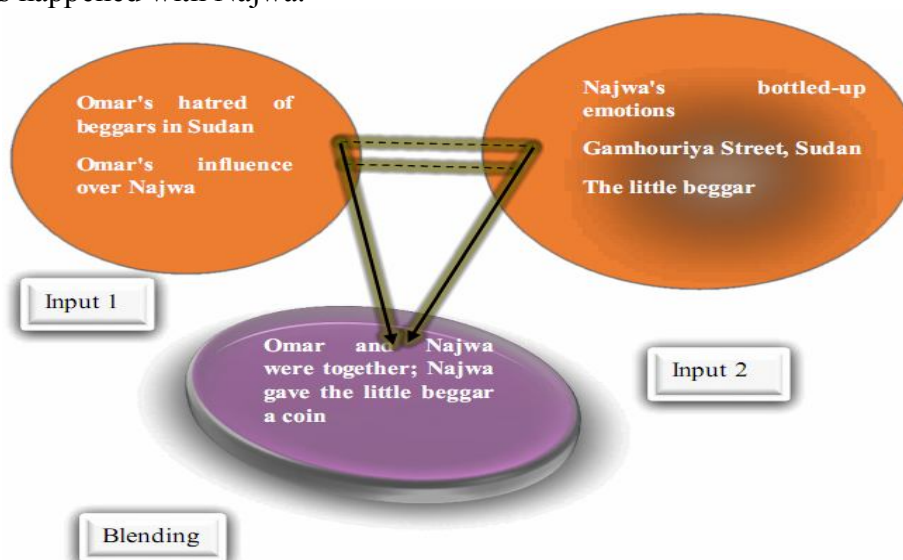
- a) At the Gamhouriya Street traffic light a little girl knocked on my window, begging with tilted head and unfocused eyes. Because I was alone, I gave her a note. If Omar had been with me, I would have given her a coin-  
he hated beggars. (p.10)





**Figure 4**

Figure (4) shows the first string to establish the counterfactual thinking by introducing a space builder using *if* conditional, followed with the expected result. Such thinking generates automatically a conceptual blending in which two inputs are formed and then mapped into a blending space, creating an emergent structure of a counterfactual action. Figure (5) displays the situation in two inputs: input (1) that encapsulates Omar's hatred towards beggars in Sudan and his influence over his sister, whereas input (2) includes Najwa's kind-driven emotions, Gamhoriya Street, and the little beggar. Since Omar was not with Najwa, the emergent structure introduces that Omar was with Najwa and therefore she gave the little girl a coin instead of a note. Simply, the blending space is counter to what actually has happened with Najwa.



**Figure 5**

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Further, Najwa's relationship with Anwar has been relying on the fact that he is a revolutionist who loathes the grass tops including Najwa's wealthy family and her father, in particular. Anwar would hurt Najwa's feelings by vilifying her father's name. To show the privilege Najwa enjoys, he has told her about his sick sister who needs an operation, but they are too poor to afford it. Such recount provokes Najwa's remorse and makes her think of not going to Europe this summer and lending Anwar the money instead. Example (c) states a counter reality to Anwar's sister in case money is available. The example offers two possible ways of blending. The first one is depicted in Figure (6) in which Anwar's sister is able to get the required operation and gets better. The second one is a speculation portrayed in Figure (7) where it is, indeed, based on the first blending; due to the ameliorated financial and health status of Anwar's family, it will be easy for him to tolerate the fact of grass roots versus grass tops, and perhaps he will not be so critical on Najwa's father.

- b) He had told me that his youngest sister was blind and if they had the money, she would be able to go to Germany and get an operation. (p.48)

