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Constructing Identities in Contemporary Arab Anglophone Women Diaspora Writings

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my father.

To my mother who has provided unflagging patience, support and love.

To my eldest brother Mohammed, who has been a great support throughout my life.

To Karima, who has made it worthwhile.

To my American Friend Shuna Durning, who has always been a source of inspiration.

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مقتضب

تهدف هذه الأطروحة إلى دراسة الأدب العربي الأنجلوفوني النسوي كظاهرة أدبية جديدة بدأت تفرض نفسها في الساحة الأدبية العالمية. بالرغم أن هذه الظاهرة الأدبية تمتد جذورها إلى قرن من الزمن، إلا أنها لم تحظ بالقسط الكافي من الاهتمام والنقد في الوسط الأكاديمي سوى في العقود الثلاثة الأخيرة. تحاول هذه الأطروحة إذن تسليط الضوء على مفهوم الهوية من خلال دراسة بعض الأعمال الأدبية المعاصرة لكاتبات عربيات في بلاد المهجر: "بنات الرياض" للكاتبة السعودية الأمريكية رجاء صانع، و"غرب الأردن" للكاتبة الأردنية الأمريكية ليلي حليبي، و"خريطة الحب" للكاتبة المصرية البريطانية أهداف سويف وأخيرا "هل يبدو رأسي كبيرا في هذا الشكل" للكاتبة الفلسطينية الأسترالية راندا عبد الفتاح.

انطلاقا من هاته الأعمال واعتمادا على مقاربات معاصرة في مجال الدراسات الثقافية، خاصة ما يتعلق منها بالدراسات ما بعد الكولونيالية النسوية، وكذا دراسات الشتات. تطمح أطروحتنا تفكيك ودحض مضامين التصورات التقليدية التي تنبني على الثنائية الهوياتية المؤسسة لبنية الخطابين الغربي-الاستشراقي النسوي والخطاب الذكوري. وهما خطابان يؤسسان لمنطق الهوية الثابتة القائمة على التطابق والوحدة في الخطاب وترسيخ ثقافة شاملة تهمش وتقصي الآخر خاصة المرأة العربية وخصوصيتها الثقافية، التاريخية والاجتماعية والسياسية. وقد حاولت الأطروحة- في المقابل- تأسيس خطاب بديل يقوم على الاختلاف والتنوع والتعدد الثقافي الذي يتجاوز التصنيفات العرقية والاجتماعية والثقافية.

كلمات المفاتيح: الهوية، دراسات الشتات ، أدب الشتات النسوي، التهجين، الدراسات ما بعد

الكولونيالية النسوية، الخطاب الاستشراقي النسوي، الخطاب الذكوري.

ABSTRACT

The thesis seeks to transcend the ethnic and race boundaries by adopting a transcultural dialogue and cross-cultural identifications as an alternative discourse to challenge the purism promoted by the existing essentialist and nationalist discourses of culture, race, and gender. Based on a corpus of four contemporary novels *Girls of Riyadh* (2008) by the Arab American writer Rajaa Alsanae, *West of the Jordan* (2003) by the Arab American Laila Halaby, *The Map of Love* (1999) by the Arab British novelist Ahdaf Soueif, and *Does my Head look Big in This?* by the Arab Australian writer Randa Abdel-fattah, this dissertation tends to explore different modalities of identity construction these authors have advocated to reflect the heterogeneity and diversity of Arab women both in diaspora and in their homeland. Drawing on a wide range of postmodernist perspectives and approaches, this dissertation decentralizes the Western tradition of binary system of thinking which places the ‘other’, especially the ‘female other’ as an ‘inferior’ subject.

The thesis adopts an eclectic approach that draws mainly on postcolonial theories, especially Homi Bhabha’s concept of ‘hybridity’ and postcolonial transnational feminist perspective that depends on the voices of different postcolonial feminists, primarily Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty, to investigate the role that Arab Anglophone women writers play in creating a path of consciousness for Arab women living in the borderlands.

The present dissertation is composed of two major parts and each part consists of four chapters. The first part is an attempt to provide a critical as well as a theoretical framework, including a wide range of concepts and theories relevant as to approaching the texts under study. As to the second part, it is completely devoted to a detailed and an in-depth analysis of the four selected novels, with regard to the theoretical framework introduced in the opening part.

Key words: Identity, diaspora, hybridity, Arab Anglophone women writers, post-colonialism, post-colonial feminism, western feminism, patriarchy.

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Introduction

Arab Anglophone diaspora literature could be generally defined as literary works and narratives produced by immigrant authors of Arab origins residing in various corners of the world, especially in English speaking countries such as the United States, England, Canada, and Australia to name just a few. Historically speaking, the origin of this literary genre dates back to nearly the turn of the twentieth century with the arrival of the first Arab immigrant authors to the States in particular Ameen Rihani and Gabran Khalil Gabran. There is a broad consensus that these writers are largely viewed as the early founders of this body of writings especially through their outstanding novels *The Book of Khaled* (1911) by Ameen Rihani and *The Prophet* (1923) by Gabran Khalil Gabran respectively. However, this literature, commonly known as immigrant's literature, minority literature, or fiction of exiles, has gained a wide currency in the last few decades as a newborn corpus in the literary diasporic scene and it has been informed and infused by a myriad of historical and political events since its beginning in the twentieth century.

It can be noted that the beginning of the emergence of this literature was somehow dominated by male Arab writers who were the first Arab immigrants to settle in the United States and other countries. Nevertheless, what one can clearly notice is the fact that this literature has been considerably marked by a significant contribution of Arab women Anglophone writers who have been able through their frequent literary productions to carve out a creative space of their own within the world literary scene in the last few decades. In other words, Arab women Anglophone writers are presumed to have recently outnumbered their male counterparts and this is largely reflected in the vast number of literary works produced by Arab women in the host countries, especially in the United States and England not to mention other European countries.

English productions by Arab women writers have dramatically and impressively increased in the last few decades. Writers like Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Alami, Leila Abulela, Soraya Antonius, Fadia Faqir, and others who either live in Britain, in the United States of America or between the United States /Britain and the Arab world, have garnered very interesting attention by many critics in different disciplines. These women writers, in particular, are of Arab descent by either being daughters of the first wave of Arab immigrants or who mostly became academics and/or intellectuals after they had migrated to United States of America or to Western Europe such as France, Spain, and Germany, to name but a few. These writers subsequently decided to produce their literary works in the languages of the host countries, especially English, given the fact that USA and England were the first destinations of huge number of Arab immigrants, not to mention the importance the English languages plays in widening scopes of readership across the globe. Interestingly, literary works written by Arab Anglophone women writers—mainly novels and short stories—have brought more recognition and visibility to the Arab woman, who have been misrepresented and depicted as homogenous, exotic, and submissive subjects by Western mainstream culture and by extension orientalist discourse.

Having left their country of origin either for economic, social, educational or political reasons, these writers have faced a host of challenges and difficulties especially the ones related to cultural assimilation and integration in the host country. Hence, most of these writers -if not all- interrogate and question the issues of identity, home, race, ethnicity, and gender in the host countries and their writings are particularly concerned with empowering Arab women's status through redressing the phallacies and stereotypes circulated by both orientalism and patriarchy .

Not only literary works written by this trend brought more recognition and visibility to the Arab woman in diaspora, but they also played a key role in making their voices heard in

the mainstream culture. In fact, the Arab Anglophone women writers have been concerned with confronting two major challenges which this thesis revolves around; the first is to subvert and redress stereotypical images presented in the Western dominant culture on Arabs in general and Arab women in particular and the second is to confront gender traditional roles embedded in their patriarchal homeland culture with the aim of establishing a bridge and a constant dialogue between cultures and races.

Equally important, the growing literary productions written by Arab women diaspora writers have attracted the interests and concerns of many scholars and critics from various disciplines and studies. Hence, this increasing interest in Arab women's writing have inevitably led to the growing body of scholarship concerned with Arab women's writings and the construction and negotiation of identities they have tackled throughout their literary works. Put differently, Arab women's writing became an interesting arena of research which led to the growing body of scholarship in the field the most prominent of which are :*Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature* (2008) by Lindsey Moore, Brinda Mehta's *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing* (2007), Anastasia Valassopoulos' *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (2007), Suzanne Gauch's *Liberating Shahrzad: Feminism, Postcolonialism and Islam* (2006), and *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (2009) edited by Layla Al Maleh.

These critical works provide examples of important critical engagements with Arab women's literature and examine their works in the light of contemporary debate over cultural identity, globalization, class, race, and gender. In different ways, these works foreground the study of Arab women's literature within an existing and on-going tradition of literary criticism. In fact, Arab women writers in America and England play significant roles not only in representing a very recent branch of literature drawing from the immigrant experience but

also in exposing and interrogating the politics surrounding the identity formation of the current diaspora community in both sides of the Atlantic who are racialized as ‘Arabs’.

Based on these fictions, some critics and scholars produced very important academic works pertaining to Arab diaspora writers. For instance, Geoffrey Nash, Layla Al Maleh and Rasheed El-Enany have generally tackled the Arab diaspora writers through a number of critical and academic works, while Anastasia Valassopoulos, Lindsey Moore and Amal Talaatal Abdelrazek have specifically focused on Arab women diasporic writers and their experiences in the diaspora world. The critical works produced by these writers have explored the in-depth the socio- and geopolitical cultural contexts that informed the productions of these writings and therefore they have contributed to the more visibility and recognition of the Arab women in diaspora space. Not only have these critics significantly examined the intersectionality of many backgrounds such as religion, ideological affiliations, class, gender, nationality, identity and diaspora in Arab women writers but they have also depicted the heterogeneity and the multi-layered identities of Arab women in a way that subverts the discursive stereotypical and homogeneous images that represent them as submissive and victims of a relentless Arab and Muslim patriarchal ideology.

Indeed, the Arab women’s Anglophone diaspora writings are very much noted for the heterogeneity and diversity of the characters they employ within their narratives as a strategic tool to counteract the misconceptions and monolithic attitudes held about Arab and Muslim women. In this regard, viewed as the cornerstones of the Arab Anglophone literature, Arab American, Arab British as well as Arab Australian women writers allegedly adopt two different strategies to shatter these misconceptions and misrepresentations about Arab women. On the one hand, Arab American women writers tend to employ literary and counteract strategies that aim to do away with the stereotypes and misconceptions held on Arabs in the American culture, while their Arab British and Arab Australian counterparts advocate, as we

will later see in this dissertation, a transcultural dialogue and cross-ethnic identification strategies as a means to bridge the gap between two worlds and cultures beyond categorization and binarism.

As mentioned above, Arab women Anglophone diaspora literature has been a very popular genre in recent years and, therefore, it has attracted many readers, as it establishes itself as an important source of knowledge in the West about the lives of Arab women. Unlike many researchers who have focused mainly on either Arab American women writings or Arab British writings, I have purposefully chosen to broaden the scope of research and investigation by fusing both writings and encompassing other Arab women diasporic writers belonging to different cultural and geographical backgrounds to expose their different diaspora experiences they have undergone in their exile.

Based on a corpus of four contemporary novels *Girls of Riyadh* (2008) by the Arab American writer Rajaa Alsanae, *West of the Jordan* (2003) by the Arab American Laila Halaby, *The Map of Love* (1999) by the Arab British novelist Ahdaf Soueif, and *Does my Head look Big in This?* by the Arab Australian writer Randa Abdel-fattah, this dissertation tends to explore different modalities of identity construction these authors have adopted to reflect the heterogeneity and diversity of Arab women in diaspora. Being highly concerned with contemporary Arab women Anglophone narratives, I have chosen to work on two Arab American writers, Rajae Al-sanae and Laila Halaby, added to an Arab British writer, Ahdaf Soueif and an Arab Australian writer Randa Abdel-fattah to reveal the different experiences Arab women have encountered in different diaspora space and locations. In brief, the criterion I have used to select the novels under studies is attributed to the fact that all these texts are contemporary and engage with issues that are relevant to the subject matter of this thesis such as identity construction, migration, gender, diaspora, cultural diversity, displacement and hybridity.

Regarding the works that have been conducted on Arab women Anglophone literature, one can notice that many researchers have adopted postcolonial theoretical background to approach this literature. In doing so, some of these works have employed resistance as a dominant strategy to counteract the Western discursive dominance over the East. This approach and argument is somehow flawed in the sense that it perpetuates the existing conflict between cultures and by extension between the East and the West. Even though this dissertation seems to adopt in a way or another the same strategy (resistance), it does not intend to keep up this growing gap and binaries between cultures and subjects. It rather seeks to maintain a perpetual dialogue and coexistence among Arab people in general and Arab women in particular *vis-a-vis* others regardless of their religious, race, class, gender and cultural backgrounds.

Hence, this thesis tackles this literature from quite different perspectives and, therefore, it adopts an eclectic approach that draws on postcolonial theories especially Homi Bhabha's concept of 'hybridity' and postcolonial transnational feminist approach that depends on the voices of different postcolonial feminists, mainly Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty, to analyse the role that Arab Anglophone women writers play in creating a path of consciousness for Arab women living in the borderlands. More importantly, the present research seeks to transcend the ethnic and race boundaries by adopting a transcultural dialogue and cross-cultural identifications as an alternative discourse to challenge the purism promoted by the existing essentialist and nationalist discourses of culture, race, and gender.

The following are relevant questions underlying and informing my research: Do all Arab women novelists share the same cultural values and use the same thematic concerns in their diaspora literature? How do their different localized experiences of immigration and settlement inform and shape their literary diasporic works? How do they cope with identity

labels and Western assumption and representation of Arabs? And more pointedly how do these writers theorize and portray Arab women diasporic identity?

In this thesis, I essentially employ a postcolonial-transnational feminist theory to examine the lives and the experiences of Arab women diaspora subjects and explore the challenges they face socially, culturally, politically and psychologically as postcolonial Third World women both in the homeland as well as in the host countries. The postcolonial feminist conceptual frame, I believe, serves as a relevant instrument and an analytical tool to study the lives of Arab women in the United States of America, United Kingdom and Australia in which the different issues of identity, hybridity, diaspora, and border-crossing are widely investigated. The major development within the postcolonial feminist discourse as a transnational paradigm has recognized the examination of the lives of diasporic, immigrant, and hybrid female subjects within a multiplicity of historical and global forces. The thesis accordingly examines the narratives produced by Arab women authors who are living in diaspora world, particularly in the United States of America, England, and Australia and, therefore, it sheds light on the distinct experiences and hardships Arab women encounter in the host countries as well in their homeland countries. More precisely, this thesis investigates the constant struggles and defiance their characters show in the face of both the conventional thought of their homeland culture and of the stereotypical images and fallacy propagated by the Western discursive practices.

Hence, this thesis is composed of two major parts and each part consists of four chapters. In brief, the first part of the thesis is aimed to serve as a theoretical ground paving for the whole research in terms of literary review, concepts, and relevant theories dealing with Arab diaspora in general and Arab women diaspora literature in particular. It seeks to provide a literary and theoretical framework for the thesis through a range of relevant concepts and theories employed to approach the texts under study. As for the second part of the thesis, it is

completely dedicated to the detailed and an in-depth analysis of the four selected novels under study with regard to the theoretical framework of the first part.

In this way, the first chapter is meant to study the Arab diaspora in the West starting from the twentieth century to the present day. Given that the present thesis focuses on the Arab women Anglophone literature in diaspora space, it is very important then to thoroughly cover the Arab immigration to the West so as to better understand the socioeconomic and the socio-political conditions that inform the experiences of the Arab immigrants in general and Arab women immigrant writers in particular. To be well equipped with this necessary information background on Arab women diasporic experiences and to pave the way to further investigate Arab women diasporic literature under analysis, the first opening chapter will trace the history of Arab immigration to three major receiving destinations, namely ,the United States of America, Europe, and Canada. That is to say, not only will this chapter examine the different waves of Arab immigrants and the driving forces behind their displacement in these three major destinations, but it will also explore their settlement patterns and the racialized politics they have undergone since their first arrival to the host countries. By doing so, we will significantly comprehend the heterogeneity existing in the literary texts produced by Arab women writers living in those societies either at the level of the themes tackled or the strategies adopted.

One of the significant arguments underlying this thesis is exploring the ways Arab women Anglophone writers have addressed the issue of race and ethnicity in their narratives and how they have redressed the stereotypes and the misrepresentations produced discursively by orientalism in general and Western feminist discourse in particular. Hence, the second chapter of the thesis will critically study the representation of Otherness in the orientalist Western discourse. It will examine mainly the representation/image of the female Other in the Eurocentric feminist narratives as well as uncover the pitfalls that Western feminist scholars

face while attempting-in their assumed mission - to rescue their sisters in the Third World societies. It accordingly consists of three sections; the first section will first provide a critical overview of the concept representation ranging from linguistics to literary and cultural studies perspectives. Then it will approach the concept of orientalism with the special focus on Said's perception and theorization of post-colonialism. The third section will draw on postcolonial feminists 'ground to examine Third World women's representation in Western feminist discourse with the aim of countering the fallacy that has been long held by Western feminists on Third World women as being homogenous and 'uncivilized other.'

As the present thesis swirls around a new-born corpus of literary works produced by Arab women living in different corners of the world, it is relatively important to thoroughly highlight this new burgeoning literature and trace its historical development in the literary scene. Thus, the third chapter will be devoted to study Arab women diaspora literature as a form of 'minor literature' added to other forms such as Asian diaspora literature, Afro-American literature and Latinos American literature, to name but just a few. This chapter will be accordingly divided into three relevant sections: The first will examine 'diaspora 'as a highly controversial concept taking into account the heated debate it has sparked among a number of scholars and theorists in a host of disciplines and areas . Then it will, in the second section , examine Arab diaspora writings in general, and the third section will be dedicated to particularly explore Arab women Diaspora writings with regard to its distinctive features as hybrid literary genre borrowing from both literary traditions and primarily concerned with issues pertaining to identity, displacement, race, gender, class.

It is indeed in the fourth chapter where the central concept of the thesis will be comprehensively discussed. The chapter will be consecrated to the discussion of identity through Arab diasporic perspectives. As the title of the thesis reveals, the concept identity forms the basis and the central pillar on which the present research is built and therefore the

last chapter of the first half of the thesis is divided into three sections. The first section will be preoccupied with the examination of the concept of identity as a complex and controversial topic in our modern times with special attention to the on-going debate over the concept among scholars and theorists from both modernist as well as postmodernist perspectives. It will be an attempt to elucidate how postmodern conceptualization of identity as being a social and historical product, has shaken and refuted the old certainties and fixities promoted by modernist views. The second section will relatively define the concept of hybridity in the light of a postmodern and diaspora perspectives which insist on 'hybridity' as an unavoidable alternative to the on-going and prolonged dispute among scholars and theorists over issues of belonging and identity. It will finally look at the 'third space' as a site for diasporic subjects in general and Arab women in particular to negotiate hybrid identity outside binarism of hegemonic forces of gender, class, and ethnicity and more importantly of race and patriarchy. It will examine the concept of 'third space' in the light of Bhabha's own perception and theory developed in his groundbreaking book, *The Location of Culture*.

As for the second half of the thesis, it is divided into four chapters and each chapter is consecrated to the close analysis and examination of one of the four novels under study. With this in mind, the first chapter will closely examine *Girls of Riyadh* (2007) written by Rajaa Alsanea, a Saudi Arabian writer who was born in Kuwait and has lived her life between Saudi Arabia and the United States, where she had attained a degree in endodontics. Even though Alsanea's journey in the United States may not be lengthy enough to be called a diasporic writer, I believe that her work under study is a pure transnational and diasporic work regarding many thematic features it addresses. In addition to the fact that Alsanea has encountered the Western culture through her stay in the United States, the novel was co-translated into English by the writer herself and Marilyn Booth, which once again strengthens its diasporic features.

Regarding the content, the novel under study depicts the lives of four Saudi girls: Sadeem, Gamrah, Mashael and Lamees. Mashael is half-Saudi and half-American. Alsanea exposes the journeys of these four female protagonists in their quest for love, happiness, and personal success in Saudi Arabian society. Except Lamees who manages to achieve success and make her dreams come true, the rest have experienced constant personal as well as professional failure due to the Saudi Arabian cultural and patriarchal mind-sets which spoil the girls' dreams and hope. Accordingly, the chapter will closely study this novel in the light of this on-going conflict between modernity and globalism represented by the four characters on one hand, and the traditions represented by the hegemonies of culture and patriarchy on the other hand. The first section will offer an overview of the historical as well as the cultural background of women's status in Saudi Arabia as a way to better understand their real motives and conditions.

Then, the second section will critically study the novel and reveal how Alsanea, speaking from the transnational feminist perspectives, addresses issues of gender bias, women's oppression, tribes, patriarchy, identity, and race. Drawing on post-colonial feminism, the section will display the extent to which Saudi women suffer under victimization by severe Saudian patriarchal mind-sets and to a lesser extent by Western orientalist misrepresentation. By tackling daringly issues that had been long held as taboo, Alsanea, as this section will show, destabilizes and directs severe criticism to the patriarchal paradigms and its deeply-rooted cultural mind-sets that violate Saudi women's basic rights. The author implicitly redresses the fallacies passed by discursive Western representation on Arab women in general and Saudi women in particular. The third section will equally explore the relentless struggles and constant resistance the four female protagonists display in the face of the Saudi conventional and traditional rules. It will also focus on their unstoppable struggles to reveal the social hypocrisy and double standards that are inherited in the Saudi society.

The second chapter will study another Arab American writer, Laila Halaby and namely her pioneering work *West of the Jordan*. Halaby's novel portrays women's constant quest for their lost identity between two worlds and cultures. *West of the Jordan* also depicts the stories and experiences of displacement and loss of four teenage protagonists' of Palestinian origin and yet their experiences are far different from the four protagonist of *Girls of Riyadh*. Each story these female protagonists narrate is the site where they reveal the multi-layered identities they adopt whether as Arab or Arab American women with regard to the multiplicity of their personal, cultural and economic conditions and circumstances they have undergone. Hence, this chapter will study the unheard stories told by Halaby in order to shed light on the heterogeneity of the experiences of Palestinian and Palestinian American women. The chapter will accordingly highlight the different negotiation processes followed by the four female protagonists throughout their quest for their lost identity both in the host country, America and the homeland, Palestine and Jordan.

This chapter will start with a brief overview of the novel *west of the Jordan* taking into account some reviews made by some critics. Then, it will study each character closely and elucidate how the four female cousins undergo constant displacement and loss both in the metropolis, America, or their homelands, Palestine and Jordan. It will further highlight the negotiation processes they have experienced at the intersection between two sides and cultures. Given that she is the only cousin who has stayed in Palestine, Mawal's experience is the first to be depicted as a character that has empowered the women of her village and make their voices heard through the storytelling strategies. Then, Soraya's and Khadija's stories will be examined with regard to their sense of loss and displacement in the American context. Hala will be the last character to be studied as she is the only character who manages to find a hybrid space of hers and makes a balance in the third space after long journeys of struggles and challenges between two cultures.

The third chapter will be devoted to the examination of *Map of love* and it will start where the previous novel *West of Jordan* ends. Though Halaby adopts resistance as a literary strategy by which her three characters challenge the hegemonies and purism of cultures, she ends up promoting through her character Hala, a transcultural attitude as an alternative to the loss and displacement one may undergo. Similarly, *Map of Love*, a novel written by an Arab British novelist, Ahdaf Soueif in 1997, adopts a transnational and hybrid discourse that recognizes and welcomes all cultures beyond any social or cultural hierarchies. Hence, this chapter will examine how the writer celebrates hybridity as fusion of different cultural backgrounds that allows the selfhood to coexist with the other in her novel. It will be concerned with showing how Soueif promotes dialogue among her Arab, British and American characters resulting in a full recognition of one's culture and that of the other, which gave birth to a self-identity that flows from the fusion of values and ways of life and styles from both cultures through an act of transculturality. Accordingly, after giving some notes on the novel in the introduction, the chapter will focus on the protagonists Anna and Amal and examine their pivotal roles in establishing constant dialogues between the British culture and the Arab culture; then it will explore how both the 'veil' and 'harem' can act as liberating forces within patriarchy values.

The last chapter will be dedicated to deal with *Does my Head Look Big in This?*, a novel by an Arab-Australian writer Randa Abdel-fattah. It was her debut novel written in 2006 and it depicts a journey of a sixteen-year-old g Australian-Palestinian girl called, Amal, who decides to wear the veil in spite of the strong refusal and the unwelcoming reactions she has received from different people including her parents. The first section of the chapter will explore Amal's decision to wear the veil and its concomitant repercussions on Amal's personal and social life. The second section will accordingly explore Amal's persevering spirit and sense of challenges to negotiate and forge her fluid and hybrid identity as a Muslim-

Australian girl in spite of the biased attitudes and othering process she has encountered in Australian milieu.

This dissertation, therefore, studies contemporary Arab women diasporic writers and their de-construction of essentialized frameworks of culture, gender, and ethnicity. Not only have these selected writers provided chance for their hybrid characters to expose the invisibility and otherness they have encountered, but also to assert their diverse and heterogeneous experiences both in the host as well as in the homeland countries. With this in mind, this research seeks to fill the critical gap by providing reflections on these aforementioned concerns and issues.

PART ONE:

**CONTEXTUALIZING ANGLOPHONE ARAB WOMEN
WRITINGS: FROM HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL
CONTEXT TO LITERARY TEXT**

1. Review of Arab Diaspora in the West

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that literature of all genres serves as a mirror for a given society in the sense that it reflects not only a considerable amount of truth, but also the social context of the society in which it is produced. In this way, it is beyond the bound of possibility to get engaged in the discussion of Arab diaspora literature without digging deep into the history of Arab immigration to the West to gain insight into the multiple historical and social forces that have informed their experiences as immigrants in many western countries. To put it differently, the nature of the Anglophone diasporic literature written by women authors cannot be adequately approached and grasped if we do not provide historical accounts of their lived experiences as immigrants in their western host countries. Accordingly, this chapter will map out the socio-political aspects of the immigration process and settlement experiences of the Arab communities mainly in the United States of America, Europe, and Canada. It will be mainly concerned to dwell upon the historical development of Arab immigrants and their formation in the West including, Arab American community, Arab European community, and Arab Canadian community.

a- The Arab American Community:

Generally speaking, Arab Americans have quite a long history. Along with its other diverse cultural, religious, and ethnic minority groups, Arabs constitute a sizeable minority population in the United States of America today. Despite the growth of this population within the States and the growing interest in Arabs on the international political scene, research and ethnic studies debate on Arab Americans remain remarkably scarce due to the heterogeneity of this group as well as the widespread misconceptions about this category of immigrants. Therefore, the present section attempts to map out the historical development and

backgrounds of Arabs within the United States of America and, by extension, the two major waves of Arab immigrants to the United States with special focus on the sociopolitical and economic driving forces that have instigated their immigration.

Historically speaking, Arabs' early existence and encounter with America allegedly dates back to the first journeys of explorations held by Christopher Columbus. Long before the period of the great migration, there had been interaction between the Arab and the American world in the 15th century. That is, when Christopher Columbus first set out his trip to India taking a western route, he had among his companions an Arabic interpreter called Louis de Torres, who was allegedly believed to have Arab roots, namely Moroccan origins. Gregory Orfalea argues that Arab migration to America began a long time ago. Indeed, some traces would attest to "an ancient North African- particularly Libyan presence on the American soil long before Columbus. Later on, in 1492, a Spanish Arab translator called Louis de Torre accompanied Columbus on his traverse to America and some Moroccan slaves were among the first explorers to set foot in the new world."¹

While the history of the Arab immigrants to the United States remains somehow uncertain regarding the controversy it has stirred among many scholars and historians, modern scholars and historians have emphasized that Arab immigrants came to the States in two waves. Michael Suleiman, for instance, argues that "there have been two major waves of Arab immigration to North America. The first lasted from the 1870s to World War II and the second from World War II to the present day²." In short, it is important to mention that both waves differ significantly in a myriad of ways regarding a set of aspects including cultural, political, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds. Hence, the two waves will be

¹ Orfalea Gregory, *The Arab Americans: A history* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2006), p.44.

² Michael W.Suleiman, "Introduction the Arab Immigrant Experience," in *Arabs in America: Building a new Future*, ed. Michael W.Suleiman (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999), p.1.

extensively discussed in detail in order to provide a historical and contextual backdrop to the lives and experiences of Arab American migrants in general and Arab American women migrants in particular.

In fact, striving to provide an accurate documentation of the numbers of the first wave of the Arab immigration to North America would be a sort of futile task because, Suleiman explains:

U.S and Canada immigration officials have at different times used different classification schemes. Until 1899 in the United States, for instance, immigration statistics lumped the Arabs with Greeks, Armenians, and Turks. For this and other reasons, only estimates can be provided.¹

Hence, the classification system used by immigrant officials which was not based on accurate criteria could not adequately be applied to Arabs who were conflated with other races and ethnicities. Equally important, national borders of Arab nations and political leadership in the Arab world were unstable and different in that period compared to the present day circumstances. Prior to the end of World War I, Turkey under the Ottoman Empire controlled Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, much of the Arabian Peninsula and much of North Africa. Therefore, those Arabs who immigrated to the United States of America before the end of World War I were classified as Turks and not Arabs. By 1899, immigrant officials realized that some of these Ottman were Syrian and they added the classification of Syrian. At that time, Greater Syria included present day Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon².

¹ Ibid., p. 2.

² Alixa Naff, *Becoming American. The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1993), p. 29.

In this way, the first wave of Arab migration to the United States dates back to the end of the 19th century and was mainly constituted by people from Great Syria, a province of the Ottoman Empire including today's Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine. These Arab immigrants were mainly Christians escaping from the Ottoman's political and economic oppression and from the periodic famines, insect blights, and the droughts affecting the area¹. Besides, most of these travellers, Suleiman avers, "were mainly poor, uneducated, and illiterate in any language. They were not trained for a particular profession. As unskilled workers, after they learned the rudiments of the English language, they could work in factories and mines."²

In the same vein, Gualtieri points out that: "they could be at once Ottomans, Syrians, Zahalnis (residents of Zahle), Druze, and Maronites, Damascene Sunnis, Greek Orthodox from Beirut, Jews from Aleppo, and many other combinations³. Among them, there were many women, following their husbands or travelling alone to seek a better life in the United States. Interestingly, first-wave migrants arrived by boat on Ellis Island and then moved to the Northeast and Midwest; they usually worked as peddlers, opened family businesses or went to work in factories. Some of them never reached America, as in the case of the 1500 Arabs who died after the shipwreck of the Titanic."⁴

It is also important to mention that these immigrants were viewed as sojourners because their initial driving forces were mainly economic. Thus, they hoped to earn as much money as possible in the shortest amount of time in order to return to their homes wealthier and prouder. In fact, they did not intend to live in America but considered it as transient home until the

¹ Orfalea Gregory, *The Arab Americans: A history* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2006), p. 51.

² Michael W. Suleiman, "Introduction the Arab Immigrant Experience," p. 3.

³ Sarah Gualtieri, *Between Arab and White. Race and Ethnicity in the Early Syrian American Diaspora* (Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2009), p.155.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp.50-51.

situation in the Middle East improved and they could return home safe. Researchers, in this regard, argue that the first wave of immigrants came to this country without the idea of making it their permanent home because, according to Suleiman, “they were only temporarily away from home”¹. In other words, they were mainly concerned with working for a short period of time to collect some wealth and then return to their country of origin where they would share their newly acquired wealth with their own families and gain some prestige.

Being highly influenced by the facilities of the American life style resulted from their supposedly short and transient stay, these immigrants came to change their old perspectives vis-à-vis their host country as well as their homeland. That is, when they returned back home for a short visit, they vastly praised and idealized social, political, and economic life in the United States and thus, unintentionally promoted immigration to the United States of America among their families and people. Consequently, the immigration by the end of the 19th century became a family movement.² However, those who did not return did the same thing by means of writing letters of praise and sending money to their families in the homeland country. Other factors that stimulated and facilitated immigration were tourists, steamship agents, and missionaries.³

Provided that these immigrants were mostly uneducated and had little knowledge of English, they could not find other jobs than peddling and free jobs that does not require professional training and knowledge. That is, peddling along with other free jobs were primarily their source for income. This earliest group was referred to as, Naff puts it, “pack peddlers because they found in it a quick way of gaining a lot of money and returning to their

¹ Michael W.Suleiman, “Introduction the Arab Immigrant Experience”, p. 4.

² Phillip Hitti, *The Syrians in America* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923), p.23.

³ Ibid.

home lands to purchase more land, marry and open up a new business”¹. Hence, in the USA, Naff explains:

Peddlers settled around a supplier, usually from their village in Lebanon; equipped with two or three suitcases each, then peddled merchandise across towns and cities. These peddlers could be compared with mobile department stores selling clothing, linens, toweling, jewelry, laces, icons, frames, and rosaries².

Peddling, therefore, facilitated the assimilation of these early immigrants because it forced them to learn English and to see the country and experience its way of life. Here, Naff adds “peddling networks provided opportunities for thousands of newcomers, but more significantly, it spared the early immigrants from a ‘ghetto mentality’”.³ However, as time went by, peddling was no longer a reliable source of money as it “declined as an immigrant occupation by 1930.”⁴ As a result, workers, according to Naff, started to look for jobs in factories and mills and many joined the assembly line but opened their own business managed by their wives and children. They were attracted by industry’s payment of five dollars for an eight-hour day, which was initiated during World War I by Ford Motors Company⁵.

By World War I, official statistics show that there were around 100,000 Arab-speaking immigrants.⁶ Hence, Arab immigrants established their own Eastern churches, an Arabic language press, and voluntary associations that reflected traditional identity makers and perpetuated the traditional community fragmentation.⁷ According to Naff, the most influential

¹ Alixa Naff, *Becoming American*, p.96.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p.26.

⁴ Ibid., p.30.

⁵ Ibid., p.31 .

⁶ Ibid., p.24.

⁷ Ibid., p.31.

factor in shaping their identities were familial and religious affiliations and these prevailed in the Arabic language press and in the formation of clubs and societies.¹

Later, particularly at the beginning of the 20th century, the first Arabic literary societies and journals were established. In 1920, Kahlil Gibran and Ameen Rihani, together with other Arab intellectuals, founded the Al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya (The Pen League) and the so-called Mahjar School of Arab-American writing. Most of the works produced in this period were written in Arabic or English with the intention of bridging the distance that separated the Arab from the American community. The Mahjar literature will be adequately highlighted in Chapter three.

It should be noted, however, that the Arab immigration to the US halted between 1920 and 1940 due to the legal restrictions and worldwide economic crisis, not to mention the outbreak of the World War II. Interestingly, the second wave of Arab immigration to the United States occurred right at the end of the World War II and it was relatively different from the first wave regarding many aspects. Religious and educational backgrounds can be seen as the first predominantly distinctive feature existing between the first and the second waves. Souleiman, for instance, argues that “unlike the first wave which was predominantly Christian from Mount Lebanon, the newer immigrants or rather the second wave were a mixture of educated Muslim and Christian Arabs and were highly skilled, and around 45 percent were woman.”²

Another striking distinctive feature is that many of these newcomers came to escape political conflicts and persecutions within the homeland like in the case of Palestinians who

¹ Ibid., p.25.

² Michael Suleiman, *Arabs in America*, p.5.

were refugees and exiles escaping from wars in Yemen and Lebanon¹ , not to mention the Isreal-Palestine war. Among these immigrants, there were also others coming from Syria, Egypt, Iraq and many other Arab countries whose main reason for immigrating was to seek better political and social conditions and in particular the ‘freedom of expression denied at home’.

In this respect, Suleiman states that “many of these immigrants were motivated by the desire to find a democratic haven where they would enjoy freedom without political or economic harassment.”²In fact, the second wave of Arab speaking immigrants had the same aspirations as the other immigrant groups arriving to the United States of America to improve their living conditions and to find better opportunities for themselves and for their families. Hence, Suleiman adds here “these immigrants were profoundly influenced by the democracy to which they had been exposed through the interaction with the United States.”³

In spite of the economic success and wealth the Arab immigrants achieved during their stay, they were inevitably susceptible to discriminations and differential treatments on the basis of their race which subsequently deferred their integration process. Suleiman explains here that “many of these individuals have faced difficulties in attaining their positions because they were of Arab background.”⁴ Put differently, the second wave of immigrants came to the States in an important milestone during which the stereotypical and the biased representations of Islam and the Arab world began to be increasingly diffused in the media to the point of destroying reputation and images of Islam and Arab immigrants in the United States. This

¹ The Yemani war took place between 1962-1970 and the Lebanese civil war lasted 15 years from 1975 to 1990.

² Ibid., p.9.

³ Ibid., p.10.

⁴ Ibid., p.16.

situation hardened the Arabs status to the extent that ‘some’, to use Suleiman’s phrase, “have found it useful to de-emphasize or deny that background to get or maintain their positions.”¹

It is of paramount importance to mention that in this period new writers and critics belonging to minority ethnic and racial groups, under the influence of Civil Rights Movement,² started to gain visibility in the body of the new emerging American ethnic literature. Few of them, however, were of Arab origins, and Arab-American literature started to gain recognition only around the 1980s when the anthology *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (1988) edited by Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa was published. Being first of its kind, this anthology represents a turning point in the history of Arab-American literature. In this sense, Lisa Suhair Majaj points out:

This collection asserted the existence and presence of Arab-American writers, introduced Arab-American poets to a new audience, created a sense of an Arab-American literary community, and made it possible for authors to write not as anomalies but as Arab-Americans, thereby laying down the page upon which the century-long story of Arab-American literature could begin to be told .And, significantly, the collection sought to leaven nostalgia with self-critique, juxtaposing reclamation with incisive cultural criticism³.

This anthology was followed by another collection of essays called *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab Canadian Feminists*, edited by Joanna

¹ Ibid.

² Civil rights movement refers to a struggle for social justice that took place mainly during the 1950s and 1960s for blacks to gain equal rights under the law in the United States. The Civil War had officially abolished slavery, but it didn’t end discrimination against blacks; they continued to endure the devastating effects of racism, especially in the South. By the mid-20th century, African Americans had had more than enough of prejudice and violence against them. They, along with many whites, mobilized and began an unprecedented fight for equality that spanned two decades.

³ Lisa Suhair Majaj, “ Arab-American Literature :Origins and Developments”, *American Studies Journal* 52, 2008 , retrieved on October 23rd , 2016 from <http://www.asjournal.org/archive/52/150.html>.

Kadi. As the subtitle suggests, this anthology, besides embracing a feminist ideology, intended to be transcultural and transracial and wanted to offer “landmarks, signposts, names, and directions not only for Arab-American and Arab-Canadian communities but for other communities of color and our allies.”¹

Speaking of the growing visibility of Arabs within the United States, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 represents a crucial moment in Arab-American history during which Arabs became targets of more discrimination and racism. This is largely reflected in the repercussions of The Patriot Act,² signed by President George W. Bush on October 26th, 2001, supporting “indefinite detention; searches, seizures and wiretapping, and guilt by association,”³ which led to the marginalization and stigmatization of the Arabs within the States. The feelings of fear, anger, and vulnerability circulating in the Arab-American community in the post-9/11 period are condensed in “First Writing Since,” written by an Arab-American poet, Suhair Hammad. The following excerpt relevantly conveys the emotional turmoil and collective hysteria following the terrorist attack on 9/11:

fire in the city air and I feared for my sister’s life in a way never / before. And then,
and now, I fear for the rest of us. / (...) one more person asks me if I knew the
hijackers. / One more motherfucker asks me what navy my brother is in. / one more
person assumes no Arabs or Muslims were killed. / One more person assumes they

¹ Kadi Joanna, ed., *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab Canadian Feminists* (Boston: South End Press, 1994), p. xvii.

² The USA PATRIOT ACT is an act of congress that was signed into law by President George W. Bush on October 26, 2001. Its title is a ten-letter acronym that stands for Uniting and Strengthening America by Providing Appropriate Tools Required to Intercept and Obstruct Terrorism.

³ Gregory Orfalea, *The Arab Americans*, p. 312.

know me, or that i represent a people. / Or that a people represent an evil. / Or that evil is as simple as a flag and words on a page¹.

As a response to this, the new wave together with the descendants of the early Arab immigrants founded a vast number of associations that deals with their issues and concerns, the most prominent of which are: Association of the Arab American University Graduates (AAUG), the American –Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), and the National Association of Arab-Americans (NAAA). In this respect, Suleiman states that “for the politically active members of this segment the emphasis is not on their ethnicity, but on their Americanism, unlike the recent arrivals who felt themselves to be an ethnic community subjected to ‘negative and hostile propaganda and stereotyping.’”²

Regarding the endurances and hardships Arab immigrants in general underwent throughout their presence in the United States, it should be mentioned that Arab women immigrants in particular faced more difficulties and challenges than their men counterparts. In addition to the frequent discriminations and maltreatments they received as Arabs, Arab women were equally oppressed and ill-treated by their homeland patriarchal mindsets. Though they had spent a great deal of time in the United States and they were exposed to its modern liberal values, Arab men immigrants transported the patriarchal values with them and therefore exerted their power over women accordingly. In this respect, Souleiman furthermore asserts that:

Arab American women have had more problems than their male counterparts in defining an acceptable or comfortable identity. The problem is multifaceted and affects different sectors differently. Women who have come from the most traditional

¹ Suheir Hammad, “First Writing Since” In *Zaatar Diva* Hammad Suheir.ed (New York: Cypher Books, 2005), pp.98-102.

² Michael Suleiman, *Arabs in America*, p.60.

countries of the Arab world have experienced a greater restriction of their freedom in the United States. This is primarily the result of an inability on the part of traditional husbands, fathers, and brothers to deal with the nearly complete freedom accorded to women in American society.¹

Hence, Arab women of the early generation did not adjust adequately to the American customs and lifestyles because they were either forced, as discussed above, by patriarchy or they did it willingly as some of them wanted to preserve their own homeland traditions and cultural heritage. On the contrary, Arab teenage girls confronted some challenges and difficulties as they were confused between the traditional practices, mainly the patriarchal ones which usually, if not always, limit their freedom and the freedom offered by the host country. That is, they showed great disapproval to these traditional practices and therefore they worked hard to broaden their rights and better their status and life within the United States. In this respect, Suleiman argues that “they condemn and repudiate any definition of their gender roles by Arab American men and how they should behave in the new land. They do not wish to be the conveyers and transmitters of tradition and culture –at least not these are defined by men or as they prevail in the homeland.”²

a- The Arab Canadian Community:

Similarly, the Arab Canadian immigrants have almost the same history with that of the Arab American immigrants regarding the economic and sociopolitical conditions they went through. However, it is very important to state at the beginning that there has been dearth of reliable sources and studies dealing with Arabs in Canada though the number of Arab immigrants has increased considerably in the last few decades. This scarcity is partly attributed to, according to Ibrahim Hayani, the “relatively small size of this population in

¹ Ibid., p.14.

² Ibid., p.14.

Canada.” There is also, he adds, “the distinct possibility that Arabs have been ignored because they are perceived to be ‘too different’, ‘too problematic’, or just plain ‘alien.’”¹

Hence, the little available literature in the field reinforces the previous idea that the history of the Arab-Canadian community is in many ways parallel to that of Arab American one with regard to their political, economic and social adversities in their country of origin as well as the racialized politics they faced in the host country. Accordingly, this section will trace back the existence of Arab immigrants in Canada vis-à-vis these sociopolitical and economic conditions they experienced; it will also explore the challenges they faced in their assimilation and integration process into the Canadian society.

The history of Arabs in Canada can be divided into several periods as it will be discussed in this section. Most scholars and historians who studied Arab immigrants in Canada mention that the first wave started around the end of the 19th century. Abu Laban, for instance, argues that “Arab immigration to Canada began in 1882, with the arrival to Montreal of reportedly the first Arab, Abraham Bounadere, a native of Zahleh in present-day Lebanon.”² Abraham Bounadere and other first adventurous immigrants came to Canada from ‘Great Syria’ and they were predominantly Christians, who left their homelands first and foremost for socioeconomic reasons. In this context, Ibrahim Hayani contends:

At that time, only the very adventurous few, mostly Lebanese and Syrian Christians, left home and kin to seek their fortune in distant lands. Most went to the United States, but a few made it to Canada.³

¹ Ibrahim Hayani, “Arabs in Canada: Assimilation or Integration?,” in *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, ed Suleiman Michael (Philadelphia: temple university press, 1999), p.284.

² Abu-Laban Bah, *An olive branch on the family tree: The Arabs in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1980), p.1.

³ Ibrahim Hayani, “Arabs in Canada”, p.284.

What is at issue here is that the number of early Arab immigrants in Canada was a diminutive figure compared with their early Arab American immigrants' counterparts. This is chiefly due to the restrictive and strict immigration policies undertaken by the Canadian government and immigration officials upon Arab immigrants. In other words, people of Arab descent were not wholeheartedly welcome within Canada because of the racialized politics adopted by Canadian governments against non-white race especially against Arabs. Ibrahim further remarks here:

In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the salient view among most English Canadians was that the values and way of life of the white race were superior to all others, especially as these manifested themselves in British institutions. Preference was therefore given to British and American immigrants, followed by immigrants from western and northern Europe and then by those from the rest of Europe. Asians and blacks were the least preferred of all immigrants and were allowed in only when there was a demonstrated need for their labor.¹

This race-based policies and classifications tended not only to preserve the ethnic purity and superiority of the West, but also to essentialize Arabs as 'other' and therefore maintain power over them .To restrict immigration process on the part of Arabs and other inferior non-white race, the Reverend James S.Woodworth stated that "The Oriental (Chinese, Japanese, and East Indians –Hindus- cannot be assimilated."² He further asserted that the "Levantine Races (Syrians, Lebanese, Armenians, Greeks, Turks, and Persians – probably Assyrian Christians)constitute one of the least desirable classes of our immigrants."³ Hence, Arabs access to immigration was very hard –if not impossible - under these biased policies and conditions imposed by Canadian officials.

¹ Ibid., p.285.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

The end of the Second World War, however, marked a turning point in the history of Arabs in Canada regarding the considerable change it brought about. After its entry into the United Nations in 1945, Canadian government started reconsidering and reviewing its old biased immigration policies and restrictions against non-white race with the aim to allow more immigrants of different races to enter and settle in Canada. Hence, they ended up inaugurating very important decisions and policies that were by all means promising for non-white immigrants, particularly for Arabs.

The Immigration Act of 1953 was, among other important acts, the first promising decision undertaken by the Canadian government that accorded many denied rights for immigrants of Arab descent. According to Ibrahim, this act dissolved a number of the previous discriminatory procedures. Hence, all immigrants from certain Middle Eastern countries came to be categorized with Europeans rather than Asians and were granted more rights and liberal rules of sponsorship by relatives who were Canadian residents. It also became possible for visitors to Canada to apply for landed immigrant status.¹ More importantly, Canadian government signed another compelling act in 1967 which was “further amended to abolish all discrimination based on national origin” adds Ibrahim. He further argues that this act established three categories of applicants:

- 1- Sponsored applicants who were essentially dependents or close relatives of Canadian residents.
- 2- Independent applicants who were to be assessed on a point system based on such objective criteria as language skills (English and/or French),education ,training, and age

¹ Ibid., p.285.

3- Refugees who are admitted on the basis of humanitarian grounds, usually to facilitate escape from political persecution or violence.¹

Following these amended laws, the number of Arab immigrants dramatically increased in Canada, giving birth to the second wave of immigrants. Put it differently, the above-mentioned privileges and rights granted by these reformed and amended laws largely facilitated the immigration process for a number of Arabs of different countries including Syria, Egypt, Palestine, Lebanon, Iraq, to name just a few. These immigrants found their solace in immigration to escape the many political persecutions and tension in the region at that time along with the socioeconomic hardships they experienced under dictatorial regimes of their countries of origin.

Interestingly, the second wave of Arab immigrants is greatly different from the first wave in terms of a number of aspects pertaining to quantity, countries of origin and economic forces. Abu-Laban argues that:

There are two distinctive periods of Arab Immigration to Canada which are labelled as the ‘pioneer wave’ and the ‘new wave’ respectively. For example, the new wave of Arab immigration to Canada is different from the pioneer wave not only in terms of volume but also in terms of countries of origin of the immigrants and the immigrants’ social, economic, political, and educational characteristics. Additionally, over the last ten to fifteen years new-wave Arab immigrants have included two types that did not figure prominently in the pioneer wave: refugees and investors/entrepreneurs.²

According to immigration statistics, a large wave of Arab immigrants arrived between 1981 and 1992, “which accounts for over 51 per cent of the total” of immigrants in Quebec

¹ Ibid.

² Abu-Laban Baha, “Arabs”, in *Encyclopedia of Canada’s Peoples*, P. R. Magocsi .ed, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press,1999), p.203.

“followed by Ontario at 37 per cent, Alberta at 5 per cent and British Columbia and Nova Scotia at 2 per cent each.”¹The Arab immigrants came from various countries and had numerous reasons for immigration to Canada. They brought along with them a rich cultural and intellectual heritage in terms of values, oral traditions, and practices.

In this sense, it is fair to state that post World War II was certainly a flourishing period at many ways to many Arab immigrants regarding the social tranquility and economic prosperity they achieved in Canada. Hence, “Canadian Egyptians are, in pursuant to Ibrahim ‘study, an example of how “push factors” determine the origin, religion, and socioeconomic profile of Arabs who immigrate to Canada.”² Speaking of the Egyptian immigrants, Ibrahim explains:

Starting in the mid-1950s, there was a significant upsurge in the number of Arab immigrants from Egypt. Until 1954, their number in Canada was relatively insignificant, but within a period of less than twenty years (1956 to 1974), more than 17,000 Arab immigrants who came to Canada gave Egypt as their country of origin. Today, Egyptians are second only to the Lebanese in making up the Arab-Canadian population.³

Interestingly, the fact that Egyptians ranked first in the above mentioned period among their other Arab counterparts may explain the utter political chaos and conflicts Egypt witnessed during its transitional period at that time. To put it differently, “the Egyptian immigrants of the late 1950s and the 1960s were largely Copts and middle-class Muslims who were disaffected with the socialist transformation of their country under president Jamal Abdel-Nasser” says Ibrahim. Hence, Egyptian immigrants left their country and came to

¹ Ibid., p.206.

² Ibrahim Hayani, “Arabs in Canada,” p.286.

³ Ibid., p.286.

Canada to escape the miserable living conditions as well as to seek a better life in terms of freedom and rights. The same was true for immigrants from other Arab countries including Palestine, Syria, Somalia, Tunisia, Morocco, to mention just a few.

In addition to facilitating and welcoming more Arab immigrants in Canada, the multicultural policies implemented by Canadian governments after the second World War paved the way later for the emergence of a body of literary works written especially in French by writers of Arab origins and other ethnic communities. Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx aver that “the 1980s and 1990s was very momentous as it witnessed the explosion of Québécois literature written in French by authors of immigrant origins and its subsequent recognition by literary critics and scholars.”¹

In fact, Arab-Canadian writers were dynamic and creative in a number of areas and interests. Not only were they poets, novelists, and playwrights, but they also worked as editors in different publishing institutions. Besides, their literary work covers a wide range of literary genres including drama, poetry, fiction, nonfiction, and essay writing. In *Voices in the Desert: An Anthology of Arabic-Canadian Women Writers*, Elizabeth Dahab contends that:

There exists in Canada a literature that was born in the 1970s at the hands of first generation Canadians of Arabic descent. . . it was produced in all genres and covers styles ranging from the realist to the post-modernist. It is written in French, English and Arabic.²

It should be stated, however, that most literature produced at that time was in French, while Arabic was their second choice and English was their third choice. Hence, Dahab explains that:

¹ Susan Ireland and Patrice J. Proulx, eds, *Textualizing the Immigrant Experience in Contemporary Québec* (Westport: Praeger, 2004), p.2.

² Elizabeth Dahab, *Voices in the Desert: An Anthology of Arabic-Canadian Women Writers* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002), pp.7-8.

Most Arab-Canadian writing between 1963 and 1974 was Francophone, produced by Arab-Québécois. They write plays or documentaries for Radio-Canada or Radio-Quebec; they are radio announcers, film script writers (Nadia Ghalem), stage-directors (Mona Latif Ghattas) or write for Les Grands Ballets Canadiens (Anne Marie Alonzo). They contribute to newspapers, literary magazines and reviews [...] At least five of them teach in some capacity at L'université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM).¹

In spite of the surge of literary production produced by Arab-Canadian writers, it received little attention among scholars and academics. The tragic event of 9/11 marked a turning point for many Arab-Canadian writers. Like their Arab-American counterparts, Arab-Canadians suffered from consequences of the terrorist attacks in terms of social exposure and vulnerability. Hence, they have used literature as a medium to openly contest the denigrating propaganda against Arabs and Arabness that started to circulate in Canada after these events. Drawing on their daily experiences and stories, these writers contributed to the birth of a new literature that combines both the cultural specificity of their homeland as aspects of the host country.

It can be concluded that Arab Canadians have nearly undergone the same social, economic and cultural challenges and hardships that Arabs in the USA have gone through. They have become aware that through their silence they had allowed their culture to be maligned and marginalized. Hence, they have come to a conclusion that it is by fighting for their rights that they and their children can make a better contribution to the society that has adopted them and that has become their new home.²

¹ Ibid., p.8.

b- Arab European Community:

Arabs had a deep history within Europe that dates back roughly to the 8th century particularly to early Islamic conquests carried out by a number of Arab leaders in different parts of Europe. Some historians and scholars, however, argue that the Arabs' first encounter with Europe had long predated Islam. Indeed, attempting to cover this topic entirely in one section will be futile taking into consideration its complex and thorny nature. Hence, this section will tackle briefly the first encounter of Arabs within Europe in post-Islamic era, at the same time it will explore the Arabs immigration process into Europe in modern age with regard to the socio-political and economic context of both the Arab sending countries and Europe receiving countries especially after the Second World War.

As it is commonly known, Arabs' presence in Europe began early in the 8th century during which Arab conquered the Iberian Peninsula, including what is now called Spain and Portugal .Other Arabs occupied the Italian island Sicily in the 9th century. In 827, Ziyâdat Allah I (817-838), the semi-independent Aghlabid ruler of Ifriqiya (comprising eastern Algeria, Tunisia, and Tripolitania), mounted an expedition that succeeded in establishing a long term foothold on the island.¹From their base in Mazara, on the west coast, taken in 827, the Muslim force of ten thousand men moved forward.² Palermo fell in 831, Messina in 843, Enna in 859, and the Island was thereafter under effective Muslim control.¹ The island was subsequently governed by the Muslim force for about two hundred years, before the Normans began to take control of the island in the 11th century, during which

¹ Udovitch Abraham L., "Islamic Sicily", in *Dictionary of the Middle Ages*. Strayer ,J.R. ed, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons,1980) ,p.261.

² James Breckenridge D., "The Two Sicilies", in *Islam and the Medieval West*, Stanely Ferber .ed, (Bringhamton: State University of New York, 1975), p.43.

“Roger I succeeded in capturing Messina, and then in 1072 Palermo fell, and in the course of the next twenty years the entire island came under secure Norman control.”²

Arab-speaking Muslim communities survived in Sicily for more than two centuries after the Norman Conquest. That is, the presence of Muslims in Sicily informed many of its cultural and civilizational aspects at different levels. Besides, the Norman princes attracted to their courts the Arab intellectuals and scholars such as the geographer Al-Idrisi, the dialectician Fakhr al-Din Al-Razi, poets and linguists such as Abd ar-Rahmân of Trapani, Ibn al-Birr, and el-Makkî. Very few buildings but numerous objects, textual products, and names of places attest to the rich and valuable historical, linguistic, and cultural presence of the Arabs in Sicily.³

Moreover, Arabs had a significant impact on European ‘civilizational and cultural features at different ways. Their presence in the 9th century⁴ brought a significant change to its inhabitants in the sense that Arabs brought about economic and social growth to Europe and particularly to Sicily. In this respect, Bernard Louis states:

The Arabs in Sicily applied much the same principles of governments as in the conquered lands of the East, and effected an important social change in the tenure and the distribution of land. The survival of many Arab place names shows the intensity of Arab colonization – The many Arabic words in the Sicilian dialect testify to their interest in agriculture. The Arabs brought to Sicily oranges, mulberries, sugarcane, date-palms, and cotton. They extended cultivation by careful irrigation, and to this

¹ Ibid.

² Udovitch Abraham L., “Islamic Sicily,” p.26.

³ Sibylle Mazot, “Fatimid Influences in Sicily and Southern Italy,” in *Islam Art and Architecture*, eds, Markus Hattstein and Peter Delius (Hagen: Könemann, 2004), p. 158.

⁴ For a more comprehensive account on the historical presence of Arabs in Sicily and Southern Italy, see Bernard Louis (2002), and Gabrieli and Scerrato (1979).

day, many fountains in Sicily, and especially in Palermo, still have easily recognizably Arab names.¹

However, in more modern phase, Arabs presence in Europe was highly attributed to drivers pertaining to colonialism and globalization. Indeed Arabs' encounter with Europe dates back to the World War I during which France was in a great need of labour force and therefore brought a number of Algerians and Moroccans to serve in its army and farms. Kozakowsk, for instance, argues that "World War I and post-war reconstruction led to unprecedented numbers of migrants in France,"² and he adds that "the Algerian community numbered perhaps 4,000 in all of metropolitan France in 1910, some 70,000 migrants made the journey across the Mediterranean in 1924, alone."³

In a similar vein, Moha Naji contends that:

With the outbreak of the First World War, more than a million North Africans, most of them Algerians, were recruited by the French army. The first Moroccans who migrated to France were from the Souss region in the south; they were recruited by the factories in Nantes in 1909. During the First World War, more than 35,000 Moroccans worked in the French agricultural and mining sectors, while about 40,000 (recruited from the Middle Atlas and High Atlas areas), served in the French army.⁴

Hence, the first Arab immigrants to Europe and, namely to France in the turn of the twentieth century were mainly comprised of people descending from North African countries, particularly from Algeria and Morocco. Later, Tunisian immigrants also joined Algerian and

¹ Louis Bernard, *The Arabs in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp.128-129.

