

**Cartographies of Identities: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural
Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers**

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Note on transliteration

I use an open inverted comma to transliterate Arabic *'ayn* and a closed inverted comma to transliterate Arabic *hamza*.

Abstract for the thesis submitted to the University of Manchester by Yousef Awad
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, 20th January 2011.

**Cartographies of Identities: Resistance, Diaspora, and Trans-cultural
Dialogue in the Works of Arab British and Arab American Women Writers**

The purpose of this thesis is to compare the works of contemporary Arab British and Arab American women novelists with a view toward delineating a poetics of the more nascent Arab British literature. I argue 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. I argue that these differences result from two diverse racialized Arab immigration and settlement patterns on both sides of the Atlantic. Chapter One looks at how Arab British novelist Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* and Arab American novelist Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* define Arabness differently in the light of the precarious position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in Britain and in the United States. Chapter Two examines how Arab British women writers Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela valorize trans-cultural and cross-ethnic dialogues and alliances in their novels *The Map of Love* and *Minaret* respectively through engaging with the two (interlocking) strands of feminism in the Arab world: secular and Islamic feminisms. In Chapter Three, I demonstrate how the two novels of Arab American women writers Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* and Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* explore the contradictions of Arab American communities from within and employ strategies of intertextuality and storytelling to subvert stereotypes about Arabs. As this study is interested in exploring the historical and socio-political contexts in which Arab women writers on both sides of the Atlantic produce their work, the conclusion investigates how the two sets of authors have represented, from an Arab perspective, the events of 9/11 and the ensuing war on terror in their novels.

Declaration

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The Author

Yousef Awad gained a first class BA and MA from the University of Jordan. His MA dissertation examined the relationship between Henrik Ibsen's works and Arab women writers. Yousef Awad had taught at the University of Jordan and Al-Ahliyaa Amman University. He also held a GTA position at the University of Manchester. Since starting his PhD, Yousef Awad has published two academic articles and presented a number of papers at conferences in Britain, the US and Europe. He was supervised by Dr. Anastasia Valassopoulos and co-advised by Prof. Patricia Duncker and Dr. Monica Pearl from the English and American Studies Department. In April 2009, he has been awarded a two-year studentship by the University of Jordan, where he is expected to start an academic career from April 2011.

O mankind! Lo! We have created you from male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware
(**The Qur'an**, verse 13, surah 49)

Introduction

Anglophone Arab Women Writers: Towards a Poetics of Arab British and Arab American Women Novelists

There has been an increase in the number of Arab women writers who write in English over the past thirty years. Some of them are academics who have decided to live in Britain or in the US after completing their postgraduate degrees like Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir and Laila Lalami. Others, like Diana Abu-Jaber, Susan Muaddi Darraj and Laila Halaby, are daughters of Arab immigrants who settled in the US. Academics such as Geoffrey Nash, Layla Al Maleh and Rasheed El-Enany have produced analytical articles and books about the Anglo-Arab encounter and the voices of Arab writers (males and females) in diaspora. Anastasia Valassopoulos, Lindsey Moore and Amal Talaatal Abdelrazek have written specifically about Arab women in the Middle East and in diaspora. These publications have placed the works of Arab writers within carefully contextualized frameworks and have examined in detail the socio- and geopolitical cultural contexts that encapsulated the productions of these writings. These critics have contributed to unveiling the intersectionality of religion, ideological affiliations, class, gender, nationality, identity and diaspora in the works of Arab writers. They have also highlighted the heterogeneity and diversity of Arab women in a way that shatters the stereotypical and homogeneous images that depict them as helpless and passive victims of a relentless Arab and Muslim patriarchy.

Building on these works, I will further examine the heterogeneity of Arab women writers in diaspora through comparing and contrasting the thematic expressions of texts produced by Arab women writers in English in Britain and in the US. I contend that Arab immigration and settlement patterns in Britain and the US

have ‘entailed highly localised patterns of interaction with prevailing social, political and economic conditions’.¹ While maintaining an interest in examining the details of the works produced by Arab women writers in English, I believe a comparative study will draw attention to the thematic, ideological, historical, geopolitical, nationalist and contextual similarities and differences among these writers in ways that help us delineate a poetics of each group of writers mainly according to their politics of location. I use the word poetics to refer to a systematic theory that attempts to define the nature of Arab women novels, the principles that govern them, the themes that distinguish them and the conditions that have contributed to their production. In other words, I am using the word poetics in the Aristotelian sense of the systematic study of literature.²

Discussing Arab American literature, Steven Salaita argues that ‘[a]nglophone Arabs are no less Arabs than anybody else - they merely carry different cultural values as a result of their different social circumstances’.³ Salaita maintains that Arab American writers ‘build a heritage identifiably linked to the Arab world but that is nonetheless their own’.⁴ ‘As the body of Arab-American literature flourishes and grows’, Salaita asserts, ‘critics and scholars need a specific

¹ Peter Hopkins and Richard Gale, ‘Introduction: Muslims in Britain - Race, Place and the Spatiality of Identities’, in *Muslims in Britain: Race, Place and Identities*, ed. by Peter Hopkins and Richard Gale (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2009), pp. 1-19 (pp. 15-16).

² For an in depth analysis of what Aristotle means by poetics, see: *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Vol. 1 Classical Criticism*, ed. by George Alexander Kennedy (New York, Port Chester, Melbourne and Sydney: Cambridge UP, 1989), pp. 149-83. See also: Alex Preminger and others, *The New Princeton Encyclopaedia of Poetry and Poetics* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1993), pp. 929-38.

³ Steven Salaita, ‘Vision: Arab-American Literary Criticism’, *Al Jadid Magazine*, 8 (2002) <<http://www.aljadid.com/features/VisionArabAmericanLiteraryCriticism.html>> [accessed: 22 April 2009], para. 7 of 22.

⁴ Salaita, para. 8 of 22.

critical matrix that uses Arab artistic traditions as well as American, and is articulated from within the Arab-American community'.⁵

Salaita's call is convincingly urgent and useful. Literature needs a critical framework that explains its aesthetic, socio-political and cultural dynamics. I would like to extend Salaita's call by arguing for the need for a specific critical matrix for Arab British literature. I contend that the development of a critical matrix for Arab British literature can be achieved through comparing and contrasting it with Arab American literature. This comparison needs to be contextualized within the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in Britain and the US that has resulted from two different immigration and settlement patterns on both sides of the Atlantic.

Based on an analytical reading of a number of novels by Arab women writers who live in Britain and the US and use English as a means of expression, one can distinguish between the thematic expressions of Arab British and Arab American women writers. My project concentrates on Arab British and Arab American women writers and explores their works with regard to contemporary discourses on feminisms, race and ethnicity, representation, migration and settlement, diaspora, and recent political events like 9/11 and the ensuing war on terrorism. By employing the metaphor of cartography, this study attempts to foreground the connections between the geographical space and the identities of Arab women writers as well as the characters they portray in their novels. Although Arab British and Arab American literatures share commonalities, I try in this thesis to map out the differences between them to show how localized experiences of immigration and settlement in both

⁵ Salaita, para. 1 of 22.

countries have influenced Arab literary productions. At the same time, the study does not aim to collapse the differences among these texts in favor of creating a common stand and a unique critical framework. This project is informed by an analytical tradition that foregrounds the politics of location, and ideological, political, social, nationalist and religious differences. A comparative study of these works will help contextualize the differences between the authors on both sides of the Atlantic and will produce a framework that helps approach, with greater scrutiny, the works of Arab women writers in diaspora.

I wish to contribute to a recent growing debate on works by Arab women writers in diaspora. In particular, I am interested in studying the writings of Arab women novelists who use English as their means of expression. While a number of Arab women writers live in Britain and France, some like Hoda Barakat and Hanan Al-Shaykh, have opted to write in Arabic, though most of their works are simultaneously translated to English. This sets my study apart from other projects that have examined the works of Arab women writers regardless of the language in which their works were originally written. The texts that I examine were all written originally in English and some are even informed by debates emerging from post-colonial theory. I believe that studying these texts will enrich our understanding of the concepts of Arab identity and diaspora, two concepts that I am interested in exploring in this thesis.

In this respect, language functions as a mode of transformation, subversion and resistance that Arab women employ to express their cultural difference in the language of the dominant culture and to challenge assumptions that literature is an elite Western discourse. As Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin argue:

Strategies of appropriation are numerous and vary widely in post-colonial literatures, but they are the most powerful and ubiquitous way in which English is transformed by formerly colonized writers. Such strategies enable the writer to gain world audience and yet produce a culturally distinct, culturally appropriate idiom that announces itself as different even though it is 'English'.⁶

In spite of the optimistic tone that colors this passage, I would like to engage with the fact that the works of post-colonial writers are nevertheless often mis/used within Western academic circles and popular culture machinery. In particular, the works of Arab women writers in diaspora have been controversially appropriated by Western publishing houses and academic circles. Citing the controversy over the West's interest in Nawal el-Saadawi's works, Amal Amireh argues that the reception of the works of Arab women in the West is closely connected to a long and complex history of 'the West's interest in Arab women as part of its interest in and hostility to Islam'.⁷ Arab women writers, Amireh argues, still carry the burden of this history, 'whose effects are too obvious to ignore'; their works are 'manipulated' to meet the expectations and assumptions of Western readers.⁸

My decision to analyze the works of Arab women writers who write in English only practically means that I have excluded writers like Hanan Al-Shaykh

⁶ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 2nd edn (London & New York: Routledge, 2002), p. 76. For a discussion of how language is used by Arab women writers as a means of subversion, see: Diya M. Abdo, 'How to Be a Successful Double Agent: (Dis)placement as Strategy in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*', in *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature*, ed. by Layla Al Maleh (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 337-69. See also: Fadia Faqir, 'Lost in Translation', *Index on Censorship*, 33 (2004), 166-70. See also: Wail S. Hassan, 'Agency and Translational Literature: Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*', *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 753-68.

⁷ Amal Amireh, 'Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers', *Al Jadid Magazine*, 2 (1996) <<http://www.aljadid.com/features/0210amireh.html>> [accessed 2 April 2009], para. 10 of 22.

⁸ Amireh, para. 12 of 22. See also: Andrea Shalal-Esa, 'The Politics of Getting Published: The Continuing Struggle of Arab-American Writers', *Al Jadid Magazine*, 15 (2009) <http://www.aljadid.com/essays_and_features/ArabAmericanWriters.html> [accessed 25 July 2010]. For a discussion of how censorship, marketing and other reasons force Arab women to write in English rather than in Arabic, see: Fadia Faqir, 'Stories from the House of Songs', in *The House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. by Fadia Faqir (Reading: Garnet, 1998), pp. 51-61.

and Betoool Khedairi because they write in Arabic.⁹ While this decision may restrict my options and problematize my definition of the expression ‘Arab British’ that I wish to propose, I believe that focusing on novels written by Arab writers in English enriches our understanding of Arab identity in diaspora as it intersects with issues of immigration, settlement, citizenship and cultural hybridity. It is my contention that the two different immigration and settlement experiences on the two sides of the Atlantic have differently influenced the literary productions of Arab writers in Britain and in the US. In this context, choosing English as a means of expression is linked, I contend, to an author’s self-presentation of his/her hyphenated identity as ‘Arab British’, an expression that I wish to propose as an identity marker.

I advocate the use of this expression when dealing with a body of literature written by a number of Arab authors who live in Britain (or between Britain and the Arab world) or who are of a mixed Arab and British marriage. In other words, I propose this expression when delineating works, written (mainly) in English, that

⁹ Also, I have excluded discussing the works of Zeina Ghandour and Sabiha Al Khemir for several reasons. First, Ghandour has written only one novel, *The Honey* (1999). Since this is mainly a comparative study, I have decided to concentrate on writers who have written two novels or more because this would give better clues about the development of their writing career. It is nearly the same reason that has pushed me to exclude Al Khemir since she published her first novel *Waiting in the Future for The Past to Come* in 1993 and published her second novel *The Blue Manuscript* in late 2008 by the time I had selected my texts. In addition, unlike Soueif, Aboulela and Faqir, who have filtered through educational systems set up/influenced by British colonialism and governance, Al Khemir filtered through a Tunisian educational system that is greatly influenced by French colonialism. The different educational policies practiced and imposed by British and French colonial administration in different Arab countries have differently shaped the future and the attitudes of Arab graduates of these educational apparatuses. The British colonial administration in Egypt, Sudan and Jordan allowed school education to be in Arabic. On the other hand, France adopted a different approach through conducting education in French. For a writer like Al Khemir who grew up in Tunisia, French language (and culture) must have left its impact on her thoughts and literary productions. For more information on how different approaches by colonial powers have differently influenced Arab writers, see: Geoffrey Nash, *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English* (Oxford & Bern: Peter Lang, 2007), especially pp. 17-21. For a recent essay on Al Khemir’s work, which examines how French culture leaves its mark on the Al Khemir’s works, see: Mohamed-Salah Omri, ‘Voicing a Culture “Dispersed by Time”: Metropolitan Location and Identity in the Literature and Art of Sabiha Al Khemir’, in *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream*, ed. by Zahia Salhi and Ian Richard Netton (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 53-75.

focus on the experiences of Arabs in Britain, deal with British colonial history in the Arab world and show an interest in current debates on the power imbalance between Britain and the Arab world. These works also reflect on the discourses of immigration, politics, economics and cultural exchange. Furthermore, the number of Arab writers who live in Britain and write in English has increased recently due to different socio-economic, political and ideological reasons, and hence, the expression 'Arab British' can be duly used to refer to this group of writers.

Arab British writers include: Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Zeina Ghandour, Leila Aboulela, Sabiha Al Khemir, Tony Hanania, Jamal Mahjoub and Robin Yassin-Kassab. That women outnumber men in this list is another reason that encourages me to focus on the works of Arab women rather than Arab men in Britain. Layla Al Maleh describes Arab British literature as 'mostly female, feminist, diasporic in awareness, and political in character'.¹⁰ The literature produced by these writers centers on the struggles of an Arab character who moves between Britain and the Arab world and it engages in a cross-cultural dialogue that revolves around socio-political themes such as marriage, love, friendship, academic research, work, religion, immigration and (self) exile. More recently, this literature has started to show an interest in second generation Arabs growing in Britain.¹¹

¹⁰ Al Maleh, 'Anglophone Arab Literature: An Overview', in *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, ed. by Al Maleh, p. 13.

¹¹ In this study, I will concentrate on Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* as heralding a new era in the representation of Arab immigration and settlement in Britain. Tony Hanania and Jamal Mahjoub have touched on this theme in their works. More recently, Robin Yassin-Kassab explores the theme of a second generation Arab British identity in *The Road from Damascus* (2008). Other Arab British women writers have not focussed on the representation of Arab immigration and settlement experiences in Britain in their novels although the plots of some of these novels are set in Britain and involve travel from the Middle East to Britain. For example, Leila Aboulela's *The Translator* (1999) shows little interest in the subject of growing up in Britain as an Arab. After the death of her husband in a car accident, Sammar returns with her son, Amir, to Sudan. She leaves him with his grandmother and returns alone to Scotland. It is not until Sammar and Rae agree to get married and to settle in Scotland that Sammar decides to take Amir with her. The theme of immigration, settlement and

Whether Arab British or Arab Americans, these authors straddle two cultures. They skilfully blend their Arab cultural heritage in their writings. Their position promotes, though not unproblematically, a common ground that bridges the gaps between cultures. They inhabit what Ahdaf Soueif calls the Mezzaterra, ‘a ground valued precisely for being a meeting-point for many cultures and traditions’.¹² Soueif argues that in the Mezzaterra ‘the language, the people, the landscape, the food of one culture [is] constantly reflected off the other’.¹³ Whereas Soueif describes the Mezzaterra as a potentially fruitful contact zone where cultures interact and constantly hybridize each other, she also maintains that the world political order since the nineties has ‘undermine[d] every aspect’ of this ‘open and hospitable’ space.¹⁴ Soueif argues that this political turmoil has provided more incentives for Arab writers to write in English in order to demystify their cultures and to restore the Mezzaterra. With a contrapuntal vision, Arab writers try to bridge the gaps between cultures and to leave corridors of dialogue open. Their belief in the potential of open dialogue and its role in preserving harmony are prompted by their contrapuntal perspective shaped by their hyphenated identities.¹⁵

growing up in Britain is peripheral to the novel’s main theme of cross-cultural dialogue. This pattern is repeated in Soueif’s *The Map of Love* (1999) as the novel ends when Anna returns to Britain with her daughter Nur. The novel is not interested in tracing Nur’s experience of growing up in Britain as a Briton of Arab descent. Through its depiction of a second generation Arab British boy who insists that he is an Arab even though he cannot speak Arabic, *My Name is Salma* draws the reader’s attention to an Arab British community coming of age.

¹² Ahdaf Soueif, *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground* (London: Bloomsbury, 2004), p. 6.

¹³ Soueif, p. 8.

¹⁴ Soueif, p. 8.