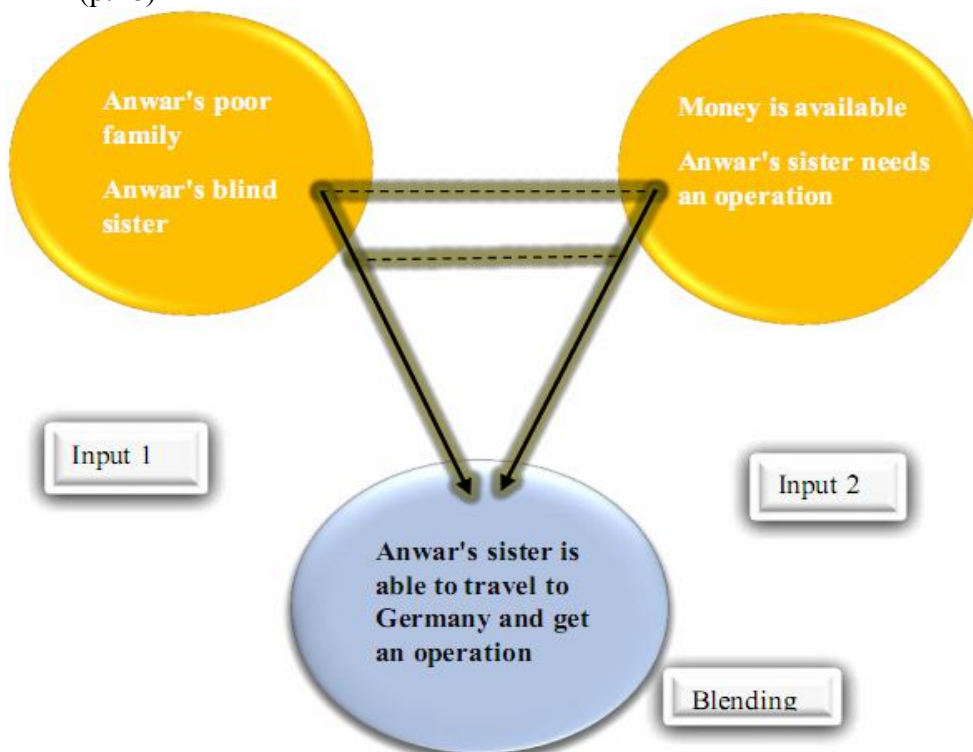
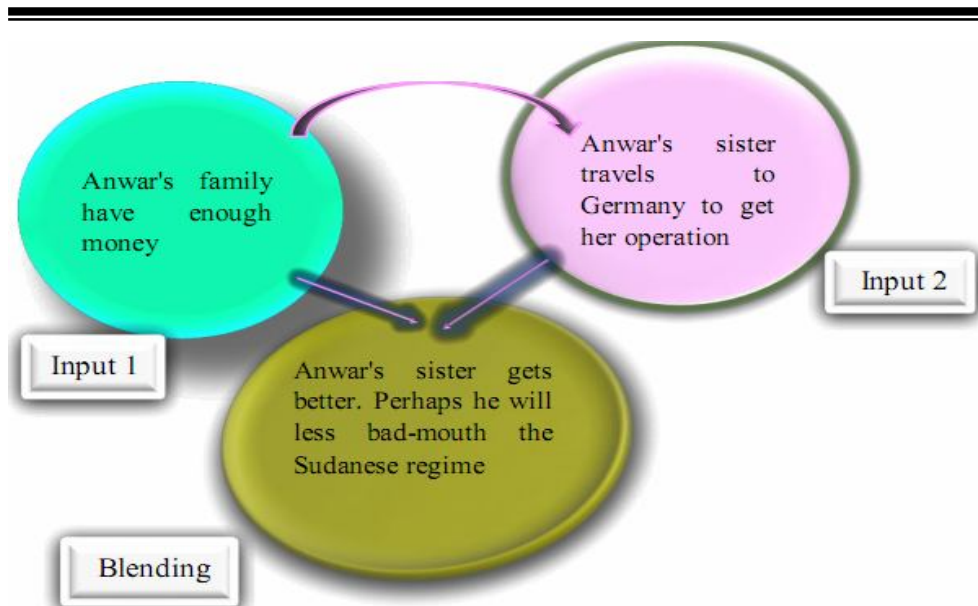