² Michael A. Kozakowski, "Making "Mediterranean Migrants: Geopolitical Transitions, Migratory Policy, and French Conceptions of the Mediterranean in the 20th Century," retrieved on 30th, September 2016 from <http://cdlm.revues.org/7776>.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Moha Ennaji, "Patterns and Trends of Migration in the Maghreb" *Migration and the Maghreb The Middle East Institute Washington, DC* May (2010), p.7.

Moroccan immigrants in France particularly in the Second World War to serve in its army forces and to contribute to the rebuilding of France after the end of the war. Ennaji avers here that “thousands of North African migrants fought in the Second World War on the side of France. Many of these migrants took part in France’s post-war reconstruction. During the post-war period, there were about 250,000 North African migrants in France - 220,000 Algerians, 20,000 Moroccans, and 5,000 Tunisians.”¹

However, the post-World War II which triggered the independence of many colonized countries, particularly North African countries marked an outflow and inflow of large Arab immigrants from more immigration sending countries to more emigration receiving countries. In other words, the end of the World War II was followed by a vast shortage of labour and yet a salient economic growth which led many European countries to open doors for greater number of Arab immigrants of different regions. Besides, “the post-independence period, Ennaji explains, was marked by the intensification of migration and the diversification of countries of destination. The main cause of this migration flow was the need for manpower for the post-WWII reconstruction of Europe and the subsequent rapid growth of West European economies.”²

In fact, regarding the complex nature of the drivers and causes of Arabs’ immigration to Europe, it is by no means possible to enumerate and discuss them thoroughly in one section. Hence, the general main causes can be related to a personal choice caused by a mere spirit of adventure and a love of change, but very often -if not always – it is attributed by other objective reasons such as social and political disappointment and economic difficulties they had gone through in their homeland countries. To put it in a nutshell, the major drivers behind immigration can be generally attributed to ‘push/pull’ model framework” that was proposed

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., p.7.

by the British scholar E. G Ravenstein. After the study on the laws of migration, Ravenstein holds the view that the motivations of population migration are the push and pull factors; the push factor refers to all kinds of repulsive forces in the original place of residence which are not conducive to survival and development, such as wars, riots, disaster, and deterioration of ecological environment; on the other hand, pull factor refers to the attraction of the destination places, where they can find a lot of better living conditions and opportunities.¹

It goes without saying that high unemployment rate in most Arab countries especially in North Africa is regarded as another key determinant of immigration towards Europe. According to Fargues,

Unemployment has been reaching highs, particularly since the implementation of IMF-inspired programs of economic reform. From West to East, unemployment is 13 percent in Morocco, 30 percent in Algeria, 16 percent in Tunisia, 9 percent in Egypt, 30 percent in Palestinian territories.²

Regarding the precarious conditions Arab countries were going through, most Arab young people were subjected to unemployment in their countries of origin, which led to their social and economic misery. Hence, they decided to immigrate to European countries not only to put an end to these endurances and sufferings, but also to better their social living conditions by working and earning sufficient income in European countries.

It is of paramount importance to state that there are other political events in the Arab world which were regarded as a source of new immigration waves to Europe such as the Palestinian exodus, the Lebanese Civil War, the first and second Iraq war, the Libyan Civil War and the Syrian civil war. Moreover, many other Arabs immigrated to Europe because of

¹ Ravenstein Ernst G., "The Laws of Migration", *Journal of the Statistical Society of London*, 48:2, (1885), p.167.

² Philippe Fargues, "Arab Migration to Europe: Trends and Policies," *International Migration Review* 38.4 (2004), p.137.

political issues in their native countries and therefore they sought asylum in other European countries, not to mention the Arabs who went to pursue up their higher studies in European universities and decided to stay there as they felt much better than their countries of origin.

Hence, North African and some Middle Eastern countries played a key role not only in covering the needs of manpower, but also in recovering post-war economic situations of many European countries. That is, over the second half of the twentieth century, the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean regions became the main providers of labour migrants to the European Union regarding the huge number of immigrants who flowed into the region in this period. However, the rise of the immigrants' number within Europe is highly attributed to many policies and facilities adopted by many European countries including; Germany, France, Britain, Austria, to name just a few. These policies took many forms such facilitating contract service workers, trainees, and permitting seasonal workers among many immigrants of African and Middle Eastern countries.

More importantly, numerous bilateral agreements were signed between North-African and European countries and gave new impulse to the migratory flows from North-Africa to Europe. For example, the Moroccan government signed agreements on the recruitment of workers with the governments of West Germany (1963), France (1963), Belgium (1964) and the Netherlands.¹ In this context, Ennaji further argues that:

The three North African countries (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) signed bilateral agreements with the major countries of destination concerning migrants' rights and obligations. Subsequently, migration towards France and Belgium became more organized as offices of recruitment began to sign work contracts with potential

¹ Michael, Bommers, et al., eds., *Migration from the Middle East and North Africa to Europe: Past Developments, Current Status and Future Potentials* (IMISCOE Research: Amsterdam University Press, 2014), p.39.

migrants. In 1974, the number of North African migrants reached nearly 1.5 million. In 1973, the Moroccan migrant population in Europe alone totalled half a million. By the mid-1970s, the number of Moroccan migrants per year had climbed to 30,000 from 17,000 in the previous decade, according to the Ministry of Employment report for 1986.¹

However, the response to the growing flux of Arab immigrants to Europe was the implementation of various limitation and regulation policies undertaken by some European countries to put an end to this increasing number of immigrants. That is, restrictive policies of Northwest European countries towards labor migration dates back to the economic crisis which followed the oil price increase in the wake of the Arab Israeli war of October 1973 and spread to the entire industrial world. Then, France, Germany, and other countries in Europe denounced the bilateral agreements and the regulation of labor migration, and the entry of aliens became subjected to a number of restrictions, many of which are still in place today².

In other words, most of European countries were greatly impacted by the inflow of Arab immigrants and, therefore, they issued many restrictive decisions to regulate the migration process. By doing so, they somewhat forced North-African migrants to find new ways to reach Europe such as family reunions, seasonal work, and illegal migration. Ennaji contends here that “the mid-1970s marked a turning point, as European policies shifted from recruiting migrants to restricting migration because of the economic recession caused mainly by the oil crisis.”³ Despite the limitations implemented by European countries to stop migratory flows towards Europe, it did not bring the desired objectives as the number of illegal migrants increased so considerably. Commenting on these severe immigration restrictions placed by European countries, Frague explains here:

¹ Ennaji, Moha, “Patterns and Trends of Migration in the Maghreb,” p.8.

² Fargues Philippe, “Arab Migration to Europe: Trends and Policies,”p.141.

³ Ennaji Moha, “Patterns and Trends of Migration in the Maghreb,” p.8.

The end of legal admission of migrant workers to Europe produced two changes. The first consequence was the permanent settlement of migrant families. Because workers could no longer travel back and forth and only immigration for family reunification remained legal, the two-way mobility of men which had prevailed until then was replaced by a one-way immigration of women and children. The second consequence was that worker migration continued, though it had to use other routes in order to circumvent the law. These were either clandestine entries, or regular entries followed by overstays, or applications for asylum.¹

The increasing number of Arabs within Europe was of a great importance to constructing their own identities as an ethnic community within the European mainstream culture. Being away from their home countries, Arab immigrants, especially Arab women underwent very hard times while trying to establish their living in the host European countries as a minor group. Thus, they started writing about these tremendous hardships and challenges, especially those linked to their identity. In other words, they established a body of literature of their own which reflects all the issues and concerns of Arabs immigrants in different receiving European countries such as Germany, France, Italy, and Spain. In France, for instance, the period between the 1980s and the 1990s witnessed the flourishing of a body of works written by authors of Arab origin, with Mehdi Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archy* (1983) and Azouz Begag's *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986) representing the turning point for the emergence of the so-called 'Beur literature.'

These writers who belong to the second generation can be seen as, quoting the Arab-French scholar Amin Maalouf, "êtres frontaliers"² translated as "borderland beings" traversed by cultural, religious, and social differences and acting as 'hyphens' between their ethnic

¹ Fargues Philippe, "Arab Migration to Europe: Trends and Policies", p.142.

² Amin Maalouf, *Les Identités Meurtrières* (Paris: Grasset and Fasquelle, 1998), p.11.

community and France. Other Arab-French writers who have gained visibility inside and outside France are, among others, Assia Djebar, Leïla Sebbar, Tahar Ben Jelloun, and Yasmina Khadra.

To conclude, Arabs had a long and a controversial history in the West regarding the multifarious phases and the complex experiences they have undergone throughout their encounters with different Western countries. Though they seem to have been informed and guided by similar driving forces, particularly social, economic and political factors, Arabs in general and Arab women experiences and struggles in particular were heterogeneous with regard to the struggles and forms of resistance they have undertaken in the face of hegemonic forces of the West and its misrepresentation of Others.

2- Representation of Otherness in the Orientalist Discourse

It is commonly assumed that Arab people in general and Arab women in particular have long been misrepresented and constructed as ‘alien other’ by Western orientalist discourse. The aim behind this construction is to maintain Western supremacy over the ‘other’ in terms of cultural, political and economic levels. Put differently, when we delve back into the history, we will definitely find a consistent record and patterns of Western intervention, manipulation and exploitation of not only the Arab and Muslim population, but also the wide-ranging world population that generally lays under the rubric of ‘immature’ world since the 16th century. In brief, Western countries were actually highly consistent in carrying out a successful formula for expansion, colonization and influence throughout the globe and not just in the Arab world.

The Western orientalist representation of its ‘Other’ in general and Muslims and Arabs in particular is not a recent fabrication, but it had been operational and deep-rooted in the West conceptualization ever since the first contacts with Arabs and Muslims. Down to the

middle Ages, especially during the Crusade Wars and along the Arabs expansion in Europe until the very days of the Third Millennium, the West promotes almost the same stereotypes for Arabs and Muslims. Whether the contact took place in the foregone centuries or it has happened recently, the West preserves a persisting conceptualization of the Arabs and Muslims as an alien “Other” or rather as an ‘enemy.’

Needless to say that western ideologies and policies have been long concerned with maintaining political, economic and cultural power over the Non-western countries to strategically enhance the supremacy of the West over the East. With this in mind, this chapter purports to examine the representation/image of the female Other in the Eurocentric feminist narratives as well as to uncover the pitfalls that western feminist scholars face while attempting-in their assumed mission - to rescue their sisters in the Third World societies. This chapter counters the fallacy that has been long held by Western feminists about Third World women as being homogenous and ‘uncivilized other’. Drawing on postcolonial feminist thought, this chapter presents a critique of western feminism vis-à-vis Third World feminism, namely Chandra Mohanty’s and Gayatri Spivak’s theorizations. Hence, the first section will provide an overview of the concept of representation in the light of some theories developed by some postmodern scholars, and the second section will outline the conceptualization of orientalism along with its impact on Arabness. The third section will accordingly examine the representation of Third World women in Western feminist’s discursive practices.

a- Representation : Conceptual Framework

Obviously, human beings created a wide range of messages and meanings and still keep on doing so to find out the meaning of life. In order to communicate with each other and pass their civilization on to the new coming generations, humans have been inevitably making heavy use of the power of images and symbols since the inception of the human history to

refer to and represent things. In brief, communication is a central aim for which human beings construct and make up a system of signs and symbols – their language- to make meaning of the surrounding world. Hence, this section will accordingly explore and cover the concept of representation and its meanings vis-à-vis language and culture. It will be meanwhile drawing a distinction between three different account, and theories; namely, the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist approaches to representation. Most importantly, this section will be an attempt to answer the following questions: What does the word representation really signify? What does the process of representation involve? How does representation work?

Representation is an act of producing meaning through the employment of language. In this regard, the Shorter Oxford English Dictionary suggests two relevant meanings for the term. Firstly, to represent something is to describe or to depict it , or call it up in mind by description, or portrayal or imagination; to place likeness of it before us in our mind or in the senses, as for example, in the sentence , ‘ his picture represents a murder of Abel by Cain’. Secondly, to represent also means to symbolize, stand for, to be a specimen of, or to substitute for; as in the sentence, ‘in Christianity, the cross represents the suffering and crucifixion of Christ’.

There are two systems of representations according to Stuart Hall. First, there is a system by which all sorts of material objects, people, and events are connected and associated with a range of concepts or mental representations which we carry around in our minds such as chair, table and tree. Without this connection, the process of interpreting the world in a meaningful way becomes almost impossible. Hence, the meaning depends utterly on the system of visual images and mental representation already formed in our thoughts which can stand for or represent the world enabling us to refer to things both inside and outside our cognition. Second, language is therefore the second system of representation. That is to say,

when we say we belong to the same culture, it is because we interpret the world in similar ways. This suggests why culture is sometimes defined in terms of shared meaning or shared conceptual maps. However we must also be able to represent or exchange meanings and concepts. The relation between things, concepts and signs lie at the heart of the production of meaning in language. The process which links these three elements together is what we call representation.¹

Moreover, language operates as a representational system. Hall considers representation as a process by which members of a culture use language (broadly defined as any signifying system deploying signs) to produce meaning.² According to this view, meaning is thought to be constructed through the medium of a language as an operating means of communication. Thus, this is a question of invention and creation. That is, there will be no meaning unless we construct it and produce it through signs and images which are interpreted similarly by the same culture groups.

In a similar vein, Fowler foregrounds that language is a central medium in the process of representation and therefore he asserts that “between human beings and the world they experience, there exists a system of signs which are the product of society. Signs acquire meaning through being structured into codes. The principle being code is language.”³ Hence, the meaning is constructed by the system of representation. It is constructed and fixed by the code, which sets up the correlation between our conceptual system and our language system in such a way that, every time we think of a tree the code tells us to use the English word TREE and different words are applied for other different languages.

¹ Stuart Hall, .ed, *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London, Thousand Oaks and New Delhi: Sage Publications In association with the Open University, 1997), pp.17-18.

² Ibid., p.61.

³ Roger Fowler, *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991), p.3.

Hall further argues that the general terms we use for words, sounds, or images which carry meaning are signs. These signs stand for or represent the concepts and the conceptual relations between them which we carry around in our minds and together they make up the meaning-systems of our culture. Signs are organized into languages and it is the existence of a common languages which enable us to translate our thoughts (concepts) into words, sounds or images, and then to use these operating signs as a language to express meanings and to communicate thoughts to other people.¹ For Hall, we use signs and symbols –whether they are sounds, written words, electronically produced images, musical notes, even objects- to stand for or represent to other people our concepts, ideas and feelings.²

The use of these signs and symbols to represent the surrounding world and people can be explained in three major different theories --reflective, intentional and constructionist approaches. According to Hall, “in reflexive theory, meaning is thought to lie in the object, person, idea or event in the real world, and language functions like a mirror, to reflect the true meaning as it already exists in the world.”³ In other words, reflective theory assumes that languages simply reflect meaning which already exists out there in the world of objects, peoples and events. Hence, language is deployed as medium to stand for things and people in the outside world so that they can make sense.

The intentional approach of representation, on the other hand, emphasizes that it is the opposite case in the sense that it holds that it is the speaker, the author, who imposes his or her unique meaning on the world through language⁴, meaning that language expresses only what the speaker, writer or painter wants to say, his/her personally intended meaning. As we can

¹ Stuart Hall, .ed, *Representation*, pp.17-18.

² Ibid., p.1.

³ Ibid., p.24.

⁴ Ibid., p.25.

see, intentional approach is in fact the opposite of the reflective approach in the sense that it reflects the intentions of the speaker rather than things or people.

Regarding the constructive approach of representation, it acknowledges that neither things in themselves nor the individual users of language can fix meaning in language. Things do not mean: we construct meaning, using representational systems — concepts and signs. According to this approach, we must not confuse the material world, where things and people exist, and the symbolic practices and processes through which representation, meaning and language operate. Constructivists do not deny the existence of the material world. However, it is not the material world which conveys meaning; it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others¹. Hence, meaning is constructed in and produced within a language.

In fact, the constructivist approach is very significant in the sense that it has a great impact on cultural studies in recent years. In brief, the relationship between constructionist theory and representation - as production of meaning through language - is recursive: one cannot exist without the other. As we have mentioned above, language is defined as a set of signs, symbols – be those sounds, words or whatever else – through which we represent other people, our concepts, thoughts or feelings. Therefore, language is a representational system involving a process of constructing meaning and making things meaningful.

At this point, it is obvious that, on one hand, language is constructed by symbols and signs and, on the other hand, it is the language that enables us to construct meaning. We cannot have language without constructing it. If there is no language, there is no meaning,

¹ Ibid.

because things do not mean anything by themselves. For example, the large plant that grows in nature, in English, is defined as TREE. It is not possible that real trees know that they are trees. They also cannot know that word in English, which represents the concept of them, written as TREE, whereas in French it is written as ARBRE.¹

Furthermore, even Plato (427-347 B.C.E.) explored this arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign. He suggested separateness between an object and the name used to signify that object; he argues that any name given to something is the right one, and if you change that and give another, the new name is as correct as the old one.² Plato maintains that “there is no name given to anything by nature; all is convention and habit of the users.”³ Meaning, in this way, is not in the object or person or thing, nor is it in the world. It is we who fix the meaning so firmly that through this process we create, as Hall calls, ‘maps of meaning’ set of codes that are essential for meaning and representation.⁴

Speaking of the arbitrary relation between the signified and the signifier, De Saussure argues that any sign must have both a signifier and a signified. You cannot have a totally meaningless signifier or a completely formless signified.⁵ It is important to notice that, according to De Saussure, the sign is completely arbitrary as there is no necessary connection between the sign and its meaning. De Saussure draws a distinction between language (*langue*) and the activity of speaking (*parole*). He argues that *Langue* is the rules of sign system (which might be grammar) and *Parole* is the articulation of signs (speech, writing...)⁶

¹ Ibid., p.21.

² Plato quoted in Jean Nienkamp, *Plato on Rhetoric and Language: Four Key Dialogues* (Lawrence Erlbaum Associates: Mahwa NJ, 1999), p. 8.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Stuart Hall, ed, *Representation*, p.29.

⁵ Ferdinand De Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Roy Harris (London: Duckworth, 1983), p.101.

⁶ David Fuller & Patricia Waugh, *The Arts and Sciences of Criticism* (London: Oxford UP, 1999), p.96.

It is obvious that these sorts of signs, symbols – these codes - do not exist in nature. This is the result of social convention, which enables us to create/construct the representational process – the usage of language to produce meaning. In this regard, Gergen argues that the construction and representation of knowledge accordingly is carried out by “social constructionist orientation of knowledge”¹ in which social interchange has a major role in constructing and representing knowledge.² Explicitly speaking, the construction and representation of meaning is achieved through social interdependence which is context dependent and that serves communal functions³.

In order to communicate our ideas, we need to know the rules and conventions but language itself is not enough to create meaning. For instance, Chomsky’s famous phrase ‘Colorless green ideas sleep furiously’ is grammatically correct but semantically meaningless.⁴ Therefore, without studying the language and its grammar (langue), we may only understand the surface of the production (parole). In this context, language is a connection between thought and sound, and a means for thought to be expressed as sound. Spoken language includes the communication of concepts by means of sound-images from the speaker to the listener. Language is a product of the speaker’s communication of signs to the listener.⁵

To conclude, the representational system, defined here as production of meaning through language, is very important in human communication. In order to enable this process – representation – we must create our own system of signs and symbols, our language. There exist three theories of representation, the reflective, the intentional and the constructionist.

¹ Gergen Kenneth, “Social Construction and Educational process”, in *Constructivism and Education*, Broadway, J. Gale ed., (Hillsdale: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 1995), p.23.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., pp. 24-25.

⁴ David, Fuller & Patricia Waugh, *The Arts and Sciences of Criticism*, p.96.

⁵ Ibid., p.102.

The most inflective theory in cultural studies, in recent years, is the constructionist one. The basic idea of this theory is that meaning is socially constructed. Things do not have meaning in themselves. We are those attaching meaning to them.

b- Orientalism and its Impact on Otherness

There is a common consensus among scholars and critics that Edward Said's book *Orientalism* is regarded as the cornerstone of post colonialism. In general, it was this famous and pioneering book that has, since its publication, inspired and paved the way to the work of numerous theorists and critics of the twentieth century such as Spivak and Bhabha. These critics along with others in the postmodern era are highly indebted to Said's book as it was the basis for their works and theories. Bhabha states that "Orientalism inaugurated the postcolonial field", and Spivak similarly depicts it as "the source book in our discipline."¹ Accordingly, this section will highlight the concept of orientalism with regard to its discursive representation and construction of the Other in general and the Arab other in particular.

It is generally admitted that the concept 'orientalism' refers to the way the West views and construct the East or the Orient with malevolent intentions and attitudes. It is, therefore, a notoriously mode and a way of seeing others which often- if not always- emphasizes, exaggerates and distorts differences of others and their local cultures as compared to that of Europe, the United States and the West as a whole. More importantly, this ideology often involves seeing the Arab culture as exotic, backward, uncivilized, and at times dangerous. Orientalism can be defined as a discourse that is meant to keep colonized peoples subservient and inferior to colonial rule.

¹ Quoted in Bart Moore-Gilbert, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics* (New York: Verso, 1997), p. 34.

Moreover, it should be pointed out that orientalism is basically seen as an ideology which is based on the premise to construct a binary division between the West and its 'Other'. Although the geographical line between the West and the East is an imaginary and artificial one, the acceptance of this binarism with the former as privileged and dominant and the latter as unprivileged and inferior, is taken for granted by Western scholars and institutions. This is significantly mentioned in Said's ground-breaking book *Orientalism*. At this moment, the relationship between the Occident and Orient becomes the relationship of "power, of domination, of varying degree of a complex hegemony."¹ He also adds "Orientalism must create its own other; because of this other it can strengthen its own identity and superiority and because of this other it can set off against the Orient as "a sort of surrogate and even underground self."²

In fact, Said's *Orientalism* is a study of how the Western colonial powers of Britain and France represented North African and the Middle Eastern lands in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. In brief, orientalism as a concept refers to the sum of the West's conceptualization and representations of the orient. This process consistently places the West in a superior position and the Orient in an inferior one. Hence, orientalism constructs a binary division between the West and its Other. Regarding this, each is assumed to exist in opposition to the other. The Orient is conceived, in this way, as being everything that the West is not, its alter ego. This is, however, not an opposition of equal partners. The orient is frequently described in a series of negative terms that serve to reinforce the sense of the West superiority and domination. If the West is allegedly assumed as the hub of knowledge and learning, then it will follow that the Orient is the place of ignorance and *naiveté*. As a result, the East and the West are positioned through the construction of an equal dichotomy. The

¹ Edward Said W., *Orientalism* (New York: Penguin, 1978), p.5.

² *Ibid.*, p.3.

West accordingly occupies a superior rank while the Orient is its other in a subservient position, which makes the relations between them asymmetrical.

Equally important, Said defines orientalism, in his highly influential work *Orientalism*, as a style of thought based upon an “ontological and epistemological distinction made between “the Orient” and (most of time) the Occident.”¹He further stresses in the introduction to *Orientalism* that the Orient has been fundamental in defining the West as “its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience.”²The Orient then serves as a mirror to the West in the sense that the West highly needs its other counterpart ‘Orient’ to justify its own sense of superiority over it. Consequently, the west is civilized only because the orient is uncivilizedetc. Richard argues, here, that “the representation of other cultures invariably entails the presentation of self-portraits, in that those people who are observed are overshadowed or eclipsed by the observer.”³

In this context, it is worth noting that Said’s argument that western views of the Orient are not based on what is observed to exist in oriental lands, but often result from the West’s dreams, fantasies and assumptions about what this radically different and contrasting place contains. Orientalism is first and foremost a fabricated construct, a series of images that come to stand as the Orient’s reality for those in the West. This contrived reality in no way reflects what may or may not actually be there in the orient itself; it does not exist outside of the representations made about it by Westerners. It is not ‘an inert fact of nature but a man-made.’⁴ In this sense, orientalism imposes upon the Orient specifically the Western views of its

¹ Ibid., p.1.

² Ibid., p.3.

³ David Richards, *Masks of Difference: Cultural Representations in Literature, Anthropology and Art* (New York: Cambridge University Press.1994), p.289.

⁴ Edward Said W., *Orientalism*, pp.4-5.

reality. But crucially, its creation from the staff of fantasy does not make it any less remote from the world.

Equally important, orientalism is meant to institutionalize the Orient by justifying to those people in the Orient the premise that it is right and proper to rule over them and by getting them to accept their lower ranking in the colonial order of things – a process we can call ‘colonizing the mind’. This operates by persuading people to internalize its logic and speak its language; to perpetuate the values and assumptions of the colonizers as regards the ways they perceive and represent the world. To explain how this works, the novelist Ngugi Wa Thiong’o points out:

Language carries culture, and culture carries, particularly through orature and literature, the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves and our place in the world. How people perceive themselves affects how they look at their culture, at their politics and at the social production of wealth, at their entire relationship to nature and to other human beings. Language is thus inseparable from ourselves as a community of human beings with a specific form and character, a specific history, a specific relationship to the world.¹

In this passage, Ngugi highlights the pivotal role a language plays in establishing binary division between the privileged European self and the presumed uncivilized other. That is, language does not just reflect reality, it also goes a long way towards creating a person’s awareness of their world, and internalizes the values by which we either willingly or forcibly live our lives. Language is highly loaded with deep intended cultural stereotypical images and meanings. Under colonialism, a colonized people are made subservient to ways of regarding the world which reflect and support colonialist values. A particular value-system is taught as

¹Ngugi Wa Thiong, *Decolonizing the Mind: The politics of Language in African Literature* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1996), p.16.

the best and the truest world-view while the cultural values of the colonized peoples are deemed as lacking in value, or even as being uncivilized ,from which they must be rescued.

In other words, the West in general and the British empire in particular did not depend only on military actions and physical forces to rule their colonies, rather they endured by getting both colonizer and colonized people to see their world and themselves in a particular way, internalizing the language of Empire as representing the natural, true order of life. People in colonies were and are still taught to look down upon their cultures, languages, values, and their people and themselves. By doing so, they have highly influenced the colonized psychology to the extent that they are made to admit passively their inferior position and their subjugated race. To show the degree of this impact, Frantz Fanon¹ contends:

On that day, completely dislocated, unable to be abroad with the other, the white man, who unmercifully imprisoned me, I took myself far off from my own presence, far indeed, and made myself an object. What else could it be for me but an amputation, an excision, a hemorrhage that splattered my whole body with black blood? but I did not want this revision ,this thematisation. All I wanted was to be a man among other men. I wanted to come lithe and young into a world that was ours and to help to build it together.²

¹ Frantz Fanon is a prominent psychologist, who wrote widely and passionately about the damage French colonialism had wreaked upon millions of people who suffered its power. Fanon is an important figure in the field of post-colonialism. He was born in the French Antilles in 1925 and educated in Martinique and France. His experience of racism while being educated by and working for the French affected him deeply; in Algeria in 1954 he resigned his post as head of the Psychiatric Department in Blida-Joinville Hospital and joined with the Algerian rebels fighting against the French occupation of the country. Influenced by contemporary philosophers and poets such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Aime Cesaire, Fanon's publications include two polemical books: *Black Skin, and white Masks*, *The Wretched of the Earth*. They both deal angrily with the mechanics of colonialism and its effects on those it ensnared.

² Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans.Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1994), pp.112-13.

In this passage, one can clearly notice the trauma and the psychological influence the colonizers have on the colonized particularly black peoples. Indeed, Fanon is deeply oppressed and feels thoroughly odd as he is defined in negative terms by the white in the position of power. He is somehow forced to look down on himself and see himself not as an ordinary human subject, with its own wants and needs as shown at the end of the quotation, but rather he is made to view himself as an object, inferior, and less fully-human other that can never be like the superior Western self.

In brief, the violence of this revision of his identity is conveyed powerfully in the image of amputation. Not only does Fanon feel abbreviated and violated, but he also feels imprisoned by an orientalist ideology that is based on humiliating and looking down upon the 'other'. Identity is something that the French colonizers construct for him, and by so doing, they commit a violence that splits his very sense of self. The power of description, of naming, is not to be underestimated. The relationship between the language and power is far-reaching and fundamental.

It is very important to note that Fanon in his famous book, *Black Skins, White Masks* fleshes out the consequence of identity construction for the colonized subject who is forced to internalize negative aspects about their inferior identity. The black basically represents everything that the colonizing French are not. For example, the colonizers are civilized, rational, and intelligent; on the contrary, the black remains other to all these qualities against which colonizing peoples derive their sense of superiority and normality. By the process of Othering, the colonizers treat the colonized as 'not fully human', and as a result, it dehumanizes natives. Othering codifies and fixes the self as the true human and the other as Other than human. The colonizers consider themselves as the embodiment of "proper self" while label the colonized as "savages."

The orientalist as a discourse, as stated above, is meant to make others internalize their sense of inferiority and therefore it circulates this stereotype to be seen as hard facts and wholly reliable truths. In other words, orientalism as a Western discourse about the Orient is on the one hand guilty of legitimizing the civilizing mission, the essentialism, the expansionism, and imperialism and, on the other hand, it convinces natives of their own inferiority. By doing so, it intentionally establishes unequal power relation between the West and the East in which the West is privileged and the East is trivialized. In this context, Rana Kabani argues “the ideology of empire was hardly ever a brute jingoism; rather, it made subtle use of reason, and recruited science and history to serve its ends.”¹ In the same vein, Said states:

that the orient became an object ‘ suitable for study in the academy , for display in the museum, for reconstruction in the colonial office, for theoretical illustration in anthropological, biological, linguistic, racial, and historical theses about mankind and the universe, for instances of economic and sociological theories of development, revolution, cultural personality, national religious character.”²

Influenced mostly by Foucault and less Gramsci, he elucidates how the West constructed the Orient in various works such as travelogues, historical accounts, state and official archives and novels. For Said, the Orient and Oriental do not exist; however, the Westerners construct and counterfeit the Orient. Orientalism, as Ashcroft notes, is “a Western invention, knowledge which constructs the East as the “other”, Therefore, in Said’s formulation, it is principally a way of defining and ‘locating’ Europe’s others.”³

¹ Rana Kabbani, *Imperial fictions: Europe’s Myths of Orient* (London: Pandora, 1994), p.6.

² Edward Said W., *Orientalism*, pp.7-8.

³ Ashcroft, Bill, et al eds., *The Post-colonial Studies Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.50.

The outcome of orientalism is the building on a binary opposition between the Occident and the Orient. The Orient is imposed as everything that the West is not, exotic, alien, dangerous, unreliable, to be tamed, exhibited, and a threat to the West. Western metaphysics is based on binary oppositions, a hierarchy in which one is privileged and the other is unprivileged. Binarism ranges from general binaries such as light/dark; white/black to some more complicated and culturally weighted as man/woman, the colonizer/ the colonized and in the case under consideration the self/other. This binary opposition takes a prominent place within feminist, psychoanalysis, postcolonial and queer theories. The Self, whether it is conceived as male, white, or European, is constructed as positive term. Conversely, the Other, be it female, black, or non-European is constructed as its negative reflections.

Moreover, orientalism must create its own other; because of this other it can strengthen its own identity and superiority and because of this other it can set itself off against the Orient as “ a sort of surrogate and even underground self.”¹ Said argues that orientalism has helped Westerners to define a European self-image. He believes that the idea of orientalism is not far from the collective notion identifying European as ‘us’ against those non-Europeans. Here European identity and culture is superior to all other cultures and peoples.²

Ironically enough, the Western orientalists allegedly claim that their mission is purely civilizing the inferior others from the savage life, backwardness, and saving women from patriarchal mindsets; however, their intervention, largely reinforced the inferiority and the subservience of the other in general and women in particular. In brief, women were mostly exoticized; often depicted nude or partially-clothed in hundreds of western works of art during the colonial period and were further presented as an immodest, active creature of sexual pleasure who held the key to a myriad of mysterious erotic delights.

¹ Edward Said W., *Orientalism*, p.3.

² *Ibid.*, p.6.

In orientalism, the East as a whole is feminized, deemed passive, submissive, exotic, lascivious, sexually mysterious and tempting; while the West becomes masculine- that is, active, and dominant, heroic, rational, self-controlled and ascetic. This trope makes way for a specifically sexual vocabulary available to those from the West when describing their encounters. The Orient is penetrated by the traveler whose passions it rouses, it is possessed, ravished, embracedand ultimately domesticated by the muscular colonizer. According to Said, this is in part a result of the fact that orientalism was ‘an exclusively male province.’¹

To conclude, orientalism, as stated above, constructs a binary division between the West and its other; therefore, each is assumed to exist in opposition to the other. Hence, the orient is conceived as being everything that the West is not, its alter ego. This is, however, not an opposition of equal partners. The orient is frequently described in a series of negative terms that serve to reinforce the sense of the West superiority and domination. As a result, the East and West are positioned through the construction of an equal dichotomy in which the West discursively occupies a superior rank while the orient is its other, in a subservient position, which furthers the gap and makes their relations more asymmetrical.

c- Representation of Third World Women Others in Western Feminist Discourse

It goes without saying that Third World women in general and Arab women in particular have almost been misrepresented by Western feminist scholars as being docile, submissive and uneducated women, not to mention uncivilized. In brief, Western feminists have, throughout their writings and studies, depicted Third World women as one singular entity and a monolithic group and by doing so they have disregarded and have intentionally

¹ Ibid., p.207.

trampled on Third World women specificities and their heterogeneous historical backgrounds which basically set them apart from Western feminist experiences.

Delving into Western feminist texts and discourses, one can obviously notice how negatively Third World women are portrayed and represented. Importantly, Western female scholars have constantly claimed to offer help to their sisters in the Third World, but yet they have, due to a set of reasons, failed to do so. Precisely put, Western feminist's so-called attempt to save and help Third World women to promote their social status is unsurprisingly characterized and largely marked by numerous shortcomings and limitations which are seen as the heart of this chapter.

First and foremost, it is worth noting that one of the basic motive beyond Western feminist's failure to allegedly help their sisters is the fact that they have approached and theorized Third World women from Western perspectives and values. By doing so, they have trampled on Third World women's own particularities such as religious, cultural and traditional tenets along with neglecting the conceptualization of gender relations, historical and economic, and most importantly the history of colonialism. For many critics, Western feminist ideology, through its act and philosophy of representation, intentionally serves to maintain unequal power structures and relations between the West and the East and therefore it ultimately reinforces the supremacy of the West over the East.

In this context, transnational feminists, however, have not only challenged the universal claim of the Western feminists to speak on behalf of all women, but they have also directed sharp criticism to Western feminism for having misrepresented Third World women. Postcolonial thinkers and transnational feminists like Mohanty, Rajan, El Saadawi, Andluaze, Kumar, and Spivak to name a few, have generated an important rethinking body of post-colonial feminists' thought. That is, the most important claim that transnational feminists have

challenged is the Western feminists' underlying assumption that all women are alike irrespective of the existing differences in terms of race, class, religion, citizenship and cultural specificities.

In his book *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Post-Colonial Reason*, Stephen Morton contends:

Alongside feminist theorists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Nawal El Saadawi and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Spivak has also persistently been critical of western feminism's historical complicity with imperialism and the tendency of some western feminist thinkers to ignore the specific social, cultural and historical circumstances of non-western women's lives.¹

Being one of the most influential figures in contemporary post-colonial theory and transnational feminists, and Marxist feminist, Spivak has made a crucial contribution to feminist thought by criticizing Western feminism, particularly its universalizing claim to speak for all women, regardless of difference in class, race, religion, culture, language, and nationality.

In her insightful and prominent essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?", Spivak has criticized the feminist discourse for speaking on behalf of the subaltern² in general and Third World

¹ Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Post Colonial Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p.125.

² The term subaltern or subalterns generally refer to the unprivileged and marginalized people in a given society. The notion of the subaltern was first referred to by the Italian Marxist political activist Antonio Gramsci in his article "Notes on Italian History" which appeared later on as part of his most widely known book *Prison Notebooks* written between 1929 and 1935. The subaltern classes refer fundamentally in Gramsci's words to any low rank" person or group of people in a particular society suffering under hegemonic domination of a ruling elite class that denies them the basic rights of participation in the making of local history and culture as active individuals. See the following article El Habib Louai, "Retracing the concept of the subaltern from Gramsci to Spivak: Historical

women in particular. She basically raises, in this widely acclaimed essay, some issues of the Third World Women which have never been invoked in the international platform. For her, feminism is a theory which could not take into consideration the views and aspirations of all the women worldwide with regard to class, ethnicity, religion and culture; this is probably one of its shortcomings for which it is fundamentally blamed and, therefore, it is viewed as Eurocentric ideology which places Western feminist' interests at the core of its agendas.

Equally important, Spivak's writings and reflections suggest a persistent challenge to the Western feminism for homogenizing and misrepresenting Third World women and therefore not allowing them to make their voices and concerns heard. For Spivak, women are not all homogenous and monolithic groups as Western feminists avow; rather there are significant differences and specificities existing among women worldwide with regard to class, colour, religion, culture and geopolitical conditions, not to mention socioeconomic conditions. Also, the European women generally seem to enjoy more rights and freedom than their counterpart women of the Third World. In this way, it would be very pointless to create a universally agreeable female gender identity without regarding these differences mentioned above.

Spivak further explores the experiences of Third World Women as being "shadowed by the doctrines of French High Feminism."¹ At this juncture, Spivak's contention is to refute Western feminism namely French feminism, as they turned a blind eye to significant differences in history, culture, colour, social class ...etc. In a similar vein, Spivak's reflections on Western feminism are highly revealed in both her reading and translation of Devi's short story work entitled "Breast Giver." Jashoda, the female subaltern protagonist of the story,

Developments and New Applications", *African Journal of History and Culture* (AJHC) Vol. 4(1) January 2012. Available online at <http://www.academicjournals.org/AJHC>

¹ Gayatri Spivak, "French Feminis in an International Frame," in *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p.141.

reverses traditional patriarchal stereotypes by taking on responsibilities allegedly held by men. Thus, she becomes the family provider by giving milk to other children after her husband becomes crippled in an accident. By doing so, she challenges Western feminist notion of motherhood as being the source of oppression for Third World women. On the contrary, she sees motherhood as a profession that grants her economic and social independency.

On her comments on Jashoda's story, Spivak argues that:

The milk that is produced in one's own body for one's own children is a use value. When there is a superfluity of use values, exchanges value arise. That which cannot be used is exchanged. As soon as the (exchange) value of Jashoda's milk emerges, it is appropriated. Good food and constant sexual servicing are provided so that she can be kept in prime condition for optimum lactation. The milk she produces for children is presumably through "necessary labour." The milk that she produces for the children of her master's family is through "surplus labour."¹

Spivak further contends that "if in contest of the colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow."² Spivak examines here the situation of British occupation in India as an example of white European ideology taking over the other cultures and perpetuating the inferiority of the 'Other'. That is, Third World women are made to be more subject to invisibility and silence than their counterpart males by Western feminist ideologies. Hence, writings about a subaltern group and particularly Third World women from an outsider's perspective -the Western feminists-

¹ Mahasweta Devi, *Breast-Giver*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, (New York: Methuen, 1987), p.248.

² Spivak Gayatri, "A Literary Representation of the Subaltern: A Woman's Text from the Third World", in *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York: Methuen, 1987), p.287.

can never be an objective process simply because such writings are carried out without experiencing the culture as an insider. Ironically, how can an outsider correctly and objectively write about or accurately express a culture they do not directly experience?

Moreover, Spivak underscores Western feminist political agenda and discourse to marginalize and disempower the Third World 'subaltern'. Stated differently, she examines the ethics and politics involved in this 'othering' process, seizing on the question of representation of the Third World. Focusing, for instance, on 'sati'¹ practice, a widow-sacrifice or 'widow self-immolation' that was very common in pre-colonial and colonial India, Spivak rejects and refutes British intervention to obliterate this cultural practice on the basis of 'civilizing mission'. Ironically enough, Spivak regards this act as a mode of silencing and disempowering Indian women under the rubric of a so-called 'civilizing mission'. This is significantly testified in her famous phrase "white men saving brown women from brown men."² British rulers seemed to ignore the religious and the spiritual significance behind this cultural practice as a noble act displayed willingly by women towards their husbands in the funeral pyre.

According to Spivak, the act of 'self-immolation' can by no means be considered as an act of suicide but "it should have been read with martyrdom."³ By willingly doing so, they gain too much respect and it is regarded as an indication of a wife's devotion and love to her husband. Spivak adds here that:

¹ Sati Refers to a very common cultural practice in India during which women would willingly immolate themselves by joining the funeral pyre of their dead husband as an act of self-devotion and love. Ancient Hindu religious texts treat 'sati' as a ritual rather than an act of suicide.

² Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (London: Macmillan, 1988), p.293.

³ Ibid., p.302 .

It is in terms of this profound ideology of the displaced place of the female subject that the paradox of free choice comes into play. By the inexorable ideological production of the sexed subject such a death can be understood by the female subject as an exceptional signifier of her own desire, exceeding the general rule for a widow's conduct.¹

In the same vein, another transnational feminist, Chandra Mohanty has refuted Western feminist representation of Third World women. Crucially, she contends that “Western feminists assume that all women are a coherent group with identical interests and desires without taking into consideration their class, ethnicity, racial formation, or different circumstances.”² Here, Mohanty draws attention to the experiences of Third World women and highlights their heterogeneous nature with regard to diverse cultural, class, ethnic, gender and religious backgrounds. Phrased in different terms, Mohanty further criticizes a tendency in western feminist scholarship to colonize the material and historical heterogeneities of the lives of women in the third world.³

Equally important, Mohanty also adds that:

For in the in the context of a first/third world balance of power, feminist analyses which perpetrate and sustain the hegemony of the idea of the superiority of the West produce a corresponding set of universal images of the ‘third – world woman’. Images like the veiled woman, the powerful mother, the chaste virgin, the obedient wife, etc. These images exist in universal ahistorical splendour, setting in motion a colonialist

¹ Ibid., p.300.

² Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, *Boundary* 2 12(3), (1986), p.337.

³ Ibid., p.343.

discourse which exercises a very specific power in defining, coding and maintaining existing first/third – world connections.¹

The major argument that Mohanty has made in her classic essay highlights the need to be sensitive to the phenomenal divisions between ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’ women. Originally written in 1984, but subsequently reproduced in different publications, Mohanty denounces Western feminists assumption of ‘a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group’ which results in creating ‘the image of an “average Third World Woman”’ who ‘leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “Third World” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc)’.² This image, Mohanty adds, “is constructed ‘in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern’”.³ In other words, Western feminists use ‘Third World’ women as their foil, producing as a result a new layer of colonization, and consequently, ‘rob [bing] them of their historical and political agency.’⁴“Applying the notion of women as homogeneous category to women in the ‘Third World colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks” adds Mohanty. Thus, she calls for ‘careful, historically specific generalizations responsive to complex realities.’⁵

Gloria Anzaldua is another critic that recounts some of the experiences of Third World women trying to show Western feminists that their assumed universalism is not working and they should stop speaking for third world women and on behalf of them. In this regard, she asserts:

¹ Ibid., p.352.

² Ibid., p.337.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., p.337.

⁵ Ibid.

Because white eyes do not want to know us, they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, and our spirit. The schools we attended or didn't attend did not give us the skill for writing nor the confidence that we were correct in using our class and ethnic language.¹

It can be noted that the idea of neglecting and disregarding the particularities of Third world women is deeply reflected in Western feminist agendas. For Anzaldua, Western ideology perpetuates the subordination and the inferiority of third world women through the philosophy of ignorance and trivialization of the cultural legacy and aspects of others in general and Third World women in particular.

In a similar debate, Marina Lazreg asserts that Western feminists' hegemony is based on their assumption that they belong to "perfectible societies" whereas other women belong to traditional or patriarchal societies and these are imperious to change from within². However, we cannot hide the fact that Arab Muslim women themselves look at Western feminists and Western women in general as being privileged thinking that Western women enjoy all their rights as humans and as women. Arab World feminists portray Western women as models in understanding and teaching women's rights and this is why many local women's rights organizations seek the support of international women's organization not only in funding, but also in policies of how to conduct workshops and training courses on women's rights.

With regard to the aforementioned factors, it is fair to state that Western feminists have failed their so-called mission to help and empower their sisters in the Third World due to the fact that their interference has entailed the application of their western perspectives and values

¹ Keating AnaLouise & Gonzalez L., *Bridging: How Gloria Anzaldua's Life and Work Transformed Our Own* (USA: University Of Texas Press, 2011), p.111.

² Marnia Lazreg, *The Eloquence of Silence: Algerian Women in Question* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.205.

to approach Third World women issues and sufferings. This failure, as it has been argued above by many critics, is attributed not only to the fact that Western feminists have examined and studied Third World women from the lens of their cultural perspectives, but also to the lack of knowledge and understanding of other differences in terms of gender relation, cultural, religious practices, and geopolitical conditions and more importantly the history of colonialism.

3- Theorizing Arab Anglophone Women Diaspora literature

Introduction

As discussed in the first chapter, there have been a number of factors beyond Arab migration process to the other countries particularly to Western developed countries where they have been pushed in a way to permanently or temporarily settle and reside as migrants. Living away from their original territories and homes has been a big challenge to all migrants regarding the family and the cultural heritage they have left behind. In this way, some of these migrants especially those with intellectual background have started writing and reflecting on the experiences and setbacks they have faced in the host countries. In doing so, they have established a newborn corpus of literature called ‘diaspora literature’ or minor literature which basically reflects their major concerns and issues pertaining to identity ,displacement, race, gender, class, to name just a few. This chapter will be accordingly divided into three relevant sections. The first will be devoted to cover the concept of diaspora along with its theories; the second one will focus upon Arab Anglophone diaspora writings in general while the third section will be dedicated to particularly tackle Arab women diaspora writings with regard to its thematic as well as literary concerns.

a- Defining Diaspora

The usages of the term diaspora have unquestionably proliferated over the last years as peoples movements have dramatically increased in the recent decades. The advent of new technology along with the development of transportation technologies have dramatically facilitated international movements among many peoples especially those who have faced political and economic hardships in their countries of origins. This situation has created vast groups of refugees and exile populations who have left their homeland to escape these political conflicts and improve their miserable living conditions they had in their homeland countries. Hence, while attempting to set a definitive and exact definition of the concept of diaspora, one will certainly find it a futile task due to its complexity and its overlapping with other concepts such as migration, exile, and transnationalism.

Regarding the controversy of the concept, Clifford James, for instance, explains that diaspora interweaves and overlaps with meanings of words like 'expatriate', 'migrancy', and 'exile' to form an 'unruly crowd of descriptive/interpretative terms' that jostle and converse in the modern lexicon of migration studies.¹ With this in mind, this section will be concerned with mapping out this concept and examine its different uses and its multiple implications with regard to the change and transformation of the world in the modern era, particularly in changing global conditions.

Historically speaking, diaspora has long been related to the process of the dispersal of the Greek, Jewish and Armenian people who unwillingly left their home of origin under different factors; but yet the traditional definition of the concept of diaspora has changed over time and its conceptualizations have proliferated in recent times due to the changing global conditions. It is now associated with the greater process of transnational migration and increasing cultural hybridity. Thus, the concept that was historically applied to the

¹ James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 9, no. 3, (1994), p. 303.

experiences of the Jews, Greeks, Armenians and Africans is applied to more than thirty different ethnic groups today.¹

In this sense, diaspora is now applied to all forms of migration, dispersion, and movement of a people from homeland to host countries. To explain this, Khachig Totolian writes “that the term that once described Jewish, Greek, and Armenian dispersion now shares meaning with a large semantic domain that includes words like, immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, ethnic community.”² Equally important, diaspora has evolved over time and has become unstable to define only limited ethnic group or to be tied exclusively to one paradigmatic case like the cases of Jewish, Greek, or Armenians.

Clifford argues here that “we should be able to recognize the strong entailment of Jewish history on the language of diaspora without making that history a definitive model. Jewish (and Greek and Armenian) diasporas can be taken as non-normative starting points for a discussion that is travelling or hybridizing in new global conditions.”³ Rather, the concept has come to further encompass labour migrants who maintain (to some degree) emotional and social ties with a homeland. Algerian, Bangladeshi, Filipino, Greek, Haitian, Indian, Italian, Korean, Mexican, Pakistani, Puerto Rican, Polish, Salvadoran, Turkish, Vietnamese and many other migrant populations have been conceptualized as diasporas in this sense.⁴

Diaspora then can be defined, at its simplest, as the dispersal and scattering of peoples from their home of origin to settle in host countries. Regarding this, Carter argues that the concept encompasses “a multitude of ethnic, religious and national communities who find

¹ Roben Cohen, “Diasporas and the Nation-state: From Victims to Challengers,” *International Affairs*, 72 (3), (1996), p.507.

² Clifford James, “Diasporas,” p.303.

³ *Ibid.*, p.306.

⁴ Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p.45.

themselves living outside of the territory to which they are historically ‘rooted’.”¹This displacement and movement from one’s homeland to host countries usually -if not always - takes place under social, economic, and political factors as revealed in the previous section of this dissertation. That is, one is mostly pushed under different circumstances to leave his or her own country of origin to settle in the host country and, therefore, they end up being diasporic living between two worlds, two cultures, and two places: one physical – state-nation and the other is imagined – homeland -with which they maintain strong connection and ties through cultural and social practices. Michel Bruneau notes here that:

A community diaspora first comes into being and then lives on owing to whatsoever in a given place forges a bond between those who want to group together and maintain, from afar, relations with other groups which, although settled elsewhere, invoke a common identity .This bond can come in different forms, such as family, community, religious, socio-political and economic ties or the shared memory of a catastrophe or trauma suffered by the members of the diaspora or their forbears.²

Accordingly, it can be noted that people living in diaspora, in spite of their settling far from their homelands and their religious and cultural practices, they still retain strong connection and perpetual attachment with their local cultures and its people either through the cultural practices they preserve in the host countries or the virtual contact they establish with their homelands. Rouse argues here that the growing access to the telephone has been particularly significant, allowing people not just to keep in touch periodically, but to

¹ Sean Carter, “The geopolitics of diaspora,” *Area*, 37 (1), (2005), p.55.

² Michel Bruneau, *Diaspora and Transnationalism Concepts, Theories and Methods*, Rainer Baubok, Thomas Faist, eds, (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2010), p.35.

contribute to the decision-making and participate in the familial event from a considerable distance.¹

In the same vein, Cohen also states that “diasporas are positioned somewhere between nation-states and ‘travelling cultures’ in that they involve dwelling in a nation-state in a physical sense but travelling in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside the nation-states’ space/time zone.”² Drawing on this conceptualization of diapora suggested by Cohen, it can be deduced accordingly that living in diaspora world inevitably leads to be torn between two places, two cultures, and two countries: one is physical – where one lives – and the other is imagined, to which one hopes and seeks return.

In his seminal book, *The Local of Culture*, Bhabha, in this respect, argues that:

It is significant that the productive capacities of this Third Space have a colonial or postcolonial provenance. For a willingness to descend into that alien territory –where I have led you- may reveal that the theoretical recognition of the split-space of enunciation may open the way to conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity .To that end, we should remember that it is the ‘inter’ – the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space- that carries the burden of the meaning of culture.³

As mentioned at the beginning of this section, the concept of ‘diaspora’ is a confounding and unstable concept that can be widely mixed up and interchangeably used with other concepts, mainly the concept of ‘exile’. Yet many diaspora scholars and theorists maintain that the terms are used quite differently in spite of the similarity they seem to have. In fact, the distinction between exile and diaspora actually dates back to the first

¹ Roger Rose, “Mexican Migration and the Social Space of Postmodernism,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, (1991), p.13.

² Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2008), pp.135-136.

³ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p.38.

diasporic experience of the Jews. The historical destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple in 568 BC highlighted the painful aspect of diaspora: the experience of displacement manifested in the banishment from the homeland, the loss of home and the sense of exile.¹

Hence, the first distinctive feature is that diaspora is meant to entail more choice in the process that determines migrants' departure. That is, a diasporic person is entitled to the freedom of choice to decide willingly whether to live in diaspora or to stay home, while exile implies implicit forces driving a subject to leave his or her home into a host country. In this respect, Israel argues that, although both exile and diaspora are two overlapping ways of describing displacement, there are subtle distinctions between them. Israel affirms:

In terms of contemporary literary and cultural studies, at least, 'exile', perhaps most closely associated with literary modernism, tends to imply both a coherent subject or author and a more circumscribed, limited conception of place and home. Maintaining a stronger link to minority group solidarity and associated with the intersection of postcoloniality and theories of poststructuralism and postmodernism, "diaspora", by contrast, aims to account for hybridity or performativity that troubles such notions of cultural dominance, location and identity.²

According to Israel's conception, the element of choice constitutes the most contentious issue in the recurrent debates over the use of the two concepts exile and diaspora when addressing the theorisations of writing displacement. In this way, he adds that "one must acknowledge the difference between the personal, economic, social, and political

¹ Roben Cohen, "Diasporas and the Nation-state," p. 507.

² Nico Israel, *Outlandish: Writing between Exile and Diaspora* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2000), p.3.

circumstances of, for example, Henry James or Ezra Pound, and, say, Richard Wright or Ngugi wa Thiongo.”¹

Israel further addresses the linguistic difference between the two concepts diaspora and exile. While exile linguistically contains both an element of force and a sense of progress, diaspora “indicates the dispersal or scattering of a body of people from their traditional home across foreign lands; yet like the agricultural sowing of seeds from which the word comes to us (from the Greek *speirein*), it also suggests an anticipation of root-taking and eventual growth.”²

Moreover, it is worth noting that diaspora, unlike other seemingly similar concepts such as: migration, exile, and trans-nationality, is deemed to be confined to set of essential features suggested by most diasporic authors and theorists. William Safran, for instance, offers a list of six defining characteristics of diasporas: “dispersal to two or more locations, collective mythology of homeland, alienation from host land, idealization of return to homeland, and on-going relationship with homeland.”³

In the light of Safran’s theorization, it is construed, accordingly, that being diasporic entails being, firstly, scattered between, at least, two destinations from one’s home of origin. Secondly, having ethno-national memory and souvenirs of homeland. Thirdly, being racialized and alienated in the receiving land. Fourthly, sustaining the ideology and the willingness of return to one’s country of origin along with maintaining strong contact with the local culture of homeland.

Most diaspora scholars seem, however, to agree upon three basic features of diaspora. First, after being dispersed, there must be a minimum of two destinations as stated above. The

¹ Ibid., p.13.

² Ibid., p.1.

³ William Safran, “Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return,” *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, (1991), p.84.

word diaspora implies a scattering, rather than a transfer from the homeland to a single destination, and is expressed in English and in other Indo-European languages with words sharing the *spr* root, such as “spores”, “disperse”, “spread” and “sperm.”¹ This specific type of dispersal is a necessary precondition for the formation of links and connections between the various populations in diaspora; the internal networks linking the various segments of a diaspora are a unique feature that differentiates them from communities that result from other types of migrations. Second, there must be some relationship to an actual or imagined homeland. Whatever the form of this bond, it provides the foundation from which diasporic identity may develop. Third, there must be self-awareness of the group’s identity. Diasporic communities are consciously part of an ethno-national group; this consciousness binds the dispersed peoples not only to the homeland but to each other as well. Especially in the cases of diasporas whose homeland no longer exists, or who have been separated from the homeland for many generations, this element of consciously held and constructed identity has been pivotal to their survival as a cultural unit. Thus, while all diasporas may be “imagined communities”, only communities imagined in certain ways are diasporas.

Looking throughout this section, which is entirely devoted to covering the concept of diaspora, we have come to witness that the concept has proven to be indeed an elusive and broad concept that one section is certainly insufficient to cover all its angles and facets. In brief, diaspora, as argued above, is basically a multi-layered and a complex concept as it is deployed to refer to all types of scattered populations with different historical, economic, social, and political backgrounds. Among these scattered people, Arab diaspora writers in general and Arab women diaspora writers in particular, whose works are under study in this thesis, form a typical case of diaspora regarding their own specificities and interests that mark them as different from other diaspora writers.

¹ Tölölyan Khachig, “Rethinking Diaspora(s),” p.10.

b- Arab Diaspora Writings : Historical Survey

As mentioned in the previous section, diaspora is a wide umbrella concept which encompasses people or immigrants being scattered to different host countries under various social, economic, and political conditions. This phenomenon of emigration for economic, political, and cultural reasons, of individuals as well as communities is highly seen in different domains of art in general and literature in particular. In this way, some of these immigrants resorted to the power of pen to put down into words their diasporic conditions and the endurances they have faced in the host countries as well as in the homeland.

Needless to say that Arab immigrant authors or Arab ‘diasporic writers’ - the term I will use in this thesis - were , as we have discussed earlier, driven to move from their Arab countries of origin to developed countries especially to The United States of America, Europe, and Canada, where they settled permanently or temporarily. Being displaced in another geographical space entailed a cultural influence and interaction with that of the host country and this was mainly reflected in the languages they used and adopted in their literary works such English, French, Spanish, to name just a few. Hence, this section will be tracing the historical development of the Arab diaspora literature with regard to the first generation of Arab immigrants and their literary texts.

It should be noted that the case of Arab diaspora literature started in the USA with the first wave of immigrants in the late 1800s, when Arab immigrants first began to arrive in North America in significant numbers from Lebanon and Syria to the United States and South America, and later to Europe.¹ Interestingly, these immigrants showed a great interest in literature and poetry, “by co-operating and helping each other in their literary works and ideas, they were able to form a coherent group with common characteristics, and some of

¹ For more details of the history of Arab immigration to the West, see the first chapter of this dissertation.

them had the talent to produce work of a quality and originality which played a vital role in the development of the romantic poetry in Arabic.”¹

Later, by the 1910s several literary societies and journals came into existence, and in 1920 the literary organization Al Rabita al Qalamaiyya (the Pen League) was established by Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani and others. These authors, who wrote in Arabic as well as in English, produced what is known by Arabs as “Adab Mahjar”² (émigré) school of Arab-American writing. Although they had their greatest impact on Arabic literature, these writers were conscious of serving as bridges between the East and the West, and they actively sought to establish philosophical meeting points between Arab and American ideologies and contexts.