¹⁵ Reading contrapuntally is Said’s strategy for unveiling how the crucial presence of the empire emerges in canonical texts such as Austin’s *Mansfield Park*. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues: As we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts (p. 59, emphasis in original). What interests me here is Said’s dismissal of a univocal interpretation in favour of multifarious readings. Hence, my employment of the term contrapuntal has to do with perspective rather than reading. In other words, Arab British or Arab American authors have contrapuntal perspectives informed by their hyphenated identities.

In employing the expression of contrapuntal, Said shows his appreciation for the counterpoint of Western classical music where ‘various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one’.¹⁶ As Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia argue, the idea of the contrapuntal reflects Said’s own identity as a site of overlapping ideologies and exilic experiences:

Contrapuntality emerges out of the tension and complexity of Said’s own identity, that text of self that he is continually writing, because it involves a continual dialogue between the different and sometimes apparently contradictory dimensions of his worldliness.¹⁷

Just like Said himself, writers like Ahdaf Soueif who live between two cultures often have contrapuntal perspectives that ‘can make connections between quite discrepant experiences’.¹⁸ These authors occupy, to use Homi Bhabha’s words ‘a third space [. . .] where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates tension peculiar to borderline existence’.¹⁹ Bhabha invites us to consider how this space ‘may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*’.²⁰

Recently, a number of monographs, collections of essays and special issues of academic journals have focused on the hybridized nature of the works of Arab American and Arab British writers. These critical and analytical works have

¹⁶ Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993), pp. 59-60.

¹⁷ Bill Ashcroft and Pal Ahluwalia, *Edward Said* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 92.

¹⁸ Ashcroft and Ahluwalia, p. 94.

¹⁹ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 312.

²⁰ Bhabha, p. 56, italics in original. Speaking from the perspective of an Arab American writer, Laila Halaby reflects on how her hyphenated identity is a site of conflict between creativity, ethnicity and market and publishing interests. In an interview, Halaby states:

In terms of writing, a hyphenated title immediately *relegates* you, as a writer, to a lesser category, a by-product of American culture rather than a part of it, though in terms of marketing, I think it is *helpful* for my publisher to say that I am an Arab American author and therefore a credible voice (p. 2). For the complete interview, see: Steven Salaita, ‘Interview with Laila Halaby,’ <[http://www.rawi.org/interviews/interviews%20 halaby .pdf](http://www.rawi.org/interviews/interviews%20halaby.pdf)> [accessed 22 April 2009].

highlighted the connections between religion, class, education and gender among other socio-political and historical issues and avoided the ethnographic approach that dominated earlier studies on Arab writers. Examples include Rasheed El-Enany's *Arab Representations of the Occident: East-West Encounters in Arabic Fiction* (2006), Anastasia Valassopoulos' *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (2007), Geoffrey Nash's *The Anglo-Arab Encounter: Fiction and Autobiography by Arab Writers in English* (2007), Lindsey Moore's *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film* (2008) and Amal Talaat Abdelrazek's *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* (2008). Through the employment of multifarious approaches, such as feminist, post-structuralist and post-colonialist, these publications have offered insightful and productive readings of texts by Arab writers.

Collections of essays include: *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels* (2002) edited by Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman, and Therese Saliba; *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream* (2006) edited by Zahia Salhi and Ian Richard Netton, and *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* (2009) edited by Layla Al Maleh. In addition, in August 2010, *Feminist Theory* published a special issue on Arab feminism edited by Anastasia Valassopoulos. The issue has focused on the works of Arab women in the form of analytical essays, discussion boards and book reviews.

Each of these publications makes a significant contribution to the field and enriches our understanding of the cultural and contextual frameworks in which the works discussed are produced. For example, Abdelrazek concentrates on the works

of Arab American women writers only. She discusses in depth the works of Leila Ahmed, Diana Abu-Jaber, Mohja Kahf and Laila Halaby. Abdelrazek shows how the hyphenated identities of these writers have contributed to shaping their works.

Valassopoulos, on the other hand, revisits some of the well-established Arab women writers 'alongside authors whose work has attracted far less attention'.²¹ Working on works written originally in English but also mainly translated into English, Valassopoulos adopts a multifaceted approach to studying these works.

Valassopoulos calls for examining how existing concepts that have come to prominence via post-colonial theory 'have made it possible to examine Arab women's writing from a wider perspective that does not give prominence to any one means of influence (such as religion, politics, ethnicity, etc.)'.²²

Moore's book addresses ways in which women deploy voice and vision in the transformations of discursive and scopic paradigms that have attempted to apprehend the Arab Muslim woman and continue to do so today.²³ She argues that 'women foreground counter-hegemonic perspectives but also problematize their own acts of speaking and looking [. . .] because of risks incurred in representing *other* women'.²⁴ Building on Valassopoulos and Moore's argument, I will further investigate the recent works of Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir and Leila Aboulela within the context of their identities as *Arab British* women writers and activists. The works of these three writers will be thematically examined in conjunction with my analysis of the works of Arab American women writers Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby.

²¹ Anastasia Valassopoulos, *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), p. 2.

²² Valassopoulos, p. 22.

²³ Lindsey Moore, *Arab, Muslim, Woman: Voice and Vision in Postcolonial Literature and Film* (London & New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 1.

²⁴ Moore, p. 15, italics in original.

Al Maleh's book includes a number of articles on the works of Soueif, Faqir and Aboulela in addition to other Arab writers who use English as a means of expression. Al Maleh's introduction to *Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature* provides a helpful survey of the literature written in English by Arab writers and writers of self-identified Arab descent. However, it might have been useful to have some brief background information about the immigration and settlement experiences of these authors or the communal dynamics that shape their works in one way or another. As with Nash, Al Maleh traces anglophone Arab literature to the turn of the last century 'when the first Arabs to emigrate to the USA had to grapple with the language and culture of the host country'.²⁵

Al Maleh also discusses the works of writers between 1950 and 1970 including Edward Atiyah, Isaak Diqs, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, Waguih Ghali and Rima Alamuddin. Interestingly, Al Maleh points out that 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'.²⁶ I argue, however, that using the word 'predecessors' gives the misleading impression of a sense of continuity from one generation of writers to another as if the two generations shared the same socio-political experiences. This is not to say that there have not been influences. Rather, it is to suggest that these influences have also been colored by the change in the diasporic experience itself.

²⁵ Al Maleh, p. 2. Al Maleh uses the expression anglophone Arab writers to refer to Arab authors who write in English regardless of their dwelling places.

²⁶ Al Maleh, p. 7, emphasis added.

Al Maleh briefly outlines the (fictional and non-fictional) works of Jamal Mahjoub, Zeina Ghandour, Fadia Faqir and Ahdaf Soueif and also discusses the works of anglophone Arab writers in Australia before briefly discussing the works of anglophone Arab writers elsewhere, including those who live in the Arab world. Al Maleh's final introductory words are interesting and worth quoting at length:

In fact, [the] commonality between 'home' anglophone Arab writers (if such a term is ever applicable) and their 'overseas' counterparts can serve as a final word of this survey. The corpus of Arab anglophone writing, regardless of its authors' dwelling-places shares likeness rather than evincing differences; they are semblances that seem to emanate from some quasi-primordial paradigm of analogous experiences and memories; of parallel life episodes lived similarly in all of their diasporic corners of the world.²⁷

Al Maleh clearly divides Arab writers who write in English into home and overseas writers. This categorization, I argue, reinforces the idea that the overseas writers belong to one monolithic and homogenous group. While I agree with Al Maleh that Arab authors share some common cultural background and share (to varying degrees) some common religious, political, social and cultural concerns, I would like to contest the assumption that commonalities outnumber differences.

Al Maleh's statement unwittingly perhaps, in its commitment to coverage, glosses over ideological, political, gender and geographical differences among Arab writers. While there is an overwhelming agreement among Arab writers on some basic political issues (for instance, the overwhelming majority of Arab writers agree to the right of Palestinian people to establish their own independent country), more recent political events have been approached and represented differently by Arab writers. For example, Arab American novelist Laila Halaby has portrayed the repercussions of the deadly events of 9/11 in an Arab American context while Arab

²⁷ Al Maleh, p. 55.

British novelists have not yet examined in depth the impact of these attacks on Arabs in Britain.²⁸ In addition to the ideological reasons that influence an author's aesthetic rendition, the localized experiences at the hostland partly impact an author's decision to implicitly/explicitly represent the post-9/11 events. Moreover, the ambiguous position Arab communities occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in both countries intersects with market and publishing interests and greatly influences how post-9/11 anti-Arab racism is represented. Since Al Maleh concentrates on similarities and commonalities in her approach, it is unsurprising that the collection encourages an undisrupted historical narrative.

Zahia Salhi and Ian Richard Netton's edited collection puts forward a nuanced discussion of literary works produced by Arab writers in diaspora. In the introduction, Salhi alerts us to the fact that we should make a distinction between the 'various categories of the members of the Arab Diaspora [. . .] exiles, refugees, expatriates, and émigrés'.²⁹ Exiles, Salhi maintains, 'keep an idealized image of home as a paradise they were forced to flee [. . .] They share feelings of solitude, estrangement, loss, and longing'.³⁰ Salhi makes some useful observations about the traumatic nature of displacement and dislocation, though she seems to narrowly define diaspora as exile, and hence, the selected essays concentrate on the first generation of Arab writers in diaspora. Instead, I want to argue that examining the works of the children of first generation exiles and immigrants widens our

²⁸ The only exception is Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus*. I discuss this novel in more detail in the conclusion.

²⁹ Zahia Smail Salhi, 'Introduction: Defining the Arab Diaspora', in *The Arab Diaspora: Voices of an Anguished Scream*, ed. by Zahia Salhi and Ian Richard Netton (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-10, p. 2.

³⁰ Salhi, p. 3.

understanding of the concept of diaspora.³¹ That is where I find comparing the works of contemporary Arab American women writers to their Arab British peers thematically useful.³² While a critical matrix has been outlined for reading the more established Arab American literature as I explain later, I am interested here in proposing a critical framework for reading the relatively nascent Arab British literature. To do so, I believe it is important to engage with examining the limitations of expressions currently used by a host of academics in reference to writers of Arab descent who write in English.

As I have just pointed out, Al Maleh employs the expression anglophone Arab to refer to Arab authors who write in English regardless of their dwelling-places. Geoffrey Nash examines the diasporic experience in the works of Arab British writers, referring to this as the Anglo-Arab encounter. Nash maintains that the works of these writers are distinct from each other but they contribute to ‘a nexus of topics, the central link of which is the notion of Anglo-Arab encounter’.³³ Nash argues that the themes explored by Diqs, Jabra and Ghali, Arab writers who wrote in English in spite of living in the Arab world for most of their lives, connect ‘in genealogical terms’ their works to the works of earlier writers such as Ameen Rihani, George Antonius and Edward Atiyah and move this category of writing ‘through the postcolonial era and into the world of confused, dissolving identities that is synonymous with the present period of globalization’.³⁴

³¹ In particular, Avtar Brah’s concept of diaspora space is of great interest here as I explain in a few pages.

³² I discuss in Chapter One in more detail the differing themes explored by the three waves of Arab American writers.

³³ Nash, p. 12.

³⁴ Nash, p. 17.

Nash's study is illuminating and offers insights into the dynamics of Arab literary productions. Interestingly, Nash describes Ameen Rihani's novel *The Book of Khalid* as the predecessor for works by Diqs, Jabra and Ghali, whom he suggests, in turn, are the predecessors for Soueif, Aboulela and Faqir. This impression of continuity, I argue, may erase the political, ideological, gendered, nationalist and geographical differences among the three generations of writers. This conflation is reinforced when Nash states that '[a]nglophone writers of Arab origin arguably represent a constituency that is even more difficult to categorise than Arab/Maghrebi writers in French'.³⁵ By comparing and contrasting Arab, Arab British and Arab American writers to Arab/Maghrebi writers who write in French, Nash's book, unwittingly, homogenizes Arab, Arab British and Arab American writers into one group based on a shared language.

Nash's use of the expression 'anglophone Arab' writers, like that of Al Maleh, groups various writers under a single umbrella. This in turn may, to the less informed reader, obscure the differences between Arab writers who live in the Arab world and write in English and other Arab writers who live in Britain, Australia and the US. While the linguistic vehicle is similar and the audience might be the same (though this is debatable), the reasons for using the language and the social and geopolitical daily practices that may influence the language can be entirely divergent. On the other hand, the employment of the expression Arab British, I suggest, emphasizes the complexity of the identity of these writers who manifest their Arab-Islamic and British cultural heritages in their writings.³⁶ Having an Arab British cultural identity

³⁵ Nash, p. 17.

³⁶ A report, based on more than a year of discussion and meetings between scholars, activists, community leaders and academics from across Britain's Muslim communities, finds out that '[n]otions of Britishness are fluid [. . .], and it is therefore open for Muslims as for others to contribute

entails a hybridized self that is influenced by historicized cultural exchanges between Arab-Islamic and British cultures.

I am advancing the use of the term Arab British as a parallel to Arab American that has been adopted by Arab intellectuals, writers and activists in the US. The term was taken up as a sign of a pan-Arab identity that encapsulated a growing political consciousness after the 1967 defeat in the face of hostility and prejudice that the word 'Arab' generated.³⁷ I hope that my proposition of using the term Arab British will generate a debate on the (in)appropriateness of this term to Arabs living in Britain. My support for using this term comes from several convictions. First, Arab British literature has recently showed an interest in representing the challenges facing second generation Arabs as I will explain in Chapter One. Second, there is a common pattern that one can notice in the literature produced by Arab British (women) writers that sets them apart from Arab American writers or other writers of Arab descent who write in English. Specifically, the works of Arab British women writers show an interest in engaging, through dialogue and debates, with other groups in Britain.

Third, more ethnographic information about Arabs in Britain will be available in the coming few years since in the 2011 Census, Arabs will be officially recognized

to them' (p. 59). The report, published in October 2009, argues that Britishness has been understood 'as a spiritual identity that favours cultural inclusiveness as an antidote to narrow nationalism and jingoism' (pp. 59-60). In this sense, the report asserts that while narratives of Britishness provide a sense of unity and shared identity, they are also 'left open enough to allow for diversity and development' (p. 60). The report maintains that in the year-long deliberations, the notion of Britishness has emerged as 'a more inclusive and less ethnic identity than "Englishness"' (p. 61). To be British is to be part of four nations within one (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) and a nation inclusive of migrant communities too, the report concludes (p. 61). For more details, see: Yasir Suleiman and others, 'Contextualising Islam in Britain: Exploratory Perspectives' <<http://www.cis.cam.ac.uk/CIBPReportWeb.pdf>> [accessed 25 January 2010].

³⁷ In the 1967 War (the Setback), Israel occupied the remaining parts of Palestine (The West Bank and Gaza - then under the Jordanian and Egyptian administrations, respectively), the Egyptian peninsula of Sinai and Syria's Golan Heights.

as a separate ethnic group.³⁸ In addition, over the past forty years the number of Arab cultural organizations has increased in Britain prompted by a combination of an increasing interest in and hostility towards a(n) (in)visible Arab population in Britain.³⁹ This is echoed in the availability of magazines that are interested in promoting Arabic literature and culture in Britain, such as *Banipal* and the *Middle East International Magazine*, and internet-based cultural and discussion groups on Facebook and Twitter.

Significantly, political crises involving Arabs and Arab countries, such as the two Palestinian uprisings (*intifada*) in 1988 and 2001, the Israeli attack on the Gaza Strip at the turn of 2009, the continuous Israeli aggressions on south Lebanon, the latest of which took place in 2006, and the events of 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror, all have created and continue to create a pan-Arab identification among Arabs in diaspora. In fact, post 9/11, Arab organisations have ‘creat[ed] spaces where it is safe to be an Arab’.⁴⁰ Through these spaces, Arab activists ‘attemp[t] to instil knowledge of and pride in their heritage [and] to teach children the language and culture’.⁴¹ Recently, social networks for Arabs in their 20s and 30s have been established in London, Sheffield, Birmingham and Liverpool. These *new* spaces

³⁸ See: BBC, ‘2011 Census Questions Published’, *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8318637.stm> [accessed 21 October 2009]. My suggestion of employing the term Arab British pre-dates this announcement.

³⁹ These institutions include: The Council for Arab-British Understanding (CAABU) which was founded in 1967, The National Association of British Arabs (NABA) and British Arab Association (BAA), founded in 2009. Now that the football club of Manchester City is owned by an Arab investment group, it may help foster a sense of belonging to Britain among Arab youths in Manchester (and Britain) depending, among other socio-political factors, on whether the owners intend to turn the club to a long term Arab affiliated entity or to sell out when market conditions allow.

⁴⁰ Lynn A. Staeheli and Caroline R. Nagel report that in response to measures taken by (British and US) governments to increase security for ‘those whose membership in society is unquestioned’, Arabs and Muslims in both countries have reported increased ‘feelings of *insecurity*’ (p. 794). As a response, Arab and Muslim organizations have created spaces where it is safe to be an Arab or a Muslim. For more details, see: Lynn A. Staeheli and Caroline R. Nagel, ‘Rethinking Security: Perspectives from Arab-American and British Arab Activists’, *Antipode*, 40 (2008), 780-801.