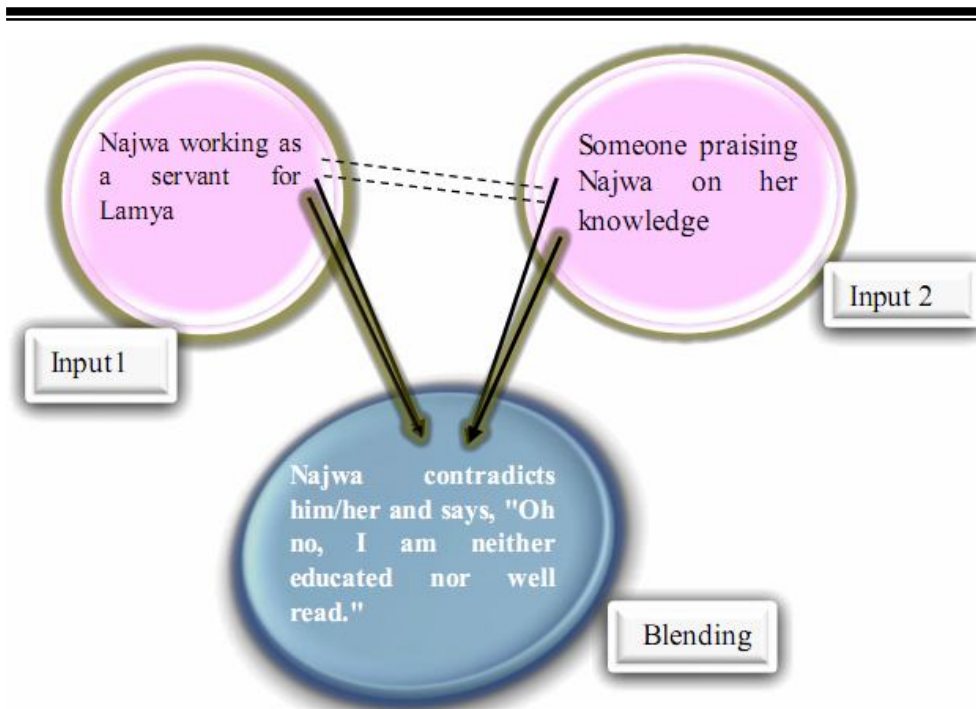
Figure 6



**Figure 7**

An instance of counter-factuality, where Najwa's low self-esteem is crystalized, appears in the following two examples (c) and (d) respectively. As life has turned upside down for Najwa, and she is no longer rolling in dough, her self-esteem has deteriorated. She has dropped out of college due to the dearth of finances and worked as a servant. Besides, she has lost connection with almost everyone she knows following her mother's death in London and the imprisonment of her twin brother, Omar. Working as a babysitter and a servant for a prestigious family in a posh area in London, Najwa has developed a good relationship with Tamer, her employer's younger brother, who praises her once for her wisdom and knowledge. Najwa's response is silence along with a smile, but while she is washing the dishes, her mind shifts to Tamer's words which agitate her mind to imagine a situation where it is someone other than Tamer, complimenting her well-grown mentality, and her response is contradicting the compliment by stating facts about herself. Najwa's counterfactual creates conceptual integration.

- c) I wash the dishes and think of what he said to me. 'You know a lot.' If someone else had said that, I would have contradicted them saying, 'Oh no, I am neither educated nor well read. Look at me in a dead-end job. (p.118)



**Figure 8**

Figure (8) presents example (c). In that figure, there are two inputs: one encases Najwa's "dead-end job", and the other is about someone applauding her knowledgeable mind. The two inputs are connected and then mapped onto the imaginatively alternative situation where her mind integrates them and comes up with Najwa's would-be answer, "Oh no, I am neither educated nor well read." (p.118) Whereas in example (d), Najwa sets a specific alternative to Tamer. She imagines that it was Shahinaz's uncle praising her knowledgeable mind, and she also imagines her reaction to his compliments that she would look him in the eye, searching for any sign of sarcasm. In that example, Najwa's mind relies on the stored mental spaces of Shahinaz's uncle blind date with her, so two mental spaces are connected in her memory, shown in Figure (9), then a blending mental space arises. In Figure (10), the blending created in Figure (9) is used as an input space that is, in return, linked to another basic input space of Najwa's dead-end job, so a new blending crops up. However, the fact that she would have suspected Shahinaz's uncle of sarcasm speaks volumes of Najwa's low self-esteem. She thinks that his words would have been out of disrespect because she is a maid with no well-educated background.

d) If Shahinaz's uncle had said to me, 'You know a lot,' I would have suspected him of sarcasm, checked his eyes for a sneering look. I am glad he went away. (p.118)