It is worth noting that these early immigrant writers especially Gibran Khalik Gibran, Mikhael Nouaima, Ilya Abou Madi, to name a few, served as mediators between the East and the West. Their pieces of literary works were of a great importance inasmuch as it served as a window and a link through which one can see two worlds and two cultures. In this regard, Rebecca Layton states that:

Going back to the early years of the twentieth century, an immigrant school of Arabic literature was led by writers from Lebanon and Syria who sought to expand the cultural production of the early generation of Arab Americans and who served as

¹ Muḥammad Badawi et al., *Modern Arabic Literature* (London: Cambridge, 1992), p.95.

² “Adab Mahjar” is literally translated into English as Arab diaspora literature which is usually meant all the writings in Arabic produced by writers of Arab emigrants in North and South America regardless of whether it is published in America itself or in the Arab East. The Arabic Mahjar literature was established at the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century by the Arab writers who emigrated to the North and South America because of socio-political and economic situation in some Arab countries, including Syria and Lebanon. Without any doubts, the works of Mahjar writers have specific place. That is because these works are examples of rich literary heritage which is surrounded by real life, sincere human feelings, sublime love and the images of beautiful nature. The nomination of Nobel Prize to the famous Mahjar writer Mikhail Nuayma is a vivid proof of the influence of Mahjar literature to the modern world literature.

a bridge between East and West. This core group of early Arab-American literati was composed of writers such as Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931), Ameen Rihani (1876–1940), and Mikhail Naimy (1889–1988). They laid the literary groundwork to which subsequent generations have added their voices and visions.¹

These authors played a key role in communicating two visions and two backgrounds and, therefore, they were deemed as translators in the sense that they let people of the West, through their literary production, see their homeland culture and the Vice Versa. In her prominent book, *Arab voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab literature*, Al Maleh asserts that:

They were the first real cultural mediators between East and West, finding themselves as they did in the conciliatory position of being able, through the medium of English to dispel misgivings about each culture and establish genuine intellectual rapprochement between two traditions. Furthermore, their mediatory function extended to reconciling faiths, Islam and Christianity in their country of origin. Gibran and Rihani wrote in a manner that synthesized Christian and Muslim registers into a more or less unified idiom.²

It is fair enough to say that these writers have been considered as the cornerstones and the founders of the early Arab diaspora in the west in general and in the USA in particular. They have achieved a great success and have gained a lot of fame due to their literary works which were widely known not only among Arab, but also among American readership. Wail Hassan, in this context, argues in his interesting article on Khalil Gibran in this collection:

¹ Rebecca Layton, *Arab-American and Muslim Writers (Multicultural Voices)* (New York: Chelsea House, 2010), p.9.

² Layla Al Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (New York: Rodopi, 2009), p.4.

It was in America that writers produced the first Anglophone Arab poetry collection, *Myrtle and Myrrh* (1905), the first play, *Wajdah* (1909), the first novel, the book of Khalid (1911), and the first Arab-English autobiography, Abraham Mitrie Rihbany's *A Far Journey* (1914). Save for Gibran Khalil Gibran (1883-1931), who broke sales records with his *Prophet* and enjoyed unprecedented success for an Anglophone Arab writers, very few others were known to the average.¹

However, one should know that it was an arduous journey for 'Mahjar' writers to live among the people who do not know their language and traditions during the early years of their settlement and migration in the host countries. That is, they faced a lot of challenges and hardships while trying to assimilate and adopt the new land's traditions and cultures at the same time maintaining loyalty and memoir to their homeland culture and origins. This is highly reflected in their strong desire to prove themselves worthy and make themselves visible in the American mainstream literature and culture. As critic Evelyn Shakir puts it, speaking of Rihani's novel *The Book of Khaled*, "implicit in all this name dropping is the claim that here is an 'oriental'; who can run with western writers, who can match their erudition and imitate their tone, their word play."²

Being scattered away from one's home country in a space which is vastly different – where one finds different language, new settings, and new traditions, is perceived as real challenge for early Arab immigrants, let alone writing creatively in an already established literary canon. Differently put, these writers found it initially quite challenging to establish their literary traditions and works within American literature mainstream at the same time keeping loyalty and their link to their home country cultures. They, therefore, sought approval and acceptance within American literary context by employing distinct narrative strategies.

¹ Ibid., p.2.

² Evelyn Shakir, "Coming of Age: Arab American Literature," *Ethnic Forum* 13.2/14.1 (1993–1994), pp.66-67.

Auto-biographers such as Abraham Mitrie Rihbany and Salom Rizk distanced themselves from those elements and aspects of Arab culture to gain acceptance by white Americans. In particular, they stressed their Christian identity, their geographical origin in the “Holy Land,” and their “spirituality,” employing biblical rhetoric and religious parallels in their attempt to engage American readers and familiarize the “exotic” even as they implicitly or explicitly sought to distance themselves from Islam and subsequently subscribe to Christianity. Many of them, as Lisa Suheir Majaj suggests, “stressed their Christian identity and association with the Holy Land for the same purpose of winning acceptance.”¹

By and large, early Arab immigrants were not enjoying much freedom to articulate their ideas and feelings as they wished. That is, as mentioned above, they found themselves largely pushed to seek acceptance and prove worthy in the American popular culture and its literary conventions. Hence, they intentionally established distance from their culture and their traditions. In doing so, they ended up yielding works that reflect their inclination and praise to host countries, and at the same time it articulates apologies for their home countries. Layla Maleh, here, argues:

But, of course, the writers desired smooth admittance to mainstream America. Perhaps it is to that end that several of them resorted to writing the personal narrative typical of much immigrant literature .Many chronicled their experiences of migration and of settling into the new host country – Asaad Yacoob Kayat, *A Voice from Lebanon*(1847); Abraham Mitri Rihbani, *A Far Journey*(1914); George Haddad, *Mt. Lebanon to Vermont*(1916); Ashad G. Hawie, *The Rainbow Ends*(1942); Salloum Rizk, *Syrian Yankee*(1943); and George Hamid, *Circus*(1950) .²

She further maintains that:

¹ Layla Al Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, p.6.

² *Ibid.*, p.5.

The purpose behind writing the self was not just the desire to record a journey and its concomitant hardships. These autobiographies were in the nature of an apologia, as if justifying their authors' abandonment of, or 'defection' from, their country of origin. The writers reason through and explain their motives for emigration. In the lines of Abraham Mitri Rihbani, "Our aim is to conquer / Ignorance by knowledge / Sin by righteousness / Discord by harmony / Hatred by love."¹

Such narrative strategies were unsurprising given the broader context of assimilation pressures, prerequisite cases and wartime fervour, all of which made the racial, legal, and social status of Arabs in the U.S. tenuous. After the 1960s, however, things began to change. The Civil Rights and Black Power movements² opened new spaces for immigrant and ethnic literary voices more generally. With the publication of works by African Americans, Jewish Americans, Asian Americans and others, Arab-Americans found it easier to write about their ethnic heritage and find publishers and audiences, even as demographic changes resulted in more Arab-Americans' turning to literature and the arts as a form of self-expression.

At the same time, there was also an influx of new immigrants from the Arab world. These immigrants, who were from a variety of countries, frequently Muslim, and often better educated and more politically engaged than the earlier immigrants had been, settled in different European countries and showed a great deal of courage to engage themselves more directly with politics and criticism. Being largely influenced by the colonial culture and their life styles, they deliberately chose to use English as a medium to communicate their ideas and

¹ Ibid., p.5.

² The Civil Rights Movement or 1960s Civil Rights Movement (sometimes referred to as the "African-American Civil Rights Movement" although the term "African American" was not widely used in the 1950s and '60s) encompasses social movements in the United States whose goals were to end racial segregation and discrimination against African Americans and to secure legal recognition and federal protection of the citizenship rights enumerated in the Constitution and federal law.

visions. They depended on English in their narratives not only for identifying with the superior “Other”, but also to reach a wider audience worldwide. Layla Maleh here avers:

that Arab students, who were mostly the products of missionary and foreign schools that were flourishing in the Middle East, began trickling into British universities or seeking employment on British soil. Many were the subjects of cultural colonialism; imbued with love of the language of their education, fascinated by the English life-style reflected in their textbooks, reared in and formed by Western norms and values, they yearned to express themselves creatively in the language of the ‘superior’ Other and to internalize the ‘Other’ in every possible way.¹

Edward Atiyah , a British citizen of Lebanese origin ,was the most prolific of the arab writers who used English for most if not all his work. For example, he yielded many works , some of which are: *The Arabs* in (1958), *An Arab Tells His Story* in (1946), *The Thin Line in* (1951) to mention a few. Those who wrote in English after him were mostly single-work authors. Waguhi Ghali, an Egyptian Copt, produced one novel, *Beer in the Snooker Club*(1964), before he took his own life. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, a Palestinian, wrote *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1960) in English, translating it himself into Arabic many years later. The Lebanese Rima Alamuddin’s *Spring to Summer* (1963) was her sole novel, followed by a collection of short stories. *A Bedouin Boyhood* (1967) by the Palestinian Isaak Diqs was likewise his only work. The literature written could hardly be said to constitute a distinctive literary corpus meriting a place on the map of world literature in English or bearing comparison with the more established Anglophone writings from Africa, India or the Caribbean. It was more or less the product of cultural and historical accidents that took the authors in the direction of one culture rather than another.

¹ Layla Al Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, p.6.

Interesting, the writings of these authors differed greatly from that of their predecessors (Rihani, Gibran, Naimy), in that they seemed to grow more out of the European tradition than the American literary scene of the time. Their works mostly reflected their British educational and intellectual formation, a phenomenon that inhibited the rise of a distinctly Arab-English style or register. Using English for their literary works is not the only distinctive feature of these authors, but rather their whole vision and their perspectives were largely marked by Western impact and culture.

This impact is also noticed through the themes they employed in their frequent works. In other words, the works mostly concerned themselves with the issue of psychological and social alienation (at home and abroad) and the 'return of the exile' theme, the experiences of hybridity and double-consciousness (Atiyah's *Black Vanguard* is an excellent example), an almost frantic preoccupation with identity (*Beer in the Snooker Club*), and the quest for authentic self-representation (often expressed by an inclination towards autobiographical writing), which clearly anticipates the postmodern and postcolonial text.

Moreover, the political theme also featured prominently in their writings. With the wide English-speaking world for an audience, they wished to communicate their ideas on the serious political issues that were troubling their countries of origin. Several works (*Lebanon, Paradise, Hunters in a Narrow Street, A Bedouin Boyhood*) were Arab versions of an 'exodus' narrative. Through these 'political' narratives, writers were able to communicate their 'thorny' political experience without falling into the hazards of apathy, banality, or sheer propaganda. Realizing that Western readers had more often than not formulated their opinions of Arabs through prejudiced accounts of travellers (who held a romantic vision of the Middle East) or the studies of orientalist (who held a narrow and reductionist view of Arabs), Anglophone Arab writers, it seemed, had the will to reclaim their narrative voice and recover their own discourse.

It can be gleaned that there were three literary trends among Arab diaspora writers. That is, in the course of one century of Anglophone Arab writing, three trends can so far be identified: the Mahjar (early-twentieth-century émigrés in the USA); the Europeanized aspirants of the mid-1950s; and the more recent hybrids, hyphenated, transcultural, exilic/diasporic writers of the past four decades or so who have been scattered all over the world.¹

Equally important, one can easily notice in the recent years the increasing number of Arab female writers in Diaspora. For example, what characterizes Anglophone Arab discourse in Britain in the past thirty years or so is that it is mostly female, feminist, diasporic in awareness, and political in character. Indeed, the presence of female writers is highly visible, vivid and indelible. Hence, this dissertation is meant to examine some of these female narratives vis-à-vis the post-colonial readings. Accordingly, the upcoming section will further delineate the emergence of a new body of literature marked by strong presence of Arab diaspora women writers.

c- Arab Anglophone Women Diaspora Writings as a Minor Literature

As it has been mentioned previously in the introduction of dissertation, most of the literary diasporic works produced in the last few decades were written by female authors living in diaspora who used European languages, especially English as their main tool for their literature and expressions. Interestingly, literary works written by these Arab Anglophone women writers—mainly novels and short stories—have brought more recognition and visibility to the Arab women whose identity is perceived by the Western readership as being different, peculiar, complex, and mosaic because of her portrayal in the media and in the books of early orientalist. This section will be as such concerned specifically with

¹ Ibid., p.12.

highlighting this new-born Arab female body of literature with respect not only to its prominent pioneers, but also to its main themes discussed by these authors.

By and large, most of these writers¹, as elucidated earlier, were driven by a number of reasons, one of which is to pursue their higher degrees. Distance from the country of origin, therefore, endowed them with much freedom to express their visions and thoughts as they wished. Differently put, leaving outside their countries of origins granted them breathing-space to reclaim their own narratives after they found freedom in hybridity and choice in acculturation. Literary and political activism was particularly attractive to them, perhaps because they found in the diaspora a site of absolute freedom, a free political and intellectual community that could accommodate the non-conformity of their views. In this context, Layla Maleh points out:

For Soueif and Faqir, Ghandour and Abulela, diaspora granted them a platform from which they could address topics deemed taboo in their countries of origin. The irony, however, is that distance does not always rescue them from their critics ‘back home’, who take them to task in unsparingly vociferous attacks, relentlessly construing both their choice of foreign tongue and their subject-matter as a reflection of disaffection or lack of national feeling.²

Arab women writings produced by immigrant writers represent a distinct trend that falls into various literary areas, but the most recurrent of these areas in recent literary criticism is Arab Anglophone literature. Certainly, Anglophone Arabic literature, that is a literature conceived and executed in English by writers of Arabic background, is qualitatively

¹ There are several names of female authors who are either Arab British - Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Layla Elalami, Betoul Elkhedir, Leila Aboulela and others—or Arab American –Mohja Kahf, Diana Abujaber, Layla Elmaleh, Naomi Shehab Nye and others –and who have gained a literary recognition for their works which created certain cultural and literary bridges between divergent spaces, cultures and peoples as is the case for Soueif’s prominent novel, *The Map of Love*.

² Layla Al Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, p.15.

different from Arabic literature and Arabic literature translated into English. According to Zahia Smail, she defines this new literature as the following:

A new Arabic literature is thus created, and although it may have been written in Arabic, such as the works of Tayeb Salih, Haifa Zangana, and Hannan Al-Shaykh, it differs from the literature of the Arab writers who write from the Arab world. The same goes for the literature of the Arab writers who write in European languages such as Ahdaf Soueif, Sabiha al Khemir, Zeina Ghandour, and Jamal Mahjoub who write in English, and Tahar Ben Jelloun, Malika Mokadem, Hedi Bouraoui, and Assia Djébar who write in French. Although they write in the language of their host country, their literature is by no means similar to that of their host country, nor is it similar to that of their country of origin.¹

In the light of this, one can note that Arab diaspora literature is unique and hybrid inasmuch as it carries signs and features of both the authors host's country and their country of origin which marks it as a distinctive body of literature from that written by Arab women authors. In other words, Arab diaspora literature places itself in the third position because it is not entirely considered among narratives of the author's host country, nor is it viewed as literature of the author's home country. Besides, it is a narrative where two cultures and two spaces converge and intersect to end up with hybrid writings. More importantly, the narrative produced by these authors is highly noted for its themes and contents that swirl around not only the pains and the sufferings these authors have encountered at diaspora world, but also the endless quest for their true belonging, their identity and loss in the receiving countries.

¹ Zahia Smail S., Ian Richard N., eds., *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p.3.

It is, therefore, in this sense that the narratives produced by this category of Arab women writers have often been classified under the few labels of minor literature, postcolonial, feminist, non-native, hybrid or Anglophone literary discourse. It is, however, difficult to locate it either in the trend of home country literature- Arabic one or host country literature -English and /or French literature because it is founded by authors who, on one hand, converge in many aspects especially in terms of their Arab identity and cultural identity, but yet diverge in terms of political, cultural and religious issues on the other hand. And just like its authors who occupy a third space within their host country, this literature is also located in a third space as it is not entirely Arab nor is it entirely English or French.

In her article entitled “Defining the Arab Diaspora”, Zahia Smail Salhi elucidates that:

Diasporic writings, however, find their originality in this difference, and as such, refuse to belong to either side of the bridge; in other words, although incessantly complain about the pains of exile, it is exile that created and in it, proliferate. Moreover, it is this aspect of being Diasporic, or exilic that makes it attractive to both parties; while the East uses it as a window to better understand the west, the west also uses it as a means to better understand the East, especially in the case of translated literature or even better when this literature is actually written in a European language.¹

Furthermore, Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of minor literature is significantly useful to better locate these narratives. Their theory simply scrutinizes immigrant writers with divergent cultural, social and political backgrounds and who stand between the culture of origin and that of the adoptive country; and equipped with the first-hand knowledge of both. They assume the role of mediators, interpreters, cultural translators or a double-sight observer

¹ Ibid., p.4.

of the two cultural entities. This is highly applicable to most Arab Anglophone women authors such as Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Laila Lalami, Leila Aboulela, Randa Abdel-fattah, and Laila Halaby, to name just a few.

For Deleuze and Guattari:

A minor literature has three main characteristics: the first characteristic of minor literature in any case is that in it language is affected with a high coefficient of deterritorialization. The second characteristic of minor literature is the connection of the individual to a political immediacy. The third characteristic of minor literature is that in it everything takes on a collective value.¹

Based on this perspective, we argue that Arab Anglophone writings, women writings in particular, may be categorized as minor and/or minority literature. Although contemporary Arab women writings are divergent as their authors belong to different communities, we believe that dealing with literary texts produced by hybrid and hyphenated Arab Anglophone women authors must submit to a finite convergence that bring the difference of these works to a common commitment *vis-à-vis* the nation, the home, the culture, the religion and above all the gender.

In this context, the localisation of Arab Anglophone women writings into the area of minor literature is based on the use of English not as a universal language, but as a linguistic means to surpass the boundaries between the Arab writer and the Western reader or as a deliberate choice for writers whose mother tongue is American English or British English. English, be it the major language, in the hands of these writers – Faqir, Soueif, Halabi, Kahf, Aboulela, Nye and all Arab and/or Muslim Anglophone –has been deterritorialized and metamorphosed to meet the cultural specificity of Arab women as

¹ Gilles Deleuze & Gillesand Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), pp.16-17.

writers who traverse worlds, cultures and languages. Therefore, the specificity of works produced in English by Arab American or Arab British (women) writers are widely divergent from works produced by main stream American or British writers in essence and in genre.

Thus, there has recently been a growing interest in these works manifested basically in the rising courses devoted to Arab Anglophone writings in many Western universities, in the many books written to record and analyse these works, and also in the many conferences and forums of which the thematic is related to the particularity of this discourse. Equally important, novels, short stories, poems and even plays produced in English by writers of Arab origins contribute to the emergence of an independent literature that is neither Arabic nor English, but it is linguistically and culturally hybrid, discursively multidimensional and literarily heterogeneous. Besides, it is important to highlight the divergences –and convergences –among works produced by Arab British women writers who may be best described as hybrid and those produced by Arab American women writers who are daughters of late nineteenth century immigrants and who may be best described as hyphenated.

In his PhD thesis, entitled *Cartographies of Identities: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers*, Yousuf Awad aims at exploring the controversy that stems out of the differences existing between Arab British and Arab American women writers. He argues that there is a tendency among Arab British women novelists to foreground and advocate trans-cultural dialogue and cross ethnic identification strategies in a more pronounced approach than their Arab American counterparts who tend, in turn, to employ literary strategies to resist stereotypes and misconceptions about Arab communities in American popular

culture. He also argues that these differences result from two diverse racialized Arab immigration and settlement patterns on both sides of the Atlantic.

In the same vein, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek has published a significant book entitled *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: hyphenated identities and border crossings*, a work that gives the reader a fascinating insight of what a hyphenated identity of an Arab American woman is. This work adds an important clarification vis-à-vis the significance of the concept of 'hyphenated identity' used to refer to Arab American writers and 'hybrid identity' to refer rather to Arab British writers within the context of our research.

Thus, straight to the point we deduce that a conceptual distinction must be given to different groups belonging to the major trend of Anglophone Arab writers: hyphenated to Arab American writers, and hybrid to Arab British writers. This distinction is highlighted in the way each group would represent their identity through writings differently and/or similarly, and then it brings a crucial dimension for the categorization of Anglophone Arab women narratives belonging to these two subgroups. I argue that the different identities strongly influence mainly the thematic construction of the writings of Anglophone Arab women writers, their conception of their 'home' /'home-country', and the diasporic experience which might be different from one writer to another. I believe that individual background of each writer and her literary tendencies also influence the perception of home.

Moreover, it is the precarious position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in Britain and the United States of America that Arab Anglophone women writers living in both countries re-identify differently their homeland and their identity as a whole. The vision of home specific to these diasporic writers is rooted in the specificity of their hybrid and/or hyphenated identity. As women, as fiction writers and as Arabs, Ahdaf Soeuf,

Fadia Faqir, Leila Aboulela, Diana Abou Jaber, Naomi Shehab Nye, and others, have found a space in their narratives to explore their own depiction of the home they either left behind at a later stage of their lives (for the first three writers) or they originally come from and nostalgically yet permanently go back to at a later stage of their lives as in the case of Arab Americans.

It could be concluded that the heterogeneity of the literature produced by Arab women writers in Diaspora rises from the different politics of location specific to two distinct ethnic communities—Arab British and Arab American – as Arab immigration and settlement patterns in Britain and the US are quite historically divergent. As a matter of fact, the literature produced by Arab British writers must be of a different cultural expression than that produced by contemporary Arab American writers. In the words of Layla Almaleh, Arab British literature as mostly female, feminist, diasporic in awareness, and political in character.¹

4- Identity in Flux: Negotiating Identity through Diasporic Perspectives

Introduction

Not only is identity regarded at the centre stage in literary and cultural productions, but also in the disciplines of humanities in general. Interestingly, identity has occupied a central place and concern in postmodern philosophy and contemporary disciplines in social sciences, cultural studies, literary studies and other academic disciplines. Indeed, it will be futile to attempt to sketch an accurate definition of the concept due to its complexities and its amalgam

¹ Layla, Al Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, p.13.

approaches and components it involves in the process of its formation. This chapter will be mainly and extensively devoted to define the concept of identity as a complex issue in the modern age due to the much heated debate it has aroused among academics, scholars, and critics in a wide range of domains in social sciences and humanities; then it will accordingly tackle the concept of hybridity from a postmodern perspective as an unavoidable alternative to the on-going and prolonged dispute among scholars and theorists. It will finally look at the third space as a site for diasporic subjects in general and Arab women in particular to negotiate hybrid identity outside binarism of hegemonic forces of race, gender, class, and ethnicity.

a- Perspectives on Identity

As it appears in the title of this dissertation, the concept of identity is a key concept among others such as diaspora and Arab women writers. In brief, the concept of identity is an important axis of analysis around which this study is shaped. That is to say, it plays a crucial role in the development of this thesis as it forms the cornerstone of the whole research regarding the fact that one of the questions this research seeks to answer is how Arab women's diaspora writers have constructed their identities through their literary works and fictions in the diaspora world. With this in mind, this section will approach the concept of identity with regard to the complexities and controversy it has provoked both in modernist as well as postmodernist perspectives. Crucially, it will argue how identity -unlike in traditional and modernist thought- is perceived as a constantly changing and is significantly constructed product vis-a-vis socio-historical, political, cultural, economic, and diasporic contexts. Put differently, this section will examine the concept identity in the light of two opposing views and ideologies, mainly modernist and postmodernist thoughts. More precisely, it will highlight this concept in the light of the following problematic questions: What is identity? Does identity change over time? Is identity shaped and determined by your family,

communities, historical, political, and cultural factors in which you live? These questions are multi-faceted, aimed to stimulate thought, to provoke inquiry and spark more controversy.

As mentioned above, it is indisputable that the concept of identity is to a large extent similar to that of diaspora regarding its complexity and elusive uses in the field of literary and cultural studies. It is rather what Avra calls “an enigma which, by its very nature, defines a precise definition.”¹ It is as such due to the fact that its constituents are complex and innumerable. In fact, identity includes numerous elements including personal, social, economic, psychological and cultural factors, to name a few. To begin with, the concept of identity is used in a basic terms to refer to a set of codes and elements that make the individual not only a distinct ‘self’ from ‘other, but also ’a distinct group with shared history, past, and cultural practices. These elements include age, nationality, profession, gender, political affiliation, affinity to name a few.

In his insightful book *On Identity*, Maalouf mentions the determiners of identity which can be “nationality or even attachment to a province, a village, a neighbourhood, a clan, a professional team or one connected with sport, a group of friends, a union, a company, a parish, a community of people with some passions, the same sexual preference.”² These defining features of identity are, however, highly arguable in a way they are not static and fixed. Rather, they are constantly contested and negotiated as they keep changing over times with different facts and contexts. More importantly, people will always try to distinguish themselves in order to prove their presence. When a group of different people meet, they usually identify themselves by nationalities, and when a group of the same nationalities meet, identification becomes on a regional basis and when those of the same region meet, it boils down to areas and neighbourhoods. These sub-levels of identity go even deeper, since every

¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Identities: Contesting Identities* (London and Newyork: Routledge, 1996), p.20.

² Amin Maalouf, *On Identity*, trans. Barbara Bray (London: The Harveril Press, 2000), p .3.

individual is unique and will continue to defend that singularity whenever they encounter gathering social contexts.

This view is enhanced by Brah who mentions in his seminal book, *Cartographies of Identities: Contesting Identities* that: “we know from our everyday experience that what we call ‘me’ or ‘I’ is not the same in every situation; that we are changing from day to day. Yet there is something we recognize in ourselves and in others which we call ‘me’ and ‘you’ and ‘them’.”¹ Hence, a person is subject to encounter various changes in myriad ways as they grow up and move on in their lives which results ultimately and necessarily in the change of their identity and their self-definition. That is, a person easily appropriates new labels and move from one position to another as they go through certain decisions in their everyday life such as getting married, changing one’s career, and joining a political party ,...etc. people start accordingly identifying you and pointing to you as such.

As aforementioned, the concept of identity has attracted due attention and concern of theorists and scholars in wide range of fields particularly cultural studies, literary studies and other disciplines of humanities. It has been noted more than ever since as a much-debated concept and, therefore, it has gained much interest in the recent decades especially with the emergence of new social groups and the fusion of various cultures resulting from neo-colonialism and its manifestations such as capitalism and globalisation. Identity construction has become, under these circumstances, a complex and on-going process.

It is of such interest to point out that identity was perceived before by essentialists in the modern era as a static and fixed essence that defines a person’s entire life. In his prominent book *Media Culture*, Keller argues:

¹ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Identities*, p. 20.

According to anthropological and sociological folklore, in traditional societies, one's identity was fixed, solid, and stable. Identity was a function of predefined social roles and a traditional system of myths which provided orientation and religious sanctions to define one's place in the world, while rigorously circumscribing the realm of thought and behavior. One was born and died a member of one's clan, of a fixed kinship system, and of one's tribe or group with one's life trajectory fixed in advance. In premodern societies, identity was unproblematical and not subject to reflection or discussion. Individuals did not undergo identity crises, or radically modify their identity. One was a hunter and a member of the tribe and gained one's identity through these roles and functions.¹

In the light of this definition, identity was viewed as a predominantly stable entity which does not only inform one's life, but also shapes and determines their existence throughout their entire life. Hence, one's identity is essentially predefined and constructed with regard to the norms, traditions, roles and functions of a certain society which a subject finds themselves unwillingly identified with even before coming to this world. Douglass, in this respect, further argues that Identity was "conceived of as something essential, substantial, unitary, fixed and fundamentally unchanging."²

It is worth noting that the concept of identity, however, has been perceived and approached differently in postmodern times by postmodern scholars and theorists due to the increasing complexities of modern life and the crumbling of the individual's unity in a globalized world. Unlike the modernist perspectives and conception which were based on the substantiality of the self and identity, the postmodernist theories view identity as an existential project which is subject to change. The existential self is always, to use Kellner's words,

¹ Douglass Kellner, *Media Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995), p.231.

² *Ibid.*, p.232.

“fragile and requires commitment, resolve, and action to sustain, thus making the creation of identity an existential project for each individual.”¹

In fact, one’s identity in modern world is no longer fixed and stable as it comes to depend necessarily on the interaction with others and their recognition. Indeed, “the other is constituent of identitywe are dependent upon others for recognition and thus for the establishment of personal identity,”² argues Kellner. It also experiences anxiety and uncertainty as one is “never certain that one has made the right choice, that one has chosen one’s ‘true’ identity, or even constituted an identity at all”,³ he adds. Hence, a person’s identity has become very questionable as “identity may become out of date, or superfluous, or no longer socially validated. One may thus experience anomie, a condition of extreme alienation in which one is no longer at home in the world.”⁴

If traditional societies, as mentioned above, were firmly bound by the social and the tribe identity that had been collectively formed, modern societies are, however, highly disintegrated and fragmented in the new modern world ,and, thus leading the rise of individuality and the anxiety of the self. Hence, the notion of identity has sparked more controversy and debate taking into consideration the globalized world where multiculturalism and multi-ethnicity has emerged as a substitution for past and fixed identities. In this respect, Kellner puts it:

Identity in modernity becomes increasingly problematic and the issue of identity itself becomes a problem. Indeed, only in a society anxious about identity could the problems of personal identity, or self-identity, or identity crises, arise and be subject to worry and debate. Theorists of self-identity are often anxious (Kierkegaard,

¹ Ibid., p.232.

² Ibid., pp. 231-232.

³ Ibid., p.232.

⁴ Ibid.

Heidegger, Sartre) concerning the fragility of identity and analyse in detail those experiences and social forces which undermine and threaten personal identity.”¹

As noted before, the concept of identity is defined by some modernist theorists as something essential, substantial, unitary, fixed and fundamentally unchanging, while others such as David Hume and Jean Paul Sartre go a step further to postulate that identity is “an existential project and thus becomes “ more mobile, multiple, personal, self-reflexive, and subject to change.”²

It is of paramount importance to state that the perception of identity has engendered more tense and debate in contemporary times regarding the modernist vis-à-vis the postmodernist backgrounds. In brief, not only has the essentialist conception of identity come under criticism with deconstructionism in postmodernist thoughts, the link between identity and authenticity has also been the subject of much speculation and has been interrogated to such an extent that today, it has become difficult to approach the notion of identity without engaging the mechanisms including the historical, political and cultural forces it involves in its construction .That is to say, the authenticity of identity has been highly questioned in the realm of postmodernist thought regarding the determiners and influences informing the construction of one’s identity.

As aforementioned, a person’s identity is defined differently according to postmodern thought. One, for instance, is never certain about their authentic identity as it is an ever changing process in which the self is subject to change in a myriad of ways. Kellner, in this respect, maintains that:

From the postmodern perspective, as the pace, extension, and complexity of modern societies accelerate, identity becomes more and more unstable, more and more fragile.

Within this situation, the discourses of postmodernity problematize the very notion of

¹ Ibid., p.232.

² Ibid.

identity, claiming that it is a myth and an illusion.....Post-structuralists in turn have launched an attack on the very notions of the subject and identity, claiming that subjective identity is itself a myth, a construct of language and society, an overdetermined illusion that one is really a substantial subject, that one really has a fixed identity.¹

It is importantly implied here that postmodern thought critically contests the modernist conception of identity as a fixed notion. It is accordingly a problematic notion and it is no longer fixed and authentic but rather it is a product determined by a number of social and historical factors. The self has, therefore, turned out to be fragmented and hyphenated in such context with no authentic identity. In countering modernism, postmodernism problematizes the notion of identity more and more claiming that it is just a mere illusion , and “self-constituting subject that was the achievement of modern individuals, of a culture of individualism, is fragmenting and disappearing, due to social processes which produce the levelling of individuality in a rationalized, bureaucratized and consumerized mass society and media culture.”²It is at this point that the sense of identity becomes in flux and mutability.

In the same vein, Hall contends that “identity is not as transparent or unproblematic as we think.” He maintains that “perhaps, instead of thinking of identity as an already accomplished fact, which the new cultural practices then represent, we should think instead of identity as a production, which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.”³

One can note that identity is highly intertwined with culture in the sense that identity, according to some scholars, is socially formulated and it is constituted through culture. In

¹ Ibid., p.233.

² Ibid.

³Stuart Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” in *Identity: Community, Culture and Difference*, ed., Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), p.222.

brief, both culture and identity are inextricably interwoven concepts in a way that one affects the other.

In fact, cultural identity is used by scholars in a wide range of humanities and social sciences and disciplines, including especially communication and cultural studies, not to mention psychology, history, linguistics, and regional studies, among others. Crucially, cultural identity refers to identification with, or sense of belonging to a particular group based on various cultural categories, including nationality, ethnicity, race, gender, and religion. Cultural identity is constructed and maintained through the process of sharing collective knowledge such as traditions, heritage, language, aesthetics, norms and customs. As individuals typically affiliate with more than one cultural group, cultural identity is complex and multifaceted. While formerly scholars assumed identification with cultural groups to be obvious and stable, today most view it as contextual and dependent upon temporal and spatial changes. In the globalized world with increasing intercultural encounters, cultural identity is constantly enacted, negotiated, maintained, and challenged through communicative practices.

In his prominent article entitled “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, Stuart Hall defines identity regarding two different ways. First, he stresses the importance of constructing one’s identity in relation to others. It is, therefore, an ‘interactive process’, which entails sharing values, traditions and cultural codes with people of the same race. In this regard, Hall argues that:

The first position defines ‘cultural identity in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of a collective ‘one true self’, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed ‘selves’, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as ‘one people’, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting

divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history. This ‘oneness’, underlying all the other.¹

This position which is based on the interaction with others in a given society is advocated by essentialists who contend that identity is a ‘fixed’ and ‘stable’ entity. Hall, however, thinks that the concept of identity has been challenged in the present time and, therefore, it has become more problematic and fluid due to the changes the world has encountered in the time of globalization. Accordingly, he adds that:

Different views of cultural identity this second position recognizes that, as well as the many points of similarity, there are also critical points of deep and significant difference which constitute ‘what we really are’; or rather-since history has intervened-‘what we have become’. We cannot speak for very long, with any exactness, about one ‘experience, one identity’, without acknowledging its other side-the ruptures and discontinuities which constitute, precisely, the Caribbean’s uniqueness. Cultural identity, in this second sense, is a matter of ‘becoming’ as well as of being’. It belongs to the future as much as to the past.²

Hall reveals here the change the concept of the identity has encountered in the modern times and the debate it has brought about among scholars. Differently put, this quote suggests the shifting that has occurred on the definition of the concept of identity with respect to post-modernism. The subject, previously experienced as having a unified and stable identity, is becoming fragmented; composed, not of a single, but of several, sometimes contradictory or unresolved, identities. Correspondingly, the identities which composed the social landscapes ‘out there,’ and which ensured our subjective conformity with the objective ‘needs’ of the culture, are breaking up as a result of structural and institutional change. The very process of

¹ Ibid., p.223.

² Ibid.

identification, through which we project ourselves into our cultural identities, has become more open-ended, variable, and problematic.¹

As a result, the subject becomes conceptualized as having no fixed, essential, or permanent identity. Identity becomes rather a ‘moveable feast’, formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways we are represented or addressed in the cultural systems which surround us. In this regard, Hall concludes that identity is “historically, not biologically, defined” in the sense that “the subject assumes different identities at different times, identities which are not unified around a coherent “self.”² Hall implies here that we all undergo different experiences which make us live under different names and conditions. He maintains that “within us are contradictory identities, pulling in different directions, so that our identifications are continuously being shifted about. If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or ‘narrative of the self’ about ourselves.”³ This fully unified, completed, secure, and coherent identity is a fantasy according to Hall’s conception. Instead, as the systems of meaning and cultural representation multiply, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities or ‘hybrid identity’ as we shall discuss in the following section.

b- Hybridity: Development and Reappropriation

The concept of identity, as it has been argued above, has been thoroughly influenced in the last few decades especially by what is now called a globalization era and its repercussions. For many scholars, not only has globalization made the world more interconnected, but it has also changed the world’s social, economic, and political structure in which peoples’ movements have become easier and therefore their identities and cultures have been

¹ Stuart Hall, eds, *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (Cambridge, Mass: Blackwell, 1996), p.598.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

perpetually exposed to change and reconstruction. To this end, this exchange and fusion have engendered new concepts such as ‘transculturalism, border-crossings, and hybridity, the latter notion around which this section revolves.

Interestingly, hybridity is one of the concepts that have gained increasing popularity in postcolonial contexts. This currency stems from the fact that the concept has not only intrigued the interests of scholars and critics in diverse areas, but it has been a compelling and critical instrument whereby cultures and identities are approached and explored. Given that hybridity is viewed among other concepts as a contested and an interdisciplinary concept, it has been constantly reworked and appropriated by critics and theorists in a wide range of academic studies and across multifarious disciplines in different parts of the globe. In spite of its popularity and its frequent use in all these fields, hybridity is still highly vague and its use and image becomes even more blurred, especially when it is linked to concepts such as ‘culture’ and ‘identity. To that end, this section is meant to explore ‘hybridity’ regarding the historical evolution of the concept within cultural and literature studies.

According to the’ Webster Online Dictionary:

Hybrid (noun)

1. An offspring of two animals or plants of different races, breeds, varieties, species, or genera.
2. Person whose background is a blend of two diverse cultures or traditions.
3. Something heterogeneous in origin or composition: composite hybrids of complementary DNA and RNA strands; a hybrid of medieval and Renaissance styles.

In the light of this definition, it is fair to note that the concept of ‘hybridity’ emanates and evolves from a biological discourse in which two species of plants or animals are merged to engender a third of its own that preserves aspects of the two species. It was further appropriated to cultural studies to denote individuals of mixed race and ethnicity.

The appropriation of ‘hybridity’ owes too much to post colonialism theory during which a host of highly disputable concepts and notions were brought up including identity, class, gender, culture, diaspora, liminality, to name a few. As Ania Loomba asserts in her insightful book *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* that “Postcolonial studies have been preoccupied with issues of hybridity, creolisation, mestizaje, in-betweenness, diasporas and liminality, with the mobility and cross-overs of ideas and identities generated by colonialism.”¹

Hence, postcolonialism played a key role in the emergence of the concept of hybridity among others which have been tackled by a number of theorists in different realms and disciplines. Many postcolonial critics and theorists have employed the notion of ‘hybridity’ in the last few decades as a means of questioning and deconstructing the hegemony of Western discursive identity politics. Ania Loomba, for instance, points out that “Caribbean and Latin American activists started hybridity as an anti-colonial strategy.”² Hybridity, therefore, is “a paradigm, a condition of our time”³ adds De Toro. More importantly, hybridity has two forms, based on the concept adopted by Bakhtin for the analysis of discourse. It has, as Bakhtin contends, two forms: the first is the organic hybridity which is, he elucidates, “a natural process wherein in all cultures incorporate elements from others as they come in contact with them,” while the second form is called “the intentional hybridity” which creates an ironic double consciousness, a ‘collision between differing points of views on the world.’⁴

‘Hybridity’ has, therefore, become a prevalent concept in contemporary post-colonial discourse and it is mostly concerned with the place of the post-colonial migrant in the West.

¹ Ania Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), p.173.

² Ibid.

³ Alfonso De Toro, “Globalization - New Hybridities – Transidentities – Transnations: Recognition – Difference” in *New Hybridities: Societies and Cultures in Transition*, F. Heidemann & A. De Toro, eds., (Hildersheim: OLMS, 2006), p.11.

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, trans. M Holquist & C. Emerson (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.360.

More significantly, it can also refer to the encounter between two or multiple cultures in (formerly) colonized areas. With this in mind, it may be useful to investigate the concept of post-colonialism from which the notion of hybridity springs. Bhabha himself describes post-colonialism as follows:

It bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. [It] emerge[s] from the colonial testimony of Third World countries and the discourses of ‘minorities’ within the geopolitical divisions of East and West, North and South. [It] intervene[s] in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities [and] people.¹

The evolution of the concept of ‘hybridity’ owes too much to Homi Bhabha². Put differently, the concept of ‘hybridity’ has been widely associated with the pioneering work the *Location of Culture* by an outstanding cultural theorist and scholar Homi K. Bhabha. That is to say, in 1994, Homi Bhabha wrote *The Location of Culture* which subsequently not only has had a profound impact on the evolution of hybridity theory, but has also become as a reference of its wide usage in a multitude of disciplines. Bhabha’s argument, in fact, has a key role in the discussion of hybridity and he is the first scholar who has developed this concept in the field of cultural studies. In this regard, Said affirms that, Bhabha “is that rare thing, a reader of enormous subtlety and wit, a theorist of uncommon power [and] his work *The*

¹ Homi Bhabha K., *The Location of Culture*, pp.245-246.

² Bhabha was born in Mumbai in 1949 and is currently a Professor of English and American Literature at Harvard University. Bhabha in his turn was heavily indebted to Said. This can be witnessed from the acknowledgements in *The Location of Culture*, in which he says that he “[wants ...] to acknowledge the pioneering *oeuvre* of Edward Said which provided [him] with a critical terrain and an intellectual project” (Bhabha xxvi).

Location of Culture is a landmark in the exchange between ages, genres and cultures; the colonial, postcolonial, modernist and postmodern.”¹

Being one of the most influential figures in the field of postcolonialism, Bhabha contends while discussing the notion of hybridity with John Rutherford: “all forms of culture are continually in a process of hybridity.”² For Bhabha, ‘the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges; rather hybridity to him is the, “‘Third Space’, which enables other positions to emerge.”³ Thus, Bhabha transfers the notion of hybridity from the biological and racist spheres to the spatial. Bhabha’s hybridity is one that proposes to shift the location of culture and identity to the liminal space which is outside the dualities of centre and margin; of Europe and the Third World. It represents the will to move from the fixed to the fluid, to the space of the ‘in-between’, for, ‘an important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of fixity in the ideological construction of otherness. “It connotes rigidity and an unchanging order,”⁴ maintains Bhabha.

He further contends that the ‘third space’ is a productive space from which alternative perspectives and new conceptions of identity are possible. However, since it is born of the attempt to undermine predetermined colonial identities and categorizations, Bhabha insists that the productive capacities of this ‘third space’ have a colonial or post-colonial provenance.⁵ It is now obvious that being as one of the most influential figures in the field of cultural studies and postcolonialism along with others such as Edward Said and Frantz Fanon, Bhabha mainly refutes the fixity and unchanging nature of the concept of identity held by essentialists and Eurocentric ideology and, therefore, he suggests hybridity as a strategic tool

¹ Homi Bhabha K. *The Location of Culture*, p.1.

² John Rutherford, “The Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha”, in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, Rutherford, J. (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1999), p.211.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.94.

⁵ Ibid., p.56.

and an alternative position that allows multiculturalism and trans-nationalism in cultural dialogues.

In the same vein with Bhabha, who emphasises the importance of space in permitting a renegotiation of identity and subjectivity and therefore allowing the margins an expression of multiplicity due to their contact with other cultures, Latin-American theorists have approached the notion of space from almost the same perspective in the sense that it enables crossing the borders of state and identity. To this end, the physical space of the border has been appropriated by theorists like De Toro for whom it (border)... is no longer a separating or excluding concept but rather a 'transversal' or , 'hybrid category' - a site of enunciation and a strategy for thinking about the World, Life, Subject.'¹

Similarly, in her semi-autobiographical work *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* that includes prose and poems highlighting the invisible "borders" that exist between Latinas/os and non-Latinas/os, men and women, heterosexuals and homosexuals, and other groups, Gloria Anzaldú identifies the border as a space where she can fully enact her role as a *mestiza lesbian Chicana*, that is her sexuality, gender and cultural positioning respectively. In this regard, she affirms that "because I, a mestiza, /continually walk out of one culture/ and into another, / because I am in all cultures at the same time."² It is, she continues, "a space, that exists wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy."³In this space, ambiguity is enabling as it permits the taking up of several positions simultaneously.

Borders are, therefore, physically fluid spaces that decentralize the dualism of the centre and the margin and, by extension, the colonizer superiority and the colonized inferiority. This

¹ Alfonso De Toro, "Globalization", p.10.

² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute,1987), p.77.

³ Ibid., p.preface.

is well illustrated by Renato Rosaldo who avers that “‘border zones’ are neither necessarily coherent nor always homogeneous.”¹ Rosaldo’s conception is significantly examined in Lionnet’s introduction to *Postcolonial Representations*, in which she reveals the importance of a hybrid language as “a site of creative resistance to the dominant conceptual paradigms’, in the ‘border zones’ of Rosaldo.”²

The frontiers, in this sense, play a key role in relocating the marginalized subjects that were before made silenced because of their inferior positions as subalterns or hybrids belonging to no specific community. Lionnet’s use of Rosaldo’s theory of the ‘border zones’ in her introduction to analyses of works by African, Caribbean and Mauritian authors’ works demonstrates the applicability of such theories to writings of authors of different geographical and cultural backgrounds. Rosaldo, like Anzaldúa and Peña refutes fixity of identity held by essentialists and he alternatively advocates a view of the border and identity as unfixed, mutable and, on-going process much like Bhabha’s ‘third space’ or hybridity.

However, the concept of hybridity, like many theories, has recently received much criticism and has been open to dispute from many critics even within the sphere of postcolonial studies. The major grounds of these critics’ dispute emanate from the historical background of the concept, the ambivalence the concept carries, along with and the lack of cohesion of the theories of the concept itself. For instance, Vinay Lal and Anand Lal aptly note, “the re-appropriation of hybridity is also form of resistance on the part of theorists like Bhabha, whose objective is to move the focus away from essentialist binaries, but despite all

¹ Renato Rosaldo, “Ideology, Place and People without Culture,” *Cultural Anthropology*, 3.1, (1988), p.87.

² Françoise Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women Literature Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), p.6.

this, the term carries with it its negative connotations. Hybridity is reminiscent of colonial prejudices and eugenic biological legacies.¹

Borsó is also another critic who has levelled a great deal of criticism at the use of concept 'hybridity' regarding its conceptualization that is based on the combining of two or more stable cultures, which leads to forging a homogenous culture. To explain his reflections on the concept, Broso argues:

Hybridity is a questionable term. It means the crossing of plants, and metaphorically, of cultures. However, if we consider hybridity as an ontological property of culture, we still presuppose homogeneity to be a previous mode of culture.²

Another salient attribute raised by critics of hybridity is linked to ambivalence. According to these critics, the new position of hybridity opens doors for the emergence of another fixed identity which hybridity claims to subvert. Put differently, while hybridity allegedly replaces the notion of an all-encompassing single and stable identity, the idea of unity and fixity is still pervasive in the sense that hybrid identity carries within itself a new single identity. In this regard, Radhakrishnan, for instance, contends that:

hybridity, as a new model, will serve as a new category of identification and thus become another means of fixing identity again: 'though theoretically speaking, it would seem that hybridity functions as the ultimate decentring of all identity regimes, in fact and in history, hybridity is valorized on the basis of a stable identity.'³

¹ Anil Lal & Vinay Lal, "Review: The Cultural Politics of Hybridity, *Social Scientist*," *Social Scientist* Vol. 25, No. 9/10 (Sep, 1997), pp.71-72.

² Vittoria Borsò, "Hybrid Perceptions: A Phenomenological Approach to the relationship between mass Media and Hybridity" in *New Hybridities: Societies and Cultures in Transition*, eds. F. Heidemann & A. De Toro (Hildersheim: OLMS, 2006), p. 39.

³ Radhakrishnan Rajagopalan, "Postcoloniality and the Boundaries of Identity," *Calaloo* vol. 16. 4, (1993), p.753.

Radhakrishnan's reflections on the concept suggests that hybridity does not put an end to the identity binarism and categorizations, but rather it reinforces it by having different types of hybridities, namely Western hybridity and Eastern hybridity: the former is laden with positive virtues while the latter is associated with the agony and the misery experienced by the subject.

Hybridity has also been a target of attacks by some critics who underscores the gap existing between the theorists and the lived realities of the people they write about. In the eyes of these critics, hybridity is a form of self-indulgence by diasporic intellectuals who are equipped with the cultural and economic facilities and resources that allow them to spend time and effort theorizing about people of different experiences. This argument is maintained by several theorists such as Friedman, and Kavoori. Friedman, for example, views hybridity, to use Werbner's words, "as a discourse to be a form of "moral self-congratulation."¹ Similarly, Kavoori extends this argument to attack postcolonial theory at large and therefore he argues that the term postcolonial "is a term less about the world it seeks to describe and more about the world its users occupy."²

Similarly, another critic, Dirlik criticises postcolonial intellectuals who, from their prominent positions in academia, in the First World, advocate theories that are far from being practical in their countries of origin. According to Arif, "Bhabha, Spivak and Said, the trinity of postcolonial studies, are too far removed from the lived reality of Third World countries to arrive at the most suitable solution for the feeling of dis-ease that prevails in the postcolonial world."³ In addition, Bhabha, for example "generalises his concept of 'the postcolonial intellectual' who is supposed to 'elaborate a historical and literary project' from 'this hybrid

¹ Werbner Pnina, "Introduction: The dialectics of cultural hybridity". In P. Werbner & T. Moddod (Eds.), *Debating cultural hybridity: Multi-cultural identities and the politics of anti-racism* (London: Zed Books, 1997), p.22.

² Kavoori Anandam P. , " Getting Past the Latest "Post": Assessing the Term "Post-colonial." *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 15, (1998), p: 201 195–202.

³ Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of GlobalCapitalism", *Critical Inquiry*. Vol.20, No.2, (1994), p.356.

location of cultural value,”¹ argues Dirlik. In this way, all postcolonial intellectuals seem to share the same values and status which has met with firm rebuttals from some theorists. For instance, McClintock states that “women and men do not live postcoloniality in the same way.”²

In the same vein, Aijaz Ahmad points out that “the postcolonial subject in Bhabha’s theory is remarkably free of gender, class and identifiable political location.”³ Discussing hybridity as a concept, Spivak herself remarks that the preoccupation with hybridity in academic discourse is at the expense of gender and class division. Hybridity thus has many drawbacks, as with all concepts. Yet, Bill Ashcroft states that:

Hybridity and the power it releases may well be seen to be the characteristic feature and contribution of the post-colonial, allowing a means of evading the replication of the binary categories of the past and developing new anti-monolithic models of cultural exchange and growth⁴.

Thus while the theory of hybridity has certain flaws, it remains one of the far-reaching features of the postcolonial world. However, there are different models of hybridity. In the early nineties, Ella Shohat, writing on the ‘post-colonial’, voiced concerns regarding the notion of hybridity and the necessity of differentiating between different types of hybridities. She avers here:

Negotiating locations, identities, and positionalities in relation to the violence of neo-colonialism is crucial if hybridity is not to become a figure for the consecration of

¹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.248.

² Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather, Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p.261.

³ Ahmad Aijaz, “The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality”, *Race and Class*, Vol. 36, No.3, (1995), p.13

⁴ Ashcroft Bill, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin .eds, *The Postcolonial Studies Reader* (New York & London: Routledge, 1995), p.183.

hegemony. As a descriptive catch-all term, “hybridity” per se fails to discriminate between the diverse modalities of hybridity, for example, forced assimilation, internalized self-rejection, political cooptation, social conformism, cultural mimicry, and creative transcendence. The reversal of biologically and religiously racist tropes - the hybrid, the syncretic - on the one hand, and the reversal of anti- colonialist purist notions of identity, on the other, should not obscure the problematic agency of "post-colonial hybridity."¹

This quote is very telling as it reminds us of Radhakrishnan conceptualization. Shohat likewise maintains that hybridity can become a totalizing mode of conceptualising agency and also glosses over the very differences that underlie the dislocations experienced by various peoples.

To conclude, hybridity, as we have seen throughout this section, is a highly controversial concept regarding its ambiguity and its criticism within the field of postcolonial studies and cultural studies. Interestingly, it can be stated that ‘hybridity is a term that has drawn a great deal of attention in the postcolonial world and has sparked severe rebuttals in the contemporary world. Its proponents, as discussed above, ranging from Bakhtin (1981) and Bhabha (1994) to more recent theorists of hybridity in its various forms are numerous, but yet it has many dissidents. Hybridity’s ambiguous status as a colonial negative term that has been reappropriated to undermine notions of purity and essentialism can be quite problematic.

As discussed above, hybridity evolution owes too much to Homi Bhabha and his pioneering work *The Location of Culture*, and Bhabha’s chief theory, in fact, revolves around refuting fixity and purity of culture and identity that are derived from colonial binary thinking. To this end, Bhabha has coined a ‘third space’ as a strategic space through which hybrid

¹ Shohat Ella, “Notes on the Post-Colonial,” *Social Text*, No. 31/32, *Third World and Post-Colonial Issues* (1992), p.110.

identity can emerge to challenge this binary opposition held by essentialist models of identity. Accordingly, the following section will be relevantly elucidating the concept of the ‘third space’ vis-à-vis Bhabha’s perception along with highlighting the significant role it has played for women diasporic subjects in deconstructing binary fixed identities and reshaping new hyphenated identities.

c- Third Space: Emancipatory Site for Arab Women Diaspora Writers

Following up the discussion above about the issue of identity and its complexity in postmodern era, it is worth noting that the concept of identity, as we have mentioned in the previous chapters, is shaped according to multiple discourses and discursive ideologies simultaneously. Thus, there is no fixed and stable identity, rather there is fluidity and on-going negotiation of the concept which implies that one’s subjectivity or identity is multiple and unstable. It is also ‘overdetermined’ in the sense that it is not decided by only one discourse, but rather by a wide range of discourses and ideologies. With this in mind, the individuals can speak from any of their multiple subject positions, which allow this multiply-constructed subject-hood to offer multiple choices for what constitutes an identity. Drawing on Homi Bhabha conceptualisation of the ‘third space’, this section will be, accordingly, devoted to further elaborate on the concept of the ‘third space’ vis-à-vis Bhabha’s theory and at the same time it will discuss its vital role as a highly useful and convenient terrain for diaspora subjects to negotiate their double belongings in host countries.

It goes without saying that migration as a process in both the modern and postmodern worlds can often –if not always- be, as we have seen in the first chapter, a result of post-colonialism and its attendant influences. As we delve into the Arab modern immigration history, we find that large numbers of Arab immigrants have found themselves, in a way or another, pushed to emigrate and make their ways to different Western countries as

immigrants from former colonies which eventually result, for many migrants, into settling and inevitably adopting the host land life style and its culture.

These migrants, however, have always been obsessed with return to their country of origin, their cultural past heritage, and identity of their ancestors left behind. This idea of 'return' has always been at the heart of immigrant experiences. Hall argues in this context that "this is the Africa we must return to – but by another "route": What Africa has become in the New World, what we have made of "Africa": "Africa" – as we retell it through politics, memory and desire."¹ As such, immigrants or rather diaspora subjects are subsequently led to existing in a space in which they feel they do not belong to any stable position or world. Rather they are occupying a hybrid and in-between space which yet allows them to reshape and reconstruct their feelings of belonging in the third space. Rushdie posits here: "sometimes we feel that we straddle two cultures: at other times that we fall between two stools. But however ambiguous and shifting this ground may be, it is not infertile territory for a writer to occupy."²

In fact, the idea of hybridity, as discussed in the previous section, is meant to refer to a mixed location where subjects do not belong to any fixed or stable positions. Differently put, 'hybridity' means that subjects do not identify with any specific culture or identity, but rather they identify with both cultural aspects, which usually-if not always- ends belonging to nowhere or to a 'third space' identity . This concept or position, indeed, allows the process of deconstructing and destabilizing essentialist categories and binary notions inasmuch as the hybrid or 'the third space' position constitutes a significant place where two cultures are confluenced and interwoven above and beyond imposed hierarchy.

Being among the first theorists to put forward the concept of 'third space', Homi Bhabha brings up the possibility of rethinking the Western Manichean polarities and therefore

¹ Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity", in *Theorizing Diaspora*, eds. Braziel, Jana Evans & Mannur, Anita (MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2003), p.242.

² Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands* (London: Penguin Classics, 1992), p.19.

providing different perceptions of national identities and national borders. In brief, ‘third space’ in Bhabha’s view opens up the possibility to destabilize essentialist perceptions of identity based on unitary set of beliefs and practices. In other words, Bhabha’s focal point is that the transcultural forms of cultures produced in ‘the third space’ serves as a counter-discourse to the discursive dominance of hegemonic structures and institutions of colonisation. This hybrid form of culture challenges what Bhabha calls ‘essentialist national narratives of culture and belonging’. The significance of these counter narratives is their “negotiation” of space where hegemonic discourses homogenise culture and society. This negotiation as a constant endeavour “seeks to authorize cultural hybridities that emerge in moments of historical transformation.”¹

Viewed in this way, Bhabha posits that the identity of the migrant, for instance, is as a kind of hybridity that subverts those stable categories of national identity. He insists here on:

The need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments of processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These “in-between” spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.²

One can therefore comprehend undoubtedly that the migrant identity is informed by ‘hybridity’ in ‘third space’ where immigrants occupy an in-between space that allows one to negotiate and question fixed national identity and nationalist discourses. Furthermore, the migrant is also, accordingly, an intermediary between two cultures and is entrusted with the task to open up dialogues between two spaces and cultures outside binary system of thought. Hence, Bhabha foregrounds the migrant literature since the migrant is living in a unique

¹ Bhabha K. Homi, *The Location of Culture*, p.2.

² Ibid.

position that allows them to address both cultures, and more importantly the dominant culture in its own language.