⁴¹ Staeheli and Nagel, p. 794.

further boost the sense of a community because they are open only for Arabs.⁴² In addition, since 9/11 Arab satellite news channels, Al-Jazeera in particular, have greatly contributed to ‘creating a *pan-Arabic* and Muslim transnational public sphere’.⁴³ Finally, all these factors combine together to help increase the visibility of Arabs in Britain in a way that helps them assume their responsibilities and duties as active British citizens.

Writing in 1992, Camillia Fawzi El-Solh asks, ‘how valid is it to speak of the Arab community in Britain?’⁴⁴ El-Solh argues that on one level this term is applicable ‘as a collective category, where history, culture and a consciousness of belonging function as common denominators overriding class-based, religious, political and linguistic differences’.⁴⁵ El-Solh argues that this collective consciousness was activated during the 1991 Gulf War, when Arabs of different national/socio-economic origins and political persuasions reacted in similar ways to what they perceived to be a double standard fuelling this war. Similarly, a collective Arab identity tends to crystallize around the Palestinians and their right to self-determination. However, El-Solh maintains, the activation of a collective identity in response to a particular set of circumstances does not cancel other configurations of commonalities or cleavages within and between Arab communities. These are, in turn, influenced by a number of variables, such as national origin, socio-economic status, religious/sectarian and political affiliations, dialect, generational and gender differences, as well as numerical strength and length/location of settlement in Britain.

⁴² Staeheli and Nagel, p. 794.

⁴³ Zahera Harb and Ehab Bessaiso, ‘British Arab Muslim Audiences and Television after September 11’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 32 (2006), 1063-76 (p. 1073).

⁴⁴ Camillia Fawzi El-Solh, ‘Arab Communities in Britain: Cleavages and Commonalities’, *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*, 3 (1992), 236-58 (p. 243).

⁴⁵ El-Solh, p. 243.

An exploratory survey published in 2009 by the think tank Atlantic Forum on Arabs in Britain confirms that the term “British Arab” is a meaningful one with which people of Arab ethnicity living in Britain do identify’ regardless of their country of origin.⁴⁶ However, the report maintains that while Arabs may consider their own identity as both British and Arabs to be straightforward, ‘they are unsure how cohesive the British Arab community as a whole is’.⁴⁷ In a sense, this report supports El-Solh’s stipulation that as we address the commonalities among Arabs in Britain, we should be aware of the differences among them. In this respect, El-Solh asserts that two patterns are broadly discernible when studying Arab communities in Britain. The first pattern pertains to ‘horizontal ties cutting across national origin’ and the second broad pattern is related to ‘vertical ties activated within a particular national group’.⁴⁸ Both patterns, however, tend to manifest commonalities and cleavages in complex ways.⁴⁹

With these considerations in view, my work examines the literature written by Arab women writers in the US and in Britain within certain thematic frameworks and specific geo/socio-political contexts. Through a careful selection of Arab women writers from both sides of the Atlantic, I intend to analyze and compare their works. I am interested in delineating differences and similarities between the two groups whilst also pointing out internal differences among Arab American and Arab British women writers. A poetics of Arab American literature has convincingly been

⁴⁶ Atlantic Forum, ‘British Arabs: Identity, Politics and Community’, <<http://www.atlanticforum.org/cgi-bin/download.cgi>> [accessed 30 October 2009], p. 12. The report concedes that there are inherent biases in the sample due to the inclusion of individuals who are in Britain specifically for the purpose of education, and the over-representation of those who have access to computers and the internet.

⁴⁷ Atlantic Forum, p. 16.

⁴⁸ El-Solh, pp. 243-44.

⁴⁹ For more details, see El-Solh, especially pages 243-49 where El-Solh highlights the complexities of the horizontal and vertical ties, as well as the impact of a multitude of variables pertaining to both the host and the home societies, respectively.

established over the past thirty years.⁵⁰ I would like to propose here a poetics of Arab British literature by drawing on the works of Arab British women writers and comparing them to their Arab American counterparts. Whilst I agree that writers in Britain are heterogeneous in their national origins, age and ideological affiliations, I believe that they can still be grouped under the umbrella of Arab British as this study will show.

The works I draw on were written between 1999 and 2007. Arab British women novelists are represented by Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela and Fadia Faqir, while the Arab American novelists are Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby. Arab American women writers selected here are members of the third wave of Arab American writers and come from mixed Arab and American backgrounds while Arab British women writers are mainly first generation authors. As Evelyn Shakir explains, members of the third wave of Arab American writers have expressed a distinct Arab American identity in their works. Arab American literature published since the 1980s, Shakir argues, testifies to ‘a sea change’ in the way Arab Americans began to perceive their identities and see themselves.⁵¹

In this case, the comparison between the first wave of Arab British writers and the third wave of Arab American writers is constructive and suggestive because both groups identify as Arabs, engage with issues of their racialization and marginalization and frame their works within a globalized socio-political and

⁵⁰ For an overview of the themes explored by three waves of Arab American writers, see: Evelyn Shakir, ‘Coming of Age: Arab American Literature’, *Ethnic Forum: Bulletin of Ethnic Studies and Ethic Bibliography*, 13 (1993), 63-80. See also: Taynyss Ludescher, ‘From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature’, *MELUS*, 31 (2006), 93-114. See also: Gregory Orfalea, ‘The Arab American Novel’, *MELUS*, 31 (2006), 115-33.

⁵¹ Shakir, p. 70. Shakir attributes this change in interests to the arrival of a new wave of immigrants from the Arab world who ‘rekindle[d] a sense of ethnicity in the established community and promoted a sense of kinship with the Arab world in general’ (p. 70).

economic context. On the other hand, I believe there is little to be gained in comparing - for the purposes of this study - the works of the first wave of Arab American writers to the works of first wave of Arab British writers because of the historical gap that separates both groups, the different political, economic and social contexts in which they have lived and the thematic differences that permeate their works.

In this study, I argue that there is a tendency among Arab British women novelists to foreground a cross-cultural dialogue and represent a cross-ethnic identification strategy in a more pronounced way than their Arab American women peers who tend, in turn, to employ different literary strategies to resist stereotypes and misconceptions about Arabs in American literary productions and popular culture. In other words, Arab British women writers seem less restricted in their attempts to create links between the Arab characters they depict and other characters from different ethnic backgrounds. Arab American women writers, I argue, while aware of the importance of a cross-ethnic alliance, tend to focus on the contradictions within the Arab American community and prioritize this investigation over other themes. In this context, while non-Arab characters (whites and non-whites) seem to be key players in the works of Arab British writers, mainly Arab and white characters seem to be the main characters in the works of Arab American novelists. The works of Faqir and Aboulela positively portray non-white ethnic characters and give them major roles. In contrast, African Americans, Native Americans, South Asians and Latin Americans are marginal characters in the works of Abu-Jaber and Halaby.

This major difference between the two sets of writers is a result, I argue, of the different ways in which Arabs immigrated and eventually settled in the two countries. While Arabs in the US are officially categorized as Caucasian/White, in Britain they are officially classified as an ethnic group. I do not intend to overemphasize the autobiographical elements in the works written by Arab British and Arab American women writers, but I want to show that the position Arabs occupy in discourses on ethnicity and multiculturalism in Britain and the US has, to varying degrees, influenced these writers' own sense of identity and has been reflected in their works. As Moore reminds us, '[a]n interfacing of autobiographical and fictional modes can be a vital part of a text's self-staging, facilitating a reflexive approach to representational practices'.⁵²

While Arab Americans have a long history of uncertain ethnic classification that was finally resolved in courts, Arab British have tended to be marginalized and rendered invisible in the racial and ethnic discourses in Britain. In fact, the discussion of Arab socio-political experiences in Britain in mainstream publications is usually subsumed by the debate on South Asian-dominated Muslims in Britain.⁵³ Moreover, unlike Arab American authors, who are a combination of first, second, third and fourth generation citizens, Arab British writers are predominantly first generation exiles, academics, refugees and professionals. This disparity is reflected thematically.

⁵² Moore, p. 14.

⁵³ I will elaborate on this question in Chapter One and the conclusion. Usually, there is only one or at most two chapters on Arab communities in edited books on Muslims in Britain. For instance, Hopkins and Gale's collection on Muslims in Britain includes only one article on Arabs in Britain. Arabs in the US are now classified as Caucasian/ White. In Chapter One, I will refer to some famous court hearings that have contributed to the current racial and ethnic classification of Arabs in the US as whites. Recent research on the perspectives of Arab British on religion, politics and the public by Caroline Nagel and Lynn Staeheli shows that while Arab activists say that they 'cannot escape the fact that Arabness is culturally bound up with Islam', they try to promote an Arab identity which is separate from 'a British Muslim identity, which, they argue publicises, and politicises religious affiliation' (pp. 107-8).

While Arab American fiction constantly engages with issues of anti-Arab racism and foregrounds social problems facing Arab American communities such as the concern of parents over the future of their (Americanized) children as the works of Laila Halaby, Diana Abu-Jaber, Susan Muaddi Darraj and Randa Jarrar show,⁵⁴ Arab British women writers rarely touch upon these issues and concentrate instead on a middle-class woman who lives the contradictions of her identity in a self-reflexive manner and pursues trans-cultural and cross-ethnic dialogues and coalitions.⁵⁵

In the works of Soueif, Faqir, Aboulela and Al Khemir, for instance, their plots center on a displaced Arab woman who either chooses to live in Britain in order to pursue higher education, work or is forced to live in Britain as a (self) exile or refugee. The protagonist is cut off from her country of origin for most of the narrative. Unlike her Arab American peers, she is not surrounded by an Arab community to nourish, critique, guide and control her. The protagonists interact with people of different ethnic backgrounds and engage in a cross-cultural dialogue and a cross-ethnic alliance, a theme that permeates the works of Arab British women novelists. Soueif, Al Khemir and Aboulela's protagonists think of their existence in Britain as temporary.⁵⁶ They are there to either pursue degrees or to work. For example, although Aboulela's British-born protagonist Sammar holds a British passport, she has never made use of this privilege. The room she lives in is nearly empty. Her South Asian British colleague Yasmin lectures her on making use of the

⁵⁴ Susan Muaddi Darraj's debut novel *The Inheritance of Exile* (2007) is a good example of the preoccupation of Arab American women novelists with issues of migration and settlement, identity, generational differences, anti-Arab racism, stereotyping and (anti-)assimilationist discourses. The novel depicts the experiences of four second generation Arab girls growing up in south Philadelphia. It also depicts the heterogeneity of first generation Palestinian women immigrants to the US.

⁵⁵ Faqir's *My Name is Salma* may be an exception because the eponymous protagonist is a peasant refugee.

⁵⁶ Nevertheless, Arab British women writers have begun to probe the challenges facing second generation Arabs in Britain as this study will show through focusing on Faqir's *My Name is Salma*.

resources open to her as a British citizen, such as borrowing books from the public library. Although some psychological reasons lurk behind this lack of interaction with the community, Sammar continues to perceive herself as ‘an Other’ and identifies with marginalized people, like Rae, a Scottish academic whose positive views on Islam set him apart from mainstream scholars, and Yasmin, a second generation South Asian British Muslim secretary who feels uncomfortable in Britain.

This sense of identity and belonging is different in the works of Arab American women writers. For example, Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz* rightly draws the reader’s attention insistently to anti-Arab racism and hostility. However, in their ambivalent relationships with people of color, the characters in the novel reflect the precarious position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in the US. Although Abu-Jaber’s protagonist Matussem and his daughters are singled out as non-whites, they still feel comfortable in befriending white people and living in an exclusively white neighborhood. In fact, the novel is exclusively populated by white people. It is possible to argue that Abu-Jaber’s hyphenated identity as half-Irish half-Arab American might have influenced her in representing her characters as more attached to whiteness, especially given that *Arabian Jazz* is her first novel. Though in Abu-Jaber’s second novel *Crescent* the cross-ethnic alliance theme is more polished, slippages are still discernable. Even the prevalent post-9/11 anti-Arab racism and violence that has further exposed the precariousness and fragility of the position Arabs occupy in the US has not completely severed Arab Americans’ attachment to whiteness as my analysis of Laila Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* shows.

In this context, we should always remind ourselves that the concerns of Arab British writers are not, and cannot, always be the same as those of Arab American

writers. For example, correcting misconceptions about Arab communities in popular culture is of paramount importance to Arab American writers whereas it is still a peripheral theme for Arab British writers. While Arab American and Arab British writers share a number of political concerns, the ways in which these themes are expressed through characterization, settings and contexts differ between the two groups. The repercussions of recent political events on Arab writers in both countries vary. In particular, we need to look at how Arab American and Arab British writers have responded to the events of 9/11 and the ensuing ‘war on terror’ that has targeted Arab and Islamic cultures.

While Arab American women novelists - such as Laila Halaby - have dramatized the traumatic consequences of these events on Arabs in America, Arab British women writers have not yet responded to these events in their fiction. This is partly due to the lack of visible Arab communities in Britain and a dominant conflation in public opinion of an Arab identity with a Muslim identity.⁵⁷ In other words, if Arabs in Britain were targeted in post-9/11 hate crimes, it is because they were conflated with other more visible Muslim communities such as Pakistanis and Bengalis.⁵⁸ It is precisely because a Muslim identity is associated with the more visible South Asian communities that a book like Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane*,

⁵⁷ Fred Halliday argues that up to the early 1990s people living in Britain and believing in Islam were not in the main referred to as ‘Muslims’ but by terms of ethnic or geographic significance. From around 1990, Halliday maintains, ‘it became more common to talk of a “Muslim community” in Britain, of “Islam in Britain” and of “British Muslims”’ (p. ix). Halliday argues that this shift was a consequence both of changes that had been maturing within the immigrant communities in Britain and of dramatic events in the Middle East, namely, when the campaign against Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* in 1989 coincided with the conflict over Kuwait in 1990-1991 following the Iraqi invasion of August 1990 (p. xvi). Halliday concludes that after close on two decades, such terms now appear so natural and objective that it is easy to forget how recently they came into general circulation (p. ix). See: Fred Halliday, *Britain’s First Muslims: Portrait of an Arab Community* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

⁵⁸ I am not trying to say the conflation of Arab, Middle Eastern and Muslim identities exists only in Britain and does not exist in the US, but I believe that in post-9/11 in the US people have mainly been targeted if they look Arab (Middle Eastern), while in Britain people have been targeted by racist attacks if they have adopted visible Muslim identity markers.

published in 2003, portrays the repercussions of 9/11 on the Bengali community in London.⁵⁹

One way of explaining the thematic differences between Arab American and Arab British women writers is through carefully investigating the contexts in which they are writing. Here, I highlight the differences between the immigration and settlement experiences of Arabs in Britain and in the US. I find this contextualizing essential because the study of literature cannot be separated from the study of its social context. One cannot comprehensively write about diaspora without discussing historical and current debates on the different integration policies in the host countries. My aim here is to provide a much needed historical perspective and to demonstrate how the very definition of ‘Arab’ in the two countries has influenced the literature produced by each group in every country. The concept of identity, I argue, is quite central to discussing the works of Arab women writers in diaspora.

Avtar Brah reminds us that the concept of diaspora should be understood as ‘an ensemble of investigative technologies that historicise trajectories of different diasporas, and analyse their relationality across fields of social relations, subjectivity and identity’.⁶⁰ Perhaps, Brah’s greatest contribution to the study of diaspora is manifested by what she calls ‘diaspora space’.⁶¹ Brah argues:

Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural and psychic processes. It addresses the global condition of culture,

⁵⁹ According to Hopkins and Gale, the majority of Muslims in Britain are of South Asian heritage, with Pakistanis constituting the single largest group: 43% of Muslims in England, 33% in Wales and 67% of Muslims in Scotland are of Pakistani origin (p. 4).

⁶⁰ Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996), p. 180.

⁶¹ Brah, p. 181.

economics and politics as a site of ‘migrancy’ and ‘travel’ which seriously problematises the subject position of the ‘native’.⁶²

Brah rightly insists that each diaspora ‘must be analysed in its historical specificity’ if the concept of diaspora is to serve as a useful heuristic device.⁶³ The identity of the diasporic imagined community ‘is far from fixed or pre-given’ because it is constituted within the crucible of every day experience; in the daily stories ‘we tell ourselves individually and collectively’.⁶⁴

Similarly, Stuart Hall calls for thinking of identity as a “‘production” within, not outside representation’.⁶⁵ He proposes that there are two different ways of thinking about cultural identity. The first position, Hall argues, defines cultural identity in terms of one shared culture, ‘a sort of collective “one true self”’.⁶⁶ This means that our cultural identity reflects the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as “‘one people”” with fixed and unchanging frames of reference ‘beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history’.⁶⁷ The second position of cultural identity recognizes that as well as the many points of similarity, there are also ‘critical points of deep *difference* which constitute “what we really are”’.⁶⁸ Cultural identity, Hall stipulates, belongs to the future as much as to the past. For Hall, then, diasporic identities are not defined by essence or purity. On the contrary, they are defined by:

the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by hybridity. Diaspora identities [. . .] produc[e] and

⁶² Brah, p. 181.