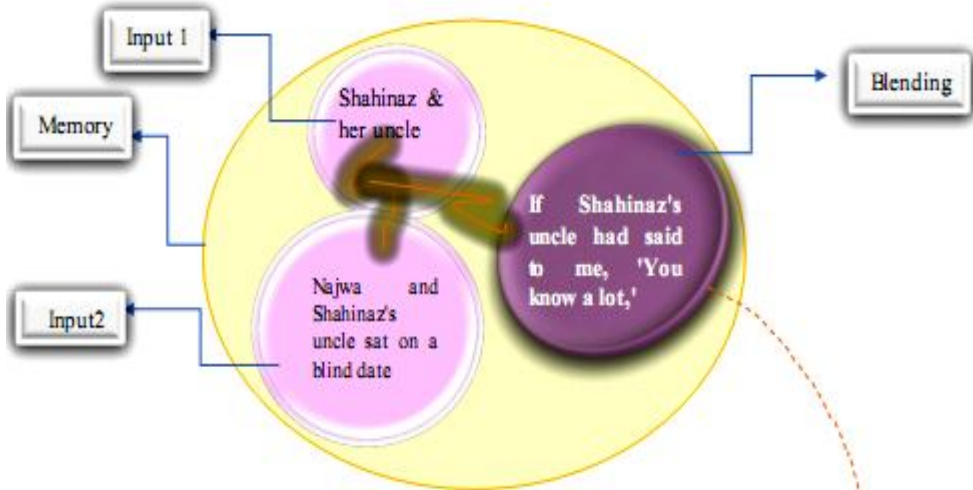


Figure 9

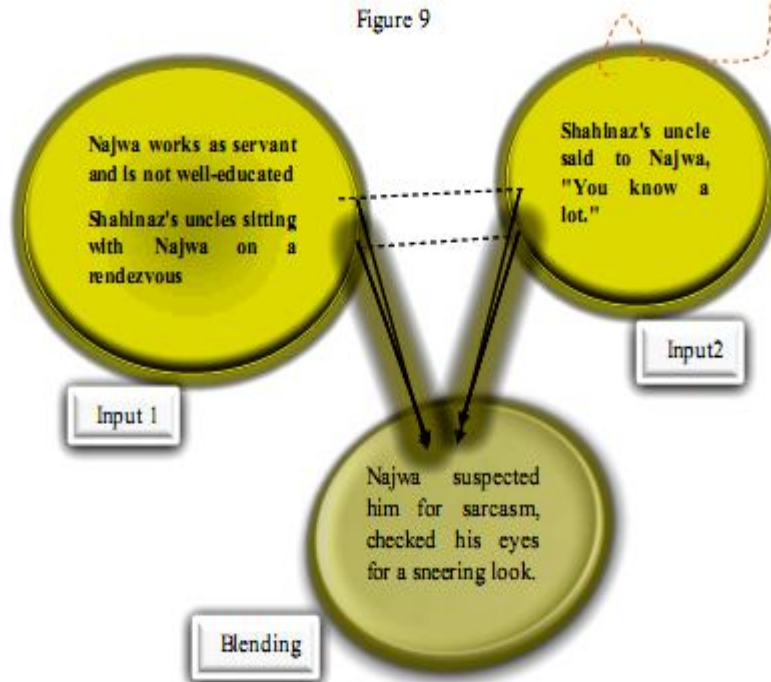
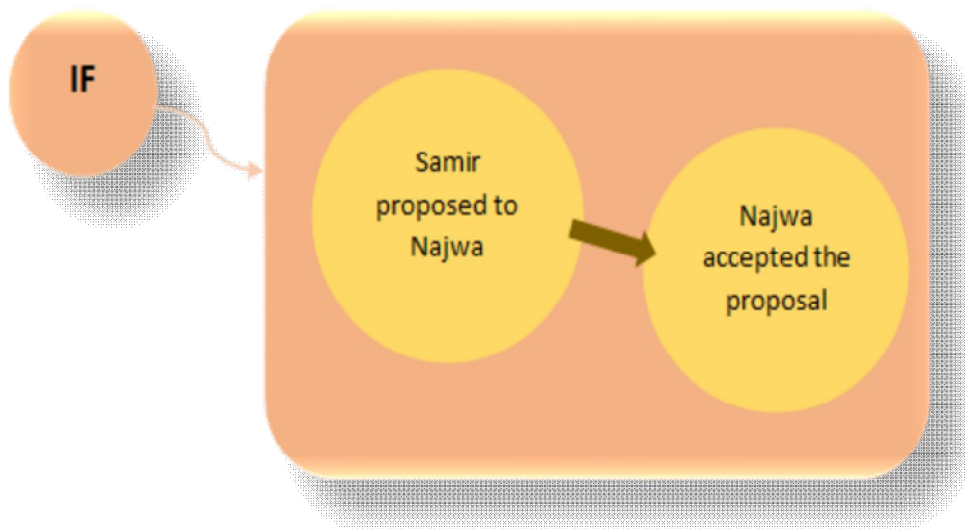