It should be further noted that Bhabha's invention of 'third space identity' can be viewed as a migrant counter-action to essentialist binary opposition and categories of identity which values Western culture over the culture of 'other'. Bhabha's conviction is that Western culture and its ideology is not only meant to dominate, but also to universalize its Eurocentric values and meaning over other cultures. Hence, a "critical theory, according to Bhabha, is a Western designation which conveys institutional power and ideological Eurocentricity."¹ This Western-labeled critical theory, he adds:

stems from the colonial tradition of engaging with texts within the familiar traditions and conditions of colonial anthropology either to universalize their meaning within its own cultural and academic discourse, or to sharpen its internal critique of the Western logocentric sign, the idealist subject, or indeed the illusions and delusions of civil society.²

More importantly, Bhabha labels this "a familiar manoeuvre of theoretical knowledge," which instead of advocating the 'chasm of cultural difference, it rather endeavours to confine and contain this difference as well as its effects through the creation of "a mediator or a metaphor of otherness" to maintain dominance. This strategy of containment adopted by the knowledge of cultural difference makes of difference and otherness "the fantasy of a certain cultural space or, indeed, the certainty of a form of a theoretical knowledge that deconstructs the epistemological 'edge' of the West."³ The other is deprived of a real space where it can actively articulate its difference, as it is actually restricted to a powerless and passive

¹ Ibid., p.45.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., pp.45-46.

presence. Hence, “the other loses its power to signify, to negate, and to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse.”¹

It is of a great importance to note that Bhabha significantly raises the tension within critical theory “between its institutional containment and its revisionary force.” He, therefore, questions the ability of critical theory to provide a balanced reference to other cultures, and consequently, it “cannot forever sustain its position in the academy as the adversarial cutting edge of Western idealism.”² Bhabha further postulates the creation of a ‘third space’ as a “new territory of translation,” which subsequently leads to the modification of the politics of cultural domination. Here he argues that:

The stairwell as liminal space, in-between the designations of identity, becomes the process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white. The hither and thither of the stairwell, the temporal movement and passage that it allows, prevents identities at either end of it from settling into primordial polarities. This interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.³

The concept of third space then plays a pivotal role in dismantling the purity of cultural identity inherently held by essentialist modernists. Regarding this, Bhabha contends that third space “challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary past, kept alive in the national tradition of the people.”⁴ In this way, the supposed purity of culture and nationalist discourses become baseless among essentialists and nationalists inasmuch as the third space “constitutes the discursive

¹Ibid., p.46.

² Ibid., p.47.

³ Ibid., p.5.

⁴ Ibid.

conditions of enunciation”¹, which “displaces the narrative of the Western [and indeed Post-colonial] nation which . . . [is] written in homogeneous, serial time by virtue of the disruptive temporality of enunciation.”²Bhabha continues that all “cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation”³ as a result of which “hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or ‘purity’ of cultures are untenable.”⁴ The discursive conditions of enunciation ensure “that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew”⁵ and therefore providing new possibilities of self-identifications among subjects .

Viewed this way, ‘hybrid subjects’ are “caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation” between borders and cultures and therefore they become “now free to negotiate and translate their cultural identities in a discontinuous intertextual temporality of cultural difference”⁶ beyond binary oppositions. In short, the recognition of the “split-space of enunciation” will open the way to “conceptualizing an international culture, based not on the exoticism or multiculturalism of the diversity of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s hybridity.”⁷ To further elaborate on the importance of third space, Bhabha maintains that:

We should remember that it is the “inter”— the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the in-between space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture. It makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the

¹ Ibid., p.55.

² Ibid., p.54.

³ Ibid., p.55.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

“people”. And by exploring this “Third Space”, we may elude the politics of polarity and emerge as the others of our selves.¹

The third space becomes as such a way of framing the ‘liminal position’ which allows hybrid individuals to create a space of their own where they can articulate their cultural differences. In this space, they are equally able to create their own history and revisit their past, reconstructing it “as a contingent in-between space that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present.”² Hence, Arab diaspora literature can be seen as the very relevant field which articulates the importance of ‘third space’ among Arab diaspora writers, especially among Arab women diaspora writers along with the crucial role it plays not only as a site for freedom to dismantle the hegemonic forces including essentialist and nationalist ideologies, but also as a space where these writers negotiate and forge new possibilities of belongings and identities beyond binary oppositions within host countries.

Having been historically invisible (or been made invisible) in the literary canon, these diaspora women writers have, however, been able, through their literary diaspora works, to attract the attention of academics, scholars, and critics in the last few decades in the contemporary world literature especially after the 9th September event in the USA. Living in diaspora or ‘in a third space’ context, these writers have remarkably managed as diaspora writers and as cultural mediators to break the gap between their countries of origin and the new host countries where they are settling; by doing so, they have significantly gained recognition to their own identities as hybrid subjects in the mainstream media and culture as well as to their literary works in the contemporary mainstream literature.

In her introduction to a collection of essays, Al Maleh argues that “the irony of Anglophone Arab literature is that it did not gain attention or attain recognition until the world

¹ Ibid., p.56.

² Ibid., p.7

woke up one day to the horror of the infamous 9/11, and asked itself who those ‘Arabs’ really were.”¹ These writers, in fact, were “able to negotiate boundaries beyond the spaces of their birthplace, an in-dwelling contentment quite unlike the expressions of pain and agonizing dislocation that characterize postcolonial hybridity of late,”² adds Al Maleh.

Equally important, this idea is further explored by Shakir, who contends that, the focus of Arab-American literature has chiefly been on the prominent writers of the early part of the twentieth century who were primarily trying to settle and assimilate into American society by showing, for example, “that Syrians were not so alien, after all.”³ The women's narratives of diaspora, needless to say, had remained remarkably silent and somehow invisible until Shakir’s famous *Bint Arab* brought into focus the lives, experiences, and the living conditions of the new immigrants who are approached through the eyes of a diverse variety of women whose struggle with the question of who they really were identified much of their experience in America. “But once, she argues, they come to this country, a great silence descends. Very little is available on what happens to them (or happened to their predecessors) and even less on the lives of their daughters.”⁴

According to Shakir, much of the conflict for the Arab Americans continues to be the “tug of war between attachment to the land of their birth (the United States) and anger or frustration at American policies in the Middle East. Though men also face these conflicts, they take on special meaning for women, female and Arab, they may feel doubly victimized.”⁵ That is to say, women are often doubly oppressed by American policies as well as by patriarchal system.

¹ Laila Al Maleh, *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, p.2.

² *Ibid.*, p.4.

³ Evelen Shakir, *Bint Arab* (London: Praeger, 1997), p.9.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9.

With this in mind, ‘third space’ position has been yet of great benefit to Arab women writers in general and particularly to Arab American women writers regarding its important role and its useful effect in allowing them to proudly articulate their double belongings and therefore to assert themselves as hybrid and transnational subjects. Al Maleh, in this context, uses R. Radhakrishnan’s terms to describe how these writers were “ensconced comfortably in the heartland of both national and transnational citizenship.”¹ She states that theirs was “a hybridity that undoubtedly helped them negotiate the ‘identity politics’ of their place of origin and their chosen abode with less tension than their successors.”²

Carving a place within mainstream Western literature as a minority or ‘émigré’ literature in diaspora context has been indeed a very challenging task for Arab women diaspora writers. Being aware of their past cultural background and their current hybrid position, Arab women diaspora writers have been entrusted to negotiate this hybridity position as an alternative to essentialist views and their perception of the notion of identity which has always placed them in a marginal space as ‘Others’ to the Western mainstream culture. More importantly, these writers have the mission to:

Negotiate identities from a vantage-point with firm links to Arab history, even when they were second or third-generation writers. Indeed, much of what they wrote still reflected a warm relationship to the homeland despite the authors’ geographical distance from it³.

The vital growth of this emerging literature is helping Arab diaspora writers in their attempts to regain their discourse as they “found ‘home’ and acceptance in ethnicity.”⁴ In this way, the work of most contemporary Arab American writers reflects a deep awareness of their

¹ Radhakrishnan, Rajagopalan, *Diasporic Mediations* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p.129.

² *Ibid.*, p.4.

³ Laila Al Maleh, *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, pp.12-13.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.24.

hyphenated identity, and embodies an exploration of the spaces situated in each side of the hyphen. In addition to that, the treatment that Arab Americans have long suffered at the hands of the most part of mainstream America helped them realize the importance of exercising self-representation in order to achieve social, political and religious equality in the United States.

In their effort to counteract being constantly received as “outsiders” since the end of the nineteenth century, they struggle to find themselves a significant place within the American culture. For that purpose, literature becomes an important means to realize such self-representation, bringing to light the unheard stories and experiences of a community.

In the foreword of *Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (2004), Barbara Nimri Aziz, a journalist and founder of RAWI (Radius of Arab American Writers), points out that like other minority groups before, Arab American writers have come to realize the importance of the “write or be written” principle. She believes that “facing the sweet and bitter, tussling with disorder, hate, fear, is asserting our responsibility, a responsibility we once had left to others.”¹ Aziz argues that after decades of misrepresentations and “half-truths,” Arab Americans “must decide what is really true and what is false, then negotiate those and add to this our own hidden experience.”² To illustrate her opinion, she mentions Toni Morrison who once described writing as:

A process by which a person goes to a place and moves dirt in order to understand why he or she is there at all. All writers are miners, sifting through the little things overlooked or abandoned or discoloured by others. This is where Arab American writers are today, first going to the place and moving the dirt.”³

¹ Aziz Barbara Nimri, “Foreword,” in *Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing*, ed. Susan Muaddi Darraj (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2004), p. xii.

² Ibid., p. xii.

³ Ibid., p. xiii.

Nimri highlights the importance of “minor details” in recreating and conveying the collective memory of Arab Americans as a minority group. She identifies these details as “the ‘little things’ we are able to identify and recover [from Arab American communal and individual histories],” making, therefore, a story more “poignant” and relative¹. The role played by Arab American literature in exposing these “little things,” according to Nimri, “may not overturn centuries of injustice, and it will not propel us into a position of dominance. But we can at least write our story... Writers cannot dispute. But we can locate ourselves at that archaeological site, and build new stories from the little things we reclaim.”²

The presence of these details from Arab American heritage in literary production not only serves to voice the Arab American experience to a mainstream audience, and therefore, humanize it, but also enhances inter-community connections and help “rebuild a fragmented, uncertain identity.”³ In my opinion, Arab American writers have the task of helping the community locate and enjoy a communal hyphenated identity taking into account its complexity and varied features.

I think that Rajaa Alsanae and Laila Halaby are prominent representatives of a generation of Arab American writers who have been trying hard to create and develop a space of their own within ethnic literatures in the United States. Their work undercuts the mainstream preconceived notions of what constitutes Arab American women subjectivity and Arab women in general and thus creating their own versions of individual and collective Arab American identities. The wide range of characters and stories with varied backgrounds they display, offers a perfect stage for the negotiation of the Third Space in the Arab American context. My analysis of their novels intends to show how they deconstruct essentialized frameworks of identity through the construction of an anti-essentialist Arab American

¹ Ibid., p.xiii.

² Ibid., pp.xiii-xiv.

³ Ibid., p.xiii.

subjectivity rooted in the Arab American experience. This unstable subjectivity is definitely complex and multi-layered, which makes the exploration of such works an exquisite critical exercise.

PART TWO:

FORGING NEW IDENTITIES IN CONTEMPORARY ANGLOPHONE ARAB WOMEN NARRATIVES

1. Destabilizing the Patriarchal and the Orientalist Paradigms in Saudi Arabian Society in Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh*

Introduction

Historically speaking, the USA, Europe, and Canada are undoubtedly known for hosting such a large number of immigrants from Arab descent. The USA, for example, remains to a great extent the destination of many Arab immigrants, who were driven by many forces, as discussed in the first chapter, to leave their homelands and settle in different parts of the United States. Hence, the few last decades witnessed the emergence of a very considerable number of American writers of Arab origin. In fact, these writers have managed through their narratives to establish and forge a new body of literature in the American mainstream culture that focuses mainly on the immigrants experiences in the hosting countries *vis-a-vis* their lived past in their homelands. Laila El Alami, Mohja Kahf, Diana Abu Jabir, Laila Ahmed, Zainab Salbi, Rajaa Alsanea ¹, to name just a few, are typical examples of increasing Arab-American women voices who have gained visibility and have occupied a very significant position in the contemporary American literature.

This chapter will accordingly examine Rajaa Alsanea's pioneering novel, *Girls of Riyadh* with regard to the historical context of women's status in Saudi Arabia. Using an analytical textual methodology, and drawing on feminist and postcolonial feminist

¹ Rajaa Alsanea, whose novel I have chosen to study in this chapter, is a Saudi writer who became famous through her novel *Girls of Riyadh*, or *Banat al-Riyadh* in Arabic version. The book was first published in Arabic language in Lebanon in 2005 and later it was translated in English in 2007 by Rajaa Alsanea herself and Marilyn Booth . The book was long-listed for the Dublin Literary Award in 2009. Al-Sanea was born in Kuwait and grew up in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. She currently lives in Chicago, where she is a dental graduate student. She received her bachelor's degree in Dentistry from King Saud University in 2005. Her novel and lifestyle have caused controversy especially among the conservative sections of the Saudi society but more liberal-minded individuals considered her a role model and catalyst for change in Arab world in general and Saudi Arabia in particular.

perspectives, the first section of this chapter will illuminate the historical background of the women's status in Saudi Arabia and the major setbacks and hardships they face in their society. Then, it will further go deeply to reveal how Rajaa Al Sanea, being influenced by her Western education and her stay in the United States, destabilizes and directs harsh criticism to the patriarchal paradigms and deeply rooted cultural mind-sets that violate Saudi women's basic rights. It will equally explore relentless struggles and constant resistance the female protagonists display in the face of the Saudi conventional and patriarchal society with its social hypocrisy and double standards as represented in the novel.

a. Historical Background

Before delving into examining the novel, it is of a great importance to start by providing some relevant notes and aspects on the Saudi Arabian country including its geography, politics, religion and culture. Geographically speaking, Saudi Arabia is an Arab country which is situated in the region of the Arabian Peninsula, which basically includes the six Gulf countries together with Yemen. In brief, Saudi Arabia is ruled by a king who draws his power from the Islamic religion. The Saudi Arabian government is a religious monarchy whose laws are based on the Islamic *Shari'a* (the laws of Islamic teachings).

It is then no surprise that women's status in Saudi Arabia is accordingly based on Islamic beliefs, though practically traditions and societal conventions play very important factors in determining gender roles. Ostensibly, it is assumed that Saudi Arabian women enjoy rather more freedom than women in some other Islamic countries in terms of education, employment, and business. The slight privileges- Saudi women have- are basically attributed to the highly rich and flourishing economy that is based on abundant oil. They have, on the other hand, fewer civil rights compared to their men counterpart and some women in some other Arab and/or Islamic country.

Women in Saudi Arabia, for instance, had been, by law, banned from driving for years; an act which was related to politics and traditions rather than to religion. In fact, the belief that women were not allowed to drive was no surprising till the December 1990 demonstration, during which forty seven veiled women decided to take a daring and rebellious act by driving cars on the King Adu Al Aziz highway in Riyadh. As a result, those participants, together with their husbands were severely punished not only by confiscating their passports, but also by suspending them from their jobs. It went even worse as Eleanor Doumato avers: “some of those who participated were subsequently harassed by phone callers, accusing the women of being agents for Western vice.”¹This incident coincided with the Gulf war, which enabled it to gain more political significance on one hand, and it, was highly attacked, on the other hand, by male extremists and conservatives who viewed it as an act of rebellion against traditional and cultural values. Hence, Saudi women ironically had to wait till 2018 to be granted this right after a long struggle and protest led by Saudi Arabian Women in the few last decades.

The veil is another appealing issue in the Saudi Arabian society which exacerbates women’s status and sufferings. Unlike many other Arab and Islamic countries whether in the Middle East or somewhere else, Saudi women are rarely- if ever seen- unveiled when outside their homes or when they are in any public sphere. Women have little room for manoeuvre when it comes to choose whether to wear on the veil or not expect those who happened to immigrate to other countries which grant women more rights and freedom as in the case of Rajaa Al Sanea, whose work is under analysis. In this context, she maintains that:

Aside from the morals and the Islamic teachings, I did not have any restrictions. I was brought up by a liberal family. They did not force me to wear the *hijab*. I started wearing it two years ago by personal choice because I wanted to do it for God.” When

¹ Eleanor Doumato, “Gender, Monarchy, and National Identity,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 19:1, (2007), p.31.

abroad many Saudi women do not veil since, as they put it, “it would attract more attention than modesty.”¹

Saudi women are bound by traditions as well as by policy to put on the veil while in Saudi Arabia to avoid confrontations with The Committee of Morals and Virtue² as well as religious scholars who most of them -if not all- condemn unveiled women. It is only outside the Saudi country that women can sigh with a relief of the very deeply rooted traditions of their homeland. In addition to the issue of the veil, women are not allowed to move outside their homes unless they are accompanied by their male relative always known as *Mahram* along with not being permitted to travel without the consent of a male guardian.

Moreover, arranged marriage is one of the most common practices in Saudi Arabian traditions and cultures. Unlike women in some Arab countries which rather tolerate and grant more personal freedoms to women in establishing premarital relationships and choosing one's spouse, Saudi Arabia's policy forbids these sorts of relationships between men and women out of wedlock. Women are, therefore, not allowed to meet men in public places unless they are married. Rather, it is mostly their parents who decide on their spouses regarding many qualities and aspects of the spouse such as class, race, tribe, and religion, to name a few. However, when a potential groom comes and asks for a girl's hand for marriage, it is almost the parents who arrange a short meeting during which the potential bride and groom can only make a very short eye contact and catch sight of each other with a presence of their parents. It is through this short meeting that the wedding date can be set after the groom and the bride agree on the marriage.

The result of the parents choosing wives or husbands for their sons or daughters according to social considerations reflects itself in divorce which is fairly common in Saudi

¹ Mai Yamani, “Some Observations on Women in Saudi Arabia”, in *Feminism and Islam: Legal and Literary Perspectives*, ed. Mai Yamani (New York University Press: New York, 1996), p. 263.

² The Committee of Morals and Virtue is the Saudi agency tasked with monitoring social behavior and enforcing the observance of Islamic moral law, including proper dress and gender segregation.

Arabia. Hence, Saudi women live very miserable social and cultural conditions including arranged marriage, divorce, women's freedom and many other problems as we shall discuss more broadly in the light of *Girls of Riyadh* in the following section.

b. Breaking the Taboo in Saudi Arabia: Critique of Social and Cultural Practices

Girls of Riyadh is a novel written by Rajaa Alsanea originally in Arabic language and was published in Lebanon by Saqi Books in September 2005. Then, it was co-translated into English by Rajaa Alsanea herself and Marilyn Booth in 2007. Generally speaking, the novel deals with the lives of four young Saudi university female students who must live according to the cultural traditions of Saudi society.

Rajaa Alsanea's *Girls of Riyadh* is structured as a series of fifty one emails sent anonymously by one of the young women whose identity is not revealed throughout the novel. That is to say, *Girls of Riyadh* is a novel narrated by an unknown young girl who sends weekly e-mails from her internet group, of which she is the administrator, to the subscribers in Yahoo. From the very start, she seems to have perceptible intention to reveal the anecdotes of her four female friends who are kept behind walls and whose lives and hopes are spoiled in the name of the misuse of religion, rigid conservative beliefs, and traditional practices. In her endeavour to reveal the true lived realities of Saudi women, the narrator quotes Nizar Al Qabani's poem, as the passage below shows, not only to give voice to her four female friends to articulate their sufferings and struggles, but also to thousands of women whose stories are neglected, buried, and never heard about. The unknown girl narrator says:

I shall write of my girlfriends, for in each one's tale I see my story and self-prevail, a tragedy my own life speaks. I shall write of my girlfriends, of inmates 'lives sucked dry by jail, and magazine pages that consume women's time, and of the doors that fail

to open. Of desires slain in their cradles I'll write, of the vast great cell, black walls of travail, of thousands, thousands of martyred, all female, buried, stripped of their names in the graveyard of traditions.¹

Throughout the novel, the unknown narrator seems to be aware of every single detail of the lived realities of her four characters. Hence, she reveals details about the lives of her four close female friends: Lamees, Gamrah, Sadeem, and the half-American Mashael, who have been friends since schooldays. These four central characters of the novel are attractive female university students in their early 20s, fashionable, bright and from the middle-upper class Saudi Arabian families. The narrator follows their life stories for twelve months seeking and struggling to find settlement either by love marriage or by traditional marriage arranged by their families.

As the story reveals, each one of the four girls experiences constant failures and disappointment except Lamees, who succeeds in both her professional career and her personal life by marrying the person she loves. As we will see later, Lamees succeeds in making a love match when she gets married to Nizar, a man of her choosing, with whom she goes later to Canada to pursue her Boards in Medicine. Sadeem is engaged to Waleed, but their marriage is never fulfilled. He divorces her after allowing him one night to make love with her before the wedding marriage is set. Sadeem even experiences a second and a much deeper disappointment when she meets a new man called, Faris whom she thinks he loves her more than she loves him. Again, Faris disappoints her by dumping her and marrying a girl that his family has chosen for him. Gamrah, a conventional and traditionally bound girl is married to Rashid in traditional way which results in her trauma after discovering that he has had a lover all along, a Japanese girlfriend whom he cannot marry. Then, Gamrah ends up divorced and pregnant. Michelle, a half –American girl, falls in love with Faisal, but his family namely his

¹ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, trans. Rajaa ALsanea and Marilyn Booth (Penguin Book: New York, 2007), p.3.

mother shows strong objection due to Michelle's low social status together with her identity as being born to an American mother. Hence, akin to Faris, Faisal leaves her and decides to marry a girl of his family choice. To take revenge, Michelle strongly determines to attend Faisal's wedding to exhibit her beauty and free spirit by dancing in front of the bride and the groom to show that she is more beautiful than Faisal's bride. These four middle-upper class girls enjoy expensive cars, first-class flights, spend summer vacations in Western countries, and use all the tools of modern technology, but still subject to arranged marriages, where strict tradition holds sway.

The weekly sent emails spark high debate within the Saudi Arabian society and it causes a stir as they spread gradually to reach a larger audience of the Internet users. As a reaction to stop her, the narrator notes "I heard that King Abd-Al-Aziz is trying to block my site to dam up the channels of communication and ward off malicious acts, scandalous deeds and all causes of corruption or evil."¹This may also account for the banning of the novel in reality as it was not allowed to be published in Saudi Arabia when it was first written, it was rather published in Lebanon as we have mentioned earlier. Moreover, all the 51 chapters in the form of e-mails in the novel starts with a verse from Quran, Hadith, a quotation of a well-known international thinker, a piece of poetry, or lyrics from a famous Arabic song that helps the reader have a deeper insight of the whole chapter.

Interestingly, the novel tackles substantial themes and debatable issues regarding the lived experiences of Saudi Arabian women in the modern world vis-a-vi the conventions of Saudi Arabian patriarchal society. Challenging, notably her conventional and traditionally bound society, Alsanea's debut novel daringly reflects the private world of Saudi Arabia's social and cultural conditions under which both men and women are victimised. At the same time, it uncovers the lives of the most privileged Saudi women who apparently share the same

¹ Ibid., p.84.

hopes and dreams as their women counterparts in the Western world. Through the four main female protagonists: Lamis, Gamrah, Michaelle and Sadeem as well as the mysterious female narrator of the tale, the author presents a penetrating diagnosis of social realities, depicting the anxiety, unfulfilled hopes, growing anger and dissatisfaction of Saudi Arabians as we shall see deeper in the forthcoming analysis.

In fact, Rajaa Alsanea is not against Islamic religion as many Saudi public and religious scholars claim. She is rather against the misuse and the misinterpretation of the religion that usually leads to the oppression and the endurance of women in the Saudi Arabian society. On the contrary, she intends to make of Islam as a source of her inspiration for claiming women's denied rights. Hence, she has sought her sense of power, her sense of identity, her freedom, and her equality with men through the basic teachings of Islam. In this regard, she makes it clear from the beginning of the novel when she starts her novel by quoting a verse from the Qur'an which relates people's better change to the change of their beliefs and realities: "Verily, Allah does not change a people's condition until they change what is in themselves."¹

In writing *Girls of Riyadh*, Alsanea benefits from her knowledge of the Islamic teachings to show how religious instructions contradict gender roles and the social traditions practiced in Saudi Arabia under which women are oppressed and victimized. She even rejects certain elements of traditions, especially the practices related to gender, and used her knowledge of Islam to denounce unfavourable traditions. In an interview conducted by Silvia Radan with Rajaa Alsanea and was held at the Abu Dhabi International Book Fair and at Jashanmal Book Shop, she contends that:

People see Saudi Arabia as a very conservative country regarding Islam, but they do not know that there are traditions not based on religion, which really control our lives.

That is why I wanted to talk about different traditions and customs in cities and

¹ Quran, The Chapter of Thunder, Verse 11" (9, in the Arabic version).

villages in Saudi Arabia that people do not really hear about or know about. There are girls who are not very conservative Muslims, yet they are very traditional. I wanted to portray this difference between Saudi traditions and the Islamic religion.¹

Alsanea makes it here clear that she is not blaming Islam as a religion, but she is rather pointing the finger at the traditions, the practices, and the misinterpretations of the Islamic religion among Saudi people which often –if not always– stand behind women’s subordination. This idea is shared by a Saudi Arabian researcher Hamda Amani Al Ghamdi, who argues in her article entitled “Arab Women’s Education and Gender Perceptions” that “cultural traditions governing Arab Muslim societies subordinate women” and she adds that

I draw from my personal experiences as a Muslim Saudi woman who grew up and completed undergraduate studies in a conservative, patriarchal society. My gender has been constructed by my Islamic faith and the Arab culture of Saudi Arabia. I read and memorized the Holy Quran from a very young age. The Quranic text does not contradict scientific discourse, which I found fascinating; indeed the Quran’s teaching to women contradicts the cultural traditions and practices I have experienced and observed. For instance, while I found the Quran supports women’s leadership, powerful male elites in most Arab Muslim societies prevent women from practicing that right.²

In the same vein, separating Islam as a religion and its misinterpretations, Naway El Saadawi alleges in one of her interviews entitled “Arab Women and Western Feminism: an Interview with Nawal El Sadawi” that:

Yes, quite a lot of people in the West think that Islam is the major element in oppressing Arab women, but in fact this is not true. If we study Islamic scientifically,

¹ Cited on March 27th, 2018 from:
<https://www.khaleejtimes.com/article/20090327/ARTICLE/303279929/1002>.

² Amani Hamdan, “Arab Women’s Education and Gender Perceptions: An Insider Analysis,” *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 8:1(2006), p.59.

look at its origin, compare it with other religions –Judaism, Christianity, and other Asian religions-we find that almost all these religions have similar attitudes to women. Indeed, sometimes we find attitudes to women much more tolerant or progressive in Islam. So it is not Islam, it is not religion even that oppress women. And Islam is not one Islam. There is the Islam of Saudi Arabia, the Islam of Tunisia, and the Islam of Lebanon. What you find is that governments and politicians invariably pick from religion what suits them and use it to justify their position.¹

Akin to El Saadawi, Alsanea among others considers herself as a catalyst for changing Saudi women's social realities and conditions through her literary work .That is to say, she is strongly determined to critique the Saudi society in the hope of changing it into a better life, though it is quite hard regarding the particularities of Saudi society that is strongly bound to traditions and tribal considerations. In this context, she avers:

In fact, I aspire to be the first to signal the beginning of change. These are social changes that are not connected to religion. This is why I am not anxious about discussing them through my writings. Silence is evil. I hate negativity and refuse to wait for others to act on my behalf. It is my duty to me and to my children in the future. I fear I will mellow out with age and lose my motivation and courage, as has happened with others.²

As one starts reading closely the novel under study, she/he can clearly notice the writer clear-cut intentions to break the silence that has been long placed on very controversial issues and topics in Saudi the Arabian patriarchal society. Accordingly, *Girls of Riyadh* tackles as well

¹ Arab Women and Western Feminism: An Interview with Nawal El Sadaawi. First Published on October 1st, 1980, retrieved on June 15th, 2019 from:
<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/030639688002200205>.

² Omar El Okeily, “Asharq Al-Awsat Interviews The Girls of Riyadh Author Rajaa Al Sanea”, *Asharq Al-Awsat Newspaper* 25 Jan. 2006, retrieved on June 21st, 2019 from:
<https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/theaawsat/features/asharq-al-awsat-interviews-the-girls-of-riyadh-author-rajaa-al-sanea>

as criticizes a wide range of social traditions and practices that are prevailing in the Saudi Arabian society and this section will accordingly reveal these practices through the four female protagonists of the novel.

From the very beginning of the novel, the writer invites the reader to look critically at gender roles and relations in the Saudi society and how these relations are regulated to serve the interest of Saudi men at the expense of women's endurance. In other words, Rajaa Alsanea raises the issue of the arranged marriage as one of the prevailing social practice in her society along with its destructive effects on both women and men respectively. Hence, she opens the novel by exposing the story of Gamrah Al-Qusmanji, who is married traditionally to Rachid Al Tanbal, an educated young man who is studying his degrees in the USA and whom she has never met before.

Before the wedding, Gamrah had seen Rashid only once, and that was on the day of the *shoufa*, the day set for the bridegroom's lawful viewing of the bride-to-be. The traditions of her family did not permit the man seeking the engagement to see the bride again before the contract-signing. Moreover, in this case there was no more than a two-week gap between the signing and the marriage celebration itself, and Qamrah's and Rashid's mothers agreed between themselves that Rashid would not see his bride during that time, so that she would have no interruptions as she prepared for her wedding.¹

In the light of this passage, Alsanea reveals how marriage is set between the couple even though they do not know each other enough as they are banned by traditions . As we have mentioned above, the couple are neither allowed to meet together nor to speak to each other before the marriage contract is signed. Ironically enough, the merely chance they have to

¹ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, p.51.

catch glimpse of each other is deeply regulated under the rubric of Shoufa¹ with the presence of their families. Alsanea deeply resents this restrictive practice which deprives both women and men of their basic right to see each other and meet to exchange ideas, nurture friendship and develop their social skills before they are married. The perception of marriage within the Saudi Arabian society goes in tune with Simone De Beauvoir point when she argues that: “for girls, marriage is the only means of integration in the community, and if they remain unwanted, they are, socially viewed, so much wastage. This is why mothers have always eagerly sought to arrange marriages for them.”²

The narrator goes on describing the Saudi Muslim wedding of Gamrah, where weddings in Saudi Arabia are seized and used by older women as it usually gives a space for them to scrutinize the young women who might be possible prospective brides for their sons. In return, young women do their best to show their beauty and great manners at weddings in a way to attract the attention of prospective mother-in-laws. In other words, It is the mothers and fathers who choose the wife for the son, or the husband for the daughter on the basis of social position of the family in society and the wealth they have. Mothers choose their son’s future wives either through matchmakers or when they meet girls in marriages or any other occasion of gatherings. Therefore, girls interested in marriages have to attract the attention of the mothers by showing good conduct so that they may have a chance to be chosen. Within this context, the narrator says:

The strategy of *yaaalla yaaalla*, which means ‘get going, but just barely’, is the most fool proof path to quick marriage proposal in our conservative society. The idea is to be energetic and constrained at the same time. ‘And after that you can be as foolish as you want,’ according to Um Nuwayyir’s counsel. At weddings, receptions and social

¹ In conservative societies like Saudi Arabia, you are not allowed to date a girl or see her before marriage. You have to see her once and this is called in Saudi dialect ‘Shoufa’, during which the couple can see each other in the presence of both families and then decide the whole marriage.

² Simone De Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (USA: Vantage: Books Edition, 1989), p.427.

gatherings where ladies meet, especially the old ladies looking to make a match, you must follow this strategy to the letter: —You barely walk, you barely talk, you barely smile, you barely dance, be mature and wise, you always think before you act, you measure your words carefully before you speak and you do not behave like a child.¹

This passage further suggests that the concept of marriage loses its value, as an institution that is supposed to be based on an intellectual match, reciprocal feelings, and love between the couple, to the social and cultural expectations of patriarchal societies like Saudi Arabian one. Indeed, marriage is not only regarded particularly as a business where one seeks profits, but also as a social shelter to escape social stigmatization especially among women. Viewed this way, marriage, as the passage suggests, haunts and obsesses women's mind due to the fact that a woman suffer endlessly in case she does not marry a man as early as possible. They fear being labelled 'spinsters' within their society if they miss the opportunity for marriage. Ironically, women are always to blame for not having been able to draw men's attention and this may account for viewing men as their saviour. This obsession is highly asserted in Gamrah's friend's rhetoric question as the narrator puts it: "why isn't me up there?"²

Given that marriage is almost usually arranged by parents based on a set of social, religious, class, and tribal considerations, Alsanea critically questions the success as well as the growth of a marriage set under these unfair conditions. Hence, she reveals the miserable outcome of this sort of marriage under which women and men are both victimized. In this regard, Rajaa Alsanea shows these sufferings through Gamrah's experience within and after marriage when she finds herself living with a man who does not show any affection or caring towards his wife. In fact, the marriage failure indications emerge very early during the wedding party when Gamrah's friends ask Rashid to kiss his wife to show love towards her. His reaction was appalling and not expected as he "sent the girls a scathing stare that sliced

¹ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, p.6

² *Ibid.*, p.8.

them into silence,”¹ says the narrator. Alsanea reveals here that Rashid along with thousands of Saudi men can hardly kiss their wives in front of others as it is an immoral act in their eyes which is largely rejected by their society.

Moreover, after marriage, both Rashid and Gamrah travel to Italy, namely to Venice, where they have decided to spend their honeymoon and later they immigrate to Chicago, where Rashid, Gamrah’s husband is doing his PhD. Given that she is imprisoned in her mother’s strict pieces of advice and instructions to show refusal and objection to her husband, Ghamrah is unable to enjoy her marital life and interact with her husband as the narrator says:

Her mother’s Golden Rule was spinning in her mind. Don’t be easy. Refusal – it’s the secret to activating a man’s passion. After all, her older sister Nafah and Hessah did not give themselves to their husbands till the fourth night. But she was setting a new record: it had been seven nights and her husband hadn’t touched her. Rashid hadn’t touched her even though she has been quite ready to ditch her mother’s theories after the first night.²

The above extract is very telling as it shows that women’s oppression is not always rendered by male hegemony, yet women themselves sometimes stand behind and are the source of women’s oppression as in the case of Gamrah’s mother, who does not only choose her daughter’s husband but is also charged to teach her daughter ascribed attitudes and traditions she is supposed to do to lead, ironically, a happy life. By doing so, she is implicitly perpetuating patriarchal structures that limit women’s freedom in terms of sexual freedom. In this context, Rubenberg avers that: “it is women who teach girls the rightness or the truth of their traditionally defined roles, responsibilities, relations, and restrictions. Mothers provide their daughters with things that are haram, *eib*, and *mamnoua*.”³ With this in mind, women are

¹ Ibid., p.10.

² Ibid., p.11.

³ Cheryl A. Rubenberg, *Palestinian Women: Patriarchy and Resistance in the West Bank* (USA: Lynne Rienner Publishers, Inc, 2001), p.79.

driven to undergo very dreadful and deplorable conditions that have subsequently serious consequences on their psychological side and their lives in general.

It is of paramount importance to note that sexual education in general and sexual freedom in particular is another serious issue raised by Alsanea in this novel to highlight the lack and the total ignorance of sexual knowledge and skills that prevail among both Saudi men and women. In describing Gamrah's experience in bed with her husband Rashid, the narrator says:

At that time, after dinner in the elegant hotel restaurant, Gamrah had made an irrevocable decision that this would be her true wedding night, something for which she had waited too long. Along as her husband was so bashful, she would have to help out, smooth the way for him just as her mother had advised her. They went up to their room and she began to flirt with him shyly. After a few moments of innocent seduction, he took things into his own hands. She gave herself up to it despite the enormous confusion and anxiety she felt. She closed her eyes, anticipating what was about to happen. And then he surprised her with an act that was never on her list of sexual expectations. Her response, which was shocking to both of them, was to slap him hard on the face then and there! Their eyes met in a stunned moment. Her eyes were filled with fear and bewilderment, while his were full of an anger the likes of which she had never seen. He moved away from her quickly, dressed hurriedly and left the room amid her tears and apologies.¹

As the passage certifies, both Gamrah and Rashid can hardly extricate themselves from the constructed *clichés* and social stereotypes they have in mind towards sexuality as being a taboo though they are legally married. Ironically enough, instead of enjoying their special moment and satisfying their sexual desires romantically as a married couple, Rashid and

¹ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, pp.26-27.

Gamrah find themselves unable to make love and interact pleasingly due to the ignorance of such a matter which ends in sort of a tragic experience.

Gamrah's suffering is aggravated throughout the marriage life with her husband Rashid. In the Arab society in general and the Saudi Society in particular, a woman impatiently seeks marriage as she thinks that it is the source of settlement and happiness towards her life. However, in the case of Gamrah, it goes otherwise as it turns out to be a nightmare and a tragedy. This is highly reflected when Gamrah starts feeling doubt and low self-esteem with her husband and says: "My husband, whom I love, hates me. He wants to throw me away."¹

In fact, there are many instances that testify to her suffering and bewilderment with her husband. Being partly influenced by the Western culture, Rashid despises his wife with the veil (Hijaab) and upon this, he says: "Why don't you wear ordinary clothes like the other women here? It's as if you are trying to embarrass me in front of my friends with the things you wear! And then you wonder why I don't take you out with me."² By asking her to give up wearing the Hijab, Rashid here is not promoting her freedom as other liberal women in the West, but rather he is seeking his own interest and image as Hijab for him becomes a source of irritation and 'embarrassment' with his Western liberal friends.

To please her husband and seeks his praise, she passively and surprisingly takes off her veil and her coat one day after persuading him to take her to the theatre, yet his reaction was as shocking as usual. Once he watches her, he expresses his blatant disapproval: "Taking them off isn't making you looks any better. So just put them again."³ Interestingly, by revealing men's ambivalent attitude towards the veil, Alsanea critically calls into question the real motive behind wearing the veil which leads to a rhetoric question: Do women put on the veil as a way to express their obedience to God as it is implied in the Saudi religious

¹ Ibid., p.50.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p.51.

discourse? Or is it merely a means by which women show their obedience to the male hegemony?

Not surprisingly, Gamrah is not leading the happy life she has ever wished to live. She is really enduring regarding her husband, Rashid, and his constant maltreatment and abuse she has received throughout the marriage life in the USA. This arises more doubt and confusion towards her husband. The following passage significantly summarizes her complete doubt:

One day as was shopping in the AL-Khayyam Arab Grocery on Kedzie Avenue, she heard the owner singing along with the famous Egyptian singer Oum Kultum .He was obviously enjoying himself and was completely immersed in a trance brought on by the music. Ghamrah listened to the melancholy tune and the words that pressed hard against a wound that sat deep inside of her. Her eyes filled with tears as the idea hit her: Can Rashid possibly be in love with someone else?¹

It does not take Gamrah a long time to find an answer to her doubt and the questions that have long occupied her mind. That is to say, Gamrah coincidentally finds out that Rashid is involved in a secret relationship with a Japanese girl, Kari, through the photos she finds in his laptop. “Sitting at the computer, Gamrah was going through some files containing screensavers when her eyes fell on a file that appeared to hold a great many photos of an Asian woman. She was Japanese, Ghmrah learned later. Her name was Kari.”² Once again, Alsanea reveals here the extent to which the Saudi man is ambivalent and contradictory by, on one hand; betraying and mistreating his wife whom he is supposed to love, and on the other hand, by establishing a secret love relationship with another woman, whom he is not allowed to marry.

Gamrah’s marriage goes worse and her plights are aggravated under these conditions. In short, her constant sufferings and endurance can be painfully reflected in the following questions which obsess her mind:

¹ Ibid., p.53.

² Ibid., p.78.

So why would he marry me if he didn't want me? Gamrah asked herself time and time again. She asked her mother whether she had heard anything from Rashid's family to suggest that he had been forced to marry her. But did it make sense that a man - and he was every inch a man, whatever else he turned out to be - would be forced to marry a woman he didn't want, no matter how compelling the reasons?¹

Being aware of the worse consequences of divorce on women within her own society especially the disgrace she thinks she might bring to her family if divorced, Gamrah does her best; even at the expense of her own happiness, to save her marriage from loss. In other words, she struggles to keep her husband by mistakenly following her mother's tactics to give birth to a child as a way to preserve the husband. "She had long heard her mother and female relatives repeating the wisdom of previous generations, that if all else fails; pregnancy was the only way to ensure that a marriage continues."² This is, however, not the case with Gamrah, regarding once again Rashid's reaction when he learns she is pregnant. Instead of being enchanted like every single man receiving such news, Rashid abuses her physically as well psychologically and then he decides to send her back to her homeland after deciding to divorce her.

What? Pregnant? You are pregnant! How did that happen? Who gave you permission to get pregnant? You mean you're not taking the pills? Didn't we agree there would be no pregnancy until I finish my PhD and we go back to Saudi? You figured you could twist my arm with these filthy tricks!³

Gamrah's marriage is doomed to failure after being divorced and having had to return to live a life of misery and boredom in her parents' house.

In a virtual re-enactment of Sadeem's tragedy, the divorce papers were delivered to Gamrah's father two weeks after Gamrah landed in Riyadh, effectively blocking all

¹ Ibid., p.51.

² Ibid., p.84.

³ Ibid., p.85.

possible maternal machinations. It appeared as though Rashid had just been waiting for the moment in which he felt he could justifiably rid himself of the wife that had been imposed on him.¹

This passage is a typical example of the dreadful consequences of the arranged marriage in the Saudi Arabian society with regard to the case of Rashid and Gamrah, whose marriage was planned and arranged by their families on tribal and family basis. More importantly, Alsanea raises, through this passage, the issue of divorce as being the source of pain and torture to a number of women in Saudi patriarchal society. Put differently, women, as represented by Gamrah, are passively divorced by their husbands without even having their permission. When a Saudi man decides that his wife is no longer an asset, he can easily desert and divorce her, yet he can still live and enjoy his life without any restrictions. On the contrary, a woman fears divorce and can hardly divorce her husband because of vulnerable position as being highly dependent on a man in many aspects of life which ultimately leads to bearing a big burden in their society.

According to El Saadawi, she argues that “the great majority of Arab women are still, terrorized by the mere word, divorce which means hunger, no home, and the unrelenting remarks of those around them”². Hence, when a woman is divorced, she is put under a lot of pressures and her freedom becomes more restricted as she is deemed as “a menace to man and society, and the only way to avoid the harm she could do was to isolate her in the home, where she could have no contact with either one or the other,”³ adds El Saadawi .

In this context, Alsanea poses a very serious and rhetorical questions which reveal the, agony, social stigma, and the endurance women undergo in the Saudi society in the marriage circle. Hence, the narrator wonders:

¹ Ibid., p.98.

² Nawal El Saadawi, *The Hidden Face of Eve: Women in the Arab World*, trans. Sherif Hetata (London: Zed Books, 1980), p.205.

³ Ibid., p.136.

Is divorce a major crime committed by the woman only? Why does not our society harass the divorced man the way it crushes the divorced woman? I know that you readers are always ready to dismiss and make light of these naïve questions of mine, but surely you can see that they are logical questions and they deserve some careful thought. We should defend Um Nuwayyir and Gamrah and other divorcees. Women like them don't deserve to be looked down on by society, which only condescends from time to time to throw them a few bones and expects them to be happy with that. Meanwhile, divorced men go on to live fulfilling lives without any suffering or blame.¹

Having to lead a life under such miserable conditions, especially in a society which lays full blame on women when it comes to divorce, women, according to Alsanea, become more subject to severe psychological trauma. To summarize these plights, the narrator says:

Gamrah suffered a great deal of pain as a result of her divorce from Rashid....Night times was the worst: Since returning to the family home, she had been unable to sleep for more than three hours a night—she, who had never found it hard to sleep ten—or twenty—hours at a stretch before her marriage and even during it! Now she would wake up tormented in anguish.²

In the same vein, the narrator recounts the story of Sadeem, the second character of the novel, as being somewhat similar to that of Gamrah .In brief, Sadeem's tragic experience is almost the same as Gamrah though they have a completely different personalities and characters.

Sadeem, as we learn from the novel, is a girl whose mother died since her birth, and therefore she is raised by her father and her eldest aunt, Badriyyah, who acts as a mother figure. Sadeem is finally pushed to marry her cousin, Tarik, against her wishes as an act of revenge to compensate for the disappointment she experiences after being dumped by her two

¹ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, p.172.

² *Ibid.*, p.100.

previous lovers Waleed Al-Shari and Firas. Sadeem's first tragic story begins when she is left by her fiancé Waleed as she allows him one night to have more freedom with her in bed before the wedding party. Provided that Sadeem is now officially married in papers to Waleed, she sees no harm in getting closer and pleases him sexually since he is her legal husband though the wedding party is not set yet. The result is that Waleed disappears and never shows up after that night and he sends her the divorce paper as he thinks she has had many previous sexual experiences with other men.

Once again Alsanea reveals social hypocrisy that is strongly embedded in the Saudi society through the experience of Sadeem. In fact, women are doomed to endure and suffer more under the men's double standard attitude and hypocrisy that are highly pervasive as the case of Waleed suggests. Paradoxically, Waleed is strongly determined to make love with his wife, Sadeem, as he seems unable to wait till Eid Al-Fitr after which the wedding party will take place.

Since Sadeem had vowed to make her beloved Waleed happy that night, and since she wanted to erase his disappointment over her insistence on delaying the wedding, she allowed him to go further with her than ever before. She did not try to stop him- as she had gotten used to doing-when he attempted to cross the signing of the contract—She was convinced that he wouldn't be satisfied unless she offered him a little more of her, —femininity, and she was willing to do anything to please him, the love of her life, even if it meant exceeding the limits she has spent her lifetime guarding.¹

In the light of this, we come to know that it is Waleed, who pushes Sadeem to make love with him and therefore she decides mistakenly to offer him more of her in the hope to gain his praise and his satisfaction since she is officially his wife; however, his reaction is appalling and paradoxical as “she kept calling through the entire week, at different times of the day and

¹ Ibid., p.32.

night, desperate to reach him. But his cell phone was always switched off and the private line in his room was always busy.”¹

It becomes even worse for Sadeem when Waleed eventually sends her divorce papers claiming that he no longer feels comfortable with her. Being divorced now, Sadeem is a shocked and she blames herself as she does not wait till after the wedding party. Sadeem never tells her family about that night since she knows deeply she will be viewed with suspicion and she will never be understood by her family and society. She believes the reason that Waleed has divorced her is that he thinks she is any easy girl who had previous sexual experiences. Hence, she collapses emotionally onto herself to suffer more as a divorcee.

Had she been wrong to give herself to Waleed before wedding celebration? Did it make any sense at all to believe that that was the cause of him avoiding her? Why, though? Wasn't he her legal husband, and hadn't he been her legal husband ever since they signed the contract? Or did getting married mean the ballroom, the guests, the live singer and the dinner? And what she had done - did it somehow deserve punishment from him? Hadn't he been the one who initiated it? Why had he encouraged her to do the wrong thing and then afterward abandoned her? And anyway, was it wrong; was it a sin, in the first place? Had he been testing her? And if she had failed the test, did that mean she was not worthy of him? He must have thought she was one of those girls who were easy!²

Alsanea poses here other rhetoric questions through her character Sadeem, which they not only give deep insight into the hypocrisy of the Saudi patriarchal society, but also show how this hypocrisy causes deep psychological and emotional trauma for Saudi women.

¹ Ibid., p.33.

² Ibid.

Sadeem's tragedy is further deepened in London, where she goes to recover from the trauma of her previous experience with Waleed. There, she meets in a birth's day party a Saudi young man called, Firas Al Sharqawi, who is a diplomat and a well-known politician. After their first contacts, she falls in a love with Firas perhaps stronger than her first lover with regard to the special respect and kindness he shows during his encounters with her.... "Until finally, praying for Waleed's return turned into praying for Firas's presence."¹ Despite the great intellectual side he shows to her during their first encounters, Firas turns out to be a traditionally bound man, the fact of which makes Sadeem suffer severe depression and agony as their relationship cannot accordingly go forward to marriage. Firas's social status as a politician does not allow him to marry Sadeem due to her marital status as a divorced woman.

Because of the very negative stereotypes held about divorcee women in his society, coupled with his family rejection, Firas is not brave enough to challenge this view as he is afraid of this prospective marriage which may bring social stigma and destroys his image with his family and his position as a politician. With this in mind, Firas is finally engaged to a girl of his family choice which ensues Sadeem's confusion and causes deep pain inside her heart as the narrator comments in the following passage:

Was it possible for Firas to marry someone other than her? How could such a thing happen? After all this love and the years they had spent together? Did it make any sense that a man of Firas's strength and resourcefulness was unable to convince his family that he could marry a divorced woman? Or was it just that he was incapable of convincing himself of it? Had she failed, after all of her attempts, to reach the level of perfection befitting a man like Firas?²

Alsanea here reflects on two important things. Firstly, she uncovers the social hypocrisy of Saudi men represented by Firas, who is obviously unable to marry a woman of his own choice

¹ Ibid., p.143.

² Ibid., p.209.

and give it in to his family, and secondly she shows the plight of divorced women in the Saudi society who are looked down at and viewed unfavourably as immoral women especially if they happen to be intellectuals and have a free spirit like the case of Sadeem.

The story of Michelle is quite different from both Gamrah and Sadeem regarding her disposition and her attitudes towards traditions. Being born to a Saudi father and to an American mother, Mashael, as her real Arabic name or Michelle, as her mother and friends are used to call her, is more herself and is more liberal. For that reason, she does not suffer as much pain and suffering as her friends do in her love relations. On the contrary to her friends, she relatively enjoys more freedom. Even though Michelle falls in love with Faisal, whom she thinks he is the right person as he loves her infinitely, their relationship is broken up due to the family considerations. Their love relationship does not span more than a year and is ultimately doomed to failure when Michelle asks Faisal to marry her and his reaction does not seem different from Firas, Sadeem's lover, due to Faisal's dependency on his family. In this regard, the narrator says:

The family of that girl was not of their sort. They must ask Faisal's father, since he knew infinitely more about genealogies and families. But from the start, his mother suggested, this line of conversation did not augur well. The girl had tricked him! Aah, the girls of this generation! How awful they were! And aah, for her young, green son- she never would have expected him to fall into the trap of a girl such as this! She asked him who the girl's maternal uncles were and as soon as she heard that the girl's mother was American, she decided to bang the door shut for good on this fruitless dialogue around this utterly ridiculous topic. So countless mothers before her, she resorted to the oldest trick in the book: "quick, son! Get up, hurry, get me my blood pressure medicine! My heart, oh, my heart, I think I am dying."¹

¹ Ibid., pp.94-95.

It can be argued that this passage is very significant as it reveals the extent to which forces such as family belonging, class, race, and religion can play such a very crucial role in judging as well as deciding on the marriages between men and women in the Saudi Arabian society. Faisal is not allowed by his family to marry Michelle, the girl he loves, due to the fact that she is, on one hand, half-American, which is highly rejected in Saudi society culture, and on the other hand, she belongs to simple unknown family which is not an asset in the eyes of Faisal's family.

Hence, Alsanea critically calls into question these unjust practices and beliefs that ban individuals from choosing their right spouse regardless of their family genealogy, and /or their class and cultural backgrounds. These maltreatments and stereotypes are further manifested through Michelle's rhetorical questions: "why am I forced to act a part in front of others? Why does not this society respect the difference between my family and other Saudi families? Everyone considers me a bad girl just because my mother is American! How can I live in such an unjust society? Tell me how, Faisal!"¹.

Equally important, Alsanea also criticizes the contradictions of Saudi people vis-à-vis their behaviours and attitudes. Though Michelle's father is very liberal, he rejects her marriage to her cousin, Matti due to religious differences as explained in the following:

Michelle discovered that the epidemic of contradictions in her country had got so out of control that it had even infected her parents. Her father, whom she had regarded as a rare symbol of the freedom of Saudi Arabia, had (himself!) now smashed the pedestal she had put him on, thereby proving the truth of the proverb: anyone who lives with a people becomes one of them!²

After Michelle's disappointment and failure to get married to Faisal as well as her family rejection to get engaged with her cousin Matti, she relatively recovers quickly and moves

¹ Ibid.,p.91.

² Ibid., pp.3-84.

forward to pursue up her studies in Dubai, where she finally works at one of the satellite TV channels owned by the father of her Emirati girlfriend, Jumanah.

Unlike all her other three girlfriends Gamrah, Sadeem, and Michelle who are destined, as we have witnessed above, to undergo constant disappointments and failures in their personal and social life, Lamess ,their fourth friend seems, on the other hand, completely different from the rest. That is to say, Lamess has been able to achieve success in both her career and her personal life though her first short-lived experience is not a success. In brief, she seems to be more prudent and wiser than the rest in the sense that she has chosen a man of her own choice whom she loves, not to mention that she moves to Canada with her husband to pursue her studies in Medicine major.

More importantly, Lamess is deemed to be adequately knowledgeable in different areas and disciplines. For that reason, her three girlfriends keep consulting her and enquiring about their potential relationship matches taking into account her deep knowledge about the horoscope field as well as computer science discipline. Also, she takes the charge of teaching her friend, Gamrah how to have access to the Internet by surfing and chatting with internet users. By doing so, she helps her break the routine and recover from the trauma and the plight ensued by her divorce from Rachid. Before she meets Nizar, Lamees first Seems to like Ali a Shiite¹, the brother of her friend, Fatima. In brief, Ali studies Medicine with Lamees at the same University, which makes their encounters more frequent. However, their relationship does not last long enough as they are caught in a café by the Police of Morals and Virtue, and

¹ Shiites are the second-largest branch of Islam, after Sunnis. A Shiite believes that Mohammed's son-in-law, Ali, was his legitimate successor as political and religious leader and prophet. Though Shiites hold this basic belief in common, there are further divisions within Shia Islam, another name for the group of Shiites. You can also call a Shiite a *Shia*, which is its root as well — from the Arabic *shi'ah*, "partisans or followers." Cited from: Vocabulary.com Dictionary

are brought to investigation as this sort of dating is not tolerated in Saudi Arabia and it is even deemed as a punishable offense. Here, the narrator says after they are caught:

There, they put Lamees and Ali into two separate rooms and began interrogations. Lamees could not bear the hurtful questions put to her. They asked her in detail about her relationship with Ali. They used coarse language and they forced her to hear words that would have embarrassed her even in front of her most intimate girlfriends. After trying for hours to appear self-confident and completely convinced of the rightness of everything she had done, she collapsed in tears. She really did not believe that she had done anything that was cause for shame. In the next room, the interrogator was putting pressure on Ali, who lost his cool completely when the man asserted that Lamees had confessed to everything and that he might as well come clean.¹

Not only does Alsanea address here the gender segregation policy that is deeply entrenched by the Saudi regime, but she also raises the issue of racism that is based on religious fanaticism among Saudi people and the regime itself. Because Ali is a Persian Shiite boy, Lamees is not even allowed to establish a casual friendship with Ali, let alone loving or marrying him due to the long constant political, historical, and religious conflict between Shiite and Sunni² ideologies. This idea is asserted when Lamees “had heard a policeman whispering into her father’s ear that they had found the boy was ‘from the rejectionist sect’. He was a Shiite from Qatif and so his punishment would certainly be worse than hers.”³ Hereby, Alsanea critically questions the individual’s freedom in general and women’s

¹ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, p.139.

² There are several different traditions within the Sunni branch of Islam, but Sunnis are often described as orthodox Muslims. Since the death of Muhammad in the year 632, there has been conflict between the Sunnis and the other main Muslim group, the Shiites, although both branches share a belief in the teachings of the Qur'an. In Arabic, the word *Sunni* means “lawful,” and its root can be found in *Sunna*, “the traditional teachings of Muhammad, or way, course, or teachings, retrieved from Vocabulary.com Dictionary.

³ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, p.140.

freedom of choice in particular to be with the person she likes regardless of their religious affiliation, class, race, or otherwise.

As a conclusion, it is fair to note that Alsanea has boldly exposed through her four protagonists together with the anonymous narrator myriads of highly debatable issues such as arranged marriage, divorce, women's freedom, and women's status in general in the Saudi Arabian context. Significantly, Alsanea has insightfully criticised almost all the social contradictions and cultural practices which usually -if not all the times- perpetuate largely gender roles and stereotypes, under which Saudi women are victimised and doomed to go through plight and very traumatic experiences as we have witnessed in this section. In fact, women, as discussed, in the novel under analysis, are still accordingly victims of severe patriarchy, strict traditions, tribal relations and misuse of religion in a very conservative society like Saudi Arabia. However, no matter how painful times and endurance women in *Girls of Riyadh* have gone through, it is very important to note that these women, as we will argue in the forthcoming section, are filled with strong determination, courage, and hope to struggle to change the status quo by not only challenging the patriarchal system, but also resisting stereotypical images entrenched firmly by the orientalist discourse.

b- Defiance and Rebel

It goes without saying that Alsanea's novel is ostensibly very daring work with regard, on one hand, to the nature of taboo topics she has discussed and on the other hand, to the particularities of the Saudi Arabian society as being vastly ruled by Islamic teachings. Taking the advantage of living across borders in the Western world, and being somewhat influenced by Western values and modernity, Alsanea tends to view herself as a catalyst and icon for changing and negotiating Saudi Arabian social realities in general and Saudi women's social status in particular through her fiction.

Though *Girls of Riyadh* may mistakenly seem, for some especially Western reader, to be reinforcing gender stereotypes and orientalist vision held on the orient subject in general and Saudi women in particular regarding the constant disappointment and failure the four protagonists seem to undergo especially Gamrah and Sadeem, a close reading of the novel will definitely refute and rectify this claim taking into account the on-going resistance and perseverance manifested by the four heroines characters throughout the novel. In other words, while the previous section rigorously examines the degree to which Saudi women are oppressed and suppressed under the rigid Saudi patriarchal framework, this section will relatively shed light on the persistent struggles and strong defiance the four characters have displayed throughout their rebellious acts against the patriarchal Saudi mind-sets and traditional conventions. Also, it will argue that there is an on-going clash between traditions on one hand, represented by mothers, fathers, brothers, and uncles, and modernity on the other hand, represented by the four protagonists namely Gamrah, Sadeem, Michelle and Lamess.

In fact, Alsanea's novel critically tries to approach the private life of the Saudi society and its maltreatment of women in particular so that it can make it visible and open to many people who do not adequately know about the life of the contemporary Saudi society. At the same time, Alsanea's novel is more concerned to show how women, being influenced by western values, through their regular encounters and travel in the Western countries, try to find a compromise between modernity and traditions, and therefore react fearlessly to traditional conventions that insist on putting them hopelessly behind the walls. The four friends are typical examples and models of modern Saudi women who are struggling and fighting to induce change and bring significant ameliorations within their society and outside by rectifying misconceptions and negative images held about them especially by Western discourse.