⁶³ Brah, pp. 182-83.

⁶⁴ Brah, p. 183.

⁶⁵ Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 1990), pp. 222-37 (p. 222).

⁶⁶ Hall, p. 223.

⁶⁷ Hall, p. 223.

⁶⁸ Hall, p. 225, italics in original.

reproduc[e] themselves anew, through transformation and difference.⁶⁹

Hall's argument is echoed by Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg who argue that 'syncretic practices and identities are differently gendered, raced, and classed'.⁷⁰ They also call for a third time-space ethnographic examination which 'involves guerrilla warfare of the interstices, where [. . .] categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, [and] nation' are constantly questioned and ruptured.⁷¹ Lavie and Swedenburg argue that third time-space 'remains anchored in the politics of history/location'.⁷² Although Lavie and Swedenburg acknowledge that it is difficult to give a vivid image of third time-space because of 'its fleeting, shifting and emergent character' and it might be seen as a utopian space the outlines of which can be vaguely made out, they call for a careful examination of the 'daily realities' for a better understanding of the third time-spaces.⁷³

The works of Brah, Hall, Lavie and Swedenburg draw our attention to the complexity of diasporic identities. In this context, the works of Arab American and Arab British writers, I argue, need to be framed within racialized historical processes that have influenced their identities and their literary productions. Their different geo-political contexts have greatly affected their creative writing. In this way, the literary productions of these authors reflect the heterogeneity of Arab cultures and the intersectionality of class, gender, race, religion, political affiliation and ideological stances. My emphasis on examining the socio-political contexts in which

⁶⁹ Hall, p. 235.

⁷⁰ Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg, 'Introduction: Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity', in *Displacement, Diaspora, and Geographies of Identity*, ed. by Smadar Lavie and Ted Swedenburg (Durham, NC: Duke UP, 1996), pp. 1-25 (p.10).

⁷¹ Lavie and Swedenburg, p. 13.

⁷² Lavie and Swedenburg, p. 14.

⁷³ Lavie and Swedenburg, p. 18.

Arab British and Arab American women writers produce their works will hopefully provide a helpful critical matrix and framework.

As Amal Amireh reminds us, although the works of Arab women writers are sometimes manipulated and used by the West to enforce some misconceptions about Arab-Islamic cultures, Arab women writers ‘should not be defeatist and abandon all responsibility for their reception’.⁷⁴ Amireh, hence, calls for more Arabic books to be made available in English to reflect the diversity of Arab women.⁷⁵ ‘Once Western readers are exposed to a range of styles, nuances, and ideologies’, Amireh hopes, Western readers will learn that Arab women writers are ‘individual artists, who speak in multiple tongues and belong to vibrant and diverse cultural movements’.⁷⁶ Amireh encourages critics who are aware of the original context in which these works appeared to produce serious debates about fiction because this ‘will remind readers that they are reading not documentaries, but “literature”, which draws on particular conventions and emerges from specific traditions’.⁷⁷ It is in this spirit that this thesis is written. In the following paragraphs, I will outline my research plan.

In Chapter One, I examine what I believe to be a tendency among Arab British women novelists to foreground and advocate a trans-cultural dialogue and a cross-ethnic identification strategy in a more pronounced approach than their Arab American women peers who tend, in turn, to employ different literary strategies to resist stereotypes and misconceptions about Arabs in US popular culture. While Arab Americans have a long history of uncertain ethnic classification that was finally

⁷⁴ Amireh, para. 19 of 22.

⁷⁵ Although the books that Amireh refers to are mainly those written originally in Arabic and translated into English, I also believe that books written by Arab authors in English can serve the same purpose (i.e. show the diversity of Arab women).

⁷⁶ Amireh, para. 20 of 22.

⁷⁷ Amireh, para. 21 of 22. See also: Amal Amireh, ‘Framing Nawal El Saadawi: Arab Feminism in a Transnational World’, *Signs*, 26 (2000), 215-49.

resolved in courts, Arab British have tended to be marginalized and rendered invisible in the racial and ethnic discourses in Britain. In this chapter, I draw on Arab British novelist Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* and Arab American novelist Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* to reveal the thematic differences between the works of Arab British and Arab American women writers: while Arab British characters feel certain that their future in Britain depends on interacting with people of different cultural backgrounds, Arab American characters seem to perceive themselves as a part of a larger white community outside which they maintain limited relations. In the two novels, Arabness is defined differently as a result of two different racialized immigration and settlement experiences in both countries.

Chapter Two focuses on the works of two Arab British women writers, Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela. Both writers employ themes such as hyphenated identities, the position of Arab women in the Arab-Western cultural encounter, and love and romance and foreground trans-cultural and cross-ethnic dialogues and alliances among their characters. Soueif's *The Map of Love* and Aboulela's *Minaret*, though differently, engage with recent discussions on feminism as a transnational movement. Both authors demystify some of the Arab-Islamic cultural symbols such as the veil, harem, hijab and mosque that are commonly associated with a relentless Arab and Muslim patriarchy. Aboulela's works foreground the importance of Islam in shaping the experiences of her characters, an approach that sets her apart from Soueif, and indeed, from the rest of contemporary Arab women writers. The two novels then represent the two (interlocking) strands of feminism in the Arab world: secular and Islamic feminisms. Taking into consideration that the plots of the two novels intricately represent the experiences of Arab and non-Arab women, the two

novels explore the precepts of feminism, its variants and its relationship to globalization, colonialism, imperialism and faith. In the two works, the authors foreground differences in social classes, history, cultural backgrounds, religion and political ideologies in a way that invites us to question the limits of (Western) feminism and examine how Arab women writers approach it. Through highlighting the social, cultural, historical and religious links that tie Arab and non-Arab women, the two novels reflect a tendency by Arab British women writers to go beyond cultural borders and engage in trans-cultural dialogues.

My reading of the above two novels is informed by my approach to the two novelists as Arab British women writers. My argument is based on the idea that the works of the two authors, and indeed those of other Arab British writers, are influenced by racialized immigration and settlement experiences in Britain. In Chapter Three, I concentrate on the works of Arab American women writers. The image of Arab communities is central to the works produced by Arab American authors since Arabs and Americans of Arab descent have been the victims of a long history of stereotyping and misrepresentations in US popular culture. In the first section, I will illustrate how Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* draws on and engages with Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Shakespeare's *Othello*, Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*, George Melford's silent movie *The Sheik* and Edith Hull's novel of the same title in order to subvert misconceptions about Arabs in American literature and popular culture through a strategy of intertextuality.

In the latter part of the chapter I argue that Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* subverts stereotypes about Arab women through a strategy of storytelling that highlights the heterogeneity of their experiences and reveals that the intersections of

race, class, ethnicity and religion crucially inform their lives. The novel underscores the role that the politics of location and subjective experiences play in building women's identities within communal cultural contexts. Abu-Jaber and Halaby employ their creative skills to engage with some of the problems that face Arab Americans and render Arab American communities marginalized. In other words, they concentrate on exploring the contradictions of their communities from within and explain them to the larger American community. In this way, the two authors' preoccupation with 'humanizing' their communities thwarts their attempts to adequately explore trans-cultural and cross-ethnic dialogues and alliances the way Arab British women writers do.

Since this study is interested in exploring the socio-political contexts in which Arab women writers on both sides of the Atlantic produce their works, the conclusion explores the differences between Arab British women novelists and their Arab American counterparts in their response to the events of 9/11 and the consequent 'war on terror'. While Arab British women writers have not explored in their fictions the repercussions of 9/11 on Arabs in Britain, Arab American novelists have represented post-9/11 anti-Arab racism and ensuing violence. In Britain, where discourses on racialized minorities focus on religion as Tahir Abbas argues,⁷⁸ a political British Muslim identity has become increasingly highlighted in popular anti-terror discourses in Britain. As Fred Halliday reminds us, the inclusion of a 'Muslim' category in the 2001 Census has led to the emergence of a 'Muslim' identity in Britain that 'has indeed come to occupy a central place in broader debates on

⁷⁸ Tahir Abbas, 'After 9/11: British South Asian Muslims, Islamophobia, Multiculturalism, and the State', *The American Journal of Islamic Social Sciences*, 21 (2004), pp. 26-38 (p. 27).

migration, integration and multiculturalism within Britain'.⁷⁹ I argue that since Arabs in Britain are more spatially dispersed than South Asian Muslims, and hence are less ethnically visible, Arabs have experienced post-9/11 hate crimes less directly than South Asian communities in Britain.

In contrast, in the US, 'where difference is primarily organized according to racial/ethnic categories',⁸⁰ Arab ethnicity has become increasingly politicized with the beginning of the war on terror as Arabs and Americans of Arab descent have become victims of institutional and popular racial profiling and violence.

Racialization, to borrow Amaney Jamal's words, 'serves as one prism through which Arab Americans interact with the dominant society'.⁸¹ In the post-9/11 period, ethnic origin has been increasingly used to construct an Arab American identity 'in terms of inferiority, suspicion, Otherness, and foreignness'.⁸² As Steven Salaita puts it, 'Arab Americans evolved from invisible to glaringly conspicuous (whether or not conspicuousness was welcomed)'.⁸³

The precarious position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in both countries has intersected with market and publishing interests and contributed to the ways in which post-9/11 repercussions have (not) been represented in Arab literary productions on both sides of the Atlantic. Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* goes beyond representing the consequences of 9/11 on Arab Americans to investigate (and complicate) the psychological, social, political and economic dimensions of the

⁷⁹ Halliday, p. xvi.

⁸⁰ Nadine Naber, 'Ambiguous Insiders: an Investigation of Arab American Invisibility', *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23 (2000), 37–61, p. 53.

⁸¹ Amaney Jamal, 'Conclusion: Arab American Racialization', in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11: from Invisible Citizens to Visible Subjects*, ed. by Amaney Jamal and Nadine Naber (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2008), pp. 318-26 (p. 322).

⁸² Jamal, p. 322.

⁸³ Steven Salaita, 'Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism: Arab Americans Before and After 9/11', *College Literature*, 32 (2005), 146-68 (p. 149).

experiences of Arab Americans through scrutinizing the concept of citizenship. In fact, through Jassim's and Salwa's, the novel's protagonists, different responses to post-9/11 anti-Arab racism are examined. The novel engages with the ongoing discussion of building coalitions and alliances between Arab Americans and people of color in the US in the post 9/11 era.

Chapter One
**(In)visible Arab British and Arab Americans? Migration, Settlement,
Racial/Ethnic Ambiguity and Literary Productions**

1.0 Introduction

In this chapter, I examine what I believe to be a tendency among Arab British women novelists to foreground and advocate trans-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic identification strategies in a more pronounced manner than their Arab American peers who tend, in turn, to employ literary strategies in order to resist stereotypes and misconceptions about Arabs in US culture. This significant difference between the two sets of writers is a result, I argue, of two diverse immigration and settlement patterns in the US and Britain. While I do not intend to overemphasize the autobiographical elements in the works written by Arab British and Arab American women writers, I want to show that the position Arabs occupy in discourses on ethnicity and multiculturalism in Britain and the US has, to varying degrees, influenced these writers' own sense of identity and is reflected in their works.

While Arab Americans have a long history of uncertain ethnic classification that was finally resolved in courts, Arab British have tended to be marginalized and rendered invisible in racial and ethnic discourses in Britain. Whether in Britain or in the US, there is a conflation of Muslim/Arab/Middle Eastern identities in mainstream popular culture. In this chapter, I will examine the socio-political aspects of the immigration and settlement experiences of Arab communities in Britain and the US and explore literary representations of Arab experiences in both countries. I draw on Arab British novelist Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007) and Arab American novelist Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (1993) in order to delineate the similarities and differences between Arab cultural productions on both sides of the Atlantic.

1.1 “The Other-Others”: Hidden Arabs’: Fadia Faqir’s *My Name is Salma*

Prior to *My Name is Salma*, Fadia Faqir wrote two novels: *Nisanit* (1987) and *Pillars of Salt* (1996). The two novels are set in the Middle East and explore various socio-political themes about contemporary life in the Middle East. In contrast, *My Name is Salma* is set between the Middle East and Britain. It investigates a new theme, namely immigration to Britain. The immigrant in question is a peasant woman.¹ The novel, I believe, shares, along with works by other Arab British women writers, a thematic interest in foregrounding trans-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic identification. Like other novels by Arab British women writers such as Soueif’s *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), Aboulela’s *The Translator* (1999) and Al Khemir’s *Waiting in the Future for the Past to Come*, *My Name is Salma* (1994) depicts the daily practices of an Arab woman who lives in Britain.

Salma, however, is less privileged than Soueif’s, Aboulela’s or Al Khemir’s protagonists. Salma is an uneducated and semi unskilled refugee. In addition, Faqir’s novel raises questions about the future of Arabs who live in Britain. Salma is cut off from her country of origin and arrives in Britain for a permanent stay. The novel portrays conflicts of integration, assimilation, racism and the settlement experience. In this sense, the novel builds on previous works by Arab British women writers and moves beyond them. Faqir’s attempt to depict this issue is pioneering and exploratory and draws our attention to the fact that Arab British communities are coming of age, and hence, they need to address questions of settlement, integration and identity. As Camillia El-Solh notes, while ‘[f]or the middle- and upper-middle-

¹ Although I focus in my analysis of the novel on Salma’s immigration and settlement experience in Britain, it should be noted that the novel explores others themes such as honor crimes in the Middle East, the oppression of women in patriarchal societies, the socio-economic marginalization of rural areas in the Middle East and guilt-ridden memories of a woman forced to leave behind her illegal baby. The story of Salma intertwines with the stories of other Arab and non-Arab characters.

class Arab, British mainstream society may seem less intimidating’, it can be more difficult for unskilled working-class Arabs ‘whose social status tends to perpetuate their marginalisation within the British social hierarchy’.² It is often, El Solh maintains, ‘the socio-economically marginalised Arabs who, for lack of viable alternatives, are most likely to end up setting more or less permanently in Britain, however pervasive the myth of return’.³

My Name is Salma tells the story of Salma, a teenage shepherdess who flees her home village of Hima in the Levant because of an illicit pregnancy. Her lover denounces her and her brother seeks to kill her to redeem the family’s honor. A Lebanese nun who has devoted her life to rescuing pregnant girls whose lives are threatened by their families, decides to smuggle Salma to a convent in Lebanon. Ultimately, Salma is adopted by a British nun. Miss Asher changes Salma’s name to Sally and arranges to take her to Britain. The immigration authorities question the authenticity of Salma’s papers but after a two-month detention, Salma is allowed into Britain.

In a hostel in Exeter, Salma meets Parvin, a second generation Asian British on the run from an arranged marriage. A relationship based on solidarity and sisterhood brings the two together. Parvin teaches Salma how to negotiate her everyday life by raising her awareness of the fact that she is a British citizen and is therefore fully eligible to the rights of a British citizen. Salma finds work as a seamstress at a local tailor shop. She also moves out of the hostel and lives with Liz, a descendant of a former imperialist family turned drunkard. Salma also forges a

² Camillia Fawzi El-Solh, ‘Arabs in London’, in *The People of London: Fifteen Thousand Years of Settlement from Overseas*, ed. by Nick Merriman, fore. by Colin Holmes (London: Museum of London, 1993), pp. 72-79 (p. 78).

³ El-Solh, p. 78.

friendship with Gwen, a retired Welsh headmistress. She gets married to her tutor at the Open University. Upon returning to her village in the Levant, her brother shoots her dead.

The development of the character of Salma from a Bedouin shepherdess to a successful migrant raises questions about issues of representation as spelt out in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'. Spivak criticizes conflating the desire of the oppressed and marginalized with the interests of the radical intellectual to construct an undivided political subject. This model, Stephen Morton argues, is unacceptable for Spivak since it is based on the assumption that 'the political desire of the oppressed and the political interests of the intellectual are identical, and [. . .] it falls back on a fixed and stable notion of the self that is prior to representation'.⁴ Spivak argues:

The subaltern cannot speak. There is no virtue in global laundry lists with 'woman' as a pious item. Representation has not withered away. The female intellectual as intellectual has a circumscribed task which she must not disown with a flourish.⁵

Spivak is warning against subsuming 'race and class differences' among women while trying to recover the voice of the subaltern.⁶ In this sense, Morton argues that Spivak's writing demonstrates an awareness of the ethical dangers of 'representing the disenfranchised from the standpoint of a relatively empowered,

⁴ Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity, and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), p. 108.