Figure 10

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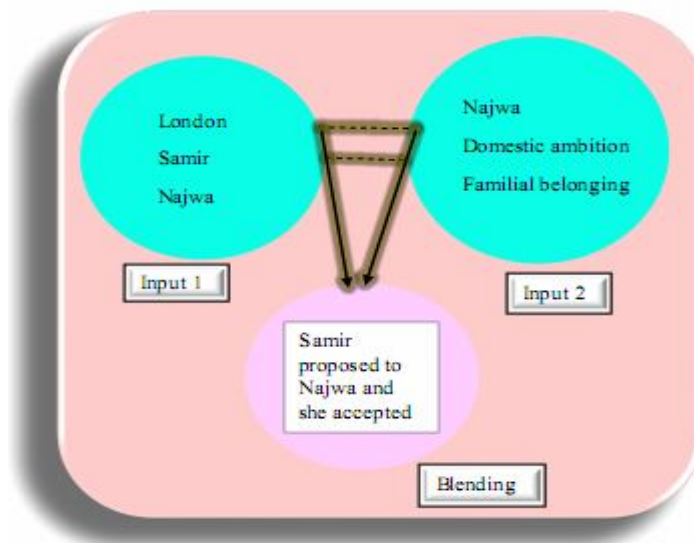
Another instance of conceptual blending via counter-factuality appears in Najwa's desire for a household to take care of. During her conversation with Uncle Saleh, she has thought of getting married to fulfill such a domestic crave and feel familial love and belonging again. Figure (11) shows the counterfactual scenario Najwa has created, thinking about getting married. The *If* space is the basis of this counterfactual because it prepares for the untrue incidents of Samir proposing to Najwa and her acceptance of the proposal.

- e) I would have liked to get married, not specifically to Samir (though if he had asked me, I would have accepted) but I wanted to have children, a household to run. (p.123)



**Figure 11**

Additionally, Figure (12) provides an instance of blending mental spaces and an emergent structure of the marriage proposal. Input (1) encapsulates three components: Najwa, Samir, and their location; while input (2) includes Najwa and her pursuits of starting a family to belong to; the blended space gives rise to the emergent structure of the imaginary marital situation.



**Figure 12**

### **Conclusion**

The exploration conducted herein has delved into the intricate realm of counterfactual thinking, offering a comprehensive investigation of this cognitive phenomenon through the prism of cognitive linguistics. Within this multifaceted framework, conceptual blending emerged as a pivotal underpinning, playing a pivotal role in the construction and orchestration of counterfactual thought processes. This inquiry found a tangible and poignant canvas in the literary tapestry of Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*, which served as an evocative conduit for the application of these cognitive principles .

The analysis of counterfactual thinking within the context of the novel revealed the inherent mechanisms of conceptual blending, which hinge on the pivotal "if...then" structure as a space builder, summoning forth the amalgamation of stored mental spaces. This intricate process unveiled the inherently spontaneous nature of blending, shedding light on the remarkable and innate human propensity to conjure alternative scenarios that deviate from the contours of reality.

In sum, this research journey has traversed the fertile terrain of cognitive linguistics and its profound interplay with counterfactual thinking. Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* has served as an illuminating backdrop against which the intricate cognitive mechanics of counterfactual reasoning have been brought into sharp focus. The analysis has unearthed the dynamic and

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creative character of human cognition, which unfailingly seeks to imagine alternative scenarios in defiance of the confines of reality. The rich examples from *Minaret* underscored the inherent spontaneity and the inexhaustible propensity that humans exhibit in weaving counterfactual narratives.

This journey underscores the indomitable human spirit and the transcendent power of imagination that drives individuals to explore the infinite realms of possibility, even within the cocoon of counterfactual thought. The overarching understanding gleaned from this exploration is that counterfactual thinking stands as a testament to the multifaceted and dynamic nature of human cognition. This research serves as a valuable tribute to the enduring allure of cognitive linguistics as a potent theoretical framework for unraveling the mysteries of the human mind and its intricate processes.

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