It seemed to me, and to many other Saudis, that the Western world still perceives us either romantically, as the land of the Arabian Nights and the land where bearded Sheikhs sit in their tents surrounded by their beautiful harem women, or politically, as the land that gave birth to Bin Laden and other terrorists, the land where women are dressed in black from head to toe and where every house has its own oil well in the backyard!¹

As we have seen in the first part, namely the section that deals with orientalism, numerous postcolonial theorists, most notably Edward Said come up with a theory that is based critically on answering back Western discourse that constantly seeks to maintain the dominant and hegemonic power of the West through misrepresenting the ‘other’ East. Most of the Western cultural productions in all its forms including books, media, and art look down and portray the other in very negative way. Jean P. Sasson’s novel *Princess: A True Story of Life Behind the Veil in Saudi Arabia*, for instance, is a typical example which seeks to perpetuate the image of Saudi women and Arab women in general in the mind of the Western reader and meet the stereotyping depicted by media.

Being aware of this as the above passage suggests, Alsanea critically opens the novel with the above quotation to show strong determination to deconstruct Western orientalist discourse which discursively views and constructs ‘others’ and women in particular as weak, exotic, submissive, and uncivilized. This idea is highly confirmed by a Saudi researcher, Aziza Nimri, who argues that “because the histories we learn in school, the tales we hear in the street, the claims made on our behalf, all somehow miss the point. Or simply get it wrong. We really do not how others write us. At best we are invisible.”² As such, Alsanea believes strongly in the power of pen and literature to correct and rectify these images within and outside her society by inviting both Arabic-speaking and non-Arabic speaking readers to

¹ Ibid., p.ix.

² Aziz Barbara Nimri, “Foreword,” p.xii.

know transparently what has been made invisible about the Arab women in general and Saudi women in particular. In doing so, she serves as a mediator to cross-culturally negotiate and bridge the gap between western culture and the Arab culture.

Accordingly, it is very important to argue that there are countless instances in the novel which highlight the real intellectual side of the four girls along with their rebellion against a rigid conception of gender roles based on social traditions and rigid culture. In a conservative society where women are expected to obey traditional gender roles, the four girls, as the following passage shows, act otherwise as they seek to rebel against the inscribed rules from the outset of the novel.

They were all to meet at Michelle's house. The hostess greeted them wearing baggy trousers with lots of pocket and an oversized jacket-gear that artfully concealed any sign of femininity –plus a bandanna that hid her hair. To top it all off, she had an open pair of coloured sunglasses that gave her the appearance of an adolescent boy who has escaped parental surveillance. Lamees wore a masculine-style following white *thobe* with a *shimagh* draped over her head and kept in place with a snugly black eqal. With her height and athletic body she really did look like a guy, and a handsome one, too. The rest of them were wearing embroidered *abayas*. But these *abayas* weren't the loose tepees that you see women wearing on the street.¹

In the light of this, we come to know that the four girls are not subservient and passive to the will of their society; rather they show a great deal of rejection and challenge by gathering at Micheele's house and wearing modern clothes and make up as an act to assert themselves as free women. Moreover, they act freer and more daringly later when they decide to take an action in the public sphere as independent women and break free from societal restrictions. As discussed in the first section of this chapter, it was till 2018 when Saudi women gained the

¹ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, pp.14-15.

right to drive after a long protest and struggle. Before this time, they were not permitted to drive and this ban stems from, to use Farzaneh Milani's words "universal anxiety over women's unrestrained mobility women."¹The real implications behind this, she adds:

In Saudi Arabia that anxiety is acute: the streets - and the right to enter and leave them at will - belong to men...Gender apartheid is not about piety. It is about dominating, excluding and subordinating women. It is about barring them from political activities, preventing their active participation in the public sector.²

However, Micheel, the bravest character in the novel is seen as the first character to challenge this rule. Provided that she has an international driving licence in the USA, Micheel dresses up in a men's clothing so as not to be recognized by the religious police. Afterwards, she picks her friends in a car in a society where women are never seen behind the wheel to drive cars by their own as they are assumed to be driven by emotion and, therefore, cannot lead cars bravely.

Michelle had an international drivers' licence. She took charge: she drove the BMW X5 SUV with its dark-tinted windows. She had managed to rent it through one of the car showrooms by putting the rental in the name of her family's male Ethiopian driver. The CD player was on full blast. The girls sang along and swayed their abaya clad shoulders as if they were dancing on the seats.³

The above expert can be seen as a major step towards achieving women's self-assertion in public sphere. Put differently, Alsanea shows here that girls, led by Michelle, are brave enough to bypass societal norms and rules imposed on them by being fashionably dressed, driving, going to the mall, chilling out, and enjoying their life away from men as free and

¹ Cited in Anushay Hossain, "Starting the Engine: Saudi Women Drive for Their Rights" Forbes, July 6th, 2011, accessed on April 7th from <https://hk.news.yahoo.com/starting-engine-saudi-women-drive-rights-155316782.html>.

² Ibid.

³ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, p.15.

independent women against all odds and gender traditional perceptions. Michelle, who is seen perhaps as the most open minded girl among her three friends with regard to her hybrid identity, acts more courageously than the rest. When she is, for instance, at the mall, she fearlessly accepts a friendship request, which develops later to a love relationship with a young man called Faisal.

Michelle had stood out from the start as a girl who was possibly bold enough to be looking for adventure. The guy asked Michelle if she would allow him to go in with them as a member of the family.....Michelle was astonished at his nerve. But she accepted the deal without much delay.¹

More importantly, Michelle is represented throughout the novel as a symbol of change with regard to her free spirit nature and rebellious character. She is perhaps seen as the mouthpiece of Rajaa Alsanea's harsh criticism of the Saudi's rigid and oppressive cultural traditions. She serves, in fact, as an inspirational girl, not to mention an eye opener for others which can be witnessed in frequent incidents. This is obviously seen when she boldly decides to celebrate Valentine's Day in a close society which acknowledges only two exclusive religious feasts: *Eid Al-Fitr*² and *Eid Al Adha*³. "On Valentine's Day, Michelle put on a red shirt and carried a matching handbag. A large number of the other female students did the same, enough of them

¹ Ibid., p.16.

² Eid al-Fitr marks the end of Ramadan, the Muslim holy month of fasting, and is celebrated during the first three days of Shawwal, the 10th month of the Islamic calendar. It is distinguished by the performance of communal prayer (*ṣalāt*) at daybreak on its first day. Eid al-Fitr is a time of official receptions and private visits, when friends greet one another, presents are given, new clothes are worn, and the graves of relatives are visited.

³ Eid al-Adha marks the culmination of the hajj (pilgrimage) rites at Minā, Saudi Arabia, near Mecca, but is celebrated by Muslims throughout the world. As with Eid al-Fitr, it is distinguished by the performance of communal prayer (*ṣalāt*) at daybreak on its first day. It begins on the 10th of Dhu'l-Hijja, the last month of the Islamic calendar, and continues for an additional three days. During the festival, families that can afford to sacrifice a ritually acceptable animal (sheep, goat, camel, or cow) divide the flesh equally among themselves, the poor, and friends and neighbours. Eid al-Adha is also a time during which Muslims visit their friends and family and exchange gifts.

so that the whole campus looked bright red, by means of clothes and flowers and stuffed animals.”¹

Another instance in the novel which proves Michelle’s strong character and her constant sense of freedom and struggle against her society is when she turns out to be like a mentor and scholar, commenting critically on social matters:

Michelle had become truly frightening lately, the way she talked about freedom and women’s rights, the bonds of religion, conventions imposed by society and her philosophy on relations between the sexes. She was continually advising Gamrah to become tougher and meaner in asserting herself and not to give an inch when it came to defending her own rights.²

Furthermore, Michelle cannot get along with the biased culture which, in her opinion, is sick. She bears deep resentment towards her traditionally-bound society which ends up in such a way victimizing both men and women. She comments on Faisal’s decision to marry a girl of his family choice: “I have complete confidence in myself, and I know I can face whatever hassles stand in my way, but frankly I don’t have the same confidence in Faisal or in any other guy in our sick society.”³ As such, Michelle can be regarded as the first revolutionary character to bring about change through her braveness and her sense of challenge.

Sadeem is also represented as an educated young woman who rebels against her society and fight to change the Saudi patriarchal mind-sets. Indeed, the novel is full of incidents that reveal her challenging and brave attitudes. The first important instance is revealed in the marriage signing contract during which she boldly protests to sign up her name in the registry book. It is very important to note that unlike men, women in Saudi Arabia are denied the right

¹ Rajaa Alsanea, *Girls of Riyadh*, p.57.

² Ibid., p.175 .

³ Ibid .,p.269.

to sign up their names in the marriage registry book. Sadeem yet shows a strong disapproval to this rule as the narrator says:

During the official proceeding Sadeem pressed her fingerprint onto the page in the enormous registry book after her protest about not being allowed to sign her name was dismissed. “My girl”, said her aunt, “just stamp it with your fingerprint and call it a day. The sheikh says fingerprint, not signature. The men are the only ones who sign their names.”¹

Another important event in the novel that reveals Sadeem’s sense of freedom is her decision to travel to London by her own. In the Saudi Arabian culture, women are not to travel by their own, especially if they happen to travel abroad unless they have a male relative companion. Yet Sadeem breaks up this rule when she freely takes a daring action to travel alone to London and rejects her father’s offer to be her companion. In answering her father’s request, “Sadeem asked him, though to let her go alone and stay in their flat in South Kensington. She wanted to spend a stretch of time by herself, she said.”²

Though it is a temporary travel, it remains for Sadeem, as a perfect outlet to express her freedom on one hand, and to allow herself to be open to Western culture on the other hand. In doing so, it is fair to say that Sadeem proves that women are aspirants, accustomed to travels, have dreams and are on move like any other women in different parts of the world. She also rebels against her society in another remarkable act by getting rid of the veil once she is in the airplane as a way of breaking free from societal restrictions. “Sadeem headed for the airplane bathroom. She took off her *abaya* and head covering to reveal a well-proportional body encased in tight jeans and a T-shirt, and a smooth face adorned with light pink blush, a little mascara and a swipe of lip gloss.”³

¹ Ibid., p.31.

² Ibid., p.61

³Ibid., p.61.

Last but not least, Sadeem comes to show a growing sense of criticality she has learnt from her personal experiences as well as from her friends. She expresses her strong disapproval and resistance to the maltreatment and abuse women suffer in her society. She says:

I'm sick of how we let everyone else control us and lead us through this life. We can never do anything without the fear of being judged holding us back. Everyone steers us along according to what they want. What kind of life is that? We don't have a say about our own lives.¹

Women's rebel and dogged perseverance within the novel can ostensibly be reflected in Lamees' intellectual side and her courageous attitudes. Alsanea presents Lamees as the most intelligent character among her other characters with regard to her wit, her rebellious nature, which may account for her constant eventual success and her distinguished accomplishments. To describe her intelligence, the narrator says in comparing Lamees to her younger sister Tamadur: "Lamees, on the other hand, was the cool A+ student who was also the favourite of her classmates because of her wit and her friendliness to everyone. At the same time, she managed to maintain her good grades. Lamees had more courage..."² Lamees' bravery is further seen in another challenging situation when she and her three high school classmates are caught with sixteen prohibited videos at school and it is Lamees, who entrusts herself with handling the problem. Upon this, the narrator says:

Lamees gathered up the videos from her classmates, stuck them inside a large paper bag, and asked them all to ask normal. She assured them that everything would turn out just fine and that she would handle the whole mess and takes care of everything.³

Lamees, as the passage tells, is a very fearless girl who steps forward to be in charge of solving the problem regardless of the risk she might run behind this act. Equally important,

¹ Ibid., p. 178.

² Ibid., p.37.

³ Ibid., p.38.

Lamees seems to be a very self-confident girl with a very pronounced view towards her actions as well as her career which can be more strongly proved when she affirms after solving the problem “Hey, I’m Lamees! The one and only.”¹ It can be alleged that Lamees is doomed to success both at her personal level when married to Nizar, the man she loves, and her career level when she goes to Canada with her husband to finish her studies in dentistry discipline. To sum up Lamees’ happy ending in the graduation ceremony with her girlfriends, the narrator comments:

Lamees was the unchallenged star of the party with her expanding belly; the foetus was in the twenty-eighth week. Lamees’s rosy cheeks and confident smile announced to her friends that hope still existed somewhere in this troubled business of life. Everything about her, on this graduation day, showed them that at least one of them was a young woman bursting with happiness.²

Even though she is the character who relatively seems to suffer more compared to her friends, Gamrah appears to be very rebellious in many reactions and situations. The first challenging attitude is witnessed when she objects strongly to marry a man of her family choice. In spite of the fact she is subject to constant pain and endurance in her society and she is always thought of as source of disgrace to her family as a divorcee woman, Gamrah surprisingly shows a great deal of protest to her family and to her society at large. This is highly manifested when her maternal uncle brings her an old potential bride to marry, but yet Gamrah’s reaction this time is unexpected. Upon this, she says:

Why? Why do I need a man to shield and protect me? Does your brother think I’m a disgrace, or I cannot protect my own self? You people don’t realize that I am grown woman now and I have a son! My word should count and I should be listened to.³

¹ Ibid.,p. 42.

² Ibid., pp.271-272.

³Ibid., p.192.

In the light of this passage, we come to realize that this event marks a turning point in Gamrah's character and views. She is being very critical towards her societal traditions and conventions and therefore she does not want to commit the same mistake for which she experiences painful moments and sufferings. This passage also shows that Gamrah is no longer as passive and silent as she is before. She comes to be self-assertive through voicing her opinion and her rights as an independent divorced woman.

Another significant act which proves her growing awareness of her rights is when she decides to be an agent woman in public space as an assistant for Sadeem's new business as wedding party organizer. She seizes the opportunity offered by Sadeem to show and prove that she can earn money independently against her family's will and wishes.

Gamrah would begin working every night after she performed the evening Ramadan Prayers at the huge mosque downtown. Shopping malls rarely open in the daytime during Ramadan but they make up for it at night, opening until three or four in the morning throughout the holy month.¹

It is of a great significant to note that Gamrah bravely breaks the rules imposed by her mother in particular and her society in general by taking strong and daring decision to work late at night outside without even the companion of any male relative. She is even assigned with the task to buy necessary commodities for the business which gives her more mobility freedom.

It should be noted that women in *Girls of Riyadh* consistently refute and challenge, with regard to aforementioned rebellious attitudes exemplified by the four protagonists, not only the negative and unfair stereotypical images that have been long circulated by Western orientalist discourse, but also the Saudi patriarchal mind-sets. Put differently, Alsanea's novel critically deconstructs Western negative attitudes which view women as submissive, exotic

¹ Ibid., p.232.

and voiceless subject by revealing the on-going struggles and resistance women show against patriarchal system.

To conclude, the novel under study critically addresses the social and cultural contradictions regarding Saudi women's status. It also depicts how the writer directs sharp criticism to many social and cultural practices as being the source of women's oppression and frustration. Alsanea raises a number of controversial issues through her four female protagonists regarding women's status in Saudi Arabia such as gender roles, arranged marriage, divorce, the veil, sexuality among others. It also involves themes related to love, social class, religion, politics, globalization and inter-cultural negotiation. The chapter also highlights remarkable struggles and resistance the protagonists have shown to the social and cultural contradictions prevailing in the Saudi society and it also investigates how these female characters, through their agencies, rebellion, and different experiences they have undergone, correct the phallacies and misconceptions held on Arab women by Western orientalist ideologies in general and Western feminism in particular as being passive, submissive and victims of their patriarchy.

2- Liminal Space as site for Rethinking Hegemonic Forces in

Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan*

Introduction

Following the discussion of gender, patriarchy, diaspora, identity construction, and belonging, this chapter will further enquire into these issues from different contexts regarding Laila Halaby's striking novel *West of the Jordan*. If Alsanae's novel *Girls of Riyadh* focuses mainly, as discussed in the previous chapter, on the endless struggles the protagonists have

displayed in the face of traditions and conventions within Saudi Arabian society, this chapter, however, will be concerned with exploring the heterogeneous experiences Arab women characters go through in *West of the Jordan* (2003) with regard to their constant attempts to negotiate and reshape their identities both in the Arab homeland as well as in American host land.

As mentioned earlier in this dissertation, Arab women diaspora writers in general and Arab American women in particular have been in many ways entrusted to redress and rethink the fallacies passed on by Western feminist discourse based on the fixity and homogeneity of their subjectivities. This chapter will, therefore, serve as a counter discourse to this presupposed assumption with regard to the complex and multi-layered identities of the four female protagonists of the novel under study. Wavering and straddling in the hyphen between two cultures and two worlds is what significantly marks diasporic subjects in the third space regarding their constant relocation and displacement that keeps recurring between home and the host land or *vice versa* which ultimately ensues the making of new identities and subjectivities. It is from this perspective the present chapter will examine the novel under analysis, with special focus on the negotiations and reconstructions of the four female protagonists identities both in homeland as well as in the host country. Through examining the lives of the four female teen protagonists of the novel, this chapter will argue that these female characters develop dissimilar experiences and identities irrespective of their common origin backgrounds. Although they belong to the same cultural and religious backgrounds, these four female characters look at the world from diverse perspectives and therefore they have shaped their identities accordingly. To this end, this chapter will first provide an overview of the novel *West of the Jordan* along with some reviews carried by some critics in the field .Then it will examine each character closely with the aim of showing how they have

constructed their identities in the face of a set of hegemonic forces and impediments including patriarchy, race, colonialism, to name just few.

On *West of the Jordan* by Laila Halaby

West of the Jordan, which won the PEN / Beyond Margins Award, is the first novel written by Laila Halaby¹ in 2003. It depicts a bunch of stories and lives of four female cousins both in the homelands, Jordan and Palestine, as well as in the host country, The USA. The novel is made up of 37 chapters, each of which is narrated by the first person narrator of the four female protagonists namely Hala, Soraya, Khadija, and Mawal. The four narrator-characters of the novel, who are late teenagers and maternal cousins tell different stories and depict different events that have shaped and forged their identities as hybrid and displaced characters.

Each narrator introduces the reader throughout the novel to her own invisible world and gives insights into her daily experiences as well as into her perception of home and life in general. Each chapter is assigned a title-based concept and therefore it is the site where the protagonists expose their identities-in-the-making, whether as Arab or Arab American women, taking into account the multiplicity of their personal, cultural and economic conditions and circumstances. The very fact that each chapter is dedicated to one character of the four to adequately recount and give an insight to their daily experiences and

¹ Laila Halaby was born in Lebanon to a Jordanian father and an American mother, Halaby went to the United States in the 1960s, when she was still a baby. Years later, she returned to Jordan to study folklore for a year, and then moved back to Arizona. Not considering herself an Arab-American, since, according to her, she is Arab and American, Halaby has always felt caught between two different cultures: “I was always in this purgatory stage of „otherness“, neither here nor there” (Interview). This experience of living between two cultures allowed Halaby to transfer all her awareness of this state onto her novels, translated into the sense of displacement of several of her characters. Halaby writes poetry, children’s fiction and she has written two novels so far: *Once in a Promised Land* (2007), which tells the story of a couple who left Jordan to live in Arizona, and needs to cope with the constant paranoia against Arabs in the U.S., and *West of the Jordan*, published in 2003.

confrontations both in Palestine and America significantly suggests the heterogeneity of Arab American women and the multiplicity of their subjectivities and their experiences.

Not only do these stories approach us from these four female protagonists' lives and offer multiple lenses, from which they can see the world, but they also give a voice and a place within the narrative to other voiceless characters and subjects to appear and make their stories heard and verbalized. That is to say, the four female characters, who have been assigned the task of narrating the chapters, significantly relate and include a number of stories of other people from different backgrounds.

Hala, who was born in Jordan to a Jordanian father and a Palestinian mother, travels to the United States to pursue up her high school with her maternal uncle Hamdi. This leads her to experience a new American culture which is largely different from her native culture. Soraya and Khadija were both born and grew in America to an Arab family; their mothers are from Nawara, a small village in Palestine which is occupied by Jewish military forces. Unlike her three other cousins, Mawal, the four character, has never been to United States and yet she remains very connected to America and its culture mainly through her cousins and family members living there.

All the four characters seem ,as we I discuss in this chapter, to go through different experiences, but yet they all converge in a diaspora world or 'third space' where they find themselves struggling to clinch a place of their own hybrid subjects either in Palestine, Jordan or America .In this regard, Steven Salaita asserts that :

Although each narrator's personality is distinct, they all share the presence of Palestine as a crucial source of their identities which indicates that they are crossing the borders

and therefore they are undergoing to use Bhabha terms “the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity.”¹

As mentioned above, no matter how similar they may seem to be taking into account their cultural and ethnic backgrounds, the four characters are largely different and this difference stems from the multiplicity of different factors and experiences that inform their subjectivities along with their identities. Salaita mentions here that although the four girls in *West of the Jordan* share “an identical cultural origin and belong to the same extended family, each is vastly different than the other three in disposition and personal circumstance.”² The very fact that they all come from Arab origins and almost share common cultural and religious backgrounds does not inhibit the process of undergoing dissimilar daily experiences and looking at the world from diverse lenses and angles which in turn paves the way for forging new identities and self-identifications.

Halaby’s main contention behind presenting the heterogeneity of the experiences of these female characters is to subvert the very stereotypical images of the Arab women in general and Palestine women in particular held in the mainstream American culture as being helpless, victimized, and oppressed. That is to say, by presenting the four female characters in different modes with regard to their endless struggles and negotiations both in the homeland as well as in the host country, Halaby’s novel seeks to deconstruct and challenge the deep-rooted portrayals of Arab women as static and homogeneous in the American popular culture. Not only do these female characters represent Palestine or Palestine American women, but they also relate to many Arab women diaspora subjects who find themselves torn between two worlds, two cultures and two hegemonic forces.

¹ Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction: A Reader’s Guide* (New York: Syracuse University Press, 2011), p.80.

² Steven Salaita, *Arab American Literary Fiction, Cultures, and Politics* (New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 132.

a. Mawal: Voicing the Voiceless Subjects

Unlike all the other three female protagonists of the novel, Mawal does not seem to experience her cousin's displacement and exile the same way they do as she has never left Palestine and therefore she has never crossed the borders. She is, however, equally displaced and exiled in many ways in her homeland with regard, on one hand, to the nature of the geopolitical circumstances of the Palestinian lands under the Israeli military occupation and, on the other hand, to her virtual contact with America through her cousins frequent visits and connection. Although the focus of this chapter lies at hybrid subjects who have experienced diaspora through displacement within and outside the homeland, Mawal stands as a very important character that represents a number of women who experience displacement from within the homeland taking into consideration the intersections of globalisation, gender, race, and more importantly the history of colonialism.

Halaby purposefully employs Mawal as a very significant character whose experiences within her homeland are informative and telling. Mawal's stories provide a fascinating insight into the lives of the women who have not had the same opportunity to leave their homeland for the USA or other countries. It is through Mawal's stories that the reader has significant perspectives of the experiences of other Palestinian women who have been left behind. Not only are we invited to share the girl's experiences in Palestine, but also to explore the stories of the people of Nawara. Equally important, Mawal's narrative allows us to have another perspective concerning her cousins' diasporic experiences. In this sense, Mawal serves as an informant character revealing the differences that exist between diasporic subjects and those who stay or perhaps are made to stay in their homeland.

Even though there are thirty seven chapters in the novel, Mawal is dedicated only seven ones which may indicate in the first place that Halaby has not treated her characters consistently in terms of attention giving. A close and in-depth reading of the novel, however,

suggests otherwise in the sense that Mawal has revealed through these seven chapters a number of significant stories related to her day-to-day experiences together with the stories of other women living in Palestine or in diaspora world.

Mawal, therefore, manages to give voice to those silent and voiceless subjects through the opportunity to narrate their experiences and endurances they go through in Palestine on daily basis. In doing so, Mawal can be seen as, to use Steven Salaita words, a “metaphorical anchor, the culturally grounded, responsible keeper of stories.”¹ Mawal’s technique of narrating and keeping stories of her homeland is revealed from the very outset in the novel namely in the second chapter significantly entitled ‘Nawara’. In describing beautifully her small village ‘Nawara’, which she has strong ties with, she says:

Our village is called Nawara, which means flowers or blossoms. When you say it, *Naw-waar-a*, a hillside of small white wildflowers comes to mind or the fragrant new blossoms on an orange or almond tree. Everywhere is famous for something: political activism, delicious vegetables, and ugly women. Our village is an island, famous for beautiful embroidered dresses that we call *rozās* while most everyone else calls them *thobes*, and yet surrounded by villages that do not embroider at all.²

This passage is of a great importance regarding Mawal’s feelings and attachment to her homeland. Unlike her other diasporic cousins who at many times show, as will be discussed later in this chapter, their detachment from their homeland, Mawal here proudly articulates her strong affection and love for her small village by associating it with merely positive and beautiful images. The very fact that Mawal transliterates the name ‘Nawara’ and associates it with blossoms and flowers suggests, somehow, the hope and life she is longing for in her occupied village.

¹ Salaita Steven, *Modern Arab American Fiction*, p.80.

² Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), p.15.

Mawal further emphasizes her link to her village by proudly highlighting a very special embroidery tradition called ‘rozās’ for which her village is known and distinguished from other places. Hence, the embroidery ‘rozās’ is symbolically used to denote Palestinian traditional and cultural heritages which form a very important constituent of their identity. It can also be added here that the use of ‘rozās’ indicates resistance and the continuity of Palestine’s past in the face of the attempts made by Israeli forces to uproot their memories.

Not only is Mawal seen as the character who is entrusted to zealously maintain Palestine’s heritage and culture through the act of embroidering ‘rozās’, which is an exclusive product of her village, but she is also seen together with her mother as the stories keepers of the women of her village who confide in them their secrets and worries. Upon this, Mawal says: “so many women come to spill their secrets and their joys and their agonies because they know my mother – and I – will keep them safe and do no more than stitch them into the fabric of our *rozās*.”¹ This indicates here that many women have great faith in Mawal and her mother to reveal their stories due to the listening power they are endowed with and therefore they feel very much released to disclose their hidden agonies and issues. Hence, Mawal metaphorically merges and sews these stories within the ‘rozās’ embroidery to preserve Palestine’s memory and to keep it alive. This is more illustrated when she affirms:

I stuck this story into my pocket, wishing I could stitch it into my skin, like one of the Bedouin tattoos my grandmother wears. Are these stories like this in lovely, tempting America? Do my cousins there even know these little histories? I doubt it.

Stitch in red for life.

Stitch in green to remember.

¹ Ibid., p.17.

Stitch, stitch to never forget.¹

This passage comes right after she has finished listening to one of these stories narrated by her grandmother about the brutality of Israeli soldiers who have destroyed the minaret of the mosque of her village that was built and funded by a nationalist figure called, Karim Sulayman. Significantly, Mawal here underscores the importance of these stories in preserving her Palestine's identity and memory and therefore she yearns to stitch these stories into her skin to become part of her as a way to show her loyalty and love to her national identity. The use of red and green colours is of paramount importance as they imply the Palestinian national flag, which is dominantly embroidered with these two colours.

Historically and politically speaking, the dresses embroidered with red and green with reference to the Palestinian flag have played key role especially during the first 'Intifada'² in 1987 as a way to maintain the Palestinian national identity in the face of the Israeli occupation. In her book entitled *Embroidering Identities: A Century of Palestinian Clothing*, Iman Saca avers that "the colors of the Palestinian flag, and the word Palestine embroidered on garments and other items became popular symbols of their homeland and national identity."³ She also adds that "despite the fact that the manufacturing of these items with explicit nationalist details has recently declined, embroidered dresses are still an expression of national identity and a way to keep Palestinian traditions alive."⁴ Mawals seems accordingly to be conscious of the importance of her traditional values embodied in the 'rozas' dress which is not the case with her diasporic cousins who seem to ignore the existence of such meaningful traditions.

¹ Ibid., p.103.

² It refers to the Palestinian uprisings and protests against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The first intifada lasted from 1987 to 1993, and the second began in 2000.

³ Iman Saca, *Embroidering Identities: A Century of Palestinian Clothing* (Chicago: U of Chicago, 2006), p.39.

⁴ Ibid., p.40.

It is very important to state that the Israeli policies were very strict and tough on the Palestinians and their territories regarding many practices including the symbolic dresses and cultural practices. To put it in another way, the Israeli policies and their colonial agendas have been very much concerned in the region with up-rooting and wiping out any symbol or artistic practice that may relate to the Palestinian's past and heritage. This may vastly explain the brutal act of not allowing Palestinian's flag and colours appear in the many occupied territories including the West Bank and Gaza, especially after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war. Commenting on this, the Palestinian artist and historian Kamal Boullata states that "exhibitions organized by the League of Palestinian Artists, created in 1973, constituted a new form of political resistance." Because Palestinian art was an expression of collective identity, Israeli authorities, he explains, "began to impose military censorship on all exhibitions. Even the combined use of the four colors that made up the Palestinian flag was banned." Boullata adds that "unauthorized exhibitions were stormed by troops, with the public ordered to leave and paintings confiscated."¹

With this in mind, these above mentioned policies triggered Palestine's growing awareness to evoke and maintain their traditions as an indispensable part of their national identity. To put it in a nutshell, Palestinians persistently appeared with symbolic cloths and garments to pass it down to the new generations as a reaction to the Israeli's constant attempts to eradicate these symbols and traditions. Shelagh Weir evokes in this context that:

despite their hardships and dislocations, many women of village origin, including those still living in their villages in the West Bank, and those living in refugee camps in the West Bank, Gaza Strip and Jordan, still wear embroidered dresses and flowing white veils, either for everyday wear or for special occasions. This not only includes the older women, who might be expected to be more conservative in dress and cling

¹ Kamal Boullata, "Art", in *Encyclopedia of the Palestinians: Revised Edition*, ed. Philip Mattar (New York: Facts on File, 2005), p.87.

more tenaciously to village styles, but also younger women, many of whom have not lived in a village since they were children, or have never done so.¹

Resisting Israeli's expansionist ambitions to eradicate Palestine's cultural heritage is highly reflected in Halaby's act of celebrating Palestine's traditions through many practices the most important of which is the 'rozaz' embroidery. Mawal is thus employed as such to stand for a number of Palestinians who resist and challenge Israeli's agendas depending vastly on this material cultural practise as the basis for their resistance. In brief, Mawal is entrusted in the novel with the task of retaining the Palestinian cultural heritage and therefore reaffirming the continuity of Palestine's traditions. By stitching these stories and pasts events into the 'rozaz' dress though they are pitiful, Mawal seeks to keep the memory of her homeland more alive. On this, Bhabha argues that "remembering is never a quiet act of introspection or retrospection. It is a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present."² By doing so, Mawal plays a very significant role in attaching and connecting not only her cousins, but a huge number of other Palestinian immigrants to their roots and culture .In other words, she serves as, to borrow Slaita Steven words, "the other three characters' foil in that she reminds them of what they once were and what they were close to becoming."³

In addition to her celebration of Palestine's traditions and memory, Mawal's sentimental and affectionate attachment to her roots and homeland is further reinforced through a number of incidents in the novel. One of these is related to her impression and her perspective towards the massive influx of immigrants of her own people to other countries especially to the USA who are somewhat bound to do so under economic and socio-political pressures. Unlike her immigrant cousins who at many ways seem , as it will be later discussed, to indulge in the American life style, Mawal expresses her very sorrow and

¹ Shelagh Weir, *Palestinian Costume* (London: British Museum Publications Ltd, 1989), p.27.

² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.90.

³ Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction*, p.80.

resentful feelings towards emigration in general and America in particular as being the source of the emptiness of her homeland. In commenting on the huge number of Palestinian immigrants to the USA, she ironically says, “Nawara could have a smaller version of herself in the United States, which is like an army calling all able-bodied young men away and then never returning their bodies.”¹ Clearly, the USA is seen in Mawal’s eyes as a voracious country which takes her own people and keeps them away from their homeland and its culture which results in leaving mothers and wives “grieving over the evils that country has introduced their sons to, like drugs and drinking and loose women and gambling.”² Mawal’s disapproval of the country and emigration as a whole is more conveyed when she mentions that:

You would think our village was in love with America with all the people who left, like America is the best relative in the world that everyone has to visit. America is more like a greedy neighbour who takes the best of you and leaves you feeling empty.³

In the light of this passage, one can deeply understand Mawal’s sorrow and sympathy she is having over her homeland and its people as a result of the emigration process. Ironically enough, she says that her ‘village is in love with America’ to refer to the huge numbers of Palestinian immigrants, who are forced under political and economic circumstances to leave their homeland and settle in America. As a consequence, America to Mawal is highly to blame for having stolen her people and therefore causing a vast emptiness among the people they are have left behind. It is even more pitiful for Mawal and her people when these immigrants get thoroughly engulfed in the American culture and life style to the extent that they end up staying there and refusing returning back home even though they have made enough money. This idea is obviously displayed by Mawal’s grandmother as she dramatically

¹ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.15.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p.96.

tells her that “very few men came back at all, or if they did they couldn’t stay, as I’m sure you know by the number of cousins you have who don’t live here.”¹

As mentioned above, Mawal appears in the novel as the character that commemorates Palestine’s memory and saves its culture through listening and narrating her people stories and their painful experiences. By so doing, she seeks to empower these voiceless women by giving them the opportunity to speak their mind and make their concerns and experiences heard. We learn this as she says “because I was always by mother’s side, people came to think of us as one, or as sisters, more than as mother and daughter, which is why women are not shy to pour out their troubles when I am in the room.”²

Through telling these stories, Mawal’s main concern is, on the one hand, to empower women and, on the one hand, she seeks to reveal the hardships and endurances her village women suffer under the hegemonic powers of the patriarchy as well as colonialism. Among the many telling and dramatic stories Mawal recounts is that of her aunt, Huda (Hala’s mother). We learn through Mawal that her aunt, Huda in the first place joins her brother Hamdi in Arizona, where he is studying at university regardless of the controversy this decision has provoked among the village people and doubters. That is to say, in a very conventional village where Huda was born along with the patriarchal mind-sets prevailing there, women can barely enjoy the opportunity to finish their studies in their homeland, let alone studying abroad. Nevertheless, Huda’s father is an open-minded man and therefore he finds no harm in sending his smart daughter to study abroad to achieve her dreams .Upon this, Mawal says:

¹ Ibid., p.98.

² Ibid., p.16.

He was open to new ideas. Against the advice of the entire village; he let her go to America and live with her brother while she studied. There is nothing wrong with letting a girl learn as much as a boy does. That is our only hope.¹

In the light of this passage, it is clear that Huda seems to be a sort of privileged girl to have such an understanding father who encourages her to finish her studies against the expectations of the patriarchal restrictions. Not surprisingly, Huda is, however, doomed to return back home shortly after she is rumoured to be involved in an immoral act by a fellow student who is staying at her brother's house. In short, Huda has just met a young boy classmate from Jerusalem, with whom she establishes merely a 'formal Arab-style' relationship'. One day, they were studying at his sister's house where he is staying, and Huda finds herself unable to go back to her brother's house during the night due to the terrible weather conditions and therefore she unwillingly decides to spend the night there. However, the fellow student from Nawara calls "his gossipy mother" back in the village and tells her that Huda has spent the night with her boyfriend. Upon this, Mawal says:

He also happened to be a big liar, and talked to his gossipy mother the next day on the phone and he told her something like: *I am fine and I see Hamdi Salaama a fair amount, and his sister, of course. Yes, she's studying. Well, she's really not so good. If you'll keep this to yourself, I'll tell you. Promise, Yama? Well, she's not so proper and last night she didn't come home at all. Why indeed? She was spending the night at her boyfriend's house.*²

This story is of a great importance as it explains the degree to which women suffer at the village with regard to family honour. In brief, Arab women are generally regarded in Arab traditional societies as the keeper of the family honour and therefore women's reputation is at stake in the sense that their deeds and behaviours are under close scrutiny by male hegemonic

¹ Ibid., p.20.

² Ibid., p.21.

discourse. This hegemony implies, to use Nader's phrase, to the "systems of thought develop over time and reflect the interests of certain classes and/or groups in society who have managed to universalize their own beliefs and values."¹ Arab male's values are to subordinate and control woman at different levels including her body. In a similar vein Kressel argues that:

In Arab Muslim culture, the honour of the patrilineal group is bound up with the sex organs of its daughters.....Maintenance of group honor means continuous supervision over daughters' movements...to make them immune from temptation (hasana) by which is meant marrying them off as soon as possible. The test of virginity is decisive and compels families never to leave young girls on their own. . . . However, the immunity of the woman and her modesty remain the concern of her family of origin even after her marriage — indeed, throughout her life.²

Huda's reputation is accordingly tarnished because she is rumoured to spend a night with her boyfriend who goes against her family strict inculcations and Arab patriarchal expectations. Besides, the very fact that she is easily condemned to commit a presupposed immoral act renders Huda to more oppression. This is vastly witnessed in Huda's father reaction, who was once an open-minded man and abruptly turns out to join the village doubters about his daughter .Shortly after this incident, Huda's father asks Hamdi to send urgently his sister back home or he will disown her. Upon this Mawal says:

She came back, and eventually the whole thing straightened itself out and her parents came to know that she was telling the truth, and the liar boy denied he had had ever said anything, but by then it was too late and Huda was back here. It was no surprise

¹ Laura Nader, "Orientalism, Occidentalism and the Control of Women," *Cultural Dynamics*, 2: 3 (1989), p.324.

² Gideon Kressel, "Sorocide/filiacide: Homicide for family Honor," *Current Anthropology*, 22: 2 (1981), p. 142.

that shortly after her return she was married to an older Jordanian man and left Nawara forever.¹

Not only Huda's ambitions and dreams are ruined by the spread gossip, but she is also returned in disgrace among her family and village people and therefore forced to marry off an old man from Jordan as a way of punishment for her alleged misconduct.

Leading a life in a village where women are expected to act upon its very patriarchal paradigms makes it hard for Huda and many others to fulfil their dreams and establish a career of their own. As discussed above, Huda's travel to pursue her studies abroad is met with strong disapproval from the village people who consider this act as a challenge to their cultural doctrines and mind-sets which reduce women to dependency and subordination. Even though she managed to travel to the USA, her short stay is inevitably doomed to failure as she is allegedly assumed to have violated traditional and cultural norms. In addition to lies which have destroyed her reputation and her academic and professional future, marriage has definitely stamped on her dreams of freedom and of leading a different life.

In addition to Huda's dramatic story and the nature of endurance she has experienced on the basis of her gender, Mawal further introduces us to another different story related to another village woman called Farah. From the very beginning, Mawal reveals the hardships and trauma Farah and many other village women undergo under hegemonic powers of patriarchy and colonialism. Mawal says "their mothers come and weep and lick their wounds in my mother's house—like Farah, a neighbour who is married to my mother's uncle Bajis."² This proves that Farah is merely one among a huge number of women who come at Huda's mother to make their voices heard.

Ironically enough, Farah which means 'joy' in the Arabic language does not fit the character with regard to the misery she is living. Upon this Mawal says: "Farah *Joy*. Surely

¹ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.21.

² *Ibid.*, p.47.

her father cursed her by giving her that name. One whose name means joy could only know misery.”¹ This misery is very much understood through her early marriage to an old man with whom she has two children. In other words, Farah is married off at the age of sixteen to an older man “who gave her two children and fists that pounded her with welts to cover her body, welts she ignored or covered.”² Even though Farah’s father shows some sympathy towards her daughter and helps her gain her divorce from this abusive man, he forces her once again to another marriage as “there is no freedom for a divorced woman with two children.”³ Farah’s misery is even worsened shortly after three years when her second husband dies and leaves her with two more babies to provide for. Once more, her father says that “you will marry again,” because marriage is seen as the only left choice for “a blackened widow back in her parents’ house, with four giant mouths to feed.”⁴

Regarding the issue of arranged marriage, which was thoroughly discussed in *Girls of Riyadh* by Alsanea, Mawal here provides a space for Farah as a way to make her voice imparted and heard about the tragic outcome of her forced marriage. In her classic work *Beyond the Veil*, the Moroccan sociologist El Mernissi writes:

The idea of an adolescent unmarried woman is a completely new idea in the Muslim world, where previously you had only a female child and a menstruating woman who had to be married immediately so as to prevent dishonourable engagement in premarital sex. The whole concept of patriarchal honour was built around the idea of virginity, which reduced a woman’s role to its sexual dimension: to reproduction within early marriage.⁵

¹ Ibid., p.50.

² Ibid., p.51.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Fatema El Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-female Dynamics in a Modern Muslim Society* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1987), p. xxiv.

Farah is accordingly forced into an early marriage even before reaching a marriageable age because staying unmarried may be a threat to the family honour and also a burden to her father. Put differently, Farah seems helpless to escape man's dependency as he is the only source for her living. What is at issue is she is denied her very basic right of choice because her father decides almost everything for her and therefore she is expected to obey his decisions. In her book *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossing*. Amal Talaat Abdelrazek argues that:

Due to financial problems and scarcity of men who either get killed by Israeli forces or who escape from this fate by immigrating to the United States, Arab fathers seize the opportunity when they find a suitable husband for their daughters, even if it means they will have to marry older men whom the daughters do not know.¹

In this way, Farah embodies a hundred of Palestinian women, who always suffer under the rigidity and control of patriarchy because they are, Amal Abdelrazek adds, "taught to accept every agony as God's fate and bury their ache because they cannot protest God's will".²The effect of deep-rooted religious discourse on the life of many Palestinian women is more emphasized when Mawal narrates:

Old women and young girls, and young girls with babies, and slap, it came back to her where she had just been and the awfulness of it and how there was no way to change it, just accept God's will and teach yourself rigidity. Teach yourself to keep all of the pain in one small corner inside.³

With the story of Farah, Halaby raises another recurring issue related to the miserable and depressing conditions Palestinian women undergo in the presence of Israeli occupation in most parts of Palestine's land. Farah's daughter is no different from her mother as she is also

¹ Amal T. Abdelrazek, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossing* (New York: Cambria Press, 2007), p.136.

² Ibid.

³ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, pp.48-49.

driven to an early marriage to an older Jordanian husband. Farah's agony is deepened as she has to cross the Israeli' checkpoints every time she visits her daughter in the other bank of the Jordan River. While crossing the checkpoints, Farah bears witness to serious maltreatments at the hand of Israeli forces which further explains the intense mortification many Palestinian women suffer from at this point on a daily basis. This is intensely revealed in the following passage:

The thought made her (Farah) heavy as she waited, waited with all the other women who were crossing the bridge, going home, envying the foreigners who could cross from another spot with nothing more than a stamped paper for their passports.”¹

Regarding both Huda' and Farah', Mawal seems to sympathize with both experiences the hardships and misery they have undergone under the pressures of patriarchy as well as Israeli occupation. However, Mawal seems to be somehow comfortable with the type of life she is leading in her village with regard to the cultural norms. In other words, Mawal does not want to follow her aunt Huda's path and therefore be confronted with her society and yet she does not demonstrate blind obedience to the patriarchal system. Mawal, however, appears at many times challenging and very critical to some aspects and practices which confine and restrict women's freedom. Upon this, she says:

And now, as summer begins, I want to lie on my back and eat the sky. I want to be mischievous .I want to stare at Miss Maryam's large pointed breasts, to stand this much closer to the vegetable man who winks, to let him touch my hand when he gives me back my change.²

Mawal here expresses her strong desires and deep feelings to bespeak her mind and enjoy her sexual freedom with a man who can love her and makes her happy. However, Mawal seems to have, at the same time, a guilty conscience regarding these supposedly immoral feelings

¹ Ibid., p.48.

² Ibid., p.19.

which go against her cultural upbringing especially those which have been uncalculated by her mother. She then mentions that:

My mother has led me to believe that feelings and thoughts such as these will take me straight to hell, or make me turn out like my untame cousin Soraya, *who ate too much cereal when she was young and has the foolishness of an American in her blood*, and that may be true but I don't much care. I want to sit in the garden and hike my dress up to my knees so my legs can feel the sun as it kisses them.¹

It should be noted that the interplay of religion and culture does shape gender relations in many -if not- all Arab societies. This passage here accordingly raises this very controversial issue and reveals the use of religion as a base against which women's bodies are guarded and controlled. According to the Arab patriarchal modes, women are not allowed to be engaged in a premarital sex because it is perceived as a sin and immoral act and therefore sex is merely permitted within marriage. Mawal mentions in the above passage her Palestinian American cousin Soraya, who is seen as a loose and degenerate by Mawal's mother regarding the sexual freedom she seems to enjoy. Mawal yet does not share her mother's perception of her cousin, Soraya because she seems to show some strong desire for the freedom Soraya has.

Mawal, as mentioned above, seems to find some space between traditions and modernity. On one hand , she is so much concerned about her reputation as a girl that she avoids confronting her traditions the same way her other cousins do, on the other hand, she longs for some moderate freedom to achieve her dreams within her homeland. In commenting on this, she says "that's all still some time away, though. I still have to finish high school, and then, if my parents will allow me, I want to go to college and become a teacher like Miss Maryam, who teaches English and classical Arabic."² Mawal here expresses her deep wishes to continue her studies and carve out a career in teaching to be an independent girl, but at the

¹ Ibid., p.19.

² Ibid., p.17.

same time she is seeking her parents' permission to do so which explains her attempt to find an in-between place .

To conclude, as mentioned in the introductory part of this section, Halaby employs Mawal as a character that is entrusted with the task of giving a voice to many voiceless and oppressed women through revealing different experiences they have gone through. By doing so, these women gain a very important space in the novel to transmit and reports their pain and agonies which are attributed to patriarchy and colonialism. Presenting different stories pertaining to women's experiences, Halaby seeks to convey the multiplicity of Palestinian women experiences and subjectivities with regard to many hegemonic forces such as gender, culture, and colonialism.

b. Khadija and Soraya: Dual identity and Displaced Subjects

As mentioned earlier, Halaby employs in the novel under study four different protagonist characters whose identities have forged and informed by the intersection of many forces such as gender, class, ethnicity, religion, patriarchy and colonialism. That is, Halaby tends to present multiple experiences and struggles of different Palestinian women with the aim of bringing to the fore the heterogeneity of Arab women who are living both in the homeland as well as in the host country. While the previous section is dedicated to examine the experiences of the character Mawal, the only character in the novel that has never left her homeland, this section will further discuss Mawal's cousins, Khadija and Soraya respectively with regard to their hybrid identities as displaced subjects.

1.1 Khadija

Khadija is Mawal's maternal cousin who is living in the USA. She was born in California to a very conventional mother, Shahira, Mawal's aunt and to a very abusive Arab father. In addition to her two older sisters from her mother's first marriage, Khadija has five siblings. In fact, Khadija has never been to her homeland, Palestine and she has never expressed any wish to go there though she still has many relatives there including her grandmother. However, this is not to say that Khadija is strongly attached to the host country regarding her reflections and attitudes towards many aspects of American cultural values. To put it differently, the fact that Khadija appears frequently indifferent to her Arab origins can be by no means interpreted as her complete assimilation and identification with the American culture since she is as well critical to many cultural aspects of the host country. With this in mind, this section will examine the character Khadija *vis-à-vis* her ambivalent and in-between position in which she does not feel comfortable with either cultures.

As we closely read the novel, we come across a number of events and incidents pertaining to Khadija's never-ending struggles to shape and negotiate her identity in the American cultural context. Indeed, Khadija is presented as character that has undergone significant change in terms of her identity construction. The very fact that she is born to Arab parents and raised in the USA renders her to conflicting identities in which she feels torn between two worlds and two hegemonies.

This is perceived from the very outset of the narrative in a story entitled "Sand and Fire" in which she expresses her anger and discomfort towards her name. Khadija says that "In Islam, Khadija was the Prophet Muhammad's wife. She was much older than he was and had a lot of money. He was said to have loved her very much."¹The first impression suggested here is that Khadija is happy and comfortable with her name regarding the explanation of the

¹ Ibid., p.36.

historical and religious significance she has provided about her name; however, right after this, she comes to suggest otherwise when she says that “In America my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle. If they can get the first part of it right, the ‘Kha’ part, it comes out like clearing your throat after eating ice cream.”¹ Khadija here shows an intense discomfort with her name as it becomes a site for conflict. She even feels so much embarrassed as her American and non-Arab peers can hardly pronounce her name correctly.

Khadija’s displaced identity is clearly revealed through her name which is the first element that marks her difference from others. To show the degree of embarrassment her name provokes, she says that:

I’m sure the original Khadija was very nice and that’s why Prophet Muhammad married her and why my father gave me her name, but I’m sure that if the original

Khadija went to *school* in America that she would hate her name just as much as I do.²

This passage is very striking because it emphasizes Khadija’s growing awareness and dynamics *vis-à-vis* her identity. Khadija is being very critical about her name in the sense that she presumes even the original Khadija would not like her name if she were born in the United States let alone others. In fact, Khadija denies any possibility of someone to be happy if they are given such names. The sense of unease she feels about her name at school prompts her to make attempts to change her name and opt for a Western name Diana:

I think princess Diana is beautiful ,and even though Diana is a pretty western name, I thought I’d like to have it, so I told my friends at school that I was going to change my name to Diana and they should call me that from now on. “But you don’t look like a Diana”, Roberta told me. “What do I look like then?” “I don’t know. Like a kadeeja, I guess.”³

¹ Ibid., p.36.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p.37.

This is another important event that explores Khadija's loss and displacement *vis-à-vis* her name. In fact, the act of wishing to change her name into a Western name can be interpreted as her attempt to seek full integration and assimilation into the American culture. It is worth mentioning here that Khadija's attempts to change her name evokes old practices of many early immigrants in the United States who sought more assimilation and more rapid integration within the American milieu through name-changing strategy. They were, Dinitia Smith avers, "workers from immigrant-aid societies who helped the new arrivals may have suggested that they change their names to simplify or 'Americanize' them. Certainly, immigrants changed their own names after they arrived".¹

By choosing the name, Diana, she wishes to escape the alienation and the estrangement she experiences with her peers. However, this attempt to pass as an American proves futile because her friend, Roberta does not validate this identity due to Khadija's facial features which do not match the American white race. This reinforces Khadija 'sense of loss at school and in a larger context of metropolitan America and therefore her pushes her to ask 'what do I like then'? Name is not the only feature that hinders Khadija's process of integration because her facial features as well mark her difference and therefore prevents her from looking American.

It should be noted that Khadija's loss and is mostly experienced at school which is seen as an important site for questioning her belonging among her peers, friends, and teachers to name just a few. Abu-Laban and Baha Abu-Laban argue here that, school absorbs "a massive" amount of time and energy of the young and strongly influences their behaviors."² School is accordingly seen for Khadija as a vital place for questioning, exploring and coming to terms with her identity.

¹ Dinitia Smith, "The Golden Door," *New York Magazine*. 27 Aug, (1990), p.36.

² Abu-Laban, Sharon McIrvine and Baha Abu Laban, "Teens-Between: The Public and Private Spheres of Arab-Canadian Adolescents," in *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, ed. Michael W. Suleiman (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999), p.117.

In fact, Khadija witnesses a bunch of experiences at school pertaining to her identity crisis. In one of her striking encounter with her social studies teacher, Mr. Napolitano, Khadija narrates that he “expects me to know more than the other kids because my parents aren’t American themselves. I want to scream at him that I am just as American as anyone here.”¹The teacher here reinforces Khadija’s alienation by categorizing her as ‘non-American’ who should have more knowledge than the rest because of her Arab’s roots. In addition to her classmates, the teacher does contribute to khadija’s estrangement by not recognizing her ‘Americanness’. In this sense, teachers, Abu-Laban and Baha Abu-Laban adds, “can act as filters for ethnicity since they are the primary adult contact outside the home and are ‘sanctioned’ by the larger community to instruct youth.”²The teacher’s insistence on this classification on her ethnic basis renders her as a racialized other and, as Salaita puts it, “causes her to remain guarded against her ethnic origin.”³

Being aware of her right to be American by birth, Khadija shows a great deal of resistance to the hegemonic forces displayed by both her teacher as well as her mother. This is vastly highlighted in one of the frequent quarrels that take place between Khadija and her mother over her identity. Here she says “Ma and I have the same argument, only she gets really mad: “You are Palestinian,’ she says in Arabic. “*You* are Palestinian,” I tell her in English. “I am American.”⁴This conversation draws attention to generation gap issue that is very recurrent between youth immigrants and their parents. While immigrants parents tend to inculcate their children with the sense of homeland culture and traditions, their children wish to do away with these traditions and therefore their relationship is marked with conflict and argument.

¹ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.74.

² Abu-Laban, Sharon McIrvine and Baha Abu Laban, “Teens-Between”, pp.118-119.

³ Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction*, p.135.

⁴ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.74.

Regarding these different ways diasporic subjects (both parents and children) deal with their ethnicity and traditions, Hall attributes this difference to the fact “there is very considerable variation, both of commitment and of practice, between and within different communities – between different nationalities and linguistic groups, within religious faiths, between men and women, and across the generations.”¹ This divergence between generations is reflected by the different languages used by the mother and her daughter. On one hand, the mother is strongly attached to her cultural and ethnic identity and expects her daughter to be as such, on the other hand, Khadija resists this hegemony by saying: “Ma, I can’t speak Arabic right, I’ve never even been there, and I don’t like all of those dancing parties. I like stories and movies. I can be American and still be your daughter.”²

Khadija once again detaches herself from her Arab cultural heritage because, for her, these traditions do not meet her wishes and expectations. In other words, Khadija denies any link and connection with her homeland culture as she does neither speak its language nor does she even know the place. Thus, she maintains her American self-identification in the face her homeland cultural forces. The very fact that she does not speak her homeland Arabic language is very telling in the sense that she lacks one of the most significant elements of one’s cultural identity. In commenting on this, Sjak Kroon asserts that “language is one of the major features of ethnic or ethno linguistic group membership and that ethnic identity is most powerfully expressed through the ethnic group language.”³ Khadija’s ignorance of the Arabic language accordingly reinforces her deep wish to remain American.

Equally important, Khadija has never stepped to her homeland country which explains the gap she feels towards this country. Put differently, because Khadija has never had the

¹ Stuart Hall, “Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural Question,” in *Un/settled Multiculturalisms: Diasporas, Entanglements, “Transruptions”*, ed. Barnor Hesse (New York: Zed Books, 2000), p. 220.

² Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.74.

³ Sjaak Kroon, “Some Remarks on Ethnic identity, Language, and Education,” in *Multi-linguism, Self Organization and Ethnicity*, ed. R. Pohoryles, R. Kinnear and G. Muskens (Vienna: ICCR, 1990), p.421.

opportunity to give a visit to her homeland, Palestine, it is almost impossible for her to know enough about its cultural features and practices. Hence, it is fair to say that Khadija lacks any individual memories towards her homeland culture because almost all the information she has about it comes from others mainly through her parents and family members, which in turn explains that the perception she has towards her culture is constructed through the lens of others and not through her own individual experiences and memories.

Individual and collective memories have accordingly played very crucial role in the development of diasporic subjects in the sense that they maintain strong tie between these subjects and their pasts which leads to the continuity needed for the construction of a diasporic community in the host country. Chamberlain relatively values both individual and collective memories for people in diaspora, and argues that both of them have equally an important role. In this regard, she argues that:

memories are all unique and personal, each an account of the individual's life course from childhood to maturity, of the transformations from a [...] village to a migrant in a busy metropolis, and of the fictionalizing process inherent in the construction of a narrative of self. Memories are a key route into revealing and understanding the processes, adjustments, and negotiations of migrants, of the mobile and liminal worlds they inhabit, of the connections with and the longings for home.¹

According to this passage, individual memories are indispensable parts for diasporic subjects to construct and negotiate their trajectories in diaspora world. They even serve as a base against which an individual negotiates their present experiences and identities in the host country. With regard to this, Khadija lacks and misses any individual memory about her homeland and culture which significantly averts her to shape her identity as American Palestinian girl. The collective memories instilled in her by her mother prove futile as she

¹ Mary Chamberlain, "Diasporic Memories: Community, Individuality, and Creativity – A Life Stories Perspective", *Oral History Review* 36:2, (2009), pp.185-186.

intensely detaches herself from her homeland culture of Palestine and embraces instead the host land culture.

Accordingly, Khadija's identification with the American culture can be clearly noticed through the juxtaposition she makes between the two cultures. In doing so, she expresses strong resentment towards some practices of her homeland culture such as dancing parties with which she feels detached and instead, she yearns for the American cultural lifestyle and its aspects such as stories and movies which make her feel more comfortable. In other words, Khadija looks down on the community life of her homeland culture and she seems to be in favour of the individual's lifestyle of the American culture. By doing so, she perceives herself beyond hybrid subject category and this clearly accounts for her insistence and struggles with her mother to be viewed merely American and yet still be her daughter. In her reaction to this attitude, Khadija's mother disowns her and says: "No! No daughter of mine is American."¹ This reaction suggests that like most first immigrants parents, Khadija's mother fosters strong ties with her homeland culture and therefore she seeks to pass it down to her daughter with the aim of keeping her connected with her roots. This is further revealed through her constant attempts to raise her daughter in accordance with the Palestine's traditions and practices which are usually met with strong resistance from the part of the daughter.

Among the pervasive incidents in the novel which display Khadija's resistance and struggles to do away with her homeland culture is when she fosters a friendship relation with a Jewish boy called, Michael. Significantly enough, Khadija hides this secret from her parents due to both gender as well as political considerations. Khadija is aware in the first place that having a male friend at school or somewhere else is something rejected by her parents and homeland culture let alone having him as a Jew, a supposedly ever-lasting enemy to her

¹ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.74.

homeland culture and to the larger Arab community. However, Khadija ignores this ‘narrow-minded’ perspective and instead she seeks to find out convergences and common aspects between Michael and herself and therefore fosters better relations between the Muslims and the Jews regardless of the political conflicts existing between Israel and Palestine. This is illustrated in the following passage:

“Did you know Jews face Jerusalem when they pray?” I didn’t know that .Michael likes to bring up similarities between Muslims and Jews; I think to show that we can be friends. I just try to forget all those things and listen to his stories. “I did not either. ‘It’s funny, because if you were in Jerusalem, a Muslim and a Jew would face different directions, but by the time they come to America, it’s all just east.’”¹

The above passage is full of meaningful aspects pertaining to tolerance and human values among individuals in diaspora. The fact that Khadija learns for the first time from her Jewish friend that both Jews and Muslims face Jerusalem while praying implies that both Muslims and Jews foster solidarity instead of conflict.