⁵ G. C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by C. Nelson, and L. Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), pp. 271-313 (p. 308). Spivak's stipulation has generated many responses. On the one hand, Benita Parry and Bart Moore-Gilbert criticize Spivak for not listening to the subaltern when they try to speak. Other critics, like Stephen Morton and Ania Loomba see Spivak's statement as a warning against 'romanticising and homogenising' the subaltern subject (Loomba, p. 195). See: Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005), especially pp. 13-36. See also: Ania Loomba, *Colonialism / Postcolonialism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁶ Spivak, p. 287.

diasporic intellectual'.⁷ According to Morton, Spivak is urging 'postcolonial critics and intellectuals [. . .] to invent a new idiom that is appropriate to articulate the singular histories, practices and agencies of the subaltern'.⁸

Seen from this perspective, I find Faqir's representation of Salma's experience as an Arab refugee in Britain important because it explores a *new* theme that has not been approached by previous Arab British women writers.⁹ The immigration of underprivileged Arab women to Britain is an entirely new theme and throws the door wide open to representing unskilled and undocumented Arab women migrants to the West, particularly to Britain. In this sense, Faqir's novel contributes to increasing the visibility of Arabs in Britain by drawing the reader's attention to the existence of poor and marginalized Arabs who do not fit in with the public view of Arabs as rich investors who live in affluent neighborhoods in Britain. As El-Solh puts it:

[T]he association of the term 'Arab' with oil wealth conjures up in the popular Western images of affluence spiced up with the exotic, thereby overlooking those Arabs in Britain who are trapped in menial employment or are subject to the restrictions of their asylum status.¹⁰

Portrayals of Arabs in popular media seem to contribute to this invisibility by depicting Arabs as outsiders to British culture. Two articles published in *The Economist* in 1988 and 1990 show how the lack of information on Arabs in Britain

⁷ Morton, p. 93.

⁸ Morton, p. 123.

⁹ In their analysis of Faqir's earlier novel *Pillars of Salt*, Fadia Suyoufie and Lamia Hammad question the representation of some of Faqir's characters. Commenting on the complexity of the words of Um-Saad, an uneducated woman from Amman, Suyoufie and Hammad argue: 'One may wonder here whether Um-Saad is capable of such sophisticated reflections or if this is intended by Faqir to underscore the solidarity between the writer and the fiction character' (p. 299). The same may be true for the representation of Salma. See: Fadia Suyoufie and Lamia Hammad, 'Women in Exile: The "Unhomely" in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*', in *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, ed. by Al Maleh, pp. 271-312.

¹⁰ El-Solh, pp. 72-73.

has contributed to the marginalization of Arab British, both politically and socially. For instance, a columnist argues that '[t]he Arabs, happy to live in their self-contained world, have felt a little need to enlighten' the British about their culture.¹¹ The 1990 article entitled 'An Unsettled Minority' claims that 'Arabs are divided over the question of whether they are Britons who happen to be Arabs or Arabs who happen to be in Britain'.¹² The article downplays statements by Arab activists that Arabs living in Britain '[are] more and more certain that their future lies in Britain'.¹³ In both articles Arabs are presented as an exotic and isolationist group that does not belong in Britain.

Interestingly, an essay in *The Nation* writes back to the accusations that the Arabs are not interested in explaining their culture to the British. The essay, written during the 1991 Gulf War, focuses on a decision by Britain's Court of Appeal to reject a judicial review of the grounds for 'internment and deportation' of Palestinians, Iraqis and others of Arab descent living in Britain.¹⁴ The Court's decision was based on the idea that the evidence of wrongdoing is not necessary in their case because "those who are able most effectively to undermine national security are those who least appear to constitute any risk to it".¹⁵ What the three articles show is that Arabs occupy an indeterminate position in the British society as viewed by the popular media.

¹¹ Anonymous, 'In a World of Their Own', *Economist*, 17 September 1988 <<http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:7002157>> [accessed 27 October 2009], para. 10 of 10.

¹² Anonymous, 'An Unsettled Minority', *Economist*, 8 September 1990 <<http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:8848014>> [accessed 27 October 2009], para. 11 of 13.

¹³ Anonymous, 'An Unsettled Minority', para. 12 of 13.

¹⁴ Anonymous, 'Watching Rights: Arabs in Great Britain', *Nation*, 11 March 1991 <<http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1G1:10452986>> [accessed 27 October 2009], para. 3 of 11.

¹⁵ Anonymous, para. 4 of 11.

This ambiguity is caused by attitudes and stances towards Arabs and the Arab world by subsequent British governments and is informed by political circumstances and crises in the Middle East that involve British political, economic and military interests. As El-Solh reminds us, the position of Arabs in Britain ‘may be influenced as much by the ebb and flow dictating diplomatic relations between regimes in the Arab world, as it is by the barometer of political relations between Western and Arab governments’.¹⁶ The culturally, socially and politically unstable location Arabs occupy in Britain becomes clearly dangerous at times of wars and crises that involve Arab countries and governments.

In fact, Arabs are entirely marginalized in the 1991 Census in Britain, the first in British history to include questions pertaining to ethnicity and race.¹⁷ Strangely enough, in the 1991 Census, around 300,000 people were grouped under the ethnic category of ‘Other-Others’.¹⁸ Madawi Al-Rasheed argues that the ‘Other-Others’ category is the nearest approximation that is available for the Arab population in Britain, although it is very much more heterogeneous.¹⁹ Al-Rasheed argues that some Middle Easterners have ticked the ‘white’ box because they do not know that it refers ‘solely to White people of European origin’.²⁰ She stresses that the exact number of Arabs in Britain is consequently unknown. However, Al-Rasheed stresses that labor migration and involuntary migration to Britain have created ‘heterogeneous

¹⁶ El-Solh, ‘Arabs Communities in Britain’, p. 237.

¹⁷ Ceri Peach, ‘Introduction’, in *Ethnicity in the 1991 Census*, 4 vols, ed. by Ceri Peach (London: HMSO, 1996), II, pp. 1-24 (p. 1).

¹⁸ In the 2011 Census, ‘Arab’ will be introduced as an ethnic category for the first time. See: BBC, ‘2011 Census Questions Published’, 21 October 2009, *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/8318637.stm> [accessed 21 October 2009]. A report by Atlantic Forum (cited in the introduction) strongly recommends including ‘Arab’ as an ethnic category in the Census Population and in the Ethnic Monitoring scheme to ‘generate better national and regional information about this group for use in providing community services’ (p. 34).

¹⁹ Madawi Al-Rasheed, “‘The Other-Others’: Hidden Arabs”, in *Ethnicity in the 1991 Census*, 4 vols, ed. by Ceri Peach (London: HMSO, 1996), II, pp. 206-20 (p. 206).

²⁰ Al-Rasheed, p. 207.

subgroups within the Arab community'.²¹ '[T]he *exclusion* of certain groups from the census', Caroline Nagel reminds us, 'is as significant as the *inclusion* of others in uncovering how societies construct and interpret "race" and ethnicity'.²² Estimates based on foreign-born labor statistics place the Arab population at about 200,000 people, exceeding the estimated populations of Britain's Bangladeshi and Chinese communities, who do have census categories.²³

The absence of the Arab population from public discourse in Britain raises several questions such as the criteria by which a group is deemed a minority group, why a group that is considered a clear "racial minority" in one European country is not considered as such in Britain, and why some groups but not others are enumerated as "racial" or "ethnic" groups.²⁴ Nagel maintains that Arabs in Britain are neither 'assimilated into the social and ideological structures of "mainstream" Englishness and whiteness nor into publicly recognised categories of "race", "multiculturalism" or "diversity"'.²⁵ They are, instead, as the census reveals, the "Other-Others": foreigners rather than minorities who fit uneasily into the system of racial categories and identities established over decades of race relations and immigration politics.

In representing the experiences of Salma in Britain, the novel is foregrounding the dilemma of Arab refugees who are rendered invisible by virtue of their ethnicity and their social status. In addition to the socio-political factors that Al-Rasheed and Nagel address, the novel, albeit fictionally, draws attention to gender as

²¹ Al-Rasheed, p. 212.

²² Caroline Nagel, 'Hidden Minorities and the Politics of "Race": the Case of British Arab Activists in London', *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 27 (2001), 381-400 (p. 381, italics in original).

²³ Nagel, p. 382.

²⁴ Nagel, p. 382.

²⁵ Nagel, p. 389.

yet another aspect that needs to be adequately discussed when examining the marginalization of Arabs in discourses on race and ethnicity in Britain. As an Arab immigrant, Salma seems invisible. When the people Salma meets try to guess where she comes from, it never occurs to them that she is an Arab:

‘Where do you come from?’

[. . .]

‘Guess?’

The list, as usual, included every country on earth except my own.

‘Nicaragua? France? Portugal? Greece? Surely Russia?’²⁶

In a shop that sells ‘ethnic’ products, Salma walks ‘[a]mong the Indian peacocks, Buddhas, Mexican parrots and quilts and Chinese tables’ and rushes out ‘through the African door’ to the street (p. 30). Finding no trace of anything Arab in this shop ‘that sells ethnic artefacts’ comes as a shock (p. 27).

Salma is always reminded of her foreignness and displacement, hence her perceived continuous sadness is born out of a very real loneliness rather than moodiness as Max, her boss at the tailor shop, believes. Due to what seems to be a lack of belonging to a particular group, she feels comfortable when she is in transit: ‘In transit or public spaces like receptions, lobbies or waiting rooms I felt happy, suspended between now and tomorrow’ (p. 138). Her attempts to communicate with the Algerian man who owns a kebab van (incidentally the only Arab she meets in Britain) turns out to be futile as the man, in an ironic twist, is suspicious of her. He thinks that she works for MI5, but his son does not share his opinion and tells his father that he is “‘paranoid”” (p. 30). The novel here reminds us that Arabs in Britain are spatially dispersed. El-Solh discusses this point in her article on Arabs in London.

El-Solh argues:

²⁶ Fadia Faqir, *My Name is Salma* (London: Doubleday, 2007), p. 61. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

The varied class origins and educational or skill levels of these [Arab] refugees, the increasingly restrictive immigration controls and the repercussions of the economic recession [by the late 1970s and during the 1980s] have all affected their socio-economic status in Britain. Generally, unless they can prove a connection with relatives living in London, refugees are housed in the borough whose turn it is to provide them with social services and housing. This practice has inadvertently led to the increased dispersal of Arab newcomers over many parts of London and its suburbs.²⁷

As Nagel puts it, Arabs are understood in public discourse to be ‘a foreign element’ in Britain, an unsettled group of dubious character which is not part of British society and, indeed, is fundamentally inimical to it.²⁸ Interestingly, the novel is keen to present Arabs as marooned in the West, not trusting each other either. To be an Arab in Britain does not only mean to be displaced. It means to be a suspect, to be under the threat of deportation and to be unable to connect with other Arabs. *My Name is Salma* is attentive to the daily experiences of the undocumented Arab population and the complex interactions that ensue. In this way, the novel invites us to think critically about the immigration and settlement experiences of Arabs in Britain.

The earliest wave of Arab immigrants arrived in Britain during the second half of the nineteenth century, perhaps even earlier.²⁹ El-Solh argues that they included Lebanese, Syrian and Moroccan merchants who settled in urban trading centres such as Manchester.³⁰ Nevertheless, sociological studies on Arabs in Britain,

²⁷ El-Solh, pp. 75-76.

²⁸ Nagel, p. 387.

²⁹ El-Solh, ‘Arabs Communities’, p. 239.

³⁰ For a historical account of Arabs in Manchester, see: Fred Halliday, ‘The Millet of Manchester: Arab Merchants and Cotton Trade’, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 19 (1992), 159-76. Halliday argues that the growing commercial links between Manchester and the Middle East naturally led to the growth of a foreign community from that area itself, and towards the end of the nineteenth century up to one hundred and fifty Middle Eastern merchant houses had been established. They included ‘Syrians’ in the old sense of the word, from what are now Lebanon and Syria, and a smaller distinct group of merchants from Fes in Morocco. Both communities preserved their language, customs, religions and in some cases dress, and they lasted as identifiable entities into the interwar

as Al-Rasheed argues, are inadequate.³¹ El-Solh argues that the lack of research on Arabs in Britain is the result of the conflation of Muslim and Arab identities, thereby overlooking Arabs of other religious affiliations, such as Christian Arabs or Jewish Arabs that have settled in Britain. By the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries increasing numbers of Somali and Yemeni seafarers were recruited to serve in the British Merchant Navy and began to establish their own communities in numerous British ports such as Cardiff, London's East End, Liverpool and South Shields. By the late 1940s/early 1950s more nationalities such as Egyptians, Sudanese and Iraqis came to Britain, many of whom remained after completing their studies. There was also an influx of Palestinians after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948. However, by all accounts, El-Solh asserts, 'these newcomers were numerically too insignificant to form distinct ethnic communities based on national origin'.³²

Al-Rasheed, too, concedes that compared to the migration from the Commonwealth countries, 'Arab migration to Britain remained a small-scale operation until the post-second world war period'.³³ In addition, their spatial dispersal, as well as the fact that they were not clustered in specific job categories, very probably also played a part in discouraging a trend similar to that discernible among the Yemeni and the Somali seafaring communities, where ethnic boundaries

period (p. 161). The decline of the Moroccan community was produced by the loss of their home market to Japanese goods and, with few exceptions, the Moroccans left Manchester abruptly in the mid-1930s. The Lebanese-Syrian community declined for essentially similar reasons, but in a less clear-cut manner. On the one hand, the commercial prospects were less, and on the other, the second generation, anglicized in a way their parents could not become, moved out of trade and out of the community to become absorbed into British life. Some of them immigrated to the US (pp. 175-76).

³¹ Al-Rasheed, p. 218.

³² El-Solh, p. 240.

³³ Al-Rasheed, p. 211. Ghada Karmi's autobiography gives a glimpse of the Arab community in London in the late forties and early fifties, see: Ghada Karmi, *In Search of Fatima* (London: Bloomsbury, 2003).

had clearly begun to be demarcated.³⁴ The 1960s, El-Solh notes, mark an important turning point in the history of Arab settlement in Britain, both in terms of numbers and the increasing diversity of national origins and social class. The post-war economic boom enabled Arab immigrants to gain access to the British labor market.

El-Solh emphasizes that we need to distinguish between ‘a more or less random and a chain migration’.³⁵ The first pattern, she maintains, applies, for example, to skilled and semi-skilled Egyptians (mostly men) who came to Britain ‘as individual economic migrants’.³⁶ Many secured a permanent residence status or British citizenship through employment and/or through marrying British women. By all accounts, this also applied to some Iraqi and Sudanese economic migrants. Chain migration, on the other hand, applies to Moroccans recruited from rural areas in northern Morocco for employment in the hotel and catering industries in London, and to some extent in the National Health Service. They were generally confined to menial jobs with little prospect of career mobility. In the late 1960s and early 1970s many of the Moroccans brought their families over to Britain, thus transforming what was originally intended as a temporary migration into a longer-term settlement.

The civil war in Lebanon and the economic boom in the aftermath of the 1973 oil crisis, coupled with economic and political instability in some parts of the Arab region, encouraged an Arab ‘brain drain as well as a flight of Arab capital in search of investment opportunities’ in Britain.³⁷ By the late 1970s and during the 1980s, the diversity of Arab communities in Britain was further reinforced by ‘the

³⁴ For a detailed study of the Yemeni community in Britain, see: Fred Halliday, *Britain's First Muslims*.

³⁵ El-Solh, p. 240.

³⁶ El-Solh, p. 240.

³⁷ El-Solh, p. 241.

increasing influx of refugees fleeing persecution from areas such as Iraq and Somalia'.³⁸ El-Solh concedes that information of Arabs in Britain 'is hampered by the lack of accurate quantitative data'.³⁹

Some Arabs have set up their own Arab businesses in Britain, ranging from real estate and import/export ventures, to consultancy and leisure services, travel agencies and small-scale commercial enterprises. However, Ghayth Armanazi describes Arab involvement in British business life as 'skin-deep'.⁴⁰ Armanazi argues Arab businessmen tend 'to prefer the understated, almost embarrassed attitude towards any business connections or activities that may carry high profile in British life'.⁴¹ Armanazi identifies two types of Arab businesses in Britain. The first includes all retail trade, service, or light industries that are geared almost exclusively towards servicing the requirements of Arabs living in Britain and Arab tourists. The second type of Arab businesses in Britain is represented by many intermediary establishments that organize supplies to the Arab market and act as a window into the outside world for Arab commercial and investment interests.⁴² However, both types are 'largely detached from the mainstream of the British economic environment and tangential to British society and culture'.⁴³

Similarly, El-Solh argues that 'these businesses are either geared to overseas, mainly Middle Eastern, markets, or have tended to operate on the basis of quick-profit considerations'.⁴⁴ By servicing a predominantly Arab clientele, generally on a

³⁸ El-Solh, p. 242.

³⁹ El-Solh, p. 238.

⁴⁰ Ghayth Armanazi, 'Arab Participation in British Business Life', in *Arabs in Britain: Concerns and Prospects* (London: Riad El-Rayyis Books, 1991), p. 33.