Khadija’s struggle and resistance to her monitoring mother who wishes to instil in her Palestinian traditions is further revealed through several encounters between the daughter and her mother in the novel. One of these events is when Khadija receives a diary as a gift on her birthday from her uncle’s American wife, who writes in the card ““The book is so you can write your secrets and no one will have to know them.””² Khadija, however, lies to her mother when asked to explain the message and upon this, she says: “Ma, who doesn’t read English, asked me what it said. Instead of saying ‘secrets,’ I said ‘stories and things,’ but I don’t think she believed me.”³Khadija’s lies to her mother can be interpreted as an attempt to avoid going into an argument with her noisy mother who is obsessed with Palestinian traditions and therefore insists that Khadija should cultivate strong bonds with her place of origin. Khadija,

¹ Ibid., pp.75-76.

² Ibid., p.104.

³ Ibid.

in fact, significantly uses the word ‘stories’ instead of ‘secrets’ because she knows previously that the word secret could be interpreted differently by her traditional mother and arouse her suspicion towards her.

In this way, it is very important to mention that Khadija’s mother serves as bodyguard to her daughter in the face of the American culture and values. Her insistence on monitoring Khadija’s behaviours uncovers the degree of pressures put in general on Arab women in diaspora as preservers of ethnic traditions and family honour. To put it in a nutshell, being a girl living in diaspora, Khadija’s behaviours and movements are spotlighted and placed under close scrutiny by her mother so as to ensure that her daughter maintains her Palestinian cultural identity. In this sense, Kristine Ajrouch avers that the family “teaches ethnic identity, and through that ‘instilled’ identity, the older generations try to control the actions of their offspring.”¹By doing so, Khadija is oppressed and her freedom is restricted by her mother’s constant control to the extent that she rarely opens up dialogue with her daughter over her concerns and when she does, she talks “only about house things and taking-care-of-your-brothers things, and sometimes don’t-do-that-or-you’ll-never-marry things.”²Khadija’s mother here does not care about her daughter ‘interests and happiness as much as she does about meeting and reinforcing patriarchal expectations that limit women’ scopes to marriage. This is highly consolidated in the following extract:

I finally have a secret, but it’s an ugly secret and I am not sure what to do with it. Ma always used to tell my two half-sisters about boys, especially American boys, and how they will take that secret thing between your legs for nothing. “No committer”. That’s why Mina and Monia were married so young .I think it’s also because their father, my mother’s first husband, was dead, and Baba wanted to get rid of the problem of unmarried girls in his house . “Your husband has to be the one to take it from you,”

¹ Kristine Ajrouch, “Family and Ethnic Identity in an Arab-American Community”, in *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, ed. Michael W. Suleiman (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999), p.130.

² Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.37.

Ma told me once. “Otherwise you are a disgrace to us and we are stuck with you forever.”¹

In fact the above passage is very telling in the sense that it reinforces Khadija’s mother control over her daughter with regard to sexuality. As discussed before, girls according to most Arab cultural values are inculcated to preserve their family honour and therefore they are not allowed to date boys out of wedlock so as to keep their virginity for their future husbands. Hence, virginity is seen as an indispensable part in women’s body without which they may miss the opportunity to get married and they may even run a risk of bringing shame to their family. This significantly accounts for Khadija’s mother attitudes towards her daughter and her constant control over her behaviours. Khadija’s mother does not want her daughter to bring disgrace to the family and that is why she keeps warning her to preserve that secret thing (hymen) for her husband as a way not only to escape possible dishonour she might bring to her family upon its loss, but also to meet her cultural upbringing.

Khadija’s mother’s concern and control over her daughter is further revealed in another important incident. One day, Khadija receives Jennifer, one of her American friends, at her house. There; Jennifer brings her brother’s nasty magazine full of sexy pictures of some women naked bodies. While showing them to Khadija, they are caught by Shahira, Khadija’s mother and her reaction is:

She grabbed it ,and after a couple of seconds she screamed curses like I have never heard ,and half of which I could not understand .She looked at Jennifer and screamed in Arabic for her to leave....Ma slapped my face , cursed me, cursed America, cursed my father, and cursed God. She burned the magazines and then the dinner.²

Khadija’s mother reaction to this scene demonstrates her strong attachment to her traditional beliefs that perceive such behaviour, unlike the American values, as an immoral act going

¹ Ibid., pp.178-179.

² Ibid., p.152.

against Arab traditions. This reveals, to employ Naber's words, "the tense and often conflictual location of Arab American femininities at the intersections of two contradictory discourses: Arab cultural reauthenticity and hegemonic US nationalism."¹ Hence, she punishes her daughter as such because watching women's naked bodies is regarded in her eyes as if Khadija were involved in a real sexual affair. Equally important, Khadija's mother's reaction can be interpreted as a disappointment she feels with regard to her perpetual struggles to keep her daughter away from the American cultural values.

Regardless of the many struggles Khadija has undergone with her mother to embrace and assimilate the American values, she seems at many times critical of many aspects of the American culture. It is true that Khadija expresses constant resentment throughout the novel towards her Arab culture, but at the same she rejects some aspects of American life style especially when it comes to sexual freedom. Khadija is once invited by her American friend Patricia for a slumber party. When Khadija tells her friend about her parents' refusal to let her accept the invitation, Patricia replies:

How are you ever going to have sex with a boy if you always have to sleep at home?"

I felt funny, like she was laughing at me. I had never thought about sex with a boy before I got married. I know that American girls do that, and probably even my cousin Soraya, but that's different.²

This passage conveys Khadija's different perception towards sexual freedom *vis-à-vis* her American peers and even to her cousin Soraya as we will discuss later in this section. Although she continuously identifies herself as an American, she still cannot get rid of many aspects of the traditional upbringing she has been inculcated by her Arab parents. She admits here that she is different from American girls which reinforces more her displacement and hybridity as a diasporic subject.

¹ Nadine Naber, "Arab American Femininities: Beyond Arab Virgin/American(ized) Whore", *Feminist Studies*, 32:1, (2006), p. 89.

² Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.173.

In this way, it can be stated that Khadija has constructed an attitude to sexuality according to her homeland cultural upbringings which somehow suggests her emotional attachment to her homeland culture. This can be further noticed in another significant reaction upon a scene involving her two American friends Michael and Patricia, whom she accidentally comes to see as having sex at Patricia's home. Khadija is extremely shocked at what she sees and her reaction is:

I turned away and shut the door behind me. I felt horrible, like can't-see and can't-think kind of horrible. My books were all over the place and I couldn't stuff them in my bag fast enough. I ran from her front door to our house. Thinking about what I saw made me feel dirty, like when you go by a car crash and look by accident and on purpose at the same time, but then you feel sick because of what you saw.¹

In the light of this passage, one can clearly notice Khadija's resentment towards American sexual freedom. She seems terrified and uncomfortable at this sexual scene because it goes against her homeland cultural values that have been instilled into her by her mother. Sexuality, therefore, is perceived as a source of nuance and discomfort to Khadija which triggers ultimately a sense of loss and displacement within the American culture. After this shocking event, Khadija heads in haste to her house seeking refuge within her homeland culture in her mother's arms. In fact, it is at her home that Khadija finds protection and healing from this previous traumatic experience. Once back home, she finds her mother playing with her little brother Hamdan, and her mother says:

"What's wrong little cucumber? Are you sick?"

"Sick, sick," said Hamouda

My mother hugged me and felt my forehead.

¹ Ibid., pp.179-180.

“I think I’m getting sick,” I told her. “Lots of the kids at school are sick,” I lied. “You stay home with us and we’ll make you better, won’t we Hamouda.”

Hamouda looked at me and shouted, “Yes!”¹

This passage conveys the idea that home becomes a shelter for Khadija from the American cultural features with which she also feels detached and estranged. Moreover, being a hybrid subject allows Khadija to open up her eyes to notice many cultural differences existing between her homeland and the host land culture. As we have mentioned before, Khadija once compares between her Arab culture informed by sense of community *vis-à-vis* her American culture based on a sense of individuality and she ends up identifying more with American individual’s values, however, she comes to feel otherwise during her first encounter with Pasty’s family after being invited to have dinner at her house .In her comment on this visit, Khadija says:

Finally Ma let me go to Pasty’s house for dinner. It was like walking into a TV show. They have a room where there’s a huge television and her father sat in front of it the whole time I was there .He barely said hi or anything ,just sat in front of the huge screen and stared . Her mom came home after we had been there for an hour and she a huge bucket of fried chicken .I was excited because we never get to eat food from outside. Pasty has a little brother who is six, like Hamdan .He took one look at his mother and screamed, “Again? We have to eat fried rats again?”²

Khadija here once again juxtaposes both cultures during the visit she pays to Pasty’s house whereby she starts recognizing the negative aspects of the American culture with regard to her Arab homeland culture. Put differently, she does not seem to praise the American individual life style represented by the father who appears introverted by being stuck to TV and never have time to speak with his kids and family. Also, even though Khadija mentions that she is

¹ Ibid., p.180.

² Ibid., p.150.

happy to eat food from outside, she implicitly disapproves this habit through Pasty's little brother, who seems jaded with the same food brought by his mother from outside.

Khadija's comparison springs from an earlier visit Pasty's family has already paid to have dinner at her house. There, Khadija's mother prepares a delicious Palestinian dish and upon this Khadija says: "Ma cooked *musakhan*, which is my favourite so I couldn't get mad. She made French fries too, which Pasty couldn't believe. "You actually made these French fries? They're not frozen? You cut them up and everything?"¹ Khadija here approves her mother's homemade dish which is obviously validated by Pasty's astonishment and question.

Unlike Pasty's mother who brings food from outside, Khadija's mother prepares homemade dishes and this significantly signals the cultural differences existing between the American and Arab life style. These differences are also reflected in Khadija's mother's reaction towards Mickey, Pasty's little brother, who is named after a singer Mick Jagger. She says: "This is the problem with America! Instead of naming their children after family or prophets or heroes, they name them after rock stars. Who would believe such a thing?"² Khadija's mother disapproves the American culture and therefore she keeps an eye on her daughter to keep her away from its influences and outcome.

However, it is of a paramount importance to mention that in addition to Khadija's mother's constant control to instil in her Palestinian traditions, Khadija's father has also been a source of nuisance to her with regard to his brutality and frustrated feelings in America. His nervous disposition springs from the fact that he is not able to achieve his dreams in America with regard to his financial conditions. He is a third mechanic at a car repair shop and therefore he does not earn enough as he is seldom called upon to work. Hence, he cultivates a never-ending nostalgia towards Palestine and a sense of rejection for the United States as it is

¹ Ibid., p.149.

² Ibid., p.151.

the cause of his loss and frustration. This is reflected when he says to his daughter: “my ache comes from losing my home.”¹

Apparently, Khadija’s father experiences severe pain and anguish because he is uprooted from his homeland, Palestine, to a country where he feels exiled and estranged and therefore he cannot make his dreams come true. Upon this, Khadija says that “My father has many dreams that have been filled with sand. That’s what he tells me: ‘This country has taken my dreams that used to float like those giant balloons, and filled them with sand. Now they don’t float, and you can’t even see what they are anymore.’”² All this turns him to an aggressive and an alcoholic father who never hesitates to abuse and beats his daughter over slight issues.

The narrative is full of incidents that convey Khadija’s endurances with regard to her father’s abuse. In commenting on this, Khadija declares that “the scariest thing is: when he drinks. He doesn’t do it that often and he doesn’t have to drink that much before his eyes become bullets, his fists the curled hands of a boxer, and our living room the ring of *Monday Night Wrestling*.”³ Khadija here describes her violent father who shows no mercy to his daughter under the influence of alcohol. Her pain and torture are further aggravated once he violently forces her to drink some liquor against her will. After doing that, he pulls her over to her mother and says that her daughter has been drinking alcohol. Khadija’s comment on this is:

I remained where I was, but the fire went from my belly to his eyes and he pulled me by the arm and then by the ear and dragged me into the kitchen where my mother was cutting vegetables. “Oh Mother of Shit,” he called to her. “Your little dog of a daughter has been drinking. Smell her mouth.” My mother leaned over me and sniffed my mouth and I closed my eyes. She slapped my face and the fire came back to me. “He made me drink it,” I screamed, and saw my father’s eyes enlarge. “A drinker and

¹ Ibid., p.39.

² Ibid., 37.

³ Ibid., p.38.

a liar!” he shouted, and started hitting me everywhere. I screamed and screamed and finally got free and ran to my room. I opened the closet and closed the door behind me and prayed to God the fire would burn somewhere else.¹

Obviously the passage demonstrates one of the most painful and poignant experiences that Khadija has gone through *vis-à-vis* her parents. Not only Khadija here is humiliated by her abusive and violent father who makes up a false story and lie to his daughter, but she is also victimized by her passive mother. Instead of at least listening to her daughter and showing sympathy for her, she easily believes her husband’s lies and consequently punishes her violently for a supposedly misconduct she has not committed. This passage also suggests that the maltreatment Khadija receives from the part of her parents signals her powerless position as defenceless girl in the face of her abusive and violent parents.

Moreover, Khadija’s mistreatment at the hands of her parents seems endless with regard to many relevant events in the novel. One of these events is described by her cousin, Soraya who narrates:

One time Khadija took two dollars from her older brother, Muhammad, to buy a barrettethat day when he came home from school, he told his father that he saw Khadija at school kissing a boy behind the gym.....Khadija’s father didn’t ask her if it was true, he just came after her with a belt, yelling *slut* and *whore* at her. She didn’t go to school for two days, and the next time I saw her she wouldn’t look at me, just held her head down like her shoes were the prettiest things ever.²

Once again Khadija is not even given the chance to defend herself in the face of the lies from male hegemonic powers. While earlier her mother shuts her ears to her daughter’s explanation, her father equally closes his ears and promptly resorts to violence as a way to punish her daughter.

¹ Ibid., pp.38-39.

² Ibid., p.31.

Regardless of the passivity she has displayed throughout the aforementioned events, Khadija makes up her mind at the end and decides to challenge her father's constant subjugations and maltreatments. This important change takes place right the day before her mother's return home after the visit she has paid to her homeland Palestine. As Khadija's father drinks too much that day, he happens to be teased by his two-year-old son, Hamouda, who points out to him "wild dog with a tick ass."¹ This is enough to make him fly into a rage:

Baba sets on fire and I'm in the kitchen trying to be invisible and slap slap slap and the baby cries, so I go to see and Hamouda's arm is in my father's teeth and blood and then Siddi comes up to hold my father or to take the baby from him, and my father hits him hard, his own father, and knocks him to the floor and then goes back to the baby, who's just crying and crying and crying.²

Upon this, Khadija gets very horrified to see both her little brother, Hamouda and her poor old grandfather abused at the hands of her aggressive and drunk father. As a reaction to this, she strongly affirms "I do what I have never done. I run to the phone and dial 911 like they say to do in school."³ Indeed, Khadija calls the police and reports this as the only way to protect her brother and grandfather who have been physically abused by a cruel and violent father.

To conclude, this could be seen as a turning point in Khadija's miserable life under the hegemony of her violent father. By calling a police to arrest her father, she has put an end to her own sufferings as well as to the whole family taking into account the endless humiliations and oppressions they have undergone in his annoying presence. Regardless of the outcome of her act against her father among her family, Khadija, using her diaspora space, turns out to a strong and active person and therefore she has challenged the strict patriarchal doctrines of her homeland culture which is based on the complete subjugation and oppression of women.

¹ Ibid., p.206.

² Ibid., p.207.

³ Ibid.

By doing this brave act, she has stepped forward into an important position as a displaced subject to negotiate her new hybrid identity as an Arab American woman. Even though Steven Salaita argues that “Khadija’s story does not have a happy ending, a fact that in itself undermines a cherished American mythology”¹ with regard to her miserable life she had led in America, there is still some promising changes for the girl in this ending in the sense that this experience opens doors for her to become active and more comfortable in her in-between space as an Arab American woman.

1.2 Soraya

Soraya is another interesting narrator-character in the novel and I have decided to include her in this section due to the fact that she is a displaced character like her cousin, Khadija, though her experience is marked as unique and distinct. She was born in Palestine and moved at an early age with her parents to the United States, where she has spent her entire life. Living almost all her life there makes Khadija feel more connected to the American cultural features than to her Arab origin’s culture.

Unlike all her other three cousins and especially Khadija, Soraya is a sexually liberated girl who is filled with the American sense of freedom to the extent that she overtly rebels against many patriarchal restrictions of her home land culture. Soraya’s longing for this supposedly freedom is, however, met with number of hurdles in the American mainstream culture which subsequently leads to her frustrated displacement. In other words, Soraya’s attempt to completely assimilate within the American society is dramatically inhibited by the American racialized politics, where Soraya and many other racialized Arab subjects have no place. With this in mind, the focus of this section is how Soraya’s identity is informed by the intersection of race and gender in diaspora space. It will examine Soraya’s negotiations and

¹ Steven Salaita, *Modern Arab American Fiction*, p.83.

attempts to assimilate to the American culture with regard to her constant rebellious acts in the face of her conventional homeland culture. At the same time, it will accordingly probe into the frustrated displacement she has undergone as a result of the American racialized politics which reinforces her estrangement and exile in the metropolitan America.

From the very beginning, one can notice that Soraya is a different character from other cousins regarding the sense of rebel she displaces in the face of the hegemony of her homeland culture. She opens up her narrative entitled 'Fire' by saying that:

I have fire. Everyone knows it. They see it in my beautiful brown exotic eyes that I paint full of Maybelline kohl to turn my tears black. "She's Arabian," they say at my high school as I pass by them. "In her country they don't have furniture or dishwashers, only oil."¹

Soraya here introduces herself confidently to the reader by her physical beauty and exoticism that is always associated with the image of Arab women in Western orientalist accounts. Interestingly, the impression we may get in the first place is that Soraya seems to be proud of her Arab origin through the physical beauty aspects she is endowed with. Nonetheless, Soraya is not driven by this alleged pride, but she is rather guided by an alluring wish to assimilate into the American culture.

In other words, given that Soraya seeks a complete assimilation within the American society, she does purposefully spread these already established misconceptions about her Arab culture in general and Arab women in particular in the hope of satisfying her American peers and, therefore, gain a recognition as an American girl. This intention is emphasized when she says that: "I tell them what they want to hear, which is nasty stories about young

¹ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.24.

men sticking their things into goats and some twelve-year-old girl being carried off on a camel to be third wife to old Shaykh So-and-So and the five oil wells my father owns.”¹

It becomes clear that Soraya here does not show any concern to correct these stereotypical images and myths about her Arab origin culture; instead she overtly reinforces these misconceptions with the aim of seeking a place within the American mainstream culture even at the expense of her homeland culture. Soraya’s irresistible wish and avid interest to assimilate into the American culture cannot be ceased even by her mother about whom Soraya says: “she exploded the first time she heard about a story I told. You have to show the best of us, not the ugly lies. But I let my ambassador sister and cousins do that while I talk ghetto slang.”² Even though Soraya’s mother insists that she should defend the Arab image before the American eyes, Soraya who seeks assimilation, argues that the task of correcting the misconceptions associated with the Arabs to the American people is none of her concern but rather it is left to other family members to do it.

Hence, Soraya meets neither her own mother’s nor her homeland cultural expectations regarding a number of frequent rebellious acts in the novel. Put differently, Soraya is filled with incredible sense of American’s freedom and life style to the extent that she shows no interest or care about her family’s reactions to her behaviours. This is obviously explained when she affirms that “my mother is disappointed that I am not a good daughter, but she won’t admit that she has anything to do with it and says instead that I have a weak spirit and have been ‘taken in by the lie that is America: freedom, freedom, freedom.’”³ Her mother’s disappointment issues from the fact that Soraya mythologizes the American freedom which makes her distant from her homeland cultural expectations. In this sense, Soraya’s sense of freedom becomes a source of nuisance for Soraya *vis-à-vis* her culture in general and her

¹Ibid., p.24.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., pp.24-25.

mother in particular to the extent that her mother describes her once as “a labor that never ends: pain everywhere all the time.”¹

In spite of the constant severe criticism she receives from her mother over her insurgent behaviours, Soraya does not care about what is being thought or said about her because her free spirit makes her strong enough to confront these tense moments with her mother. Here she says:

My sister and cousins are the way my mother wishes I were and she is always comparing us and telling me what good girls they are and how I am just a headache . . . She can't accept that my way of being different is just as good as everyone else's way of being the same. I like to enjoy myself, unlike my sister Pauline who, despite her American name, is very conservative and believes that all answers lie in God's words and that suffering is good.²

This passage is very informative in the sense that it suggests Soraya's growing sense of challenge in the face of her mother's expectations. Interestingly, Soraya here challenges her mother's wish to be the same as her other cousins because she argues that difference is part of human nature that should be tolerated as such. Besides, Soraya seems to cultivate strong bond with the American freedom values and, therefore, she chooses to be different from her other cousins and especially her sister Pauline, who despite of her American name, is a tradition-bound girl.

Soraya then stands as a very strong character in the face of the restrictions and norms imposed by her mother and, therefore, she ends up distancing herself more from her homeland culture. This distance is highly perceived through a set of incidents and arguments in the novel during which she disapproves many features of her homeland culture and mind-sets. Accordingly, Soraya once expresses that she just cannot understand why “the older people all

¹ Ibid., p.25.

² Ibid., p.25.

act the same way they did when they were home” because she argues that it “isn’t fair in a lot of ways because we’re in America now, but they tell us we are not supposed to be living an American life.”¹The girl raises here the generational gap between youth and old generation and she critically uncovers the older generation contradictions to expect their children to lead a life with a strict accordance with the place where they were not born or where they are not living.

Soraya’s critical behaviours towards her homeland culture may emanate once again from the absence of both individual as well as collective memories related to Palestine which somehow evokes khadija’s experience *vis-à-vis* her homeland. Even though Soraya was born in Palestine, she does not cultivate any memory connecting her to Palestine or to any of her family left behind because she moved to the United States at an early age. This, on one hand, increases the enormous gap she feels towards the hometown culture and it, on the other hand, paves the way to a greater sense of belonging to the American culture.

In this regard, Andreas Huyssen avers in his article, “Diaspora and Nation: Migration into Other Pasts,” that:

The traditional understanding of diaspora as loss of homeland and desire to return itself becomes largely irrelevant for the second and third generations who . . . are no longer conversant in language and culture of the country of their ancestors. Whether or not they were to describe themselves as diasporic subjects, the key problems lie in their relation to the national culture they live in rather than to the imaginary of roots in the culture of ancestors. It is primarily a problem of life in the present and the negotiation with the host culture.²

Given that she belongs to the third generation, Soraya’s connection to the country of her ancestor is accordingly baseless taking into consideration not only the absence of memories,

¹ Ibid., p.31.

² Huyssen Andreas, “Migration into Other Pasts,” *New German Critique* ,88 (2003), p.162.

but also the inadequate knowledge she has about her homeland culture. In this way, for Soraya and for many third generation immigrants, cultivating bonds with the host country where they are living becomes of a greater significance in their lives than their ancestor's culture. Hence, Soraya constantly shows no interest and care about her parents' past and their cultural heritage because for her the present is more significant than the past and her present lies in the United States, where she should construct a new life and a new identity different from the older generation. This idea is further highlighted in another significant incident in her encounter with her uncle, Haydar who once says:

Losing a country is what makes your eyes dance, is what my Uncle Haydar told me once. That works for him because he has lost his country. Even though we come from the same place, and I am from the grandfather who was his father, I have been here too long with a father who wants to be too successful for my country to be lost. My eyes dance because I am alive, but I don't tell Haydar that.¹

Soraya makes it clear that she is different from the older generation in terms of their perceptions of loss of homeland in the host country. Indeed, Soraya shows here a great deal of sympathy towards her uncle Haydar's agony resulted from the displacement and loss of his home he is undergoing in the United States; however, she does not share these feelings of loss with him because she feels she cannot lose something she never had. Hence, she implies that one may feel loss over their country for which they have significant memories connecting them to that place, but yet they may not feel this loss over a country for which they have empty and void memories.

The emptiness Soraya nurtures towards her ancestor's culture prompts her to identify with America and, therefore, she embraces the American cultural values with which she feels more comfortable. America for her is the country where she can enjoy her freedom and life

¹ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.115.

away from her homeland cultural restrictions. In this way, she displays a great deal of resistance and protest against her parents' constant attempts to restrict her freedom and control her behaviours with adherence to Arab patriarchal practices. Accordingly, the novel is full of episodes exploring Soraya's sense of rebel in the face of her homeland cultural expectations. One of these incidents is when she confidently affirms that:

I have a skinny girl's waist with woman hips and large breasts. I know my body is sexy; I can tell by the way men look at me; by the way men have always looked at me. I try to hide it in front of my family, and most days I go to school early so I can change out of my loose pants and elbow-length shirts into tighter clothes that make my body show more.¹

Soraya here rebels against her Arab cultural restrictions which expect women to put on loose clothes to hide their sexiness. Even though she is aware of these restrictions, Soraya enjoys her freedom while outside and, therefore, she exposes her sexy body through the tight clothes she wears as a way of defiance to her family expectations. By doing so, she shows her strong disapproval of many aspects of her Arab culture with which she feels estranged.

Soraya's resistance is more elaborated in another relevant incident during which she dances freely regardless of her family's criticism and disapproval. She says:

It always happens like this: when it comes for the women to dance, I put them to shame. Even when I was little it happened like that. I don't know where it comes from, but they know it – it's fire. They talk about how bad I am, especially at weddings in the States, because I dance shamelessly where men can see me and not just in front of women and a camera.²

Soraya here expresses her strong sense of freedom and desire through the act of dancing which goes against her family's will and expectations. According to her Arab cultural norms,

¹ Ibid., p.30.

² Ibid., p.29.

women are not supposed to dance in the presence of men so as to escape their attention, but yet Soraya here acts otherwise with accordance to her free spirit and, therefore, she dances freely and enthusiastically to attract men's attention as a way of challenging this conventional cultural hegemony.

By doing so, Soraya does away with these patriarchal mind-sets that suppress women's fire and the desires they feel inside. This challenge is further revealed through another similar encounter with her mother during which her mother fails to arguably convince her of why she should not dance the same way she does. Regarding this, Soraya's mother says "it is not proper to behave like that, like a loose woman."¹ However, Soraya does not see any reason and logic behind her mother's claim and, therefore, she defiantly answers and questions "But if I'm happy, what's wrong with that?"² Her mother's weak reasoning "you shouldn't show it. Finish"³, shows that the mother can barely provide convincing answers to her daughter other than to blindly and passively follow Arab patriarchal rules and traditions.

Dancing, thus, can be seen as a very important tool employed by Soraya to express her longing for women's freedom and satisfaction missed in her homeland cultural milieu. Simply put, dancing for her is a source of power and control over her own body whereby she uses it as a weapon to resist not only her family, but also all the cultural rules of the community she has been instructed to follow obediently. In commenting on this, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek argues that:

Dancing has been Soraya's way of letting out her frustration as well as expressing her joy, tasting her freedom, and rebelling against all restrictions imposed on her by any kind of authority including her own mother and Arab culture... For her, dancing creates an atmosphere of rave that inspires confidence and independence."⁴

¹Ibid., p.29.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Amal Talaat Abdelrazek, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers*, p.141.

In another relevant incident, Soraya mentions one of her short visits to Nawara when she is dancing at her grandmother's house:

Once I danced every night in a black slip with a candle burning in front of a barred window that often had Israeli soldiers on the other side of it. It was only a room in my grandmother's house in boring little Nawara, but *hiz hiz hiz* the way my feet taught my hips to follow the drumbeats, I imagined I was an imprisoned princess and the man who watched me from behind his gun was my evil captor. I would dance every night, waiting for the heroic prince who would rescue me and love me until the drumbeats stopped, which would be never.¹

This passage is full of meaningful messages regarding the importance of dancing in Soraya's combatting both the Israeli colonial forces as well as her homeland cultural forces. Dancing here plays a key role in relieving Soraya's pain and hardships under the pressure of culture as well as Israeli occupation. In fact, Soraya's aim behind dancing is twofold: first, she uses her body in dancing as a significant weapon to challenge the Israeli soldier since she does not have a gun to face him; second, she regards dancing as an important tool that not only helps her escape the boredom and the displacement she feels in Palestine, but also helps her set herself free from her Arab cultural rules and traditions.

Regarding the cultural impositions inflicted by her mother and her family as whole, Soraya appears more critical of many other incidents in the novel following these restrictions. She often questions why her mother cannot be rational and cannot perceive things beyond the Arab rules and traditions. She, for instance says:

I like to have fun, to enjoy myself and to feel good. I have always been that way. My mother tells me how wrong this is, like it is evil or something and my sister says the same thing. I think they think it's wrong because they don't know what it is to be

¹ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.28.

satisfied, and it scares them. It seems all of the women in our family are like this. Even though married ladies talk about sex, it is always within the context of a marriage and you have to have been a virgin.¹

Ironically enough, Soraya explains here that her mother and her other female relatives cannot understand what it means to enjoy one's freedom because they are not used to it and it scares them to the extent that they prefer to stay away from it. More importantly, she criticizes the fact that women can hardly bring up the issue of sex because it is still perceived a taboo. Hence, Soraya distances herself from her female relatives because she implies that she is a different girl, holding liberal cultural values that allow her to enjoy her sexual freedom the way she pleases and not the way her culture wishes.

Unlike her cousin Khadija, whose sexual freedom has been guided by her Arab traditions, Soraya's sexual freedom is highly informed by the American liberal values. She believes that her body is her own property and she has the right to use it as such with accordance with her own desires and not with the wishes of others. Here she says that:

This year I told my family a thousand and one lies and went to a disco and danced for a beautiful man who came to love me, love me so much that I carried his credit card, wore his jewellery, and had lunch with him until I satisfied him in every way.²

Soraya's strong determination to challenge the cultural norms is so obvious here to such an extent that she lies to her parents so as to enjoy her sexual freedom. This sense of challenge becomes clearer when she strongly affirms that "I am a new breed. A rebel. My mother and her sisters can spill a story from any woman, but I can make a man talk. I am in between. Familiar ears. Safe mouth. I have men as friends, as well as lovers."³ By saying she is a new breed, she significantly implies that she belongs to a new hybrid space filled with joy and satisfaction she needs as a young girl. Besides, this in-between space opens doors for Soraya

¹ Ibid., p.30.

² Ibid., p.28.

³ Ibid., p.56.

to live her life the way she wishes in the sense that it grants her a complete freedom to choose to have men both as friends and as lovers without restrictions. Hence, sex, unlike her other female relatives, is by no means a taboo for Soraya because she finds no harm in making love with the men she chooses as lovers.

Even though Soraya is aware that her Arab religious traditions and standards govern women's sexual lives and therefore they do not allow women to have sex outside marriage, she seems indifferent to these codes and she acts in compliance with her own 'new breed' sense of free spirit. In this way, Soraya not only breaks the taboo of sex, but also defies mainstream patriarchal sexual codes of her Arab culture by which women's bodies and sexual freedom are captured. Soraya calls out for a broader understanding of human values that promote cross-cultural dialogues and communication which go beyond fanatics and extremism. This is significantly depicted when she mentions that "I'm sick of everything being *haram* or *halal*, but nothing in between. I am in between."¹

Soraya insists on her status as a new breed whose aim is to find an in-between space devoid of extremes. Soraya's displaced- self and position evokes Homi Bhabha's concept of 'third space' in which two different worlds bring a person a dual and merged identity. To put it in a nutshell, Bhabha contends that "border lives" leads the person to experience "the moment of tran-sit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, [for] there is a sense of disorientation, a disturbance of direction in the 'beyond'."² Following this, the subjects living in the in-between space straddling between two different cultures ends up experiencing a dual life and hybrid identity. Bhabha adds here that "these 'in-between' spaces provide the train for elaborating strategies of selfhood- singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity,

¹ Ibid., p.117.

² Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, p.1.

and in-innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.”¹

Accordingly, being a ‘new breed’ in the in-between space opens Soraya’s eyes to many unfair and biased practices against women on the basis of gender roles. Her critical perspectives regarding these practices are present at many confrontations with her family members throughout the narrative. In a relevant scene, Soraya invites, Ginna, her American friend, to attend her cousin Lina’s wedding party. While Soraya, Ginna, and Khadija are dancing, they are abruptly obstructed by Khadija’s father, who violently pulls out Khadija and humiliates Ginna for no reason. Following this, Soraya despises this derogatory and regressive attitude on the part of Khadija’s father and she even criticises other women’s reactions they show in the face of this behaviour. Here, she says: “All those ladies heard my uncle’s stupid words, but no one stopped him, like a wild dog allowed to bite everyone.”² Therefore, Soraya is outraged and expresses her rejection to these practices especially these women’s complete silence which perpetuates women’s oppression and subordination.

It is very important to note that Soraya’s hybrid identity is shaped and informed by her constant negotiation with the culture of the homeland as well as of the host country. Soraya’s attitude towards her homeland culture is marked by severe criticism because she believes that these traditions do not meet her wishes and ambitions as a young girl living in a liberal country like America; she comes, however, to realize that even America does not either grant her the supposed freedom she is yearning for, which subsequently leads to her loss and displacement in the American diaspora.

In commenting on this, Amal Talaat Abdelrazek states that: “Soraya suffers from a deep sense of displacement, living in two different worlds but failing to become part of either one. She fluctuates between an Arab world that she loves but whose traditions she rejects and an

¹ Ibid., pp.1-2.

² Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.35.

American world that she looks up to but cannot attain.”¹ Soraya’s loss becomes more visible at the end when she comes to witness that belonging to America is impossible however much she tries to. In other words, Soraya’s constant attempts to assimilate into the American culture prove futile because she finds herself othered and displaced on the basis of her race as an Arab girl.

This is witnessed in an event when she and her Palestinian friend, Walid find themselves involved in a fight at a bar with a group of white Americans on the ethnic basis. That is to say, both Soraya and Walid once go to a bar called, “The Jack Knife,” in which everything has a “white name, white customers, white neighborhood”² and at the middle of their talk at the bar, they are abruptly interrupted by a harassing white customer voice who says “speak English!.” Walid’s answer that they could speak what pleased them, however, provokes anger among the white customer and his white peers: “Fucking Mexicans,” said a back as soft as the eyes. “He thinks we’re Mexicans”. We laughed, and Walid knew the soft man would be watching and would be thinking we were laughing at him and would not let it go.”³ To avoid more confrontations, Soraya and Walid decides to leave the bar and while leaving they are again interrupted by the white customer who yells “You speak English pretty good for a wetback. Just remember, this ain’t a Mexican joint. You go somewhere else to drink your *cervezas* and hang out with your *puta*.”⁴ This is a very telling event upon which Soraya comes to wake up from her long dreams and illusions about American’s supposed freedom. The white man’s racist reactions and words can be interpreted as if Soraya and Walid penetrate a place where they are not supposed to be and therefore they should be expelled and punished for this violation.

¹ Amal Talaat Abdelrazek, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers*, p.140.

² Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.52.

³ *Ibid.*, p.53.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.58.

As a reaction to these racist comments, Soraya yells “we are not Mexicans!’ I shouted. ‘We are Americans.’”¹By saying this, Soraya identifies herself with the American identity and therefore she seeks recognition to be seen as any other American citizen, enjoying the same rights and the same duties. Nonetheless, Soraya’s words aggravates the vexed situation and provokes their rage more to the extent they end up committing violence against Walid as if they are purifying the American blood from other brown and black races. What is at issue is that being immigrants of Arab origins makes their status and position more complex with regard to other ethnic immigrants groups. In other words, Soraya and Walid are maltreated above because they are mistakenly thought of as Mexicans, which means that their situation could have been worse had the white customers known they were Arabs. This is further revealed later when a policewoman comes to investigate the aggression, the following conversation takes place:

“So they beat you up for being Mexican?” the policewoman asked. “We’re not Mexican.” “You got beaten up for being Mexican and you’re not Mexican? What are you?” “Palestinian”. “Well you got off pretty lucky then.” The policewoman was quiet for a minute. “That jacket sure makes you look Mexican.”²

Ironically, the policewoman here, who instead of granting security and protecting people from violence and abuse by taking actions against the aggressors, acts very indifferently in the way that reinforces stereotypes and prejudices held against immigrants in general and Arabs in particular. This racist behaviour reinforces the American racialized politics which is based on favouring white American race over other races and other ethnic groups especially Arabs. It also demonstrates that Arab’s image is tarnished and homogenized by the American mainstream culture on religious and ethnic bases.

¹ Ibid., p.59.

² Ibid., pp.50-60.

In this context, Nada Elia mentions that “the ‘othering’ and rejection of Arabs and Arab Americans is as old as this country as is the erroneous homogenization of all Arab Americans as Muslims,”¹ which explains that such negative attitudes held about Arabs is deeply-rooted as it has a very long historical background prior to the September 11th events. As it predates 9/11, Elia adds, “this rejection cannot be attributed to the trauma of the terrorist attacks, and is quite clearly based in religious intolerance, the assumption that Arabs are irrevocably ‘other’ because they are Muslim, aliens in this Judeo-Christian culture.”²

This event marks a turning point in Soraya’s self-identification and position *vis-a-vis* America and its politics. After witnessing and undergoing these horrific moments, Soraya is driven to reflect and reconsider her myths about the American values and dreams. She finally comes to realize that her dreams can hardly be achieved because she belongs to a race that is by no means welcome in the United States. Her reflections are as the following:

Sneak back home, heart pounding hours later, with rage, with hate. What loser morons and, squeezing tears out, wishing that it was one of those American movies where Walid would knock those guys to the floor and we would walk off without a scratch, my heroic prince defending my honor... but that’s not what the American movie would show, would it? Instead it would show the super American guy knocking the scummy Arab flat on the ground like what happened. Still wishing... that I were a superhero like in those cartoons where she comes in and wipes out the bad guys and still looks great. But there aren’t any Arab ones, are there? My hair is too dark, too thick; my skin is too far away from white to let me even pretend to be an American superhero.³

¹ Elia Nada, “Islamophobia and the Privileging of Arab American Women,” *NWSA Journal*, 18:3, (2006), p.155.

² *Ibid.*, p.156.

³ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.60.

Soraya is now convinced that her strong determination to identify with the American culture is vastly shaken by the American orientalist ideologies. She tries to imagine the possibility of Walid, acting as a superhero in an American movie and thus protecting her from those aggressors, but yet her imagination is interrupted by the illusion of the American fantasy. Hence, Soraya discerns that the American movies would never allow a character of an Arab traits acting as a superhero because Arabs are assumed of as backwards and villains and, therefore, they should be represented as such. Equally important, Soraya realizes then that Arab women can neither be positively depicted in Hollywood films and American pop culture, nor can they be portrayed as other than submissive and oppressed.

Following this incident, Soraya's displacement and loss is intensified as she comes to fathom that she will never be recognized as an American citizen due to her race and ethnic traits. Her persistence to assimilate into the American society is doomed to failure as she finds herself rejected by the American racialized politics where immigrants and Arabs in particular have no safe and equal place. Hence, at the end of the narrative, Soraya turns back to her homeland culture, seeking refuge and warmth she misses in the American society and here she says: Who would think I would want to go back, just to watch my grandmother watching the day that sits slow and fat like a watermelon, watch the sky watching us, and beg for the sun to cover us quietly.”¹

This passage signals Soraya's mental and psychological relocation to her homeland through arousing nostalgic feelings for her Palestine. Regarding the displacement and the loss she has undergone under the illusions of the American values, Soraya resorts to her homeland cherishing memories with the aim of not only escaping the loss she is experiencing in America, but also fostering a strong bond with her Palestine homeland. By mentioning that she misses her grandmother and her land, Soraya implies that she yearns to establish strong

¹ Ibid., p.189.

connection and attachment to her Arab roots and culture as a way to find a safe place beyond racism and loss.

To conclude, even though the narrative seems to end with strong indications that Soraya longs to identify with her Palestine homeland and people, the negotiations and struggles she has had with her mother and other family members may suggest that the character's identity is torn between two worlds and two cultures. As discussed above, on one hand, the character has displayed many critical attitudes towards a number of her homeland patriarchal practices and, by extension, to Arab patriarchal mind-sets; on the other hand, she has despised the American racialized politics which stand as a compelling barrier to her American self-identification. Hence, it is fair to note that Soraya is caught between two opposing cultures in which she neither belong to America, nor to Palestine but "Lost in somewhere you grew up in, with a language you have taken, with a world that you want, but which is behind that clear steel curtain. Watch it. Watch it all you want, but it will never be yours."¹

c. Hala: Negotiating Boundaries

Unlike all the three narrator-characters and especially Khadija and Soraya ,who, as we have discussed, could not somehow foster strong ties in their negotiations process with neither cultures, Hala's character and experiences are vastly dissimilar to her cousins regarding the extent of balance of which she manages to establish between the two worlds and cultures. Hala, as we will discuss in this section, can be regarded as the only character that negotiates her identity construction from a transcultural perspectives without having to privilege one culture over the other. After a long journey of identity quest and negotiations between the two cultures, she ends up finding a space of her own void of essentialist views of both cultures. Accordingly, this section will rigorously examine Hala's identity construction

¹ Ibid., p.191.

vis-à-vis her homeland as well as her host land culture. It will explore how Hala forges her new hybrid identity that aids her serve as a bridge and mediator between the two cultures and, by extension the Arab and the American culture.

Before proceeding to explore how Hala negotiates and forges her identity as a diasporic subject between the American and Arab culture, it is first compelling to introduce her and provide some relevant aspects about her origins so that we can better understand how the character constructs her hybrid identity by adopting different constituents and elements into her lifestyle.

To begin with, Hala is born in Jordan to a Jordanian father and to a Palestinian mother, Huda (the three cousins' aunt). At the age of seventeen, she manages to emigrate from Jordan to the United States to finish her high school and to pursue up her university studies. Hala stays there with her maternal uncle, Hamdi and his American wife, Fay, who fill her with support and motivation to study hard and to achieve her mother's American frustrated dreams and wishes. Hala's story begins right in the plane while returning back to her country, Jordan to visit her dying paternal grandmother after two years of absence. Hala's first visit to her home country was during her mother's death after she had spent one year in the United States. However, prior to Hala's travel to the states, it is important to mention that Hala's mother, who died shortly after Hala's departure, plays a very crucial role in convincing her husband to let Hala go to the United States to finish her studies.

Given that Hala's father is a conventional and tradition-bound person, he displays strong objection in the first place to allow his daughter to travel alone to a country where she will be away from his control. His reaction on this is "there was not a chance in the world that he would let such a young girl go live in America with only a maternal uncle and his American wife."¹In spite of this opposition, Hala's mother constantly persists that her

¹ Ibid., p.9.

daughter should go to the United States because she believes her daughter will carve out a new career there away from her homeland limitations. Put differently, Hala's mother had already travelled once to America to finish her studies; however, she was forced to come back to Palestine in disgraceful way and was married off as a punishment of her presumed misbehaviour.

Thus, being already aware of the miserable living conditions Palestinian and Jordanian women are undergoing in their homelands, Hala's mother does not want her daughter to experience the same path and endurance she and these women go through, but rather she seeks to save her daughter from these restrictions by sending her to a country that will grant her freedom and more life's opportunities that she herself missed. Hence, her reply is that "If Hala stays here she will rot like me and Latifa. Look at us. We have rotted. Let Hala go and dream."¹Huda's words significantly summarize Jordanian women's sufferings and the miserable lives they are leading under the hegemonic power of patriarchy. Huda argues here that Hala should have an opportunity to lead a different life from her mother and her elder sister Latifa, whose dreams and wishes have been spoiled in Jordan. That is to say, Huda is aware that her daughter Hala is a very smart girl and, therefore, she is worth of another much better life than simply being married off to an old man with whom her dreams will be by no means possible to come true.

At this point, it should be noted that Hala's mother appears largely different from her other sisters, especially Khadija' and Soraya's mothers. We have seen earlier how both mothers have constantly tried to limit their daughter's freedoms and make sure their daughters act in accordance with the traditional gender roles. However, Hala's mother acts otherwise regarding the struggles she takes to set her daughter free from the old Arab traditional mind-sets that seek to subjugate and limit women's freedom.

¹ Ibid., p.9.

The Moroccan sociologist and feminist Fatima El Mernissi regards “the return to the past, the return to tradition that men are demanding, is a means of putting things ‘back in order.’ An order that no longer satisfies everybody, especially not the women who have never accepted it.”¹ This implies that Arab men purposefully invoke traditions and use them in a way that serves their own patriarchal interests which aim to maintain power and predominance over women. Even though Huda is frustrated because her dreams are sabotaged as she was married off to an old Jordanian man (Hala’s father), she wants to compensate for this misery by insisting that her daughter should go to the United States, where she can experience a different path other than hers. Hence, Huda’s first wish seems to come true as her husband is eventually convinced to allow Hala to travel to the United States, especially after he learns that his wife is diagnosed with a fatal cancer. Upon this Hala says:

My mother was excited, perhaps because she thought I’d have a chance to finish what she barely started, or perhaps because she thought I’d have a freer education. Regardless, I was terrified at the thought of being away from my family, even though the idea of going to America – the America my mother had only tasted – was exciting.²

Hala seems to be hesitant in the first place to welcome the idea of living away from her family; however, this hesitancy turns to motivation and excitement when she feels that this experience will help her fulfil her mother’s unfulfilled and frustrated dreams. Besides, this idea stimulates Hala more regarding her growing desire to construct her own individual identity free from the restrictions and harassments inflicted by her society. Hala’s free spirit and her craving for reading and knowledge is highly disapproved and criticized by her family members who usually discourage women to read and learn. Hala explain this:

¹ Fatima El Mernissi, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women's Rights in Islam*, trans. Mary Jo Lakeland (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1987), p.43.

² Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.9.

I spent a lot of time alone reading, a source of embarrassment and concern for almost everyone in my family. “She will be blind before she is fifteen years old,” Aunt Suha, my father’s sister, would tell my mother every time she came over and found me bent over a book. “You shouldn’t let her do this or no one will marry her.” My mother would nod, appeasing Aunt Suha enough to let the subject rest until the next time she came over. She never discouraged me, though, and liked to hear about the books I was reading, and read them herself if she had not done so previously. My father didn’t approve of reading outside of school texts, and he used to take away my books when he came across them.¹

This passage conveys a very important message pertaining to women’s education in the Arab world particularly in the Jordanian society. While most Arab patriarchal societies regulate women to private sphere where they are supposed to be obedient wives, taking care of domestic chores and household tasks, women’s education is undermined as such and it is not a priority since it will open doors for women to look beyond these marriage and domestic restrictions.

Accordingly, apart from her mother and her elder brother Jalal, Hala is hardly encouraged to learn and carve out her career as an independent girl due to the Arab patriarchal restrictive gender roles which prioritize girls’ marriage over their education and learning. In this way, women are allegedly viewed as potential wives and passive mothers who are confined to reproductive and domestic roles. Being aware of this gender disparity and its paradoxical lines, Hala decides to travel to the United States as a way to escape these biased practices of her society and seek better living conditions that allow her to fulfil her dreams as well as her mother frustrated dreams.

¹ Ibid., p.8.

It is true that Hala's travel to the States seems to bring her some temporary relief from her cultural restrictions and past pain; however, her sufferings are promptly brought back during her first urgent visit to her homeland upon her mother's death. Hala, for instance, finds herself once again under the control of her repressive father who "not even two days into my mourning her death, he made it clear that he was going to be the one to make the decisions about my life from then on."¹

Shortly after the death of her protective mother, Hala's father ruthlessly reinforces his powerful position as a father figure who will exert control over his daughter and decide on her destiny and life on her behalf. His first decision is that "it is time for you to be with your family. I'm sure you understand. You must think about life now, and plan to put your roots here as a woman."² By deciding that Hala should stay in Jordan, he invokes traditional gender roles of Arab society which relegate women to marriage and domestic chores as we have mentioned before. After once allowing Hala, with the persistence of her mother, to move to the United States, Hala's father changes his mind shortly after his wife's death and expects Hala to replace her mother's position by taking care of household duties till he can find her a potential husband.

Nevertheless, Hala becomes fully alert of her father's malevolent intentions to control her and restrict her freedom which her mother has already granted her. Hence, her answer to her father's authoritative mode of behaviour is compelling. She says:

A screen lifted from my eyes. I was to replace my mother with a husband. I was to stay in Jordan forever. Marry – engaged even before high school was over. Have children. Be someone else's burden. Maybe I spoke because I learned how to move my tongue like an American. Maybe it was just my grief that made me lose control. Or anger. "I am going back with Hamdi and Fay."

¹ Ibid., p.45.

² Ibid.

“You will stay here. You have no more need for them.”

Strength came holding the hand of rage. “My mother’s wish was that I study in America. If I stay here, I will kill myself. I will go to my mother and then you will have the blood of two people on your hands.”¹

This passage marks Hala’s turning point *vis-à-vis* her father. Taking the advantage of living already one year in the United States, she becomes strongly determined to challenge her father’s decision to stay in Jordan and live a miserable life like other Jordanian women. Hala no longer wants to be an obedient girl like both her mother and her sister, Latifa and, therefore, she rebels against her father’s intentions and decision to subjugate her, especially after the death of her protective mother.

Moreover, she implicitly accuses her father of being the cause of her mother’s death regarding the restrictions and limitations she has undergone throughout her miserable marriage. To phrase it in another way, being once again back home instigates many recollections of Hala’s painful pasts and memories in Jordan and, therefore, she even prefers to die rather than to allow herself to repeat the same experiences and plights that her mother and her sister have already experienced. Hala’s short stay in America inspires and stimulates her enough to shape a different character that prompts her to feel alienated and critical towards many cultural practices of her homeland. Consequently, Hala’s father feels somehow defeated and his answer is described by Hala as the following:

He stared at me. No yelling. No cursing no invitations to kill myself this very minute at his feet --- something I surely would never have been able to do even with my grief at its strongest. Just staring. He turned and walked away. We did not speak again. Jalal took us to the airport and my father did not come to say good-bye.²

¹ Ibid., p.45.

² Ibid., pp.45-46.

Later, Hala's alienation is even more exacerbated during her second visit to Jordan to see her dying paternal grandmother. After two years of absence, she comes back again to her homeland to find out that she is more estranged from her homeland regarding a number of underlying instances. The first incident comes right on board while Hala's Jordanian traditional clothes instigate a sense of alienation from her homeland culture. She describes this:

My gray, ankle-length dress scratches me everywhere, no matter how I shift in my regular-class, no-frills seat. It tickles my bottom and has a scooped back front, so people can peak from all angles. I thought the dress would give me confidence--- mostly covering me, but pretty---but instead I fold myself, hunch, and calculate whether a tiny airplane bathroom is big enough to hold me as I change my clothes.¹

Hala here displays the sense of detachment she feels with wearing a loose dress of her homeland country. Instead of feeling confident with this dress which represents Jordanian culture, Hala feels otherwise in the sense that this piece of cloth becomes a source of discomfort and irritation to her. Provided that the clothes generally represent one's homeland culture, Hala's alienation with this dress can also imply many other aspects of her culture from which she comes to experience estrangement and detachment after her stay in America.

Once Hala arrives to Jordan, she finds her father waiting at the airport to pick her up home. On their way back home, Hala feels a deep sense of melancholy and loss as she remembers her dead mother:

I lean back in the soft leather. I can't erase the picture of my last visit, my mother's funeral, and then the huge fight. The memory comes in my eyes, burning like the sun that's setting, but I keep my silence as we drive into the desert . . . I am silent. I do not want his stories or drunken, smoky love songs tossed in my lap. I want my mother

¹ Ibid., p.1.

back so much it aches. I want to hear her stories about her village, her words in my ears, her fingers stroking my hair.¹

Being back home evokes very sad and grieving memories of Hala's mother's death as well as her tense relationship with her father. Hala, who has spent two years in the United States after her mother's death, is unable to take away the memories of her mother's tragedy and the sufferings she has experienced under the pressure of her despot father.

Shortly after few days of her arrival, Hala further experiences more sense of conflicted feelings towards her homeland. Even though she is mostly surrounded by her family members in a place where "There is comfort to be in my own house, to wake up in my own language."² Hala does not feel utterly attached to them as she "walked so far away from them."³ As a result, she perceives herself different from her people in a way that makes her feel displaced and exiled with her homeland. Regarding this, Hala mentions:

I know they see me with curious eyes. I left before marrying age. I have finished high school and I should be coming back for marriage, not for death. I should have longer hair, I should wear makeup. I should not wear blue jeans and "extremely unfeminine dresses," as Aunt Suha says. I should stop using English words. Nila, one of my classmates at the American school just married and is pregnant. I am unconnected.⁴

Hala admits here that her identity has been informed by her stay in the United States to the extent that she is perceived as a stranger among her people. The fact that Hala spends three years in the States is enough to make her look different from the people of her homeland and alienated from many cultural traditions and practices. In other words, Hala is filled with a sense of not belonging to her people because of her new attitudes and new look she adopts

¹ Ibid., p.13.

² Ibid., p.77.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

while staying in the United States. Regarding this feeling of loss and displacement Hala is going through upon her return, Stuart Hall argues:

These returnees have different reasons not to feel comfortable in their homelands: Many miss the cosmopolitan rhythms of life to which they have become acclimatized. Many feel that, home has changed beyond all recognition. In turn, they are seen as having had the natural and spontaneous chains of connection disturbed by their diasporic experiences. They are happy to be home. But history has somehow irrevocably intervened¹.

Accordingly, Hala's displacement and disconnectedness is highly attributed to her diasporic conditions and experiences as a diasporic subject in the host land country. This sense of loss is further reflected in a number of other relevant instances. Hala, For instance, goes through this feeling at her home where she finds herself detached due to her mother's absence. About this estrangement, Hala says: "everything is white. The house is white, the yard is white tile, and the six-foot wall that borders the house is white. White, white, white, white to blind the morning sun, as though they were in competition."² Even though the white colour is generally associated with positive meanings such as purity, safety, and new beginnings, it is not used here as such because Hala's repetitive use of the white colour reveals the growing emptiness and the detachment she feels at home. Instead of being filled with warmth and comfort that home supposedly offers, Hala feels void and coldness as a result of her mother's absence which ultimately reinforces her sense of displacement.

Hala experiences disconnectedness not only in her home or/and with her father, but also with her elder sister, Latifa with whom she feels no connection. Hala says then that "It occurs to me that Latifa and I share nothing, except our mother"³, which implies that her relation with Latifa is so cold and distant even though they are sisters. Latifa is constantly hostile and

¹ Stuart Hall , "Thinking the Diaspora: Home-Thoughts From Abroad," *Small Axe* 6, (1999), p.3.

² Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan*, p.78.

³ Ibid.

keeps frequently harassing her sister, but yet Hala intentionally disregards her remarks and her critical attitudes as though she does not know her. This is explained when Hala says: “Latifa’s words don’t make me angry. It’s as if I am watching two people talking as they face a white wall, but I have no connection to them.”¹

Hence, Hala’s stay for two weeks in her homeland Jordan is marked by a complete estrangement and conflicts she has had towards her people and her family members including her father and her sister, Latifa. She is strongly determined to live her own life differently from other women of her family as well of her homeland people regardless of the hegemony of her father and her culture .Her sense of defiance is summarised in the following excerpt:

I am not ready to marry at all. I know this. And if I stay here, I might come to feel differently. And then I will be like my mother. The Woman of Unfulfilled Dreams. Better to be like Uncle Hamdi, The Voice of Reason and Capitalism. If I stay I will be one of my father’s jokes too. A joke that makes nobody laugh.²

Hala makes it clear here that she yearns for a different life beyond her societal expectations and restrictions that imprison women within the wedlock of marriage. Being as such, she says: “I remain unconnected, like a charm without a chain to hang, I’m happy”³, which reveals her strong rejection to abide by the traditions dictated upon her by the society.

However, it is important to note that Hala’s detachment with her homeland and its culture does not last longer upon her meeting with her older cousin Sharif, who has just returned back to Jordan after having spent years of experiences in Europe. Hala’s experiences of estrangement *vis-à-vis* her family members as well as her culture throughout the first days of her stay in Jordan seem to come to an end once she meets her cousin, whom she has not seen since her childhood. Hala’s first encounter with him after his long absence marks a significant change in her life due to the key role he plays in not only evoking very happy

¹ Ibid., p.79.

² Ibid., p.83.

³ Ibid.

memories of her childhood, but also in getting her closer to her roots and culture. Following this meeting, Hala says: “I feel a wave inside of me, as though a giant change is about to occur.”¹

This change is inaugurated at the very beginning as he introduces himself as a guide and therefore offers to give her a tour to some prominent places of Jordan. “I am a professional tour guide. I would be delighted to reacquaint you with your homeland. One of your homelands, at least.”² Having experienced almost the same diasporic conditions in Europe, Sharif seems to be the only member within her society who shows a great deal of understanding towards Hala’s displacement and, therefore, he seeks to open doors for Hala to reconnect with one of her homeland culture by helping her explore the cultural heritage and traditions of her Arab roots.

Right from the beginning, Sharif ‘s attempt to re-approximate Hala from her origins starts by his offer to take both Hala and her sister Latifa to pay a short visit to a very old castle of Ajlun city. On their way to this place, we come to notice Hala’s changing feelings and attitudes towards her place of birth. “I watch the hills and trees and villages, imagining the people who live there, wondering if my mother thought of her village every time she drove by Jordanian villages. Being away has made me see the country as more beautiful. I’m even enjoying Latifa.”³ This first visit invokes vivid memories pertaining to her mother, Huda as well as to her second homeland Palestine as echoed by Sharif. Besides, this is a momentous phase in Hala’s change regarding her new tone and impressions she has appropriated to her country and her sister Latifa. Significantly, Hala has expressed favourable expressions and comfort towards her country and her sister for the first time since her return to Jordan.

¹ Ibid., p.119.

² Ibid., p.120.

³ Ibid., p.132.