⁴¹ Armanazi, p. 33.

⁴² Armanazi, p. 35.

⁴³ Armanazi, p. 35.

⁴⁴ El-Solh, p. 241-42.

seasonal basis, their economic impact on the British economy would appear to be relatively limited, El-Solh asserts.⁴⁵ *My Name is Salma* engages with some aspects of Arab experiences in Britain. The opinions of Max, a working class Englishman, are greatly influenced by British journalist reports which render Arabs as extraordinarily rich people. Max complains:

‘You know what bugs me about them [Arabs]. They come here like an army, buy houses and cars then sell their houses and cars without us hard-working English people making a sodding penny out of it. They don’t go to estate agents or dealers, no, they buy off each other’ (p. 152).

In fact, Max’s argument is predicated on the same logic that the two columns in *The Economist*, cited earlier, rely on, namely, that Arabs are a rich isolationist group who do not belong to Britain. Max’s reaction is informed by the predominant ideas that circulate in the media about Arabs as rich and affluent businessmen and merchants. Max’s opinions on Arabs seem fixed and ahistorical. For him, Arabs are a homogenous group who simply want to remain isolated from the larger British society.

It is important to note, however, that recent research on Arabs in Britain ‘destabilise[s] dominant narratives’ that Arabs stand outside the public realm as they

⁴⁵ El-Solh, p. 242. We should take into account that Armanazi’s paper was written in 1990 and El-Solh’s paper was published in 1992. Since then, Arab investments in core British businesses have increased. For instance, Dubai Ports World, though not without judicial restraints, bought British shipping and ports group P&O for £3.9 billion in 2006. See: BBC, ‘High Court Clears P&O’s Takeover’, 2 March 2006, *BBC News* <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/4765262.stm>> [accessed 12 November 2010]. Also, in 2008, Abu Dhabi United Group bought Manchester City Football Club. See: BBC, ‘Arab Group Agrees Man City Deal’, 1 September 2008, *BBC News* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/sport1/hi/football/teams/m/man_city/7591735.stm> [accessed 12 November 2010]. Since then, the Group has been involved in projects to rehabilitate the neighbourhood surrounding the club. For instance, in 2010, Manchester City signed a £1 billion agreement with Manchester City Council to develop land around Eastlands stadium in a scheme that is expected, according to *The Guardian*, to transform one of the poorest areas of the city. See: Guardian, ‘Manchester City and Council Agree £1bn Development around Eastlands’, 12 March 2010, *Guardian Sport* <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/football/2010/mar/12/manchester-city-development-eastlands>> [accessed 12 November 2010].

try ‘to bring their Arab identities into the public sphere and [. . .] encourage other community members to do so, as well’.⁴⁶ In a series of articles on Arab activists that show the heterogeneity of Arabs in Britain, Caroline Nagel and Lynn A. Staeheli discuss strategies of assimilation employed by Arabs in Britain.⁴⁷ Nagel and Staeheli argue that for Arab activists in Britain, ‘integration reflects a commitment to participation in the places where they live, but does not require residential mixing, assimilation, or denial of connections to their homeland’.⁴⁸ The activist interviewees’ understanding of integration ‘departs significantly from the notions of loyalty and conformity that increasingly characterize public discourse’ on integration in Britain as they (the activist interviewees) see the Arab British community’s ability to integrate ‘as hinging not only on their willingness to know and to respect Britain, but also on Britain’s willingness to know and to respect them’.⁴⁹ The interviewed Arab activists insist that ‘efforts to encourage participation in British life are pointless’ if the larger British society refuses ‘to recognize cultural difference or to accept the inevitability’ that the British majority must change.⁵⁰

In ‘Hidden Minorities and the Politics of “Race”: the Case of British Arab Activists in London’, Nagel reports that Arab activist interviewees argue that they need to conform to dominant ways of life and to prove their compatibility with the

⁴⁶ Caroline Nagel and Lynne Staeheli, ‘British Arab Perspectives on Religion, Politics and “the Public”’, in *Muslims in Britain*, ed. by Hopkins and Gale, pp. 95-112 (p. 96).

⁴⁷ The authors explain that they chose to speak with activists from the Arab British community for several reasons. The first reason concerned accessibility and the sensitivities involved, particularly in the post-9/11 context, with approaching and requesting interviews with people of Arab backgrounds. The second, and more important, reason related to the authors’ interest in public articulations of Arabness. Activists are not the only ones to project identities in the public sphere, but they play a salient role in creating public Arab identities and positioning these identities within existing systems of racial, ethnic, and religious identities in Britain (p. 421).

⁴⁸ Caroline R. Nagel and Lynn A. Staeheli ‘Integration and the Negotiation of “Here” and “There”: the Case of British Arab Activists’, *Social & Cultural Geography*, 9 (2008), 415-30 (p. 417).

⁴⁹ Nagel and Staeheli, p. 425.

⁵⁰ Nagel and Staeheli, p. 427.

English mainstream. Arab activists' main message, Nagel asserts, is that by keeping one's identity subtle, flexible and private, Arabs will achieve the desired outcome of having a status on a par with the mainstream while maintaining themselves as a distinct entity, implying 'that having a politicised, public, or simply visible identity is to render one's community marginal and backward and to be a stigmatised minority group'.⁵¹ In sum, the interviewees are 'ambivalent about being collapsed into existing - often stigmatised - categories', and push to be recognized as 'a distinctive cultural group' with unique political demands.⁵²

The articles of Nagel and Staeheli are illuminating. They highlight the precarious position that Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in Britain. However, these articles are based on interviews with Arab activists, mainly in London. The authors acknowledge that there is a kind of bias in the sample of interviewees since they are predominantly educated professionals. The people Nagel and Staeheli interview have also been represented fictionally in the works of Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela through the characters of Asya and Sammar, respectively. Here, I am interested in discussing the literary representation of Arab migrants and refugees and their experiences of immigration and settlement in Britain. On the one hand, the representation of refugees and migrants in Arab British fiction can enhance our understanding of the diversity and heterogeneity of Arab communities in Britain. On the other hand, the interaction of these fictional characters with their surroundings helps us delineate a poetics of Arab British literature.

Faqir's *My Name is Salma* depicts the experiences of a female Arab refugee.

While maintaining, like other Arab British women writers, an interest in

⁵¹ Nagel, 'Hidden', p. 394

⁵² Nagel, 'Hidden', p. 396

foregrounding trans-cultural and cross-ethnic identifications, Faqir's novel centralizes a marginal character both in her own community back home *and* in her life abroad. Faqir's protagonist is a lower class Arab woman immigrant, a figure that has not received enough attention in literary works and to some extent, social studies. Since Arabs occupy an ambiguous position in ethnic and racial discourses in Britain, fiction presents itself as a good vehicle through which issues around refugees and immigrants can be explored and scrutinized. In this way, literary representations can expand our understanding of the complications that accompany immigration and settlement. As Giorgio Agamben reminds us, refugees 'brea[k] up the identity between man and citizen, between nativity and nationality, [. . . and] thro[w] into crisis the original fiction of sovereignty'.⁵³

By reading *My Name is Salma* in the context of Arab immigration and settlement in Britain and the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in Britain, I do not intend to reduce Faqir's novel to a surrogate anthropological text. I do, however, wish to argue that there are thematic differences between the works of Arab British women writers and their Arab American peers which, on the one hand, reflect the divergent ways in which Arabs immigrated and eventually settled in both countries and, on the other hand, expand our understanding of concepts such as Arab identity and diaspora through literary representations. Arab British women writers seem less restricted in their attempts to create links between the Arab characters they depict and other characters from different ethnic backgrounds. Arab American women writers, I argue, while aware of the importance of a cross-ethnic alliance, tend to focus on the contradictions of the Arab American

⁵³ Giorgio Agamben, 'We Refugees', trans. by Michael Rocke, *Symposium*, 49 (1995), 114-19 (p. 117).

community and prioritize this investigation over other themes. I do not intend to overemphasize the autobiographical elements in the works written by Arab British and Arab American women writers, but I do want to show that the position Arabs occupy in discourses on ethnicity and multiculturalism in Britain and the US has, to varying degrees, influenced these writers' own sense of identity and is reflected in their works.

My Name is Salma was published in 2007, and has only been extensively examined critically by Geoffrey Nash in his book *The Anglo-Arab Encounter*. Diya M. Abdo, in her discussion of Faqir's earlier work *Pillars of Salt*, has argued that Faqir's novel 'creates a third language and space [. . .] by alienating English-speaking readers from their own language and estranging Arabic from the Arabic-speaking readership'.⁵⁴ Nash argues that *My Name is Salma* explores 'the nullification of choice in the context of globalised power systems in which the individual is transplanted across lands and cultures with next to no say in the process or its outcomes'.⁵⁵ Nash maintains that, structurally, the novel challenges the reader through breaking up Salma's story between 'a series of discrete time-blocks in Salma's life' to reflect 'the fragmentation and dislocation of her experience more successfully than a linear narrative would'.⁵⁶

Nash notes that Salma's 'multi-layered composite-self [. . .] is not so much a hybrid as a set of juxtaposed parts that do not mix though their boundary lines may meet'.⁵⁷ Nash points out that the Bedouin Arab and British/Western codes of cultures

⁵⁴ Diya M. Abdo, p. 239. See also: Suyoufie and Hammad, 'Women in Exile', in *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, ed. by Al Maleh, pp. 271-312.

⁵⁵ Nash, p. 127.

⁵⁶ Nash, p. 129.

⁵⁷ Nash, p. 130.

Salma engages with exist in ‘a condition of chiasmic separation and mutual incongruence’ and hence as readers we are never sure which aspect of Salma will predominate.⁵⁸ Nash highlights Salma’s traumatic experience of fragmentation and disconnectedness:

Faqir’s decision to invest Salma with a full stock of handicaps and vulnerabilities, compounded by the removal of all but the basic elements of choice, foregrounds her migrant alienation – caught between two worlds – and, consequentially, deepens her sense of rejection by both.⁵⁹

Nash maintains that ‘[a] dreadful determinism undermines every step she makes toward integration in the land of migration’.⁶⁰

Nash’s analysis is revealing and his focus on Salma’s experiences in Britain is powerful. He rightly points out that the novel presents a theme that has not been explored adequately by previous Arab British novelists since the eponymous protagonist is an Arab woman refugee rather than an educated middle class Arab woman.⁶¹ In this way, looking at how this Arab female refugee manages to transform her new habitat is quite significant. In this context, I am interested in investigating the strategies that Salma pursues to alleviate her intolerable experience. A closer look at Salma’s fertile relationship with her South Asian British friend Parvin reveals the

⁵⁸ Nash, pp. 130-31.

⁵⁹ Nash, p. 131.

⁶⁰ Nash, p. 133.

⁶¹ Hanan Al Shaykh’s *Only in London* (originally written in Arabic but translated to English shortly after the Arabic version appeared) is set in London. However, the ease with which the characters travel to and from Britain makes this novel completely different from *My Name is Salma*. Samir arrives in London on a mission which he completes in a few days, but he decides to stay. Even his wife and his children join him for a while. The arrival of Arab characters in Britain does not seem to be restrained by travel constraints, like acquiring visas. Although Amira, the Moroccan prostitute, explains that she has suffered upon entering Britain and acquiring British citizenship, within the novel’s context, this theme is marginal. Probably, Al Shaykh’s short story ‘I Sweep the Sun off the Rooftops’ (written in Arabic and translated into English) is more thematically connected to *My Name is Salma* since the protagonist of the story is an unskilled Arab woman migrant who narrates her experience of immigration and settlement in Britain.

embodiment of a cross-ethnic survival plan. The Salma-Parvin relationship represents an empowering feminist stance that the novel seems to positively depict.

Salma's ability to make links with other women in the novel is a theme that I wish to explore in my reading as one such empowering strategy. Salma's ability to make these links with (predominantly) women of different ethnic origins can be viewed as a process of 'transforming habitation'. Ashcroft, in *Post-colonial Transformations*, argues that the practice of habitation 'is more than the occupying of a location, it is itself a way of being within which, and through which, place comes to be'.⁶² According to Ashcroft:

Habitation is critical to the ability of colonized or dislocated people to transform that external cultural pressure which constricts them because it extends through the widening horizons of the experience of place, from the intensely personal (often regarded as the province of poetics) to the global.⁶³

In this context, Ashcroft points out that the practice of habitation involves a confrontation with boundaries which 'are fundamental to European modernity'.⁶⁴ Ashcroft argues that the most subtle way of dealing with boundaries lies in the mode of their habitation because, Ashcroft maintains, '[i]t is through habitation that the concept of boundary [. . .] may be deconstructed in post-colonial discourse, as the tenuousness of its symbolic spatial function is exposed'.⁶⁵

I would like to extend Ashcroft's argument by arguing that boundaries are not only physical borders that demarcate a country from another. Boundaries are also social, psychological, as well as ethnic and racial. In this sense, the opportunity to transform boundaries is made available to refugees, displaced people and the

⁶² Bill Ashcroft, *Post-colonial Transformations* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 159.

⁶³ Ashcroft, p. 159.

⁶⁴ Ashcroft, p. 164.

⁶⁵ Ashcroft, p. 181.

marginalized as is the experience of having boundaries reinforced. Seen from this perspective, Salma's ability to make links with women of different cultural backgrounds and ages is an act of crossing borders and transforming them 'by seeing the possibilities – the horizon – beyond them'.⁶⁶

According to Nash, *My Name is Salma* articulates 'the asylum seeker's condition that is gender-specific' and emphasizes the experience of an Arab female immigrant.⁶⁷ Salma arrives in Britain for permanent settlement as the adopted daughter of a British nun. Nevertheless, she is detained by the immigration authorities for two months. Once she enters Britain, we trace her experiences of living in diaspora. This experience is constituted through her encounter with racism, alienation, marginalization and exploitation. Faqir explores these themes in radical ways and I find in *My Name is Salma* an attempt to fictionally portray the lives of thousands of undocumented and underprivileged Arab migrants in Britain in order to draw the attention to this less represented group of people. As Agamben reminds us, because 'the refugee unhinges the old trinity of state/nation/territory – this apparently marginal figure deserves rather to be considered the central figure of our political history'.⁶⁸

The novel opens with Salma walking in Exeter in the morning but remembering her past: 'It was a new day [. . . it took me] to Hima [. . .] I used to be a shepherdess, who under a barefaced sun guided her goats to the scarce green patches with her reed pipe' (p. 7). We immediately recognize her as a displaced and marginalized refugee whose status, as Agamben points out, 'is always considered a

⁶⁶ Ashcroft, p. 182.

⁶⁷ Nash, p. 128.

⁶⁸ Agamben, p. 117.

temporary condition that should lead either to naturalization or to repatriation'.⁶⁹

When she passes by HM Prison in Exeter, Salma reveals to us that she is 'on the wrong side of the black iron gate' despite her dark deeds and her shameful past (p. 8).

Further along, Salma tells us that once she had her first fish and chips meal, but her mountainous Arab stomach could not digest the fat: 'Salma resisted, but Sally must adapt. I kept looking up adapt in the Oxford English Dictionary: Adapt: fit, adjust, change' (p. 9). Salma links her first experience of non-Arab food with immigration and exile: 'An immigration officer might decide to use my ability to digest fish as a test for my loyalty to the Queen' (p. 9).

Salma's entry to Britain is marked by anti-immigration sentiments and this influences her experience. Upon entering Britain as the adopted daughter of Miss Asher, the immigration officer asks her if she is "seeking political asylum?" (p. 134). Salma's adoption papers are in order but the immigration authorities question their authenticity. Minister Mahoney, Miss Asher's friend who teaches Salma English and helps her settle in Britain, exposes the authorities' unwillingness to 'create a precedent' (p. 142), highlighting what Lavie and Swedenburg call '[t]he repressive style of response' by the West towards immigrants and refugees.⁷⁰ Lavie and Swedenburg argue that:

The repressive style of response is exemplified in the hysterical talk in Western Europe about the 'invasion' and the 'flood' of immigrants, refugees, Muslims, and foreigners, and the concerted and ever escalating official efforts to stem the flow, to erect the ramparts of 'Fortress Europe,' to refuse residence to asylum seekers, to deny full citizenship rights to second- and third-generation resident 'others',

⁶⁹ Agamben, p. 116.

⁷⁰ Lavie and Swedenburg, p. 3.

and to marginalize, criminalize, and exploit the labor of undocumented Third World residents.⁷¹

The literary representations of the experiences of Salma and other marginalized people in the novel exemplify some of the ideas that Lavie and Swedenburg spell out in their argument. In face of attempts by Western governments to demarcate the borders of the nation through ongoing processes of legislation-making and law enforcement that ultimately criminalize refugees and render them as enemies of the nation, Salma, with the help of Parvin, seeks to redefine citizenship through finding a platform from which she asserts her right to exist.