During this short visit there, Hala sets about her journey of exploration of the splendid landscapes and places of her homeland as if she has never been there before. Hence, she articulates her sense of comfort and peace that have been absent throughout her first days:

Up and up and up and we reach the highest part of the castle, which looks out over a small valley. We sit there silently for what seems like a very long time, legs dangling over the edge and a story here and there to fill our ears. It is like sitting with the oldest friends in the world, no words are necessary, but when they come, they are most welcome. For the first time since I have been back, I feel at peace.¹ (p.133)

This is a new episode in Hala's life during which she comes to visualize things differently and value every aspect of her birth 'place. This new phase of Hala's life is highly attributed to Sharif's constant efforts to reconnect her to her country again after weeks of displacement. Regarding this, Hala says:

With this day, a new chapter of my life begins a new beginning after my grandmother's death. Sharif comes over every day to take us somewhere: to the *souq*, the mall, visiting friends or relatives, to Jerash, to Ajlun, wherever our hearts desire. This is the perfect way to come home and taste it all over again.²

After long struggles and conflicting feelings, Hala seems to come to terms with her past and feel peace towards her second side of the hyphen. With the presence of Sharif in her life, Hala forges a new hybrid identity that appropriates a mixture of complex elements of both her Arab and American culture.

Given that Hala is born to parents of distinct backgrounds (Palestinian mother and Jordanian father), her diasporic conditions are more complex than others in the novel. Hence, Sharif acts as a mediator in Hala's negotiating of her identity not only with her Jordanian origin, but also with her Palestinian roots. Hence, he evokes a very significant and nostalgic

¹ Ibid., p.133.

² Ibid., p.134.

memory of her childhood during which they go into the beach of Aqaba near Palestine upon a family excursion. There, Sharif takes Hala to the sea and bewilders her by saying:

“Let’s swim home,” he says with his face still in the sun. “Home? This beach won’t reach to Amman. How can we swim there if there is no water?” I try to stay still so my shell will come back. “I mean to Palestine.” He turns to look at me. “We can’t swim to Palestine.” “Why not? She’s right there.” He points to the right, below the sun. We are so close that we can see the houses on the shore. “That’s Palestine?” He nods, still looking, I feel funny inside. “We’re not allowed to go there. It’s not our home anymore.” The water is very blurry now. “Says who?” He stares at me with his hands in fists at his waist.¹

This passage is of a great importance as it reveals Hala’s complex elements of her hybrid identity prior to her experience as a diasporic subject in the United States. In other words, Hala’s hybridity dates back to her early childhood as being a mixture of both Palestinian as well as Jordanian roots. Sharif suggests going home as if reminding Hala of her other roots she ignores. Following this, Hala is very surprised to know for the first time from Sharif that Palestine is her second home after Jordan but at the same time she is frustrated to know they are no longer allowed to sail there because of political reasons. Thus, this incident is very telling in the sense it raises Hala’s awareness about the Israeli -Palestinian political conflicts at an early age.

As we have seen above, Sharif helps Hala reshape her identity in different ways. Not only has he opened doors for her to explore the beauty of her country, but he has also contributed to her growing awareness of her complex belongings and home. He has been acting as a mentor to Hala regarding his great role in bringing her in terms with her origins.

¹ Ibid., p.125.

She admits that her cousin Sharif “is making me see my country in a way I never have.”¹ She further adds that he makes her “become self-conscious, not in a pretty/ugly way, just aware of myself and my body.”²

As a result, Hala fosters strong feelings and ends up falling in love with him regardless of their age difference. Sharif in turn feels almost the same feelings, but yet refuses her father’s offer to marry her as he advocates her freedom and he previously knows that marriage will neither help Hala fulfil her long-awaited dreams nor will it bring her the happiness she deserves. Sharif’s compassionate intention is reflected in the following dialogue between Hala’s father and a friend of his:

Two months she has been here and I really have no idea what to do with her, so I am going to put her on a plane back to the States. Hala is a kind girl and, you are right, very different from the others. She has her mother’s spirit. I was prepared to marry her to someone – a relative – a very good man who would have been a good match for her, but imagine this: he refused me . . . He refused me because he thinks she needs to choose her own life. ‘If I have true love for her, which I must in order to marry her, I must allow her to be free. This is why I refuse you.’ Imagine a man telling a father what to do with his own daughter.³

This passage significantly displays that Sharif rejects his own happiness at the expense of Hala’s freedom and dreams. Put differently, even though he loves her, he refuses this marriage because he is aware it will inhibit Hala from exploring the world the way he has done. Here he says: “I have explored the world and have come back to settle. You are seeing it for the first time. I think you have come back to say good-bye.”⁴ Therefore, Sharif prioritizes Hala’s freedom and happiness over his own feelings. He adds that “I am an older

¹ Ibid., p.134.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid., p.195.

⁴ Ibid., p.197.

man and I cannot give you what you need. I would be always good to you, I would always love you, but I am too old to expect what I have to offer you is enough to keep you happy.”¹

In this way, it is worth noting that Sharif has been a key to Hala’s quest for self-identification and negotiation between the two worlds. Hala, who used to be critical towards many cultural aspects of her homeland, manages at the end with the help of her cousin, Sharif to establish a balance and find a third space for her between the American and her homeland culture. Hala’s process of reconciliation is summarized in her very trip back to Arizona during which she decides to wear a traditional Palestinian embroidered *roza* that belongs to her mother.

“Why must you wear that? You know it is not appropriate. You are not going to a village or for a visit to someone. You are flying to America! Miss Modern Lady Who Had Almost No Interest In Dresses Until Today, why can’t you wear your beloved jeans like you do all the time?”²

This passage conveys a very telling message regarding Hala’s changing attitude towards her homeland culture and its clothes. Right at the very beginning of her visit, Hala, as we have discussed earlier of this chapter, expresses sense of discomfort and irritation upon the traditional dress she wears on a board. However, she comes here to articulate different feelings in the sense that the traditional dress ‘roza’ becomes for her a source of comfort, pride and most importantly the sign of her cultural attachment. Hala’s persistence to put on ‘roza’, a typical dress of her Palestinian mother stands for the continuity of this Palestinian tradition within Hala’s self-identification. Hence, unlike her previous flight, Hala asserts “I am not at all nervous on this flight. There is no mystery and no worrying. No one is expecting a face I cannot offer. No, this flight is quiet.”³

¹ Ibid., p.199.

² Ibid., p.203.

³ Ibid., p.204.

Moreover, Hala's change is further noticed after her arrival to America again, where she starts valuing and cherishing objects and items brought with the aim of evoking past memories of her homeland country. In other words, she decorates her bedroom with objects and features of her Arab roots so that they can evoke her homeland culture and memories which have become a key to her negotiation process in the United States. Upon this, she says:

By the evening the bare walls are bearable, lively, different and familiar. I sit on the floor and stare, then close my eyes. It is deep night-time in Amman – and in Nawara – and I have tucked my memories under a scratchy blanket, wishing them the sweetest dreams as I open my eyes to a new, but not unfamiliar world.¹

To conclude, even though Hala experiences loss and displacement throughout the first days of her arrival, she ends up living in a more balanced path thanks to the help of her cousin Sharif. She comes to end her narrative as a hybrid character who can live in the third space as a as an American and as an Arab girl without preferring one culture over the other. Unlike the other cousins whose displacement seems endless, Hala adopts transnational aspects to her character and therefore she manages to turn her displacement and loss into a comfort and balance by maintaining the features of both cultures and worlds.

Conclusion

As discussed in this dissertation, the work of Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* approaches us from the daily lives and experiences of four Palestinian young female characters struggling in the borderlands to seek a space of their own in the face of power of dominant cultures, patriarchal system, and racialization. These experiences lived by Soraya, Hala, Khadija, and Mawal confirms their diversity and heterogeneity even if they belong to the same family. They keep straddling between two cultures and spaces and end up forging

¹ Ibid., p.220.

new fluid identity that resists the hegemonies of culture, colonialism, and patriarchy and at the same time it embraces both elements of the two worlds. The next chapter will study *Map of Love* by Ahdaf Soueif and it will relevantly and further demystify the importance and dimensions of embracing the transcultural dialogue as a literary strategy employed by Arab diaspora women writers not only to open up on-going cultural negotiations and dialogues between the West and the East but also to redress misconceived assumptions and stereotypes circulated by western discourse.

3. Bridging the Cultural Gap in *The Map of love* by Ahdaf Soueif

a. Notes on the Novel

As discussed in the previous chapter, Laila Halaby has addressed very significant issues pertaining to, race, colonialism, patriarchy, and identity. She has been entrusted as an Arab American writer not only to reveal the social contradictions prevailing in the Arab world, but also to correct the stereotypical images that have been long inherent and embedded in Western media and other Western discursive practices. It goes without saying that these images and misrepresentations of the East and particularly of the Eastern women have been of a great concern to many postcolonial feminist Arab writers for whom the act of writing has proved to be a very fruitful tool and strategy to counteract these discourses.

Taking the advantage of having been constantly encountered with Western values and education either by temporary or permanent immigration process, or by being born there to Arab parents as the case of Halaby, the Arab women diasporic writers, as we have already mentioned in the introduction, critically foregrounded a very outstanding corpus of texts – usually in Western languages: English, French and others to feature their own experiences both in their homelands as well as in their host countries. By doing so, they have challenged both Western hegemonic culture and Western feminist discourses which have undermined and

placed them in inferior positions with regard to their Third World essentialist identity. Ahdaf Soueif, Laila Abouloula, Asia Djabbar, Laila Al Alami, to name just a few are all typical models of this trend of new body of literature which deals basically with their own issues and concerns in the diaspora world.

In fact, literature in general and postcolonial literature in particular is alleged to have the quality of revisiting the history of colonization and its aftermath on colonized subjects which in turn helps the latter reconstruct their own history with regard to the long established unequal power relations between the colonizer and the colonized subjects. Indeed postcolonial literature enables postcolonial subjects to critically rethink their inferior positions *vis-a-vis* the superiority of the West. In order to escape the master/slave cycle, Paul Hamilton argues “that postcolonial subjects must produce a narrative of history and knowledge, through `parodic distance not scientific mastery.”¹

Hamilton further argues that the struggle to empower a postcolonial stance takes the form of attacking the very idea of a cultural centre with a single history that needs revision or supplementation. Parodic distance, he continues, “offers a subversive mimicry which questions the usual aims and goals of cultural controversy. This form of stylistic rewriting of history offers another knowledge where the identities of the oppressor and the oppressed are questioned, distorted and resisted.”²

Indeed, historical fiction, like the example under study (*The Map of Love*), is of a great political importance for postcolonial writers and especially women taking into account the fact that “the imperatives behind female and ethnic (re)writing of history are inescapably different from those of white men.”³ One of the driving forces in the writing of historic fiction is to give a voice to the silenced subject. For a woman, “to re-write an established male-

¹ Paul Hamilton, *Historicism* (London: Routledge, 1996), p.184.

² *Ibid.*, pp.183-84.

³ Ann Heilmann, and Mark Llewellyn, M. “Historical Fictions: Women (Re)Writing and (Re)Reading History”, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 15:2 (2004), p.142.

authored work - as history writing has been mainly exclusive to men - presents a challenge to both the author and the reader.”¹

Written in 1997 by Ahdaf Soueif², *The Map of Love* tells a story of four female characters: Anna Winterbourne, Layla Al Baroudi, Isabel Parkman, and Amal Al Gamraoui, the narrator of the story. The novel interlinks two different stories occurring at two different eras. One is set at the end of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the other is in the late twentieth century. Both stories are narrated by an omniscient narrator Amal Al Gamraoui, who builds up the stories on the diaries and reports she has found in the trunk brought to her by Isabel, her cousin and her brother Omar’s girlfriend, who is living in the United States. Amal chronologically pieces together these diaries and journals which Anna would write to Sir Charles, her father in law and her other British friends during her life in Egypt in the beginning of the twentieth century. The two stories revolve around Anna and Amal, who both live in two different periods of time and space, the past and the present, but yet become close friends across time though they have never met each other physically. The first heroine, Lady Annia Winterbourne, is intrigued by the museum painting to set sail in 1900 to Egypt after her husband’s death Edward as a result of the trauma he has gone through after his return from the war on Sudan.

Upon her arrival to Egypt, Anna disguises herself in man’s clothes and goes out to discover the Egypt she has heard about and that she has seen in the museum painting. However, she gets abducted and kidnapped and brought to Sharif Pasha Al Baroudi’s house by two Egyptian males who are protesting against the imprisonment of Layla Al Baroudi’s husband. Upon her arrival, she is destined to encounter Layla Al Baroudi for the first time,

¹ Ann Heilmann, and Mark Llewellyn, M. “Historical Fictions,” p.142.

² Ahdaf Soueif is an Egyptian novelists and short story writer. She was born in Cairo, March, 23, 1955. She received her education in both Egypt and England. She obtained PhD in linguistics at the University of Lancaster. She wrote three short stories collections; *Aisha* (1983), and *The Sandpiper* (1999) and her latest work is a collection of short story, *I Think of You*. She also wrote two novels: *In the Eye of the Sun* (1993) and *The Map of Love* (1999). She also wrote a book, *Mezzatera* in 2004.

with whom she establishes a very close tie both as a friend and later as her sister in law after she falls in love with and marries her brother, Sharif Pasha Al Baroudi, an Egyptian nationalist who is committed to defend Egypt against British colonization. Through her journey with him, Anna realises the brutality and the vulgarity of colonialist Britain and writes her thoughts in her diaries and letters to her friends in Britain. However, Sharif Pasha is assassinated after ten years of marriage by unknown men while he is riding his carriage.

After a hundred years later, the second story takes place at the end of the century. Similarly, the story is about a love affair between an Egyptian nationalist, Omar Al Gamrawi, Amal's brother who is living in the United States and an American journalist, Isabel Parkman, the descendant of Anna and Sharif Pasha. Omar meets Isabel in New York and they fall in love with each other regardless of the age differences. While arranging for her journey to Egypt to meet Amal, she comes across a trunk left at her parents' house which is full of Anna's letters and dairies both in Arabic and English. She shows it to Omar, who recommends she takes it with her to Amal, whom he is certain she, will decode it for her.

Driven by her curiosity, Isabel, an American, travels to Egypt in an attempt to understand and learn more about her ancestors. Amal's encounter with Isabel in Cairo involves receiving a trunk that Isabel brings with her to find out that it contains Anna's diaries and letters which recount the fascinating details of her personal and political histories during her stay in Egypt. Amal arranges these diaries together with respect to the chronological order and she starts developing a warm empathetic relationship with Anna across time and space. Both Amal and Isabel explore Anna's story and through this they establish constant link between the past and the present. Amal and Anna are the main voices in the novel. Amal represents modern 'independent' Egypt, while Anna, through her letters and diaries, which constitute personal and political history on their own, represents the English coloniser as well as colonised Egypt.

As a post-colonial female writer Ahdaf Soueif writes the *Map of Love*, as a masterpiece novel that unravels Western colonialism with regard to the growing sense of the Egyptian national feelings and resistance to the British as well as American colonizing policies in two different eras. Soueif also reveals the complexity of cultures and politics of the late nineteenth century and the late of the twentieth century. Most of the characters employed in the novel are historic figures from the late nineteenth and the first decade of the twentieth century, reflecting on their life experiences under British colonialism as well as their resistance to the Western colonial ideology. To give more credibility and authenticity to the events and themes of the novel in the eyes of Western readership, Soueif intentionally employs Anna, as a British woman character to bear witness to the barbarism and ignorance of the colonial power of the real being of the Eastern people and Egyptians in particular. To this end, Anna, occupying a neutral position, is endowed with the task of featuring and reporting the realities of Egyptians as she witnesses them and not as she has heard about them long time ago. In doing so, Soueif does not seek somewhat a confrontational attitude towards the West, but she is rather concerned with bridging the gap between the West and the East through on-going peaceful dialogues and encounters.

Before proceeding into the in-depth study and analysis of the novel, it is very important to state that the *Map of Love* has received a very considerable attention and much criticism among many scholars and researchers in the field of postcolonial literature since its first publication in 1999. I have found, however, that very little attention has been given to postcolonial and transnational feminist perspectives in informing and approaching the work of Ahdaf Soueif. In fact, a number of critics and reviewers have focussed mainly on the cross-cultural encounters together with linguistic and cultural hybridity. To begin with, Catherine Wynne alleges that The *Map of Love* is a novel “that attempts to explore the limits of the

common ground, the Mezzaterra, through ‘focus[ing] on [a] hybrid family:’¹She further argues that while the novel unveils ‘the heterogeneity and complexity of intercultural engagement, [. . . it] reveals the common ground as partial, fleeting and ultimately as illusory’². Likewise, Joseph Massad avers that “Soueif’s writing investigates the possibilities of cultural dialogue as well as the politics of desire, both within and outside this dialogue”³. “Central to her investigations, he adds, is the encounter of East and West, of Arabic and English, and of men and women in an intercultural context”⁴. On the other hand, the use of hybrid language in the novel has also received relatively much concern among researchers. In their article entitled “Code Switching in Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*”, Mohammed Albakry and Patsy Hunter Hancock explore that code switching is employed as a “literary device’ and as ‘foreignizing strategy’ in *The Map of Love* that ‘could potentially function as a discourse of resistance within/to the dominant Anglo-American language and culture.’⁵

In fact, Soueif’s main concern is not to denounce directly Western colonialism as most Arab women diaspora writers do, but rather she is first and foremost willing to bring the two cultures together through transnational encounters between the East and the West. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and transnational feminism paradigms, this chapter examines the counter-active discourse and transnational strategy Soueif deploys to re-write Egyptian history and particularly women’s agency with regard to their endeavour to redress the misconceived assumptions held by both Western orientalist and Western feminism in particular. Accordingly, this chapter will be divided into sections. The first section will discuss trans-culturalism as a practicable substitute that resists and creates a bridge between

¹ Catherine Wynne, “Navigating the Mezzaterra: Home, Harem and the Hybrid Family in Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*”, *Critical Survey*, 18 (2006), p. 59.

² *Ibid.*, p.65.

³ Joseph Massad, “The Politics of Desire in the Writing of Ahdaf Soueif,” *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 28 (1999), p. 74.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 75.

⁵ Mohammed Albakry and Patsy Hunter Hancock, “Code Switching in Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*,” *Language and Literature*, 17 (2008), pp. 231.

geographical boundaries, cultures, time and space through reconciliatory discourse and love affairs. The second section will further look at the novelist's conscious decision of deploying Western women, Anna and Isabel to negate misconceptions of Arab/Islamic traditions in Egypt particularly through foregrounding the concepts of the *Harem* as well as the veil in the Egyptian society.

b. Anna and Amal: the Intermediaries of Cross-cultural Dialogue

After a close critical reading of the novel under study, one can easily come up with the assumption that, regarding the interweaving of the past and the present narratives and events which shape the largest parts of the novel, Soueif's endeavour is not only limited to explore the brutality and the fallacies of both the British colonial power in the past and the American foreign policies in the present towards the colonized natives, but she further seeks throughout the novel to foreground transcultural and cross-class dialogue as a strategy to negotiate cultural differences. To this end, Soueif is much interested in exploring travel writings conducted by white English women as she sees more authenticity and objectivity in their attitudes towards the colonized along with their curiosity to learn other's cultures and to acknowledge their particularities without preconceived stereotypical images. For the purpose of reconciliation, Soueif employs Anna as a permissive lady traveller who is entrusted with introducing the Western reader to Egyptian cultural aspects and life styles outside colonial prejudices.

Accordingly, this section will, as I have mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, draw on postcolonial feminist and transcultural feminism perspectives to foreground the significance of transcultural and trans-class constant dialogues to bring together the two cultures regardless of their disparities. Put differently, this section will focus on the roles both protagonists Anna and her sister-in-law Layla are entrusted with to build a bridge

through reconciliatory attitudes between the West and the East worlds. Equally important, this section will argue that the novel develops a cross-cultural as well as a transnational identification to bring two different cultures to coexist harmoniously through the same characters Anna and Layla.

It is widely alleged that most Arab and Third World women -if not all- suffered from double oppressions with regard to their gender basis. Not only were they politically oppressed by the colonizers through the process of colonization, but they were also oppressed by patriarchal structures within their own cultures. Under these existing lived circumstances, women were somehow bound to enjoy a common sisterhood that knows no boundaries with regard to their prevailing subordination and oppression .To this end, the matter of solidarity and consolidation among women has become an imperative to put an end to these oppressions. Virginia Woolf, points out in this respect that “as a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.”¹

Anna’s story is not only a tale of an English widow who sets foot in Egypt in the late nineteenth century and falls in love and marries a member of an upper class and nationalist man . It is also about her friendship with Layla, her sister in law, who helps her learn more about Egyptian cultural practices, the fact of which makes her reveal many constructed fallacies about the life of Arab women at that time. Anna is first and foremost employed to correct several misconceptions that orientalist have endeavoured to construct about Arab women’s lives. As Lindsey Moore puts it, “*The Map of Love* deploys elements of the romance genre as a lure into revisionist historiography.”² In this sense, Soueif’s book echoes Sara Mill’s assumption that the writings of female travellers do not fit neatly into an orientalist

¹ Quoted in Jane Marcus,ed , *Three Guineas* (NewYork: Harcourt, Inc , 2006), p. 129.

² Lindsey Moore, *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), p146.

framework and often ‘constitute an undermining voice’ within the colonial discourse¹. Mills highlights the uneasy and somewhat contradictory position Western female travellers have occupied in relation to colonial discourse:

Dominant discourse is problematic because of its conflict with the discourses of ‘femininity’, which were operating on them in equal, and sometimes stronger, measure. Because of these discursive pressures, their work exhibits contradictory elements which may act as a critique of some of the components of other colonial writings.²

Being highly influenced by her father-in-law's ideas about the Empire, Anna was receptive to liberal ideas of anti-colonial nationalism. Her friendship with Layla and her marriage to Sharif are two of the main cultural dialogues in the novel. Through Anna's character, the narrative negotiates the problem of difference across the boundaries of cultures. This is evident in Anna's attention to clothes and different cultural practices in Egypt.

In fact, there are countless instances in the novel that reflect on Anna's strong determination to correct the British colonisation's brutality and atrocity towards the colonised through her objectivity and her reconciliatory attitudes. From the outset of the novel, Anna seems to be very critical as she daringly questions the real motives behind British colonial presence in Sudan. While conferring with her father in law, Sir Charales, about her worry of her husband's trauma which resulted from his participation in War on Sudan, she says: “I told him, though. I told him this was not an honest war. This was a war dreamed up by politicians, a war to please that widow so taken with her cockney Empire- Ah What's the use?”.³

¹ Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 91.

² *Ibid.*, p.91.

³ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), p.30.

Anna is here alert that launching a war on Sudan is highly inspired by real colonial and political implications par excellence rather than by the ‘civilizing mission’ as the British colonial system has constantly alleged. Anna’s growing resentment against her country’s colonial policy is perpetuated upon her husband’s tragic death which arises from his trauma which he has been undergoing since his return from the war. She vehemently grieves the death of her husband when she says “If I could believe that he died for a noble cause. If I could believe that he died contented.”¹

After her first husband’s death (Edward), Anna decides to pay a visit to Egypt and her move is driven by two reasons. The first reason is to curiously know about the cause of her husband’s death in the desert given that Sudan was a part of Egyptian land during the late of the ninetieth as well as the beginning of the twentieth century. The second motivation is to learn and discover the exotic life and cultures of the Egyptians which she has seen in one of the British orientalist’s paintings. Put differently, the widow Anna was attracted by Fredrick Lewis’ oriental paintings, and therefore she gets intrigued to explore the East in general and Egypt in particular since the latter is under her country’s colonial control. Though it seems that her curiosity is based on an orientalist background, she critically questions the existence of the exotic world Lewis depicts. Anna says:

I walked to the Museum and I went to see the paintings. I cannot pretend to a wholly untroubled mind—nor would it be proper now to have one—but I was able once more, to take pleasure in the wondrous colours, the tranquillity, the contentment with which they are infused. And I wondered, as I had wondered before, is that a world which truly exists?²

¹ Ibid., p.41.

² Ibid., p.46.

The above quotation speaks volumes as it articulates Anna's sense of scepticism which does oppose the British orientalist ideology that is based on essentializing facts and identities of the colonized subjects. In so doing, Anna is viewed as a very critical and prudent person in the sense that she does not passively absorb or trust constructed truths until she has enough empirical proves.

In this regard, As Valassopoulos argues: "Anna's reasons for travelling to Egypt [are] both political and aesthetic' as she resolves to understand the reasons for her husband's death and to visit the romantic images of the East as depicted by Fredrick Lewis."¹ Anna's desire to visit Egypt, Valassopoulos explains, "has its roots in an image of orientalist art."² She further demystifies that "although it is the idea of the harem as depicted by Lewis' painting that motivates Anna to go on her journey to Egypt, 'it may be possible to escape the imperialist ideology though it may not be possible to ever negate the intermediary stage of being an orientalist."³

Similarly, the narrative reveals another significant instance which marks Anna's prudent and neutral attitudes towards the colonized natives. This occurs when she comes to bear witness that the place she is allured to visit is completely different from and even contradicting the images she has previously had in her mind. Upon her arrival to Alexandria, she writes to her father in law, Sir Charles:

Alexandria seems, on the face of it, a rather jolly place and today I ventured out for a short walk on my own along the seafront, within sight of the pension .I could see no trace of your famous bombardment and –receiving nothing but smiles and kind looks from the Natives and doffed boaters from Europeans-was hard to put to imagine

¹ Anastasia Valassopoulos, "Fictionalising Post-colonial Theory: the Creative Native Informant?", *Critical Survey*, 16 (2004), p.34.

² *Ibid.*, p.35.

³ *Ibid.*

scenes of fanatical wickedness. But I am yet new to this place and know nothing of it save what can be seen by the most superficial eye.¹

In the light of this quotation, Soueif makes Anna through her real interaction with natives as a core figure in redressing the distorted truths and stereotypical images the orientalist discourse has constructed before and after the colonial era. As discussed previously in the section devoted to the concept of orientalism, the East has been constantly misrepresented and distorted by the West's hegemony which has ideologically constructed the East to be seen, to use Edward Said's phrase as "being irrational, backward, despotic, inferior, depraved, aberrant and feminine sexually."² Anna has come, however, to negate these negative images and stereotypes assumed by the West and prove them wrong through the first-hand experiences and observations she has made upon her arrival to Egypt and with the daily interaction with the Egyptians.

It is very important to note that Anna's first experience and encounter with the Egyptians is marked by an ironic scene with respect to the orientalist signs and aspects this experience portrays. After being abducted in disguised male clothes and being brought to Sharif Basha's residence by two members of anti-colonial Egyptian activists who mistake her for a youthful Englishman, Anna notes in her journal describing the act of abduction:

Eventually one, the slightly older and more composed of the two, delivered an address to me in perfect French in which he assured me they were neither robbers nor brigands, that their actions were prompted by political motives, and that my person, possessions and horses were safe and would be returned to me as soon as their demands were met by the Egyptian Government.³

¹ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*, p.61.

² Alexander L. Macfie, *Orientalism* (London: Longman, 2002), p.8.

³ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*, p.106.

This quotation is very telling as it does reinforce the fallacies and misrepresentations the West has constructed about the East. Though Anna is trapped as a Westerner in the local's hands, she is assured her safety as well as her possessions which refute the cruelty and brutality of the Easterners. Most importantly, this passage is of a great significance as it marks a turning point in Anna's life. It invites us to learn ironically that Anna is introduced to forge a strong cross-cultural tie with natives, namely with Layla and her brother Sharif Basha after being taken to Sharif Al Basha's house. In their first encounter there, Anna and Layla are doomed to conduct their first dialogue in French which is very significant indeed.

We gazed at one another, and then I said '*Vous parlez Francais?*' and her face was lit up a wide smile of relief. *Oui, oui*, she said eagerly. *Et vous ausi, madame?*' She tilted her head slightly to one side, waiting for my answer.¹

French is presented here to use Moore Lindsey words "as a third language that short-circuits the political power imbalance between English and Egyptian characters."² In brief, the act of using the French language as a means of communication between Anna and Layla speaks volumes in the sense that it does not only reinforce Anna's neutral position as a Westerner white woman, but also suggests her growing respect and understanding of the natives whom she has come to explore. In other words, Soueif makes Anna gain access to respect and sympathy of both Layla and the readership respectively as she is speaking a neutral language that does not imply British dominant culture along with the fact that she is doing her best to exchange views with a woman from a colonized country.

In another similar scene, Anna also shows a wise attitude in her conversation with Layla's brother, Sharif, who becomes later her husband. Upon their first encounter, they tend to communicate in French as they both can speak it well. They have an apparent consensus

¹ Ibid., p.135.

² Lindsey Moore, *Arab, Muslim, Woman*, p.151.

that French is a common ground and a language of harmonization; so their conversations are conducted in French as well. Sharif and Anna feel a mutual feeling of otherness with the use of French in their communication. In commenting on the significance of the use of French language as a means of communication, Sharif states that “it makes foreigners of us both. It is good that I should have to come some way to meet you.”¹ Similarly, Anna avers that “there is a problem of language. I have conducted my friendship in French, but I am now resolved to really learn Arabic.”² Indeed, the idea of making too much effort to learn Arabic suggests how far she is open-minded and ready to understand and communicate with Sharif in particular and people around her in general.

Moreover, the significance of the employment of the French language lies in the implication that the two languages are meant to be equal away from the power relation paradigms. That is to say, Soueif’s aim through this is to make the cross-cultural dialogue non-hegemonic. This feminist technique is meant to open corridors of dialogues in the current situation of unequal power relations. Soueif places Lady Anna in the *Mezzaterra*, a meeting point for diverse cultures and traditions that offers “at once a distillation, an enrichment of each thing, each idea.”³ This encounter is very significant and fruitful for both Anna and Layla in the sense that it strengthens their strong bond though they belong to different cultures.

Layla, as we have learnt in the novel, has become Anna’s mentor to Arab culture and life. Layla, to use Shao-Pin Luo’s words “guides’ Anna ‘towards compassion and understanding of Egyptian life, Egyptian women and Egyptian culture.”⁴ Layla becomes a

¹ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*, p.157.

² *Ibid.*, p.160.

³ Ahdaf Soueif, *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground* (New York: Anchor Books, 2004), p. 8.

⁴ Shao-Pin Luo, “Rewriting Travel: Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love* and Bharati Mukherjee’s *The Holder of the World*”, *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature*, 38 (2003), p. 92.

central figure in the historical narrative the way her granddaughter, Amal, stars as the protagonist of the contemporary tale: both of them have steadfast roots in the Arabic language and Islamic traditions on the one hand, and they enjoy, on the other hand, a Western education that helps them bridge the gaps between the different cultures.

As discussed before, female travel writings, according to Sara Mills, have been trivialized and seen inappropriate for the Western colonial power with regard to that fact they lack the necessary tenets on which the orientalist discourse is based. The present narrative, however, articulates and strengthens women's presence through Anna's voice as to re-write, analyse, and reconstruct personal as well as historical accounts from the lens of feminist perspectives, thereby negating all false accounts of Egypt's inferiority that has been written. It is fair to note here that Soueif tends to give Anna's accounts more credibility with regard to her British origin. In brief, Anna supplements white's men's accounts with what he lacks. As a woman, she provides him with information to the missed and invisible part of the culture he has not mentioned. The white woman's account is supposedly narrated through close and daily observations while his is mostly written from his imagination and myths. This attitude is further reflected when Anna writes another letter to her father in law, Sir Charles to give accounts of what she has witnessed so far in Cairo. Here, she says:

It is now a week that we have been in Grand Cairo and I have met with the greatest consideration and kindness from everybody here have been to dinner at the Residency, where Nina Baring has kept house for her uncle these two years.....I find myself seeing things here through your eyes, imagining that I know what you would think of them.¹

¹ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*, p.66.

As seen in this quotation, Anna is correcting the orientalist discourse which has mostly othered and associated the colonized or the non-Western 'other' in broad term as being 'uncivilized', brutal, and barbaric people. Anna is witnessing contradictory and opposing truths about the natives from whom she has received heartfelt welcoming and kindness.

It is also important to state that Anna narrates the past outside the colonial spectrum and aligns herself with anti-colonial nationalist movement in Egypt. Soueif gives Anna's activities and credibility on behalf of the nationalist cause with frequent references to pro-Egyptian figures such as Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (author of the *Secret History of the English Occupation of Egypt* and a campaigner on behalf of Urabi and his fellow revolutionaries). She is portrayed as a prudent woman who does not deny her British self, and who is also aware of the Egyptian identity. She asks her British friends to stop being ignorant about a society that exists in a land they are occupying. She says:

I do believe I am sensible - only I am sensible too of the wrong being done here and that there is a living world which people are refusing to see or even hear about. I know that this sensibility is born of my affection for my new friends but it is nonetheless trustworthy for that.¹

Anna further gains much more credibility as she remains neutral in the face of the conflict between the British Empire and the Egyptian's cause until she attains enough knowledge of both sides through dealing closely with the natives. This is highly elaborated on through her linguistic reference to the Egyptians in the beginning of the novel as 'natives' or 'Arabs' whom she has secluded herself from, but yet very eager to mix with and explore. Even during her abduction, she is unexpectedly very calm and understanding which reveals that the natives are not brutal as it is circulated by Western colonial agenda. However, Anna

¹ Ibid., p.240.

shifts later to labelling them as ‘my friends’ after she has explored the good nature of the natives, with whom she has established close ties in the face of many challenges especially the brutality and atrocity of the colonizers whom she has denounced.

Apparently, Anna does maintain constant critical perspectives to the British colonial power and its concomitant hypocrisy after she gets closer to the Egyptians and gains enough knowledge about their culture and life in broad sense. Based on her own personal experiences with the locals, she is reproaching the bias and follies of her country towards the ‘Other’. Anna, as we have learnt throughout the story, keeps constantly sending personal accounts and letters to her father in law, Sir Charles hoping to reveal to the Western reader all these contradictions and misdeeds of the British Empire to the natives. In one of her letters, she says after witnessing the unjust colonial policies in different sectors of the Egyptian society:

Mrs Butcher –neat as a new pin–suggested that while material progress was, naturally, to be commended, our administration could be reproached for having ignored the spiritual life of the nation we govern. This was a signal for Mr Willcocks, who deplored how little was being done for education and said he did not believe we intended to leave Egypt when we had finished reforming her- or we would be doing more to educate the people that they might be able to govern themselves.¹

In these lines on the letter sent to Sir Charles, Anna reproaches, through the voice of Mrs Butcher, an agent at British Agency and Amal’s chaperone, the British malevolent attitudes reflected in their regressive policies towards the education field and the spiritual life of the Egyptians. Given that education lies at the heart of the progress of any nation, British policies, however, diminish and turn a blind eye, as the above passage reveals, to this important sector

¹ Ibid., p.99.

which implies that the colonizers are discursively resolved to maintain power and knowledge through denying the locals from their right of education.

More importantly, Anna comes to find out that the natives are not ‘infants’ and are not ‘degraded’ as seen in the eyes of the colonizers, but rather educated and intellectuals and their country is not different from any other, except for their cultural practices such as their language along with the way they are dressed which is something very natural with regard to distinctively cultural differences of the countries worldwide. With the Egyptians, she learns that what all Egyptians are after is what all people of any nation are supposed to have: freedom and democracy. She says: “And so I know now that what the ‘talking classes’ are demanding is not only an end to the British Occupation but that the country should be governed - like ours - by means of an elected Parliament and a Constitution.”¹

This reveals that though Anna identifies with her own British people by saying ‘like ours’, she is apparently against colonial policies which oppress and suppress the natives rights of freedom and democracy. Anna rather affirms that other nations do have the right to exist and the British oppressors should acknowledge this right regardless of their own particularities of culture and religion as their demands are legitimate as much as they are for her country.

Soueif relentlessly endeavours to construct a bridge between the white and the native one woman or rather between the West and the East. To this end, she seeks to establish this on-going connection not only through Anna’s strong friendship with Layla, but also through her growing sense of challenge reflected in her daring decision to get married with Sharif Al Basha in the face of its concomitant outcomes. By this marriage, she is alert that she is doing something against her country’s will because it is inherently seen as an act of betrayal in the

¹ Ibid., p.159.

eyes of the British colonizers. On his part, Sharif Al Basha seems to be aware of how challenging this decision is with regard to its implications and thereby saying: “our ways are so different. Let's be patient with one another.”¹

In brief, to make their love flourish and succeed, they need strong determination to face the challenges and restrictions imposed upon them by their societies. Soueif also seeks to forge this transcultural connection with regard to Anna's tie with Layla. Firstly, Anna and Layla become friends and later sisters-in-law having scores of things in common. More significantly, Layla becomes Anna's mentor charged with opening her eyes to closed Egyptian society so that she can understand its people as well as its culture.

After Anna enacts her marriage with Sharif Al Basha, she has become part of Al Baroudi's family and thereby being closer and having more access to observe and witness the realities of the Egyptians from inside. In so doing, Anna is accessed to gain more knowledge about the Egyptian life and their cultural practices especially the harem and the veil which are seen at the heart of the colonial discursive pretexts.

Historically speaking, it is presumably thought that the harem and the veil have always been overtly a fertile ground for scores of orientalist paintings and travel writing accounts on the Orientals ranging from the medieval ages to the twentieth century onward. The recorded paintings, the travels accounts, and in a broad sense, most orientalist literary and artistic productions on the Orient in general and the Arabs in particular are alleged to encompass a great deal of folly descriptions and fallacies through their misrepresentations of the oriental Muslims and especially Arab Muslim women. They are depicted as submissive and oppressed veiled women captured within the harem quarters as captives with no freedom and no agency. They are even portrayed as backward women and sex objects to do nothing, but to render

¹ Ibid., p.353.

sexual services to their male masters and to be charged with the household duties. In his book, *Travels in Egypt and the Holy Land*, Wilson argues:

Wives in this corner of the globe appear to be in a complete state of captivity .they are slaves to their husbands ,and allowed to see no other persons at home than their families or relations ,and when they do appear in the streets ,their faces are completely veiled .¹

It is worth noting that the Westerners have also articulated seemingly ambivalent sentiments towards these above mentioned cultural practices. On one hand, the veil and the harem are symbols of oppression, and on the other hand, they are assumed as exotic and the source of curiosity. In this context, Mabro notes,

For centuries Europe has been both fascinated and repelled by the veil and the harem, symbols which, on the one hand, have prevented the observer from seeing and communicating with women and produced feelings of frustration and aggressive behaviour. On the other hand, they have provided men with a fantasy and dangled the promise of exotic and erotic experiences with the 'beauty behind the veil' and the 'light of the harem. ' Female observers... have been as ambiguous, as hostile and as Eurocentric as men in this respect, if for different reasons.²

Furthermore, the harem and the veil have not only been a targeted concern of male orientalist literary and cultural production, but they have also been at the core of the interest of many Western feminist discourses which presumably maintain a condescending tone on the subjects of the harem as well as the veil. To put it differently, for many Western feminist

¹ Quoted in Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil: Challenging Historical and Modern Stereotypes* (London: Billdes Limited ,Guilford and King's Lynn, 2003), p.19.

² Judy Mabro, ed., *Veiled Half Truths: Western Travellers' Perceptions of Middle Eastern Women* (London: I.B.TAURIS, 1991), p.2

writers, the harem and the veil are seen as signifiers of oppression and repression of the Arab Muslim women. The veil in their eyes is seen as the extension of the walls of the Harem when a woman is outside. For example, in Badran's introduction to Huda Shaarawi's autobiography, she postulates that "when the women went out they veiled their faces thus taking their seclusion with them".¹

Based on this, it is safe to argue that the West has always been fascinated, but yet perplexed with these two cultural practices. This leads them to draw inaccurate conclusion based more on their orientalist fantasy that the veil and harem are signs of women's degradation and oppression and, therefore, it is their duty, they assume, to 'liberate' and 'modernise' the uncivilized and the captives veiled women from their supposedly oppressive cultural paradigms.

The narrative, however, counteracts this discourse and explains and reinterprets the politics, the history and the traditions that caused much confusion across the centuries. Put differently, Soueif intelligently employs Anna as a white British female character who uses her position and access to the harem world to redress these negative misconceptions and stereotypical images about the Egyptian society. Anna reinterprets constructed Western fantasies and fallacies in an attempt to correct the image of the Arab woman and to give it a new dimension from the Western woman perspectives. Through Anna's character, the narrative brings attention to clothes and different virtues in the Egyptian culture in an attempt to cross boundaries and achieve reconciliation. Through her diaries and letters, Anna reveals her personal experience with the veil and the harem far from prejudice and discrimination.

As we proceed in analysing the novel, we come across frequent moments which imply Anna's tolerant attitude and her incredible ability of understanding the implications of the

¹ Badran Margot, "Preface, Introduction, and Epilogue" to *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist* by Huda Shaarawi, trans. Badran, Margot (New York: The Feminist Press. 1987), p.7.

particularities of Egyptian cultural practises. Put differently, Anna advocates the native's rights to practice their traditions freely without restrictions and shows empathy and understanding towards their values. Anna's acknowledgment and promotion of the rights of the locals is summarized in the following passage taken from one of her letters to Sir Charles. She says:

I chose my violet silk, which Emily did not think was grand enough and I own it probably was not, but as I knew that Moslem notables were to be present I thought it would provide me with adequate covering and would not cause offence. We are, after all, in their country.¹

Anna acknowledges that Egypt belongs to the Egyptians and that foreigners should be sensitive towards local traditions. Another far-reaching instance which reveals Anna's understanding of the particularities of the locals is when she happens to experience wearing the veil and examine its personal and social dimension. She expresses this on many occasions. She covers her face when she travels in disguise. She also wears it on other occasions while she is married to Sharif out of respect to him and his culture. In doing so, Anna shows seemingly great comfort in wearing it and considers it a privilege as one 'can see without being seen'. Here she asserts:

Still, it is a most liberating thing, this veil. While I was wearing it, I could look wherever I wanted and nobody could look back at me. Nobody could find out who I was. I was one of many black-clad harem in the station and on the train and could have traded places with several of them and no one been the wiser.²

In the light of this, Anna refutes the assumption that the veil is seen as a sign of slavery and women's degradation. On the contrary, she indulges more freedom and has more advantages

¹ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*, p.94.

² *Ibid.*, p.194.

in the sense that she can exclusively see everyone and everything without being seen. Equally important, Anna, through her above experience, transforms the veil from its traditional meaning into a concept of freedom. She turns its significance of a symbol of oppression to a sign of liberation.

In addition to the empowerment and liberation, the veil is further represented as an act of subversion and deconstruction of the orientalist discourse. Anna rebels as she enjoys wearing the veil and realises the freedom it gives to women trampling on the misconceptions attached to it. This act challenges orientalist scholarship that associates the veil with negative connotations. More importantly, Anna undergoes change in terms of her physical look as well as of her personality. She is allowed, upon this veil, to experience the culture from the Egyptian perspectives. Hence, Anna, being already the inferior gender in her British patriarchal system, comes to experience this inferiority from an Egyptian context. She notes:

But the oddest thing of all was that I suddenly saw them [her British friends] as bright, exotic creatures, walking in a kind of magical space, oblivious to all around them; at ease, chattering to each other as though they were out for a stroll in the park, while the people, pushed aside, watched and waited for them to pass. There was another man with them ...I surmise it must be Mr Wilfrid Blunt...I had been wishing to meet him these five months and now he walked past me - and I was invisible.¹

As mentioned before, the harem is as much significant as the veil in the sense that it has been at the heart of many of the orientalist accounts and their artistic production during the nineteenth as well as the twentieth centuries. It has been the issue whereby Westerners or rather the colonizers were intrigued and bewitched since they were not accessed to this closed harem world and thereby fantasizing and imagining this world about which they have no

¹ Ibid., pp.194-195.

accurate or correct knowledge. The word 'harem' is, in fact, a very broad topic to cover within one single essay or even one section. It could, I would use Katherine phrase, "be a whole book itself."¹ However, I will provide the most common held assumptions about the term with regard to the orientalist representations.

Generally speaking, the term harem allegedly refers to the segregated part of the house to which strange men do not have access. It is the place where female relatives of a man share much of their time together with their children, enabling them to have easy access to other women in their community. The Western understanding of it, however, suggests misconceptions in the sense that they associate it with negative images such slavery, oppression, and invisibility. In her definition, Katherine argues:

The European notion of the harem was already an idea predicated on the ages-old orientalist fantasy of the exotic Middle East. A harem is simply the women's quarters in a house, or a man's wives, but paintings of women in a harem, for example, depicted scores of women lying about just waiting for their male master's sexual indulgence.²

The harem is, therefore, in the Western eyes a place, where exotic and sensual women are gathered together waiting for their master to come and choose one of them to fulfil his sexual desires. Many travellers have written about the conditions they saw in the harem describing women as wicked, degraded and uneducated, and therefore, bad mothers who brought up degenerated children.

Soueif once again entrusts her character Anna with the task of dismantling these images attached to the harem through her close established connections with a considerable number of Egyptian women with whom she can see the life and experiences from inside the Egyptian

¹ Quoted in Katherine Bullock, *Rethinking Muslim Women and the Veil*, p.19.

² Ibid., p.20.

society. As a woman, she is eager to visit Egypt and understand the culture by herself without any interference or help from anyone of her British friends. She is rather engrossed to form her own independent opinion and ,therefore , to decide if the locals are really 'degraded' and 'uncivilised' like she is informed by her friends. Anna says, "I would have remained within the world I knew. I would have seen things through my companions' eyes, and my mind would have been too occupied in resisting their impressions to establish its own."¹As discussed before, Layla has been the key to open Anaa's eyes to many Egyptian traditions and cultural practices. With the help of Layla, Anaa is allowed to enter to the closed world of harem which she is intrigued to explore. Upon her experience there, Anna comments:

I do assure you dear Sir Charles that you would find these ladies congenial. They uphold the idea that a woman's first duty is to her family, merely arguing that she can perform this duty better if she is better educated .They also write articles arguing against the enforced seclusion of women and point out that women of the fellah class have always worked side by side with their menfolk and no harm has come society as a result. Madame Fawwaz has published a book which is a collection of short biographies of ladies of note- apparently our own Queens Elizabeth and Victorian are among them.²

Her texts reveal that the harem system does not necessarily mean a non-monogamous system. It also does not refer to uneducated women who are degraded and oppressed. They are, in fact, educated women who fight for the liberation of their nation and uphold ideas about the emancipation of the Egyptian woman as the passage demonstrates. Anna's honest and accurate description and interaction with Egyptian women also demonstrates that the harem is not a place of licentiousness and sexual indulgences as her friends have mentioned

¹ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*, p.212.

² Ibid., p.237.

before coming to Egypt, but a secluded space where socially and politically active women discuss political and cultural matters in a safe and quiet environment. In other words, If Anna's first-hand experience of wearing the veil helps her view it as an empowering rather than an oppressive token that allows Muslim women to move freely outdoors, then her first-hand experience of residing in and visiting the harem is no less beneficial since Anna learns, and explains to her English friends, how the harem is a relaxed indoor space that allows women to socialize and run their businesses from a quiet quarter in the house.

To conclude, Soueif, through Anna normalises and humanises the harem system. Anna becomes a mediator between the Egyptian and British cultures. She helps the Egyptian nationalists and supports the education of women. She reveals her experience as part of the harem and challenges claims that women are oppressed in such a social system. Not only does she support the Egyptians, but she reveals that she is ashamed of her own country and its prejudices against the locals.

c. Isabel and Amal: Agents of Reconciliation

As we have argued in the previous section, Anna has played a pivotal role in achieving mutual understanding between two worlds of different backgrounds and thereby getting them closer and bridged however much challenging it is for her. Equally important, she has been depicted as a catalyst for better change with regard to the great deal of understanding and agency she has exhibited to get the East and the West closer.

Akin to Anna's willingness and tendency to acknowledge and respect the particularities of the Egyptians, this attitude is echoed over a hundred years later by her great granddaughter Isabel and Layla's great granddaughter Amal, who both form the cornerstone of the second story of *the Map of Love*. It senses that as if 'the history is repeating itself' when it comes to discuss Isabel's relationship to Amal in the present time. As mentioned before, Isabel gives a

visit to Egypt after she has met Omar in the United States and falls in love with him. Upon her arrival to Egypt, she is welcomed and hosted by Omar's sister Amal, who has just returned back from England to stay in her homeland. Like Layla, her great grandmother's relationship with Anna, Amal develops a strong and close relationship with Isabel, who in turn shows a great love and respect to the native cultures and their life. It is no surprising then that Amal undertakes the task of introducing Isabel to the Egyptian way of life almost the same way as Layla has done before with Anna. There are a range of incidents that address not only Isabel's growing understanding and respect towards the local culture and its people, but also the welcoming and reconciliatory attitudes Amal and other members of the Egyptians show towards foreigners. Accordingly, this section will argue how both Isabel and Amal have been charged with the same task their great grandmothers had done to establish on-going negotiations and connections between the colonizer and the colonized or the West and the East in a broad sense.

Indeed, Soueif represents Isabel, the American journalist in the second story which takes place in the end of the twentieth century as an icon for change for better understanding between two cultures, the role of which Anna has already accomplished in the first story. A close reading of the novel suggests a number of incidents in the novel that highlight Isabel's struggles and abundant efforts, with the help of her cousin Amal, to cross borders and establish transcultural dialogue based on mutual understanding of both sides more precisely between the West and the East.

The first scene is marked when Isabel is witnessed making a great effort to speak Arabic upon her first encounter with Tahiyya, a male's doorman's wife at Amal's residence. "Hallo",

Tahiyya says loudly in English, straightening up and smiling, raising her hand to her head, miming a greeting in case Isabel does not understand. ‘Hello’ says Isabel. *Izzay el-sehha?*”¹.

As suggested in the above scene, both Tahiyya and Isabel show their readiness and pleasure to speak each other’s mother tongue languages though neither of whom masters it. On Tahiyya’s part, she is the first to instigate the dialogue using the English greetings, ‘Hallo’ with Isabel though her knowledge about English is apparently limited to some few notions as we have learnt in the novel. Isabel replies in turn with the Egyptian dialect greetings, ‘*Izzay el-sehha?*’ which can be literally translated into English as: ‘ how are you?’. This suggests to what extent they both have much consideration for each other far away from condescending tone .

SouEIF, on the other hand, entrusts Amal with the task of teaching and opening Isabel’s eyes to Egyptian culture as a way of bridging the gap between the West and the East which in turn echoes Anna’s experience with Layla over a hundred year ago. Without any hesitancy, Amal offers to teach Isabel some basics of standard Arabic language so that she can better understand the Egyptian society.

I’ve learned the Alphabet and they’re giving me lists of words’, she says, ‘but’ ‘But?’ ‘I haven’t got a handle on it. How it works.’ Listen’, I say, ‘you know the alphabet and you’ve got a dictionary .Everything stems from a root. And the root is mostly made up of three consonants-or two. And then the word takes different forms ‘Take the root q-l-b,qalb. You see, you can read this?’ ‘Yes’.²

This act of perseverance to learn standard Arabic on the part of Isabel informs the reader that Isabel does appreciate and respect other cultures for which she comes to explore. It

¹ Ibid., p.78.

² Ibid., pp.81-82.

also demonstrates that Isabel is eager to be accessed to the Egyptian cultural life through the act of learning their language.

Another important event which reveals Isabel's reconciliatory attitudes and readiness to understand and respect the particularity of Arab culture takes place in her journey with Amal to her small town Tawasi. On their way, Amal notices that Isabel is mostly dressed "with long skirt, the loose, long-sleeved top, the scarf tied casually over the hair."¹ Hence, Amal asks:

What is all this? A new image?Isabel shrugged. She had worked it out for herself. She had seen the groups of tourists in the old city, in the Bazaar, their naked flesh lobster like in the heat, the locals either staring or averting their eyes as they passed by.²

Here Isabel is highly conscious and shows a great deal of understanding about the implication of the restrictions of the clothes. In brief, she comes to realise unsurprisingly through her above stated observation that putting on suitable clothes that fit the Egyptian culture does prevent her from male's gaze. This can also be significantly read as a way to dismantle Western orientalist discourse concerning the veil and clothes in general. While the veil, as discussed in the previous section, is associated with 'degradation' and 'slavery' in the eyes of the orientalists, Isabel resists this view by showing comfort as well as the qualities of covering women's body with accordance to the Egyptian cultural norms. By doing so, she argues that she escapes men's gaze which makes women feel more at ease with their bodies.

This might be read differently as an act of disempowering women with regard to Western feminist agendas which consider the veil as a sign of seclusion and oppression. However, the argument developed in the research is partly predicated on transnational feminists and particularly on Chandra Mohanty's perceptions on the on-going dispute

¹ Ibid., p.165.

² Ibid.

between Western feminists and Third World feminists. As we have discussed in one of the sections in the first part of the thesis, Western feminists have trampled on the socioeconomic, social and cultural particularities of the Third World women, thereby failing at establishing a global feminist body based on mutual understanding however much the differences are. They also use “Third World’ women as their foil, producing as a result a new layer of colonization, and consequently, ‘rob[bing] them of their historical and political agency’¹, argues Mohanty.

She further asserts that applying the notion of women as homogeneous category to women in the ‘Third World’ “colonizes and appropriates the pluralities of the simultaneous location of different groups of women in social class and ethnic frameworks.”² Thus, Mohanty calls for “careful, historically specific generalizations responsive to complex realities.”³ In this sense, the veil is understood as a sign of the particularities of Third World women in general and Arab Muslim women in particular to be appreciated and tolerated.

Another significant incident which demonstrates Isabel’s understanding is at Tawasi, Amal’s hometown. Being at her company there, Amal introduces Isabel as her brother’s fiancée although the two are not officially engaged, here she says: “...This is my brother’s fiancée.”⁴ Isabel approves of Amal’s words because a relationship between a man and a woman out the wedlock is considered as an unacceptable act in the eyes of the locals and, therefore, it may spark resentment feelings among peasants’ women regarding their Arab-Islamic cultural upbringing. Here again, Isabel shows her flexibility to change and to adapt to the new situation she finds herself in because she has a necessary readiness and open-mindedness that make her see cultural differences beyond condescending attitudes. This incident may indicate that the more a feminist movement is sensitive to cultural nuances and

¹ Chandra T. Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2003), p. 39.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love*, p.174.

the more attentive it is to the economic and the socio-political issues that influence the lives of the people it tries to represent and interact with, the more successful this movement is.

The act of tendency to understand other's differences and particularities is further reinforced during Isabel's short-lived stay at Amal's town Tawasi. In brief, in their first encounter, Amal plays the role of the translator between Isabel and the local peasants who express their resentment feelings towards the USA policies in the region. On her part, Isabel shows a great deal of sympathy as well as empathy towards the women peasant's issues and endurences under the USA policies. The encounter becomes certainly a fruitful and mutually beneficial meeting regarding the fact that the women, with the help of Amal, begin to explain to Isabel that the USA determines and tremendously influences their lives through the direct and indirect demands from the Egyptian government. As an American journalist, Isabel seems empathetic towards their conditions and therefore she assumes she can offer some help to other women or rather the Egyptian locals through reporting their demands to the USA government in the hope to change their policies.

And since Sett Eesa [Isabel] is here with us – tell her, ya Sett Amal, tell her to tell her government to lighten its hand on us a little.' 'Everything that happens they say Amreeka wants this: they cancel the present cooperatives, Amreeka wants this.'¹

The above scene demonstrates that Isabel really undergoes a first-hand experience as she comes to witness and realize her country's paradoxical democracy towards the 'Other'. In other words, it is at Tawasi that Isabel is made to open up her eyes to her country's fake democracy and its parody through its regressive and repressive policies in the Egyptian society in particular and in the Third World in general. Ironically enough, the US government is allegedly assumed to proclaim itself as the sole international guardian of the developing

¹ Ibid., p.176.

world rights, but yet it is simultaneously found promoting repressive governments and anti-democratic regimes in the Middle East since they preserve and serve the US own interest.

Conclusion

Map of Love is a postcolonial narrative of Britain and Egypt in the nineteenth century. It is a story of trans-cultural love affairs woven into a valuable historical context. The word ‘map’ in the title suggests political boundaries of nations. By ‘love,’ the author attempts to create a world that is not charged with hate and resentment of different political and cultural entities. Love does not only mean romance here, but love of country, nation, sensual pleasures, family, friends, and love between the living and the dead. *The Map of Love* suggests a new domain of sovereignty that would include the whole world rather than divide it into two parts: East/West. More importantly, *The Map of Love* constructively contributes to current debates on feminist coalition building and demystifying First-Third World power imbalance among other issues. Through demystifying Islamic symbols such as the veil and the harem and presenting them as empowering rather than oppressive tools, the novel seems to adopt what Miriam Cooke calls Islamic feminism, ‘a contingent, contextually determined strategic self-positioning’ that seeks to ‘bridge religious and gender issues in order to create conditions in which justice and freedom may prevail.’¹

¹ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 59.

4. Negotiating Hybrid Identities in *Does my Head Look Big in This?* by Randa Abdel-fattah

a. Notes on the Novel

Randa Abdel-Fattah is another eminent writer added to a number of Arab women diasporic writers who have recently gained considerable visibility and recognition through their narratives and literature especially among western Australian readership. As I have already mentioned in this research, all these writers have been displaced from their homelands and relocated to different western countries under different circumstances. It has been argued that a few of these writers are mostly academics and scholars who decided to settle in many western countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, or the United States after completing their postgraduate studies. While other Arab women academics and writers are daughters of the first and the second waves of Arab immigrants and therefore they are seen as second generation citizens of the West rather than naturalized citizens. Suheir Hammad (U.S.A), Fadia Faqir (Britain), Mona Simpson (U.S.A), Diana AbuJaber (U.S.A), Leila Aboulela (Britain), Zeina Ghandour (Britain), Mohja Kahf (U.S.A), Monica Ali (Britain), Leila Halaby (U.S.A), Samia Serageldin (Britain), and Randa Abdel-Fattah (Australia), are the most notable Arab writers . Some were born in the host countries and others in the host countries but yet, most of whom -if not all- place the issues of identity, race, class and gender at the heart of their diasporic narratives and texts.