As an Arab, Salma's 'precarious set of life experiences' and her isolation are, to use Nash's words, 'rendered doubly debilitating [. . . because . . .] she belongs to no recognisable diasporic community'.⁷² The term 'Arab' conjures up negative images for some characters. The porter at the hostel tells Parvin that Salma is from "[s]omewhere in the Middle East. Fucking A-rabic! She rode a camel all the way from Arabia to this dump in Exeter" (p. 14). Parvin's initial response is that she does not want to "share the room with an Arab" (p. 14). This stigmatization leads some Arabs in the novel to hide their Arabness. An Algerian waiter pretends to be French (p. 20). In other words, as an Arab, Salma is rendered an other, someone who does not fit easily in the existing racial and ethnic classifications in British popular culture. Faced with these exclusionary and essentialized social frameworks, Salma persistently fights social marginalization.

Salma continues her attempts to integrate into mainstream British society. She tries to understand British politics. She tries to 'decode the latest poll in the

⁷¹ Lavie and Swedenburg, p. 3.

⁷² Nash, p. 130.

paper', whereby Labour is leading the Conservatives by five percent (p. 23).

Watching *Spitting Images* with Liz, Salma shows an interest in knowing British politics:

'Was that the shadow Chancellor?' [Salma] asked Liz.
'No, the Prime Minister. The Chancellor does not spit,' she answered and looked at the television screen, not wanting to be interrupted.
'Who are these puppets?' I asked.
'Foreigners! Aliens like you,' she said and smiled (p. 24).

Liz insists on pushing Salma to the margins of the nation by highlighting her inability to understand British politics. In this way, the novel highlights Agamben's discussion of how refugees and citizens of the advanced industrialized states are both 'denizens', a term coined by T. Tammar to show 'that the concept citizen is no longer adequate to describe the sophisticated reality of modern states'.⁷³ In other words, the integration attempts of Salma are confronted by Liz's reluctance to accept Salma as a British citizen. As Agamben notes, 'substantial assimilation in the presence of formal differences exasperates hatred and intolerance, xenophobia reactions and defensive mobilizations will increase'.⁷⁴

While Salma feels that Britain is her country as she 'ha[s] nowhere to go' (p. 71), Liz persistently treats Salma as an alien, a person who has no right to be in Britain. Similarly, Max insists on excluding Salma from belonging to British culture. Looking at a photo of Princess Diana wearing a swimming suit, Max expresses his anger and dissatisfaction. When Salma tries to justify it, Max interrupts her: "'Sal, you don't know anything about us, the British, do you? [. . .] I don't blame you, being foreign and all'" (p. 241). In short, Salma's frequent experiences of exclusion

⁷³ Agamben, pp. 117-18.

⁷⁴ Agamben, p. 118.

and marginalization make her feel ‘surrounded by high walls [. . . but] ever grateful to the host country for allowing [her] to step on its soil’, to quote Faqir’s autobiographical essay.⁷⁵ The immigration guide makes it clear that immigrants have to be passive and just follow the current.

Gradually, this sense of exclusion brings Salma closer to other marginalized people:

In the early evening the city belonged to us, the homeless drug addicts, alcoholics and immigrants, to those who were either without a family or were trying to blot out their history. In this space between five and seven we would spread and conquer like moss that grows between cracks in the pavement (p. 25).

As a refugee with no family ties and a limited financial income, Salma is a marginalized person. Her survival hangs on building bridges with other marginalized people: the homeless, the poor and social pariahs. Salma identifies with these people who, like her, are uprooted and rendered powerless. As a group, refugees, to borrow Agamben’s words, ‘call into question the very principle of the inscription of nationality and the trinity of state/nation/territory which is based on it’.⁷⁶

Just like other works by Arab British writers, *My Name is Salma* valorizes coalitions and alliances between Arab and non-Arab characters. In addition, through the portrayal of the experiences of a refugee rather than a middle-class person, *My Name is Salma* expands previous writers’ literary representations of Arab experiences in Britain in ways that give prominence to the anomalous position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in Britain. In this way, the novel is alert to the

⁷⁵ Faqir, p. 59.

⁷⁶ Agamben, p. 118.

fact that Arab communities in Britain are coming of age and they need to explore their various problems.

Nash notes that the depiction of the literary representation of the ‘Anglo-Arab encounter has pertained to historical connections going back to the era of European colonization of the Middle East’.⁷⁷ Nash maintains that Arab migrants from the *mashreq* have come to Britain ‘with no significant sense of being former colonial subjects of the British’.⁷⁸ The novel draws our attention to Arab immigrants and asylum seekers, who ‘have not typically established themselves in Britain in the same considerable numbers as communities from Asia, the Caribbean and Hong Kong have’.⁷⁹ Faqir’s decision to portray the experiences of an Arab female immigrant to Britain is an attempt to think about the future of Arabs in Britain and establish parallels with other communities of color.

Parvin, underprivileged but resolute, tells Salma to forget her country of origin and to think of her future in Britain. Salma’s response to Parvin’s call is different from that of Sammar in Aboulela’s *The Translator* to a nearly similar request made by South Asian British Yasmin. While Yasmin’s call fell on deaf ears, Parvin finds an attentive recipient. The different attitudes of Sammar and Salma reflect different stances of Arabs with regard to issues of identity, citizenship and settlement in Britain that, in turn, reflect socio-economic and political changes in both the Middle East and Britain in the period that separates the two works.

What the two novels portray, however, is that in both cases the Arab characters always *connect* with other ethnic groups. Arab British characters find

⁷⁷ Nash, p. 126.

⁷⁸ Nash, p. 126.

⁷⁹ Nash, p. 126.

consolation in connecting with other marginalized people. Arab British women writers seem keen to foreground these trans-cultural and cross-ethnic coalitions. Sammar's only friend in Britain is South Asian British Yasmin. Sammar falls in love with Rae, a Scottish academic whose positive views on Islam sets him apart from mainstream scholars. Similarly, Salma is guided by South Asian British Parvin, befriends and identifies with Gwen, a lonely old Welsh woman, and just like Sammar, gets married to John, a British academic whose northern and humble working class origins render him socially marginalized in south England.

That Salma maintains very good relations with other marginalized white people, like Gwen and John, encourages us to consider the novel's underlying agenda of aligning Salma with marginalized groups regardless of their ethnic origins, age and creed. In this sense, the novel invites us to consider the prospects of Arabs in Britain and suggests ways of understanding some aspects of their racialized experiences. That Salma identifies with less privileged white people invites us to look at marginalization in its widest sense as a basis for coalition. This means that economic, social, political, ethnic and class discriminations are all markers of victimization and instigate a reaction from those concerned. The novel seems to point out that for Arab British characters to enter the ethnic border zone is not a choice, but is indeed a matter of survival. Since these Arab characters live in Britain on their own, interacting with fellow marginalized individuals becomes the lung through which they breathe, survive and flourish.

Salma's relationship with Parvin proves vital for the former's survival. Parvin becomes Salma's mentor:

'We have to look for jobs,' said Parvin [. . .]

[. . .]

‘The doctor said too much past,’ I said.

‘Yes, Salma, too much past,’ she said as if talking to herself.

‘Too hard though,’ I said.

‘Yes, I know, I know,’ she said (p. 108).

Parvin is urging Salma to think about Britain as her home and draws Salma’s attention to the fact that there is no point in living in the past; one has to move on. In this way, the novel offers an insightful comment about the future of Arabs in Britain. While it is futile to cling to the past, it is also important to be an active member of the multicultural British fabric. When the GP refuses to prescribe medication for Salma, Parvin grabs Salma’s hand and shouts at the GP: “‘You call yourself a doctor! This woman is ill and you send her off without any medicine, afraid to spend some of your precious budget’” (p. 146). Parvin shows her anger at the GP’s austerity and her words solidify Salma’s sense of belonging as a British citizen entitled to all the rights of citizenship: “‘You also think that we waste the NHS, us Pakis. Well, I have some news for you. We are both British and soon we will be sitting in your very seat’” (p. 146).

The relationship between Salma and Parvin is beneficial for both. They literally and metaphorically walk ‘[h]and in hand’ (p. 151). Through their solidarity and alliance they support each other and survive uneasy experiences. The novel highlights the merits of trans-cultural and cross ethnic alliances. When Salma decides to enrol for a BA degree, it is Parvin who properly fills the application form for her (p. 161). When Parvin goes for a job interview, Salma tailors a suit for her, makes her a cup of coffee, and accompanies her to the interview (p. 137). When Parvin gets married, she insists that Salma be her bridesmaid (p. 170). Their dependence on each other’s support underlies their success: they flourish and triumph. By foregrounding

this relationship, the novel draws our attention to survival strategies that immigrants, refugees and marginalized people have open for them. Their collective power is their means for survival.

Just as the novel depicts the experiences of an Arab immigrant woman in Britain, it draws our attention to the existence of growing Arab communities that are coming of age. This is a new theme in the novels of Arab British women writers. Writing in the mid 1990s, Ghada Karmi describes Arabs in Britain as ‘an unusual migrant group’ because, Karmi claims, they retain ‘their primary focus’ on their countries of origin, think of themselves as temporary residents in Britain and relate ‘almost exclusively’ to other Arabs.⁸⁰ Karmi argues that as more Arabs settle in Britain, they need to seriously consider the social, economic and political implications of their presence in Britain. According to Karmi, Arabs have to decide whether or not ‘they wish to remain separate, non-participatory cultural entities within the larger society in Britain’.⁸¹ Faqir’s novel is interested in portraying the complex experiences of Salma as a British citizen of Arab descent. Salma, guided by Parvin’s advice, does not want to be excluded from the nation; she wants to be an active member of multicultural Britain. In this sense, *My Name is Salma* contributes to debates on the dynamics that constitute an Arab British identity.

More than twelve years after Karmi made her argument, Arabs in Britain seem eager ‘to validate Arab cultural identities in Britain, rather than to create a public, Muslim identity’.⁸² According to Nagel and Staeheli, because of the

⁸⁰ Ghada Karmi, ‘The Egyptians of Britain: a Migrant Community in Transition’, Working Paper, University of Durham, Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, Durham, 1997, p. 3.

⁸¹ Karmi, pp. 25-26.

⁸² Nagel and Staeheli, ‘British Arab Perspectives’, in *Muslims in Britain*, ed. by Hopkins and Gale, pp. 95-112 (p. 100).

politicized nature of debates about Islam and ‘the often negative meanings about Islam that circulate in public discourse’ in Britain, Arab activists in Britain ‘eschew a political identity as British Muslim, and instead promote an identity as British Arab’.⁸³ In other words, Arab activists in Britain insist that their identities ‘not be submerged by an Asian-dominated British Muslim identity in the public sphere’ and seek a ‘representation based on specific Arab identity and Arab political interests, rather than religion’.⁸⁴ Arab activists, Nagel and Staeheli argue, ‘see themselves as different from “British Muslims” in terms of their political agendas and objectives and in terms of their cultural practices and religious attitudes’.⁸⁵ Nagel and Staeheli maintain:

Our respondents, then, draw distinctions between Arab, Asian and, perhaps, British Islam. These distinctions are accompanied, as well, by statements of ecumenicalism, which many of our interviewees see integral to Arabness. Study participants, in other words, tend to view Arabness as a multi-faith identity that requires a toned-down and more flexible conception of Islam than that associated with either Asian or British Muslims.⁸⁶

Through the Salma-Parvin relationship, *My Name is Salma* seems to engage with current debates on citizenship, minorities and multiculturalism in Britain. That the Salma-Parvin alliance is not predicated on a communal ‘British Muslim’ identity shows that the novel, while upholding Islam as a significant cultural identity marker and a powerful transnational movement, is interested in presenting a coalition based on locally-experienced socio-economic and political issues that result in marginalizing certain groups. Simultaneously, the novel is actively engaged in

⁸³ Nagel and Staeheli, p. 101.

⁸⁴ Nagel and Staeheli, p. 107.

⁸⁵ Nagel and Staeheli, p. 106.

⁸⁶ Nagel and Staeheli, p. 106.

exploring the particularities of Arab communities in Britain through representing some aspects of Arab experiences in public life in Britain.

In this context, findings of a survey by the Atlantic Forum on Arab British contradict a ‘largely anecdotal’ assumption that there is low level of participation of the Arab British community in UK politics.⁸⁷ At the same time, the survey confirms that the strong identification with the Arab community ‘co-exists’ with successful integration into the wider British society.⁸⁸ Arabs in Britain have been actively seeking to explain their cultures to the British.⁸⁹ On 20 May 2009, then British Foreign Minister, David Miliband, attended the launch of the British Arab Association (BAA), a community-based organisation which aims to encourage and empower Arabs to participate in British political and civil life.⁹⁰ An ambitious project was launched in July 2006 with the publication of *Local Arabia*, a free weekly newspaper aimed at the Arab community in London. According to the opening editorial in the first issue dated 7 July, 2006, the weekly aims at encouraging Arabs to adopt an Arab British identity, fostering a sense of belonging to Britain, becoming a source of reference and information for other ethnicities in Britain, and challenging narrow racist visions.⁹¹

⁸⁷ Atlantic Forum, p. 21.

⁸⁸ Atlantic Forum, p. 16.

⁸⁹ In a letter submitted to the Commission for Racial Equality in December 2002, chairman of The National Association of the British Arabs (NABA), Ismail Jalili, spells out some of the concerns of the Arab community in Britain especially, the lack of public and official recognition of anti-Arab racism. One manifestation of this racism is marginalization which is in turn manifested in the government’s lack of consultation with the Arab British community when circumstances would naturally suggest it. See: Ismail Jalili, ‘Concerns of the Arab Community in the UK: A Letter Submitted to the Commission for Racial Equality’ <http://www.naba.org.uk/content/theassociation/reports/concerns_of_the_arabs.htm> [accessed 2 November 2009].

⁹⁰ <<http://www.british-arabs.org.uk/about.htm>> [accessed 6 May 2010].

⁹¹ Local Arabia, ‘Why Local Arabia’, 7 July 2006 <www.localarabia.com> [accessed 20 July 2009], para. 5 of 7. However, this ambitious project seems to have come to a halt since the end of January

My Name is Salma actively engages with the above debate on Arab participation in public life through the various encounters that Salma experiences with the Algerian owner of the kebab van whose life seems mediated by immigration laws and a sense of persecution. Living in Britain for an Algerian immigrant is risky. They risk being exposed and caught by the immigration authorities. This might explain why an Algerian waiter pretends to be French and it also explains why Arabs keep themselves to themselves. The risky conditions of living in Britain look to be the only topic that a father and a son chat about during their work:

‘I said Yasin has no papers and no brains,’ the older man said.
‘He is a “ten-pee” then,’ the young man said.
‘Yes, you slot the ten-pee coin in a public phone, call immigration, finish him off,’ the older man said (p. 188).

The Arab experience in Britain is clearly framed by harsh immigration laws and the daily life of an Arab in Britain, just like that of a refugee, immigrant and asylum seeker, is at the mercy of immigration authorities. Their daily lives seem to ebb and flow with international and domestic political changes. At times of world political crises, refugees, immigrants and asylum seekers are the scapegoats that governments sacrifice under the name of fighting terrorism and disorder.

In face of and in spite of the restrictions imposed by authorities and law enforcement entities, the novel seems to suggest that socially, politically and culturally-marginalized groups can/should reach a meeting point and make themselves more visible and influential. In this sense, the novel reiterates Lavie and Swedenburg’s call on minorities to create solidarity:

2007. I tried to contact the newspaper (by phone and by e-mails) several times to no avail. In fact, the website is no longer accessible.

One minority can form alliances with another, based on experiences its heterogeneous membership partially shares, each in his or her fragmented identity, without trying to force all fragments to cohere into a seamless narrative before approaching another minority.⁹²

While the novel emphasizes, like other novels by Arab British women writers, the importance of a trans-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic identification, it also focuses on the experiences of the disenfranchised, marginalized and undocumented Arab migrant.⁹³ The novel depicts the heterogeneity of the Arab community in Britain. I would like to suggest that for our specific context, it is useful to bear in mind El-Solh's comments when she argues that:

Thus, at times a pan-Arab identity may function as a centre of gravity overriding national, sectarian and class affiliations. At other times, specific issues may be the focal point around which individuals/groups may rally, in turn creating cleavages or encouraging commonalities which may vary over time.⁹⁴

Faqir's novel shows that displacement and marginalization are markers of victimization and can, under the right circumstances, instigate a creative reaction by the concerned. *My Name is Salma* goes beyond the ethnic borderland to include other modes of disenfranchisement like social class and (old) age. The tendency of Arab British women writers to open up these themes and build coalitions is a central aspect that distinguishes their fiction from that of their Arab American peers. In the case of *My Name is Salma*, this openness is not limited to a certain ethnicity or faith, but is eclectic. It is here that I wish to turn to Arab American novelist Diana Abu-

⁹² Lavie and Swedenburg, p. 10.