Arab women writers could hardly express their concerns and interests for the readers as they were made invisible and their voices went unrecognized in the western mainstream culture. Following a number of infamous and horrendous terrorist attacks, especially the 9/11

events in the USA and Bali Bombing event¹ in Indonesia and their concomitant repercussions on the lives of Muslim Arabs, several Arab women writers have become bewildered and confused as their identities have come to be more questioned and interrogated than ever since by Western media and politics. Hence, they have created a literary space and corpus whereby they could define who they are and articulate their own experiences and worries in the hope to correct and negotiate their identities in multicultural contexts and settings. With this in mind, it is fair to state that Randa Abdel-Fattah² has emerged as a prominent young adult writer with her debut novel, *Does My Head Look Big In This?* in 2005. She is a highly successful Muslim diasporic writer not only for producing eight young adult fictions, but more importantly, for demonstrating noticeable concerns for issues affecting Muslims migrants facing identity crises and acute injustice in the host lands. The emergence of Abdel-Fattah's literary works to some extent has created visibility for Muslim diasporic community in Australia. Accordingly, this chapter will study her first novel, *Does My Head Look Big in This?* with regard to post-colonial and feminist postcolonial theories. Put differently, drawing on the postcolonial theory embodied in Homi Bhabha's conceptualisation of the concept of hybridity and its manifestations, this chapter seeks to explore the complex process of shaping and forging

¹ The 2002 Bali bombings occurred on 12th, October 2002 in the tourist district of Kuta on the Indonesian island of Bali. The attack killed 202 people (including 88 Australians, 38 Indonesians, and people of more than 20 other nationalities). A further 209 people were injured, retrieved from Wikipedia on 26th, May 2018.

² Randa Abdel-Fattah, the author and lawyer, is an Australian-born Muslim–Palestinian–Egyptian, who lives in Australia. She reluctantly abandoned her hijab when she failed to get a job in the Australian labour market. She is the author of the following novels for young adults: *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (2005), *Ten Things I Hate About Me* (2006), *Where The Streets Had a Name* (2008), and *Noah's Law* (2010). *Does my head look big in this?* was awarded the Australian Book Industry Award in 2006 as the Australian Book of the Year for Older Children. It received widely and uniformly positive reviews. The book also received both national and international commendation from the newspapers such as the British newspaper, *The Times* (cited in *Weekend Australian* (23-24 September 2006, 4)), the *CourierMail* (30 August 2005, 1), the online British newspaper *The Independent* (8 May 2006). The author herself says in an interview with *The Weekend Australian* (23-24 September 2006, 4) that the book's appeal is due to 'an overwhelming thirst for alternative narratives', and adds: 'I think most intelligent people can see past the demonic and one-dimensional images of Muslims and are thirsting for an insight into the Muslim community'.

hybrid identity in liminal and third space with regard to the novel under study *Does My Head Look Big In this?*.

To this end, this chapter contains two sections: the first section will explore Amal's decision to wear the hijab and its concomitant repercussions and effects on Amal's personal and social life. More importantly, it will examine how Amal, the protagonist of the novel, though being born and raised in Australia, is painfully othered and demonized on a number of stances and levels by different Australian institutions upon her decision to wear the veil as a marker of her religious identity. The second section will explore her persevering struggles and challenges she has exposed at personal as well as social levels to resist these biased attitudes and othering process in an attempt to negotiate and forge her fluid and hybrid identity as a Muslim-Australian girl.

b. Othering Amal

In this section, I will start with giving an overall view of the novel under study and then I will go through a detailed and a rigorous analysis of the novel to examine how Amal is constantly othered, vilified and demonized by the Australian society upon her unexpected decision to assert her Muslim identity through the act of wearing the veil as a full-timer.

Does my Head Look Big in This? is Randa Abdel-fattah's debut novel written in 2006 and it tells a story of a sixteen-year-old Australian-Palestinian girl, Amal Mohamed Nasrullah Abdel-Hakim , who has decided to wear the hijab (head scarf) as a full time wearer to the MacCleans Grammar School, an elite private school in Melbourne. Abdel-Fattah's protagonist, Amal, is an only child to a doctor, Mohamed and his dentist wife, Jamila. In short, Amal's parents are both born in Bethlehem, Palestine, and immigrated to Australia to pursue up their academic studies. Given that they belong to a well-to-do family, they reside in Camberwell, a very affluent countryside in Melbourne. Apparently, Amal's parents are

depicted as devout Muslims who are strongly attached to their religion by constantly and regularly performing Islamic practices and rituals as moderate Muslims. Hence, Amal is highly influenced by her parents' adherence to the moderate Islamic teachings, but yet she still maintains very close and strong friendship with her peers of different races and religions.

It is very important to note that Abdel-Fattah portrays Amal as strong-headed and yet a typical smart teenage girl who keeps negotiating and arguing with her parents over several social and personal issues. Amal also finds great pleasure in spending her time with her best friends regardless of their different backgrounds due to her good-natured and open-minded person who tolerates other differences. She establishes strong ties with diverse categories of friends coming from different religions and races such Japanese, Jewish, and Christian friends. Abdel-Fattah mentions in one of her interview with Hazel Rochman (2007), that she had a determination to write a book that can serve as an alternative portrayal of young Muslim girls with the aim to “shock readers into realizing that teenagers, no matter what their faith or culture have common experiences; that there is more in common, than there is different; and that the differences should be respected, not feared.”¹

Amal's open-mindedness is plainly revealed through her interest and admiration for one of her schoolmates, a popular boy named Adam Keane. As a teenager, she seems to be highly attracted to her classmate, Adam who seems in turn to have a mutual admiration for her, but yet they cannot establish very strong intimate relationship as Amal refuses to kiss him due to her Islamic religious faith. Moreover, Amal is also a very studious student and, therefore, she does very well at school though she has been constantly mocked and bullied by some racist attitudes coming from some of peers and schoolmates especially from Tia Tamos upon her act of wearing the veil at school.

¹ Hazel Rochman, Review of *Does My Head Look Big in This?*, *Booklist*, November 15, 2007, interview with Randa Abdel-Fattah, p. 54.

From the very beginning of the novel, we are introduced to Amal's abrupt decision to wear the hijab at all times whenever she is in public spaces after she would wear it occasionally particularly when she would pray at mosques and/or when she was attending Hidayah school, an Islamic college where the veil is regarded as a part of the school uniform. Given that she is a daughter of a devout family, the veil is not new to Amal as her mother, Jamila already wears it as a full timer.

It is not surprising that Amal starts thinking seriously to go ahead with her decision to wear the veil at all times to assert her religious identity as a Muslim –Australian girl as she sees no harm and contradiction in being both a Muslim and an Australian citizen at the same time. By doing so, she is seeking to gain visibility and find a place through her hyphenated identity in the Australian multicultural society. This is plainly proved when she openly avers: “I'm an Australian-Muslim-Palestinian. That means I was born an Aussie and wacked with some seriously confusing identity hyphens.”¹

However, Amal is aware that asserting herself as a veiled Muslim girl within the Australian dominant culture entails constant struggles and endurance resulted from the distorted and tarnished image of the Muslims that have been circulating in the Australian society in particular and in the West in general. Amal is deeply conscious about the potential challenges and hardships she can face upon her abrupt decision to put on the veil as a full timer in a society and culture where the image of Muslims has been demonized and vilified by Western media especially after the aforementioned terrorist attacks which have unenviably placed Muslims under scrutiny and suspicion.

Accordingly, it is worth stating then that the protagonist Amal, as we come to realize throughout the novel, has been racially and religiously othered and mistreated on a number of

¹ Randa Abdel-fattah, *Does My Head Look Big In This?* (New York: Scholastic Inc, 2005), p.6.

racist attitudes within the Australian society which have subsequently raised her sense of confusion and uncertainty as a Muslim girl living in-between in a liminal space.

Amal's first encounter with estrangement and racial discrimination occurs at an early stage of the novel, mainly when she goes to a Catholic primary school as her parents would live far away from an Islamic school where she is supposed to be. There, she expresses the alienation and the bias she has experienced by her peers and by the Australian cultural norms at large. She says:

When I was in elementary school, different-colored socks were enough to get you teased. So when you're a non-pork eating, Eid celebrating Mossie (as in taunting nickname for Muslim ,not mosquito) with an unpronounceable last name a mother who picks you up from school wearing a hijab and Gucci shades, and drives a car with an "Islam means peace" bumper sticker, a quite existence is impossible.¹

Amal explains here the hard times and the endurances she experiences as being the only Muslim girl in the catholic school where particular clothes and certain eating habits makes her more subjected to alienation and confusion. This passage suggests that Amal is not at ease with her religious identity regarding the fact that she feels deeply separated from her peers as she realizes the necessity to conform to the dominant culture and more particularly to the Westernized construction of female identity. Regarding this, Abdelfattah reveals through her protagonist, Amal that Muslims can be easily prejudiced and maltreated once they try to maintain their cultural and religious identity in the face of the Western dominant culture.

With this in mind, Amal gradually develops a sense of identity confusion and crisis. She, therefore, starts to lose her confidence in herself as a person having an Australian–Muslim hybrid identity which makes 'one', to use Zygmunt Bauman expression, "thinks of

¹ Ibid., p.10.

identity whenever one is not sure of where one belongs.”¹ Moreover, Amal’s sense of confusion and crisis is increasingly developed especially after she has decided to wear the veil permanently in a society where the image of Muslims has been stereotyped and tarnished by a set of Western institutions and discourses. In spite of Amal’s constant attempts and perseverance to assert herself as an Australian-Muslim girl, she is yet confronted with a number of recurring obstacles and challenges arising from her religious practices and identity. Put differently, Amal finds no harm in living peacefully as a Muslim girl within an Australian society, but yet she is constantly seen as the ‘other’ who threatens and spoils the Australian dominant culture.

Amal’s major challenge is to wear the veil at McClean high school as an Australian-Muslim girl and who can perform her religious practices without restrictions and harassment and to be accepted as such. Hence, before Amal appears with the veil at McClan School, she decides to go for a test-run at her local shopping mall in order to explore other people’s reactions and to test her own determination. Prior to that, she gets increasingly nervous, revealing her three greatest fears:

1. Smart-ass comments (e.g. I’m standing on the escalator and a group of guys yell out ‘nappy head’ or some equally original comment);
2. Humiliation (e.g. toilet paper on my shoes, tripping on my heels, the painful public moments made even more excruciating when you already stand out like a Big Mac in a health food store);
3. Fixated staring (e.g. I’m trying to order chips at the food court and the girl at the counter can’t register that I don’t want sauce because she’s too preoccupied burning her retinas.²

¹ Zygmunt Bauman, *Life in fragments: Essays in Postmodern Morality* (Malden and Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), p.82.

² Randa Abdel-fattah, *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, p.27.

This passage invites us to learn that though Amal is previously aware of the potential repercussions and stir the veil will cause, she is ready to take on her decision. Amal's first endurance with the veil is witnessed right after she goes to do the shopping at the mall to examine people's reactions towards her new look with the veil. There she says:

So you can understand why I'm walking around the stores as if I am in combat mode, avoiding eye contact with other people and waiting for something to happen. But as I browse through the stores I realize how uncomfortable and irrational I'm acting because it feels like most people couldn't care less.¹ (Ibid)

As the above passage illustrates, Amal's first appearance in a public space as a full wearer of the veil does not go unnoticed especially in a society where the veil and other religious markers and symbols are vastly questioned as they are loaded with very negative social and cultural connotations. It can be, therefore, argued that Amal is not at ease with the veil due to the unwanted attention it has brought to her. This proves the sense that Amal raises the Australians' suspicion and she is accordingly viewed as the 'other' subject who threatens their sense of serenity through the act of the veil.

Indeed, Amal's second experience with her new decision to wear the veil at all times has pushed her to undergo very miserable moments especially at McClean high school, where nobody else has the same Islamic background and culture. This growing discomfort is perfectly illustrated when Amal draws comparison between her old Islamic Hidaya school and her new McCleans school. At Hidaya, she reveals, on one hand, her comfort and she avers "all that mattered was how hard you studied or shacked off, and your friendships. And it was no big deal if you didn't have a clue who you were because nobody was asking for an explanation anyway."² On the other hand, she, however, expresses sort of alienation and estrangement at McCleans, where class and race highly defines your status and identity. Here,

¹ Ibid.

² Ibid., p.35.

Amal states “there’s something about McCleans. I just don’t feel at home. How much your dad earns, how many cars you have, whether your money’s “old,” all that sort of crap counts as your initiation ceremony.”¹ Finding herself in such a position means she has to face and struggle against all types of discriminations and stereotypes that have class and social status basis.

Accordingly, Amal is aware of her ‘unique’ position as a Muslim girl having a Middle Eastern background and therefore she knows that she is perceived as a different ‘other’ within the dominant Australian milieu where the class and race are very decisive factors in one’s identity. This has certainly ensued more discomfort and unease at her school, but yet it has helped her not only become more conscious of her true hybrid identity but also it has made her strong enough to challenge the bully and racism she has encountered within the Australian society. Amal describes her first encounter with her racist peers during her first day at school and says: “Tia Tamos, with her entourage of Mini-Mes, Claire Foster and Rita Mason, made that very clear to me on my first day of school. I was talking to another girl and she asked me where I lived. I overheard Tia snickering with the Mini-Mes about us probably living off welfare.”²

Being the only Muslim student at McClean school implies that Amal’s actions and appearances will be under rigorous scrutiny and spotlights from the part of her peers especially Tia Tamos, Claire Foster, and Rita Mason, who have been maltreating her throughout their encounters. Once Amal is, for instance, back from the winter vacation during which she has come up with her decision to wear the veil, her first appearance with performing her religious practice prompts unwanted attention and reactions among those peers. Here she says:

¹ Ibid., pp.34-35.

² Ibid., p.35.

My friends, Simone and Eileen, are grinning proudly at me. Everybody else is staring like I've dyed my hair green or shown up to school wrapped in toilet paper. Tia Tamos, Claire Foster, and Rita Mason look at me and the snigger amongst themselves.¹

In spite of the support she seems to receive from her two close friends Simone and Eileen, Amal apparently does not feel at ease in the first place with the veil as the passage suggests. She is even nervous about the repercussions her decision has caused her among her peers and, therefore, she is unable to hide the deep sense of discomfort she is feeling upon these reactions. In his article "National Identity, Religious Identity and Literature: Negotiating Identity in *Does My Head Look Big In This?*" Ameri Firouzeh argues that "the worries of the fictional character are not without basis. Some mainstream Australians are not comfortable with the hijab at all. The hijab can remind them of Muslim identity, which they might have problems with for different reasons."² There will be, he adds, "a lot of inner and outer battles she has to fight in order to re-establish her position among her friends and to deal with her identity hyphens in a society which considers a hijab-wearer not necessarily an insider."³

Indeed the novel is full of frequent instances which spotlight this othering and alienation Amal has experienced upon her decision to wear the veil in the Australian mainstream culture. In fact, this sufferance, on one hand, comes from her peers in particular as we have mentioned before and, on the other hand, it comes from white Anglo-Saxon Australians in general to whom Muslims are a real threat to their society. Accordingly, Amal's othering and maltreatment comes almost from her arch-enemy Tia Tamos, who represents orientalist views and ideologies towards others in general and Muslim Arabs in particular. Tia, as we have learnt throughout the novel, maintains her constant affront and humiliating attitudes mostly

¹ Ibid., p.42.

² Ameri Firouzeh, "National Identity, Religious Identity and Literature: Negotiating Identity in *Does My Head Look Big In This?*", *Illumina*, 2 (2007), p.57.

³ Ameri Firouzeh, "National Identity", p.57.

throughout her encounters with Amal and this is revealed through her first verbal reaction towards Amal's appearance with the veil as a full timer: "I just don't know what I'd do without my long hair!" she says to Claire and Rita... "I mean, what's a woman without hair? You have to have a model's face to get away with covering up. Don't you think so?"¹. Tia here shows strong rejection and intolerance to Amal's particularities and freedom of choice embodied in the veil wearing. In Tia's eyes, Hijab represents a very oppressive and repressive sign whereby women are subjugated and oppressed as it restricts their freedom and hinders them from exposing their femininity and physical beauty. Hence, Tia's view of the hijab is vastly based on the Eurocentric conceptualization of the sameness of all women regardless of their backgrounds, cultures and traditions, encouraging the assumed universal prescription of gender roles and particularly female's physical appearance which is always defined in accordance with Western beauty standards.

In this way, it can be argued that Tai's perception is based on Western feminist perspectives *par excellence* in which women especially Third World women's particularities and cultural traditions are reproached and trampled on as they fail to conform to the Westernized female identity. This view can draw our attention to Chandra Mohanty's breakthrough classic essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse" in which she reveals the shortcomings of Western feminism *vis-à-vis* Third World Women as we have discussed in the first part of this dissertation.

Originally written in 1984 but subsequently reproduced in different versions, Mohanty directs sharp criticism to Western feminists as they, she argues, fail to recognize and acknowledge the assumed differences that concern gender, class, ethnicity, history, religion, and other important aspects. In other words, Mohanty accuses Western feminists of assuming "a homogeneous notion of the oppression of women as a group" which results in creating 'the

¹ Randa Abdel-fattah, *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, p.78.

image of an “average Third World Woman” who ‘leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and her being “Third World” (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized, etc)’.¹

By wearing the veil, Amal is vilified and reviled as she fails to meet the Western expectations and constructions of gender roles and, by extension, femininity standards which trample on the social, political, religious and personal particularities of others. Instead of considering it as a personal choice and part of the individual’s freedom, wearing the veil is, therefore, a strong sign for backwardness and oppression in the eyes of the Westerners. This idea is perfectly revealed when Amal again encounters other peers at school and she says:

This morning I ‘m in the hallway when I overheard some girls talking about me next to the lockers. one of them says the word *oppressed* and the other one is saying something about me looking like a slob. I can’t go up to them, because they’ll know I’ve been eavesdropping .So I walk slowly away ,feeling like a boiling kettle of water about to whistle and screech.²

This passage clearly reinforces Amal’s torture and the pain she experiences in the Australian dominant culture because of her religious identity. Even though Amal finds no harm to live as both an Australian and Muslim girl within an Australian society, she is apparently not accepted yet as such regarding the tarnished image of the veil and the Muslims in general in the Australian cultural milieu.

Following this, the novel introduces us to a number of scenes through which we come to witness that Amal is not considered yet as an Australian and, therefore, she is alienated by some largely white Anglo-Saxon Australians on the basis of her religious signs and practices. When Amal, for instance, is doing ablutions for her prayer, Tia ironically comments: “...I don’t know. You’re not walking in the desert, you know .We do have shoes in this

¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders*, p. 22.

² Randa Abdel-fattah, *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, p.63.

country.”¹Tia here shows extreme disapproval of and rejection to Amal’s right and freedom to practice her religiosity believing that Islam is backward and oppressive. Hence, Randa Abdelfattah tends to show through her character Amal the real hardships and obstacles of Muslims and especially Muslim’s women in the host countries while trying to maintain their religious and cultural identity.

It is very important to mention that Tia has kept her derogatory comments and insulting attitudes towards Amal since their first encounter as an attempt to humiliate and other her in front of her peers and classmates. The following passage is a relevant scene which presents a conversation between Amal and her arch-enemy at school, Tia:

Why don't you just fucking leave our country and go back to some desert cave where you belong?' I stand over her, my heart drumming in my chest. 'This is my country and if you ever forget it again I'm going to rip your head off!²

This passage is very telling with regard to the orientalist discourse that is based on strict binary system of thinking. Put differently, the unwelcoming attitude Tia shows here perpetuates Western essentialist conception of others which homogenises and constructs ‘others’ as inferior, oppressed, and uncivilized. Tia here reminds Amal of her true Arab identity which is associated with backwardness and inferiority in the eyes of the West as a discursive ideology to dominate ‘others’ and keep them under control.

Not only is Amal othered at school by Tia and her peers, but she is also othered and seen as an outsider who threatens Australian security and culture by large number of Australians. In the first anniversary of the 9/11 events, Amal encounters very hard moments at the bus upon the radio news covering this tragic events. There she says:

As we walk, I suddenly become aware that the volume of the radio has been raised so that it blares out through the bus. A voice on the early-morning talk show shouts

¹ Ibid., p.117.

² Ibid., p245.

words of outrage about “Muslims being violent”, and how “they’re all trouble”, and how “Australians are under threat of being attacked by these Koran-wielding people who want to sabotage our way of life and our values». My face goes bright red, and my stomach turns as the bus driver eyeballs me through the reflection of the mirror, looking at me as though I am living proof of everything being said. I felt almost faint with embarrassment as the angry voice blasts through the bus for everyone to hear.¹

On another similar occasion, Randa Abdel-fattah introduces us to Amal’s alienation and estrangement after the Bali bomb attacks in 2002 during which 80 Australian tourists were killed. Amal’s status as an alien in Australia is, therefore, more intensified and her suffering is aggravated for many people around her. She hears the news of bombings the day after the attacks at the school assembly. The principal is giving a speech about the event, and Amal feels really distressed.

I cry, but it's bizarre because I can't even break down and grieve without wondering about what people are thinking of me. I wince every time Ms Walsh says the word ‘massacre’ with the word 'Islamic', as though these barbarians somehow belong to my Muslim community.²

This passage reveals that Amal’s religious identity causes her bewilderment and trauma in Eurocentric society which views Muslims as fanatics and associates their religion with terrorism and violence. The fact that she, as a Muslim, feels she is not even allowed to sympathise for her fellow Australians tragedy reveals the depth of the loneliness and alienation she is undergoing at this time and her sense of guiltiness that her classmates consider her to be positioned in the terrorist camp.

Being the only Muslim girl at McCleans School can be described as a painful experience to Amal with regard to the follow-up of the Bali bombing and its concomitant

¹ Ibid., p.160.

² Ibid., p.250.

reactions among her peers. Put differently, after these tragic events, Amal seems to bear the burden as though she is to blame for these events due to her religious identity as a Muslim. Hence, she is subjected to constant offensive remarks and bullies especially from the part of her peers. In commenting on one of the many of such recurrent instances, she maintains:

Tuesday morning. I'm at my desk in home room, fuming over an article about terror suspects and "people of Middle Eastern appearance" when Tia walks up to my desk again.... "Did you watch that documentary on those Muslim fundamentalists last night? You're Arab aren't you? It must feel awful knowing you come from such a violent culture."¹

It can be contended from the above passage that Australia is not in a way or another exception from what is defined today as 'Islamophobia.'²The passage then suggests that the wider community of Australia has little knowledge of Islam and this ignorance is perpetuated by the discursive depiction of Muslims by Western social institutions .Tia here articulates through her practices these institutions and therefore she is reporting what she has already been exposed to mainly by media depictions and reports.

Equally important, it is worth stating that Amal further represents a large number of Muslims who have been constantly racialized by media representations within Western countries in general and Australia in particular. In this regard, a number of researches have been relevantly conducted to elucidate the strong influence media exerts to demonize and tarnish the image of Islam in the Australian society and thereby raising anti-Muslim

¹ Randa Abdel-fattah, *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, p.155.

² Islamophobia is a form of intolerance and discrimination motivated with fear, mistrust and hatred of Islam and its adherents. It is often manifested in combination with racism, xenophobia; anti-immigrant sentiments and religious intolerance. Manifestations of Islamophobia include hate speech, violent acts and discriminatory practices, which can be manifested by both non-state actors and state officials. Islamophobic rhetoric associates Muslims with terrorism and portrays them as an international and domestic threat. It makes stereotypical allegations about Muslims as a monolithic group of people whose culture is backward and incompatible with human rights and democracy. Retrieved on April, 12th, 2019 from : <https://www.emisco.eu/a-proposed-definition-of-islamophobia/>.

sentiments among Australians and perpetuating the biased policies against Muslims.¹ Arthur Saniotis, for instance, argues in his seminal article entitled, “Embodying Ambivalence: Muslim Australians as Other”, that “Nineteenth-century Australian policy-makers treated Muslims entering Australia with circumspection, referring to them as ‘undesirable immigrant.’”² This accordingly accounts for why “Muslim Australians were frequently represented by the press and ordinary citizens as morally reprobate, and they were associated with a series of pejorative images”³.

In a similar vein, Mishra argues that:

With the increasing number of people who carry the label 'Muslim' among their important identity-makers in Western countries, every day there are more people who, like Amal, 'feel forever excluded from the nation in which they live and excluded from its fundamental values.'⁴

As a conclusion to this section, it can be argued that Randa Abdel-fattah depicts the othering and alienation processes that many Muslim immigrants like Amal and others undergo in the host countries *vis-a-vis* their attempt to maintain their religious and cultural identities. Amal, the protagonist of the novel under study is still regarded as an outsider and is therefore excluded from her nation especially when she decides to wear the veil as full-timer. In spite of all these hard moments and suffering Amal has to undergo as an Australian-Muslim girl, she has strongly resisted and challenged all these stereotypes and tarnished images that have been associated with Arabs and Islam in the Australian society. The next section will be devoted to elaborate more on these challenges and resistance carried out by the

¹ To learn more about the image of Muslims in Australian society, I recommend the following : Nahid, Kabir. “Representation of Islam and Muslims in the Australian Media, 2001-2005”, *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs*, 26:3, 313 – 328.

² Arthur Saniotis, “Embodying Ambivalence: Muslim Australians as ‘Other’”, *Journal of Australian Studies*, 28:82 (2004), p.50.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Vijay Mishra, “Multiculturalism”, *Year's Work in Critical and Cultural Theory*, 17:1 (2009), p.49.

protagonist Amal in her attempt to firmly assert her hybrid identity as both a Muslim and an Australian girl in a dominant Anglo-Saxon Australian milieu.

c. Amal: Resisting Othering and Stereotypes

As seen in the previous section, Randa Abdell-fattah has spotlighted Amal's racialization and othering process she has been subjected to in the Australian society and at Mcschool in particular, where she has been mostly viewed as an outcast to many of her peers. In so doing, Abdel-fattah has revealed by extension the ways in which Muslim Australians in general are attributed with exotic others and how such constructions and misconceptions are played out in the Western dominant cultural in general to perpetuate orientalist views and agenda.

Abdelfattah, however, has attempted to destabilize these images attributed to Muslim Australians through her protagonist Amal, who has been struggling to assert her sense of being as a Muslim and Australian citizen regardless of the difficulties she has encountered. Thus the key stereotype challenged in this novel is that of Muslim woman as the exotic other. The narrative challenges this stereotype through representing Muslim women as recognisable and familiar identities. With this in mind, I argue that this novel mainly challenges the Western conception of viewing Muslim women as 'exotic others' and problematizes these women's othering in Western societies. Therefore, the alternative this narrative suggests for Muslim woman's identity is the possibility of reconciliation of Muslim identity with the Western national identities. This novel, hence, introduces the devout Muslim women not as strangers but as familiar figures in the West, undeserving of the discrimination they experience.

Accordingly, this section will explore Randa Abdel-fattah's juxtaposition of these images by representing Muslims and women in particular neither as exotic others as perceived by Westerners nor as different from other Western women, but rather as any other ordinary women, thereby suggesting the reconcilability and recognisability of Muslim and Australian identities in the Australian cultural context. More precisely, this section will probe into the protagonist Amal's constant resistance and persevering attitudes she has displayed in the face of all these aforementioned challenges to assert firmly herself and gain recognition and visibility as an Australian Muslim subject in a predominant Australian culture.

Before delving into investigating Amal's reflections and challenges she has displayed towards the othering and the alienation practices, it is of a paramount importance to draw attention to the 'paratext' of the book which can suggest very relevant interpretations with regard to redressing the image of Arabs and Islam in particular. To this end, Randa Abdel-fattah has chosen a very significant cover in the latest edition of 2008, which does counter the already held misconceptions about Muslims and veiled women in particular. Once we glance at the cover, we are exposed to a seemingly happy confident teen girl with dark blue eyes and a red scarf looking straight up the sky, along with a wide range of bright colourful circles at the background. This suggests that Abdel-fattah juxtaposes the negative images attributed to veiled women by representing them as strong characters, filled with hope and joy. The fact that the veiled girl has dark blue eyes and is looking up smilingly at the sky implies that she looks very self-confident like any other Western woman looking forward to have an answer to the ironic question "*Does my Head Look Big In This?*"

To challenge the misconceptions and fallacies held about Muslims by Western media and orientalist discourse at large, Abdel-fattah has deployed irony as an effective literary device to achieve this goal. The use of this technique is significantly employed on the title of the novel "*Does My Head Look Big In This?*" By asking this rhetorical and ironic

question, the author is perhaps expecting the reader to say “no” because this is what is likely and normally said especially when people tend to show respect and tolerance towards other’s clothes and attitudes regardless of their differences. Abdel-Fattah, in this way, tends to redress derogatory images attributed to the veil by addressing those who hold these negative attitudes to change their perspectives and, therefore, prompting them to show respect and tolerance to the veil wearers no matter how different they may look.

Abdel-fattah’s dependency on the use of parody is remarkably illustrated on Amal’s reflections and reactions. Instead of being influenced by the remarks others make upon her decision to become full time wearer of the veil, Amal, on the contrary, shows unprecedented resistance whereby she uses parody as the main weapon to challenge these stereotypes and maltreatment she is undergoing as a veiled Muslim girl. In this regard, it is very important to note that Amal is depicted from the very beginning of the novel as a very strong and brave character and this bravery is highly witnessed in a number of ironic as well as witty answers and remarks she has displayed in various challenging and scenes that we will be examining throughout this section.

Amal’s bravery and defiance can be obviously touched when she explains her decision to wear the veil as an attempt to assert her religious identity as a Muslim and thereby maintaining spiritual connection with God whom she worships. At this juncture, she proclaims:

I feel like my passion and conviction in Islam are bursting inside me and I want to prove to myself that I’m strong enough to wear a badge of my faith. I believe it will make me feel so close to God. Because it’s pretty hard to walk around with people

staring at your “towel-head” and not feel kind of pleased with yourself--- if you manage to get through the stares and comments with your head held high.¹

The above extract demonstrates that Amal views wearing the veil not only as a religious ritual whereby she establishes a spiritual connection with God, but also as a source of warmth, passion, and love. Equally important, Amal here illustrates her real motivation and driving forces behind her decision which is based on her personal conviction and free will ‘*par excellence*’. In doing so, she is implicitly answering back those who hold negative attitudes and misconceptions about Muslims and women in particular, who mistakenly think that the veil is the emblem of oppression imposed on women to disempower them.

Following this decision, Amal shows a strong sense of challenge in the face of many hegemonic forces and rejections including her parents at home. Amal’s first confrontation lies at her parent’s reaction towards this abrupt decision to become a full time wearer of the veil in public space. Being aware of the risk Amal may run into, they can hardly approve of it and their reaction is:

My dad looks away awkwardly, scratching his head. My mom sighs and then leans over and takes my hand in hers. We’re proud of you. But it’s a big decision honey, and you’re not at Hidaya anymore. It’s a different environment at McCleans. It might not even be allowed.²

Amal, here, is thoroughly surprised at her parent’s unexpected reaction with regard to the unconditioned support and care they have displayed at a number of issues and troubles she has faced before. Their response, however, suggests a sense of parental concern that is centred on their understanding of the public perception of the hijab and the person wearing it. In other words, her parents are very much aware of the troubles this decision will bring about

¹ Randa Abdel-fattah, *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, p.7.

² *Ibid.*, p.23.

especially that she will be easily recognised as a Muslim girl and that she will be often the object of unwanted attentions among her peers and other Australians in public the sphere.

Much to their surprise, Amal is firmly resolved to go on with her decision to wear the veil as a full time wearer. In spite of all these discouragement and warning she has received from her parents upon this decision, Amal resists and shows strong determination to take the action and here she avows:

Yeah right! How can they stop me?! It's up to me whether I want to or not!" I'm acting like I've already made the decision .I haven't ,but the thought that somebody else might take that choice away from me is energizing something inside me. Call it what you want. Defiance. Pig-headedness. It's burning me to think that I might not have the right to choose.¹

This extract imparts relatively Amal's growing sense of responsibility and autonomy over her actions and attitudes *vis-à-vis* her parents as well as others at large. Amal sounds here, as the passage suggests, very self-confident and agent in underpinning her decision that allows her to be who she wishes to be regardless of other's perception and reactions. Indeed, phrases and words in the above passage such as 'it is up to me whether I want to or not' and 'call it what you want' are significantly articulated to stress Amal's resolve to identify as a Muslim-Australian girl though this identification is not welcomed by her parents whose principal concern is to ensure her comfort and better life.

Amal's endeavours to construct her identity as 'hybrid' subject living across two cultures is, however, faced with scores of obstacles and hardships she has to confront throughout . To this end, Amal's challenges start very early in the novel and her first struggles at the public space is reflected in various instances in the novel. The first-hand experience

¹ Ibid., p.23.

with the veil at the public place is played out at the shopping centre where she accidentally meets other veiled girls with whom she identifies herself and, therefore, she feels more comfort and empowerment though she does not happen to know them in person. There she says:

“*Assalamu Alaykom*”, she says, greeting me with the universal Islamic greetings, Peace be upon you. “*Walaykom Wassalam*”, I reply, smiling back at her. The other two girls also greet me and I reply and they all smile warmly at me. They go back to their conversation and I walk off with a big grin because it is now that I think I begin to understand that there’s more to this hijab than the whole modesty thing. These girls are strangers to me but I know that we all felt an amazing connection, a sense that this cloth binds us in some kind of universal sisterhood.¹

This passage is very telling in the sense that it brings to light not only the central role the veil plays in shaping Amal’s hybrid identity, but also it the ease and comfort she experiences with the veil that triggers ,in turn, her identification with other Muslim girls with whom she seems to share a very important common point. With this in mind, it can be argued that the veil is more than a piece of cloth put on a woman’s head, but rather it has much more complex readings and representations. That is to say, the veil here is represented as a source of empowerment and consolidation among Muslim women and therefore it does counter the contemporary Western discourse which perceives the veil as a source of oppression. Moreover, this brief interaction reassures Amal that the hijab may not necessarily mark her as different from the rest of the larger society as there are many other girls doing what she is striving to do. The hijab, therefore, reinforces the sense of collective identity that Amal has been preoccupied with ever since she was a young girl growing up in Australia.

¹ Ibid., p.28.

In her article entitled “The veil debate—again, on shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the global Era”, Leila Ahmed argues that the reasons women wear the veil across Muslim societies are “as varied, multiple, complex, and shifting as are the women themselves”¹. In a similar vein, Susan Taha Al-Karawi in an article entitled “ Negotiating the Veil and Identity in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*”, notes that the multiplicity of positive and negative meanings associated with the veil also displays a complex and, at times, contradictory range of meanings. It is positively associated with modesty, protection from unwanted male attention and desire, and liberation from the demands of consumerist capitalist economies and their investment in women’s bodies. It signifies security and agency, and functions as a means of mobility in the public sphere². Hence, Amal’s act of wearing the veil can be seen to have twofold dimensions: to perpetuate this positive image with regard to the comfort and protection Amal feels after her first-hand experience with the hijab; at the same time to implicitly refute the contemporary Western misconceptions of the veil.

Another big challenge Amal has to face is her first appearance with the veil soon after the winter break at her new upper-middle class McCleans Grammar School, where religious signs and practices are highly scrutinized especially among her peers and administrators. Given that Amal is recently enrolled at McClean School, where she finds herself the only Muslim girl marks a big challenge both at her personal as well as her professional levels with regard to her identity construction as a Muslim-Australian girl.

The first person Amal encounters at school after her controversial decision is the school principal Ms Walsh, who initially expresses strong opposition to this surprising matter on the pretext that this school has certain rules and guidelines to follow, one of which is to stick to

¹ Leila Ahmed, “The veil debate—again”, in *On shifting Ground: Muslim Women in the global Era*, ed. Fereshteh Nouraie-Simone (New York: Feminist Press, 2005), p.164.

² Susan Taha Al-Karawi, “Negotiating the Veil and Identity in Leila Aboulela’s *Minaret*”, *Journal of Language Studies*, 14:3(2004), p.256.

the general uniform of the school. Amal is, however, very persevering in her choice and, therefore, she appears very strong to negotiate her identity construction with her as a Muslim-Australian girl. The following dialogue allows us to better grasp Amal's negotiation and challenge to be who she is with Ms Walsh, who represents Western discourse here:

“....So you parents have made you wear the veil permanently now? Starting from today? Your first day of the second semester. Couldn't it wait until tomorrow? After they'd spoken to me?” I stare at her in shock. “My parents? Who mentioned my parents?” the veil, dear” Her voice is annoyingly phony. “So you've been made to wear it from today?” “Nobody has made me wear it ,Ms Walsh”. “It's my decision.” I shift in the chair, my butt numb from the hard wood.¹

The above passage relatively uncovers the commonly held belief that Muslim girls are indoctrinated to wear the veil as it is not based on their personal choice, but rather it is conceived of as a practice being coercively imposed on women and determined by collective pressures from an authoritarian power such as parents and inflexible Islamic teachings. To this end, Amal here, however, deconstructs this view by testifying that wearing the veil emanates from her personal conviction and volition to live as a Muslim –Australian girl and yet it has nothing to do with other's authority. The phrase “Nobody has made me wear it” is an ample evidence to prove that Amal is very agent in her decisions and life choices. Hence, it can be argued that Amal struggles to challenge the stereotype that Muslim girls have no say in their choices pertaining to their life and career. In so doing, she represents almost all Muslim girls as being agent enough to decide their own life out of their free will and therefore to change their life into better .

¹ Randa Abdel-fattah, *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, p.39.

Amal's constant struggles with her veil in a non-Muslim milieu are further intensified at McCleans School, where she finds herself an object of public judgment and scrutiny especially among her peers. The first confrontation occurs with two of her classmate called Kristy and Tim, who ,by extension, represent Western hegemonic discourse about other's cultural difference :

Did your parents force you?" Kristy asks, all wide-eyed and appalled. My dad told me if I don't wear it he'll marry me off to a sixty-five-year 'old camel owner in Egypt"

'No!' She's actually horrified.

'I was invited to the wedding,' Eileen adds.

'Really?' This is definitely a case of dropped from the cradle.

"Hey! Amal!" Tim Manne calls out. What's the deal with that thing on your head?" "I've gone bald." Get out!" "I'm on the advanced Hair Program."¹

Kristy and Tim's ridicule and mocking questions in the above extract can be explained as attempts to reinforce, on the one hand, 'hegemonic culture of the West, and on the other hand, to essentialize the others' identity and the Muslims' in particular through undermining and trampling on their cultural and religious particularities. The veil, in their eyes, is viewed as the icon of exoticism whereby Amal is viewed as a different and exotic other. To challenge these stereotypes and misconceptions, Amal, has used parody as a very effective weapon and strategy to overcome such situations. Rather than refuting Kristy of her guiding assumption (namely, that Amal is forced to wear the hijab by her parents), Amal repeats that assumption, exaggerating it even to the point of introducing another anti-Muslim stereotype herself, that of

¹ Ibid., pp.70-71.

arranged or, rather of forced marriage. Equally important, Amal's narrative voice through the expression 'Really?' This is definitely a case of dropped from the cradle' suggests her criticism for Kristy's ostensible *naiveté*.

In his seminal and relevant article entitled "Challenging Stereotypes: Randa Abdel-Fattah's Use of Parody in *Does My Head Look Big in This?*", Colin Haines avers that "the novel engages in a practice of parody—an exaggerated, often funny, redeployment of stereotypes in order to expose the ignorance wherein they originate."¹ Instead of implicitly refuting their assumptions and stereotypes, Amal is sarcastically emphasizing them by the act of 'oversimplifying' with the aim to subvert these commonly held misconceptions of the Muslims and veiled women in particular. Put differently, Amal is previously aware of the Western stereotype that girls are commonly assumed to have no 'say' in matters pertaining to their daily practices and their life in general.

To this end, she ironically confirms her classmate's question that the veil is forced by her parents on her so as to avoid being married off to an older rich man. In this way, both Tim and Kristy are made easily duped with regard to their naiveté to believe Amal's responses. With this in mind, Amal is not perpetuating these stereotypes, but rather she is subverting them with regard to the fact that the reader not only knows that hijab, in her case, is a matter of personal conviction rather than of coercion, but they can also see that the stereotype equating the hijab with oppression is, at best, simplistic and naïve.

Equally important, the stereotype here, as Colin Haines further argues, "is wilfully repeated, but in such an exaggerated or hyperbolic way as to deflate or subvert the supposed "truth" the stereotype purports to convey".² Hence, parody in this context is, he adds "to undo

¹ Colin Haines, "Challenging Stereotypes: Randa Abdel-Fattah's Use of Parody in *Does My Head Look Big in This?*" *Bookbird: A Journal of International Children's Literatur*, 53:2(2015), p.31.

² *Ibid.*, p.31.

by overdoing”.¹ Accordingly, Amal challenges these stereotypes by means of ironic oversimplifications that aim to deconstruct these commonly held misconceptions about Muslims.

In many recurrent scenes, the protagonist Amal seems to resort to the same strategy in her confrontation to these stereotypes that can be widely seen as inherent parts of Western dominant discourses including media, popular culture, and schools. Amal’s ironic words in the following excerpt demonstrate this while confronting her classmate Adam about the alienation of Muslims:

‘Yes, yes, I’m aware of that,’ I groan. The first Muslim she (her classmate, Tia) has ever met. It makes me sound like an alien. Oh, it was my first encounter with a Muslim! Wow! I even had my camera! Can’t wait to ring the National Museum. I’m sure they’ll be interested in putting on an exhibition!²

In the above example, Amal is articulating and exaggerating again the same anti-Muslims stereotypes that Muslims are alien in the Australian dominant culture. She is sarcastically suggesting that Muslims should be exposed at a special exhibition day to be visited and screened since they are perceived as grotesque others in the eyes of Westerners. In doing so, Amal undertakes to redress the Muslim’s image in the West depending on ‘parody’ as a key instrument to oversimplify and subvert these stereotypes.

it is worth noting that Amal is seeking to forge diasporic identity which guarantees her Australianness as well as her Arabness in the face of all these aforementioned challenges .To put it in a nutshell, Amal, as has been discussed above, is struggling to gain the recognisability and acceptance as ‘hybrid’ subject; in so doing, she is dissolving the essentialism as well as the purity of all cultures. Central to this regard is the definition of

¹ Ibid.

² Randa Abdel-fattah, *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, pp.146-147.

Homi Bhabha, who argues that “liminal space is an interstitial passage between fixed identifications [that] opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy.”¹ In this way, Bhabha and other post-structural and post-colonial theorists have identified a place of ambivalent existence for minority subjects who are situated between the ‘same’ and the ‘other’ – an emancipatory space that provides the potential for the development of hybrid identities that challenge oppressive binary oppositions. He further adds that the ‘In-Between’ can be seen as the link between two or more cultural identities. It is also the “connective tissue that constructs the difference between upper and lower, black and white.”² It is meant that opportunities for hybridisation open up spaces for negotiation where unequal power relation is critically deconstructed and yet agency still exists in the interstices of the exercise of power which can give rise to new meanings for and about minority communities.

Based on this, it is fair to state that Amal does feel she is suspended in-between two worlds and cultures, and yet she is not favouring one culture over the other. In a number of challenging scenes, Amal identifies with Australia as an attempt to gain visibility and recognition. Apart from her religious identity, marked through the wearing of the veil, the reader might find it futile to recognize Amal as an Arab with regard to her accent, her white skin and green eyes colours, to name just a few. Amal’s reaction to the anniversary of 9/11 terrorist attacks and the Bali bombings remains the most remarkable attitude which can be seen as strong evidence for the complexity of her identity as a Muslim-Australian girl. In her comments on these two tragic events, she respectively avers:

I know it sounds awful, but I felt confused .Because for some reason their deaths were more shocking and disgusting and numbing than all the deaths you normally read

¹ Homi, Bhabh, *The Location of Culture*, p.4

² *Ibid.*, p.4.

about and see on the news. You know how it is, you turn on the six o'clock news and there are people starving and countries bleeding and people dying for the right to freedom from occupation and dictatorship and what do you do?.....because I couldn't stop bawling, watching the towers come down.it was a terrible thing to happen.¹

In another similar scene, Amal empathetically questions:

What song was playing when the bomb went off? Were there honeymooners? Oh my God, how could honeymooners be killed like that? Did the bombers watch as their inferno turned human life into carcasses? ...How many Indonesians died? Do people care? Who would look after their children?²

These passages are very significant in the sense that they demonstrate that Amal does sympathise and empathize not merely with the victims of these terrorist attacks, but also with victims of dictatorial systems across the world. It is equally important as it reveals Amal's reflections on a number of debatable issues pertaining to politics. As the passage reveals, she criticises severely these terrorist attacks and in doing so she, on the one hand, identifies with any Australian public who condemns such acts, and on the other hand she is conveying the point that Muslims are not terrorists as it is widely perceived in Australia and the West at large. In this way, Amal encounters complex identity aspects with regard to her ambivalent position as a Muslim-Australian girl.

Following these previously mentioned events, Amal is, on frequent instances, put in situations where she asserts herself as an Australian who cares for her country, Australia, but which nevertheless shows that her understanding of being an Australian is different from some of her classmates' understanding of Australianness. As an example of how she thinks about her national identity when she feels that her being an Australian is being questioned by

¹ Randa Abdel-fattah, *Does My Head Look Big In This?*, p.159.

² *Ibid.*, pp.249-250.

people around her, we can refer to the following assertion by her the day after the Bali bomb attacks when she says:

‘By recess I’ve had enough. I spend the rest of the day in the nurse’s office wondering how naïve I was to ever think that I could find my place in my country and be unaffected by the horrors and politics in the world. I have nowhere else to go and nowhere else I want to go. Once again I don't know where I stand in the country in which I took my first breath of life.’¹

The use of the phrase ‘taking my first breath of life’ in the example above shows Amal's intimate and emotional attachment to Australia. To Amal, being born in Australia and feeling that Australia is your country is enough for being a true Australian. However, as discussed above, the question of Australianness, from the perspective of some Australians, is rather different.

Based on the above analysis , it can be viewed that the representation of Muslim culture, Muslim women and Islam that the novel offers aims to challenge popular and populist misconceptions, to emphasise commonalties in spite of differences and to arouse the empathy of the reader through the focalization and humour of the novel. That is to say, the representation of Muslim people in this novel is aimed at reconciliation rather than provocation.

Conclusion

It can be concluded from the above analysis that Amal manages at the end to find a space for her hyphenated identity as an Australian Muslim girl inspite of the rejection the challenges she has confronted in the Australian mainstream culture. Amal represents a typical example of a character equipped and filled with hope, passion, and ability to mix with both

¹ Ibid., p.251.

the minority as well as the majority group. She constructs third space of hers that allows her to adopt both cultures; a condition which helps her forge a fluid identity in the Australian milieu. This fluidity opens doors for her to be more receptive towards other cultural and religious beliefs. Amal's decision of wearing the veil proves to be a powerful tool for her empowerment and self-identification as hybrid subject.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that this thesis has adopted an interdisciplinary approach that employs a bunch of theoretical tools from a range of postmodern theories. Post-colonial studies, post-colonial feminist theory and diaspora studies have been adopted to approach four selected texts written by contemporary Arab women Anglophone diasporic writers belonging to different cultural backgrounds. Hence, it has engaged in examining four novels written by these four Arab woman diasporic writers living in different countries and representing different diasporic experiences.

Rajaa Alsanea and Leila Halaby, on the one hand, seem to represent Arab-American writers, and yet they are different with regard to the fact that Leila Halaby was born in the United States, while Rajaa Alsanea was just a temporary immigrant and this influences their literary productions in terms of their thematic concerns. Rajaa Alsanea, for instance, focuses typically on the oppression and maltreatment Arab women receive in their homeland as a result of the prevailing patriarchal mind-sets, and at the same time she exposes the struggles and defiance her four protagonists display in the face of these conventional and oppressive practices as well as the Western stereotypical images. Leila Halaby, in turn, addresses Arab women's loss and displacement in the American dominant culture and their constant struggles to shape their identities in the diaspora space. Ahdaf Soueif and Randa-Abdelfattah, on the other hand, stand for Arab British and Arab Australian writers respectively and both writers adopt transcultural dialogue and belongings in their literary texts to celebrate cultural differences beyond cultural, racial, class, and gender hierarchies.

In spite of the numerous similarities these Arab diasporic writers share, they have depicted Arab women specificities and the heterogeneous experiences they have undergone in their long journeys and negotiation process to forge their hybrid identities in the face of the

cultural and gender hegemony. It is true that these writers belong to the same diaspora and they have all been exposed to Western culture in different ways, they have adopted different strategies to articulate their hybrid identities. Unlike the Arab British writer, Ahdaf Soueif and the Arab Australian writer, Randa Abdelfattah, who foreground and advocate a transnational belonging as a strategy to promote dialogue and coexistence between the Arab characters they depict and other characters from different cultural backgrounds, the Arab American writers, Rajaa Alsanea and Leila Halaby adopt resistance as a strategy to resist the hegemony of the patriarchy of their homeland as well as the dominant culture of the West. Hence, the ninth chapters presented in this dissertation portray the articulation of these themes through the selected novels by the four women writers under study.

As we have seen, the first part of this research serves as a historical and theoretical framework for the whole dissertation taking into account the historical background and theoretical tools it provides to approach the four selected novels. Regarding this, the first chapter examines the Arab diaspora in the West and therefore it traces the historical development of the Arab immigration process in three major destinations the USA, Canada, and Europe. Accordingly, this chapter focuses on the main driving forces that have instigated the creation of three Arab communities in the West: Arab American community, Arab Canadian community, and Arab European community.

The second chapter provides definitions and some critical reflections on representation and orientalism as two key relevant concepts to this study. It also examines the representation of third world women in Western feminist discourse in the light of two scholarly leading figures in post-colonial feminist studies Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty. The focal point of this chapter is to critically dismantle Western conception of the other in general and Western feminist conception of Arab women in particular as being homogeneous, submissive and uncivilized other.

Regarding that the thesis is centered on Arab women diaspora writings, the third chapter introduces the concept of diaspora along with its theories as useful theoretical instruments for the whole dissertation. It provides an overview of the concept and its historical origins in the light of some postmodern cultural theorists. This chapter also traces the origins and the poetics of Arab diaspora literature in general and Arab women Anglophone writing in particular as a new body of immigrant literature with special thematic and literary concerns.

The fourth chapter critically presents the concept of identity through Arab diasporic perspectives. It argues first that identity is a complex issue that has yielded thorny discussions among scholars in different fields. It ends up maintaining that forms of identifications are constantly shifting, temporary, and most importantly based on human agency according to many scholars in the cultural studies field such as Stuart Hall, Avtar Brah, and Douglas Kellner, to name just a few. Then it relatively provides some critical reflections on the concept of hybridity in the light of a postmodern and diaspora perspectives which proclaim 'hybridity' as the essence of diaspora subject identity in general and Arab women diaspora identity through which they transgress national, racial, cultural, and gendered constructed categories. In the same vein, this chapter draws on Homi Bhabha's seminal book *Location of Culture* (1994) to relatively highlight the significance of third space as a site and position where hybridity or hybrid identities are created between defined categories to deconstruct the binarism of cultures, nations, races, and genders.

The second half of the thesis is consecrated to analyse the four selected novels in the light of these theoretical tools. The first chapter, then, deals with Rajae Alsanea's novel *Girls of Riyadh* that addresses the heterogeneity of Saudi women with regard to the different experiences they go through. The novel argues that there is no single homogenous Saudi identity in the sense that the country is vast and culturally heterogeneous.

More importantly, *Girls of Riyadh* negotiates Saudi traditions and modernization on the one hand and mediates between Saudi Arabia and the West, who still stereotypes Saudi women as passive, illiterate, backward, religiously fanatic and unchangeable, on the other. Most of the characters of this novel experience life in the West, especially in America and are capable of adjusting to the American culture and openness while being there. The novel addresses both Saudi/Arab and Western audiences as it shows that Saudi people fight two battles at the same time, to bring a change to their society and to negotiate with the Western media, scholarship, and popular culture that reduces them to backward and religious fanatic Arab/Muslims.

The author of the novel has herself completed her postgraduate studies in the USA, and even long before, like many Saudis, she used to go outside Saudi Arabia for vacation. The novelist can be seen as a mediator between Saudis /Arabs and Americans. Her characters, like the half-half Saudi-American Mecheel, are trying to negotiate the two worlds emphasizing the importance of cultural exchange between the Arab and the Western worlds, and the American in particular. Therefore, this novel can be considered as an important site for socio-cultural negotiations within and outside the Saudi society. It brings Saudi people closer to people of other cultures in an attempt to help them move beyond their stereotypes about Saudi people and cultures, especially about the status of women. The novel negotiates boundaries emphasizing the importance of communication among Saudi women to redress the misconceived assumptions about the Saudi women and Arab women at a broad scale.

The second chapter of this dissertation analyses Leila Halaby's novel *West of the Jordan* and it shows how the writer endeavours to depict the heterogeneity of the Arab diasporic women through engaging four different female characters of varied stories and experiences. The four girls, though they seem to meet in a number of convergent lines such as race, culture and ethnicity, have undergone different challenges and experiences that have

significantly contributed to their identity construction as hybrid subjects. By doing so, Halaby seeks to challenge the essentialist discourses and by extension Western and nationalist discourses that claim purity and fixity of cultural identity. In this sense, Halaby relatively offers transnational identity as an alternative option to these discursive essentialist views and their assumptions about the purity of cultures. Through presenting these four multiple characters with different stories, Halaby aims at challenging the hegemony of Western discourses and by extension Western feminism for their ethnocentric assumptions about the singularity and the homogeneity of women's experiences and the universality of their struggles.

The third chapter tackles Ahdaf Soueif's novel *Map of Love* and it foregrounds cross-ethnic identifications and trans-national belonging among characters crossing different borderlands and cultures across different times. On the contrary to Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan*, which features some social aspects of the Arab American community with regard to the experiences of four Arab teenage maternal cousins who are displaced and dislocated between two worlds and cultures, Ahdaf Soueif's novel *Map of Love* traces and celebrates the shared histories of three countries: Great Britain, the United States, and Egypt. It highlights the commonalities as well as the differences existing among these cultures across space and time through personal, political, cultural and historical encounters of the protagonists belonging to different cultural backgrounds. In other words, Ahdaf Soueif advocates trans-cultural dialogue between women from different backgrounds and shows how these women exchange cultural values and ideas beyond misconceptions and cultural categorizations. As discussed, the novel interlinks three stories centered on four female characters of: Anna Winterboune, Isabel Parkman, Layla al-Ghamrawy and Amal al-Ghamrawy and foregrounds two cross-cultural romances separated by almost a century, breaking down cultural and national boundaries as well as those of space and time.

This chapter argues that Ahdaf Soueif's use of cross-cultural dialogue among her female characters proves to be powerful a technique to women's consolidation across the space and time .The four female protagonists' strong bond can significantly be viewed as a typical image of human interactions regardless of the cultural, geographical, social, differences existing between British, American and Egyptian societies. More importantly, the novel provides hope and coexistence represented through cross-cultural love, cross-cultural female relationships and inter-cultural marriages.

As for the fourth and the last chapter of this thesis, it examines Randa Abdel-fattah's novel *Does My Head Look Big in this?* The novel brings forward the othering of Muslims in general and the Muslim women in particular through a young teenage female protagonist, Amal. In spite of the othering process Amal has been subjected to upon her decision to wear the veil within the Australian cultural mainstream, she maintains a great deal of faith and resistance to keep up with her sense of being as an Australian Muslim girl. Randa Abdell-fattah represents Amal as a strong and self-confident girl who takes the decision to wear the veil regardless of the repercussions this act has brought to her with regard to her family, school and to the Australian society at large. In other words, Amal, in the small society of her school, overcomes the challenges of othering and is finally reconciled and accepted within the society. Amal's acceptance into her Australian community is a gradual process and later the novel shows how Amal most noticeably receives the recognition she seeks from people at her school especially after she proudly represents her school in a debating competition she wins. Through patience and yet active engagement with her society rather than isolation from it, Amal gains recognition as a hybrid character belonging to both cultures and worlds.

The conclusions that can be gleaned from these novels is that the four diasporic writers under study tend to call into question the racialization, oppression, subjugation and inferiority Arab women are subjected to on the ground of race, gender, class, and ethnicity. Being

exposed to Western culture and its values from either being born or being temporary immigrants there, the four Arab diasporic writers critically destabilize the Western binary system of thought established by discursive essentialist views as well as Arab patriarchal paradigms as being a real predicament and source of Arab women's invisibility. By doing so, the four writers offer chance for Arab women through their characters in the novels to negotiate and shape their hybrid identity as an alternative belonging and self-identification that shakes and destabilizes these old certainties of the modern conception of identity as well as gendered identities. In other words, they critically bypass racial, gender, class, and ethnic considerations and advocate an alternative discourse that celebrates freedom of choice, individual's freedom, trans-nationalism, cultural diversity that foreground human's agency and collaboration.

More importantly, unlike some other diasporic writers who represent their diasporic subject as a person in exile, yearning for a return to their homeland and lingering on nostalgic recreations of the world left behind, the writers under study have celebrated their hybrid identities and their third position to actively negotiate alternative modalities of belonging that surpass the idea of a mythical place of origin to which one should return or that of a single cultural identity to which one should stay loyal. They all advocate a fluid hybrid identity that occupies the hyphen which allows one to straddle between two cultures and two worlds away from any binaries of culture and gender. That is to say, they bring together celebration as well as self-critique as pervasive themes in their literary writings.

It is true that the four Arab women diasporic writers under study seem to employ different strategies and techniques to articulate their concerns and their perceptions related to gender, identity, ethnicity, class, and colonialism. However, the four authors have almost adopted hybrid identity and transcultural belongings as an alternative discourse to the mounting tension between the coloniser and the colonized subjects and between the East and

the West at large. This new discourse allows accordingly the plurality and celebration of the cultural differences beyond binarism and essentialism.

I admit that this research is not void of its limitations regarding the texts as well as the approach I have chosen for this study. That is to say, I have chosen four novels written by different Arab women Anglophone writers living in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia and I have not included other writers from Canada, France, and Spain etc. Equally important, even if the study adopts a post-colonial feminist approach to study these texts, it fails to cover and tackle thoroughly other relevant aspects related to class, religion, and language. Hence, I believe that these limitations opens doors for me and other researchers to fill this critical gap by conducting further research in this area from different perspectives and regarding other Arab women diasporic writers living in other diasporic space .

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