⁹³ Although I focused in this section on the relationship between Salma and Parvin, the novel highlights the relationship between Salma and Gwen. In fact, Gwen is portrayed as a marginalized person who gave everything to her children, but got nothing. Gwen's Welsh accent is often ridiculed by Liz, the descendant of a British imperialist family. Gwen continuously supports Salma. The novel depicts how this relationship is beneficial for both characters.

⁹⁴ El-Solh, p. 249.

Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* to show how Arab immigration and settlement experiences in the US have influenced the thematic representations of Arab literary productions.

1.2 'White but not Quite': Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*

In this section, I argue that Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* reflects, unlike Arab British literature, a tendency by Arab American novelists to foreground the experiences of Arab characters as members of an (in)visible Arab American community. Arab American novelists tend to highlight several aspects of Arab American daily experiences, especially anti-Arab racism and bigotry. I will show that the ambiguous position occupied by Arabs in the ethnic and racial discourses in the US has shaped the literature produced by Arab American writers. Arab American literature, I argue, is ambivalent to locating the experiences of members of the Arab American community in a (non-white) ethnic context. Even after the events of 9/11, Arab American characters have remained indecisive about aligning themselves with people of color in the US. This phenomenon is in sharp contrast with the literature produced by Arab British women writers, which from its inception, seems alert to highlighting the importance of a trans-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic alliance as I shall show in Chapter Two when examining the works of Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela.

Arabian Jazz is Abu-Jaber's debut novel. She has written two other novels: *Crescent* (2003) and mystery novel *Origin* (2007). Her memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, was published in 2005. *Arabian Jazz* is a foundational text in Arab American literature. Upon its publication in 1993, the novel generated a great controversy among members of the Arab American community. *Arabian Jazz* tells the story of the Ramouds, an Arab American family living in upstate New York.

Matussem, a migrant to the US from Jordan, married Irish American Nora and had two girls: Jemorah and Melvina. Nora subsequently died during a visit to Jordan and Matussem lives with his two daughters, now 29 and 23, respectively. Fatima, Matussem's sister, immigrates with her husband to the US to keep an eye on her brother. Matussem and his daughters live in an all-white impoverished neighborhood. In the morning, Matussem works as a maintenance superintendent at the city's hospital. At night, he plays drums in the jazz band he has founded. Influenced by his cousin, Uncle Fouad, Matussem decides to visit Jordan, his first since the death of his wife there some twenty years ago. At first, Matussem decides to remain indefinitely in Jordan, but he then changes his mind and returns to the US.

In his introduction to an interview with Diana Abu-Jaber, Robin E. Field argues that like many other 'pioneering ethnic' authors in the US, Abu-Jaber has been 'alternately lambasted and lauded for her work'.⁹⁵ In the same interview Abu-Jaber tells Field that she thinks that 'because there was so little written about the Arab American experience when *Arabian Jazz* came out, it really got looked at under a microscope'.⁹⁶ Steven Salaita highlights the importance of *Arabian Jazz* as one of the early novels to depict the incongruities of Arab American communities. Salaita argues:

It [*Arabian Jazz*] was, one might say, a landmark work in the Arab American tradition, not unlike Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in that of [the] Native American. [. . . *Arabian Jazz*] explore[s] the 'othering' of Arabs in American society, assimilation patterns, stereotypical attitudes by both White and Arab characters, gender

⁹⁵ Robin F. Field, 'A Prophet in Her Own Town: An Interview with Diana Abu-Jaber', *MELUS*, 31 (2006), 207-25 (p. 208).

⁹⁶ Field, p. 210.

relationships, and the complexities of ethnic signification (often a layered process among Arab Americans).⁹⁷

With these views in mind, I believe that unravelling the history of Arab immigration and settlement in the US is crucial to understanding *Arabian Jazz*. In particular, I argue that the novel is shaped by the precarious position Arabs occupy in the discourses on multiculturalism and ethnicity in the US. Unlike Arab British women's literature, Arab American women's writing is ambivalent towards delineating an Arab identity in an entirely non-white context. In other words, although Arab American writers attempt to foreground links between Arab American characters and non-white characters in their works, these attempts are not always successful, conveying an ambivalence and indeterminacy toward non-whiteness. In fact, Arab American literature is mainly populated by Arab characters who seem to perceive themselves as members of a larger white American community. This ambivalence can be best explained, I argue, within a racialized historical context of immigration and settlement in the US.

Alix Naff points out that early Arab immigrants to the US were Christians from Mount Lebanon, then under the Ottoman occupation and part of Greater Syria.⁹⁸ The early immigrants worked in pack-peddling because they found in it a quick way of gaining money and returning to their homelands to purchase more land, marry and open up new businesses. In the US, peddlers settled around a supplier, usually from their village in Lebanon.⁹⁹ Naff notes that peddling played a major role

⁹⁷ Steven Salaita, 'Sand Niggers, Small Shops, and Uncle Sam: Cultural Negotiation in the Fiction of Joseph Geha and Diana Abu-Jaber', *Criticism*, 43 (2001), 423-44 (pp. 423-24).

⁹⁸ Alix Naff, 'The Early Arab Immigrant Experience', in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. by Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 23-35 (p. 29). See also: Michael W. Suleiman, 'Introduction: The Arab Immigrant Experience', in *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, ed. by Michael W. Suleiman (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999), pp. 1-21.

⁹⁹ Naff describes New York City as 'the Syrian mother colony and the cultural and economic center' (p. 31).

in the assimilation of these early groups of immigrants because it forced them to learn English and to see the country and experience its way of life first hand.

Peddling networks provided opportunities for thousands of newcomers, but more significantly, Naff argues, it spared the early immigrants from ‘a ghetto mentality’.¹⁰⁰

By 1910 peddling declined as an immigrant occupation.¹⁰¹ Workers started to join factories and mills and many joined the assembly line but opened their own businesses operated by their wives and children.¹⁰² They were attracted by industry’s payment of five dollars for an eight-hour day, which was initiated during WWI by Ford Motors Company.¹⁰³ As a consequence, a large number of Arabs settled near the Ford factory in Dearborn. By World War I, official statistics show that there were around 100,000 Arabic-speaking immigrants.¹⁰⁴ Arab immigrants established their own (Eastern) churches, an Arabic language-press, and voluntary associations that reflected traditional identity markers and perpetuated the traditional community fragmentation.¹⁰⁵ According to Naff, the most influential factors 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.¹⁰⁶ Michael W. Suleiman argues that from 1870 to World War I, Arab immigrants thought of themselves ‘as in, but not part of, U.S.’ society and body politic.¹⁰⁷ Their internal politics, Suleiman maintains, ‘reflected and emulated’ the politics of their homelands, acting as subjects

¹⁰⁰ Naff, p. 29.

¹⁰¹ Naff, p. 30.

¹⁰² For a detailed description of how early Arab *women* immigrants contributed and in some cases wholly shouldered family responsibilities, see Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997).

¹⁰³ Naff, p. 31.

¹⁰⁴ Naff, p. 24.

¹⁰⁵ Naff, p. 31. See also: Michael W. Suleiman, ‘Arab-Americans and the Political Process’, in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. by McCarus, pp. 37-60.

¹⁰⁶ Naff, p. 25.

¹⁰⁷ Suleiman, ‘Arab-Americans and the Political Process’, p. 38.

of the Ottoman Empire since they felt that they were in the US on a temporary basis. It was not until the French forces occupied Syria (and Lebanon) that homeland politics started to play a role in the formation of Arab social clubs in the US.¹⁰⁸

Arabian Jazz reflects in a humorous way on the divisions among Arab Americans. For instance, upon the arrival of an archbishop from Jordan, members of the Arab American community in upstate New York throw a welcome party where ‘a large group of them [. . .] perform tribal dances [. . .], brandishing long swords’.¹⁰⁹ Fatima expresses her embarrassment: “‘A country bumpkin! These one’s throwback to camels and tents, my God. What will the Americans think now?’” (p. 60). Shortly, a fight breaks out and ‘the men [. . .] swiftly factionalized, Saudis with Saudis, Lebanese with Lebanese, and so on’ (p. 67). In a humorous way, the novel draws the attention to the sectarian, regional, political and nationalist cleavages that divide Arab American communities and are reminiscent of early immigration waves. Fatima’s words reflect an anxiety about assimilating to American ways and suppressing traditional cultural heritage. This anxiety, I argue, has been influential in shaping Arab American settlement experience.

While the Arabic-language press reflected the fragmentation of Arab communities, it ‘significantly’ contributed to the Americanization process through explaining the US social, economic and political life ‘though in fairly simple and idealized terms’ to members of Arab communities.¹¹⁰ World War I affected Arabs in America in a significant way.¹¹¹ Arab community leaders urged young men in the US

¹⁰⁸ Naff, p. 32.

¹⁰⁹ Diana Abu-Jaber, *Arabian Jazz* (New York & London: Norton & Company, 1993), p. 60. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

¹¹⁰ Naff, p. 33

¹¹¹ Suleiman, p. 38.

to join the American armed forces ‘to help their new country and to liberate their old homeland’.¹¹² Community leaders encouraged Arabs in the US to ‘buy American Liberty bonds to help with war effort’.¹¹³ Moreover, travel to and from the Middle East became more difficult and dangerous as the major water passages were the sites of naval battles. Greater Syria was divided into four countries after the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916 and in 1917, British Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, made his famous declaration in favor of a Jewish ‘national home’ in Palestine.

Shortly afterwards, Congress passed a series of restrictive immigration laws culminating in the Johnson-Reed Act in 1924 which restricted Syrian immigration under the quota system to 100 people annually.¹¹⁴ Early Arab immigrants were cut off from their homelands, a fact that accelerated the Americanization process.¹¹⁵ As Naff and others argue, if it were not for the arrival of new waves of Arab immigrants after the liberalization of the US immigration laws and the 1967 war defeat, the descendants of the first generation Arabs ‘might have assimilated themselves out of existence’.¹¹⁶

The defeat resulted in the awakening of the third generation of early Arab immigrants who adopted an Arab identity instead of a Syrian one. As a consequence, both the new arrivals and the third generation began to work for their ethnic communities and the political and social causes of their people in the Arab countries. Members of the second Arab immigrant wave were a mixture of educated Muslim

¹¹² Suleiman, ‘Introduction’, p. 5.

¹¹³ Suleiman, p. 5. See Halliday’s ‘Millet of Manchester’ for details on the role the Manchester Syrian Association (MSA) played in mobilizing Syrian communities in America to actively participate in the campaigns against the Ottomans.

¹¹⁴ Naff, p. 26. Until then, the term Arab American has not existed as I will explain. ‘Syrian’ refers to Arabs from the Levant.

¹¹⁵ Naff, p. 31.

¹¹⁶ Naff, p. 35.

and Christian Arabs and were highly skilled. They also carried with them the sense of a pan-Arab national identity foregrounding political and cultural commonalities among Arabs. Many of them were Palestinian refugees and intellectuals seeking the freedom of expression denied at home. Some of them fled the totalitarian regimes in their countries. A considerable number of them fled the Lebanese civil war and the Israeli invasion of south Lebanon. Some of them were from Iraq. This means that Arab immigrants in the post World War II era were more socially, economically and religiously heterogeneous. Significantly, in *Arabian Jazz* Matussem and Fatima are the children of a mixed Muslim-Christian Palestinian family that flees to Jordan as a result of the Israeli atrocities against Palestinians. Matussem and Fatima immigrate then to the US in the 1960s after the liberalization of US immigration and naturalization laws. Fatima's eagerness to join an association that attempts to reproduce Arab culture in the US, reflects a tendency among Arab immigrants post-WW2 to frame their ethnic identity within political discourses of anti-Arab racism and xenophobia.

In fact, due to the unprecedented flow of Arabs to the US in the 1960s, new arrivals and descendants of early Arab immigrants established a number of associations that articulate the causes and concerns of Arabs. The Association of the Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG), the National Association of Arab-Americans (NAAA) and the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC) are among the most prominent establishments. Suleiman argues that the Arab American community today is a composite of recent arrivals and the third or fourth generation members of the early immigrants. Their differences stem primarily from the fact that 'the older or earlier community has been well-integrated in U.S.

society'.¹¹⁷ Suleiman argues 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 feel themselves to be an ethnic community subjected to 'negative and hostile' propaganda and stereotyping.¹¹⁸ Through highlighting the different immigration and settlement experiences of members of the Ramoud family, *Arabian Jazz* reflects the heterogeneity of the Arab American identity and the ways in which different members of the community perceive their identities. While the 20-year old Melvina considers herself American, her aunt, Fatima, insists that she is an Arab who 'live[s] among Americans, [. . . and] want[s] to keep herself, her family, and a few friends apart from the rest' (p. 360).

Religion is one area that differentiates Arab American communities as Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad argues. Haddad states that up to the 1950s, about 90 percent of the Arab immigrants to the US were Christians while the others were Sunni, Shia, and Druze Muslims. However, by the middle of the century the constituency of the group began to change and eventually some 90 percent of the Arab immigrants to the US were Muslims.¹¹⁹ Kristine J. Ajrouch, and Amaney Jamal point out that since immigrants to the US with ancestral links in Arabic-speaking countries are quite diverse with regard to immigrant status, national origin and religious affiliation, their attitudes to a white racial identity differ, indicating divergent assimilation patterns in the Arab American community.¹²⁰ Ajrouch and Jamal's argument invites us to consider the significance of the historical process by

¹¹⁷ Suleiman, p. 60.

¹¹⁸ Suleiman, p. 60.

¹¹⁹ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, 'Maintaining the Faith of the Fathers: Dilemmas of Religious Identity in the Christian and Muslim Arab American Communities', in *Development*, ed. by McCarus, pp. 61-84 (p. 63).

¹²⁰ K. J. Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal, 'Assimilating to a White Identity: the Case of Arab Americans', *International Migration Review*, 41 (2007), 860-79 (p. 876).

which Arabs in America became classified by the US government as Caucasian/White after a series of legal challenges in the early twentieth century.¹²¹

As Nadine Naber explains, the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in discourses of race and ethnicity in the US is a product of factors both external and internal to Arab American communities.¹²² On the one hand, government officials who have classified Arabs and their descendants according to multiple and conflicting categories have, in part, structured the social and historical invisibility of Arab Americans. On the other hand, the fact that Arabs in the US are heterogeneous and ‘identify according to multiple, conflicting labels shape the internal difficulties associated with classifying this population’.¹²³ In fact, the historical, social and legal circumstances that surrounded Arabs’ acquisition of an official white status have also influenced Arab American literature and its engagement with whiteness. Arab American literature, it is possible to argue, has been shaped by the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in the US.

¹²¹ In 1914, George Dow, a Syrian immigrant living in South Carolina, was denied American citizenship on the basis that he did not meet the racial requirement of the US law, which limited naturalization to ‘aliens being free white persons’. The shocked Syrian community managed to resolve the problem by demonstrating that they were Arabs and therefore members of the Caucasian race. Dow was finally granted citizenship. The judge ruled that Syrians ‘were to be classed as white persons’, and were eligible for naturalization. Although this was not the first case to ignite a community response, Syrian immigrants mobilized around it to a degree that was unprecedented. However, the community would endure a series of court cases challenging their racial status between 1909 and 1915 and again during the 1940s. The involvement of Syrian community leaders in George Dow’s case, which helped settle the question of Syrian whiteness from a legal standpoint, was part of an effort that began earlier under less litigious circumstances. The sense of Christian entitlement to share in whiteness was markedly evident in the Dow case (Gualtieri, p. 42). For more details on this case and similar cases, see: Sarah Gualtieri, ‘Becoming “White”’: Race, Religion and the Foundations of Syrian/Lebanese Ethnicity in the United States’, *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 20 (2001), 29-58. See also: Randa A. Kayyali, *The Arab Americans* (Westport, CT, & London: Greenwood Press, 2006), especially pp. 45-54.

¹²² I cite in the conclusion one historical incident that highlights the ambiguity of the position Arabs occupy in US racial and ethnic discourses.

¹²³ Nadine Naber, ‘Ambiguous Insiders: an Investigation of Arab American Invisibility’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 23 (2000), 37–61, p. 38. I discuss Naber’s essay in more detail towards the end of this chapter.

In her study of Arab American literature, Evelyn Shakir claims that Arab American literature ‘got off to a precocious start’ but then lay ‘dormant’ for nearly half a century.¹²⁴ Examining the works of early Arab immigrants like Gibran Khalil Gibran, Abraham Rihbany and Ameen Rihani, Shakir sees a strategy of self-conscious portrayal characterized by the ‘desire to serve as mediator[s]’ between Arabs and Americans.¹²⁵ As Shakir puts it, although these writers could not hide their foreignness, they made it ‘respectable’ through putting on the guise of prophet, preacher, or man of letters.¹²⁶ The second generation of Arab American writers, like Vance Bourjaily, William Peter Blatty and Eugene Paul Nassar, produced very little literature. Shakir commends Bourjaily because he ‘wrote against the grain of stereotype’ but his perspective remained ‘resolutely’ masculine.¹²⁷ She says that Blatty’s sense of humor is ‘a good marketing tool’, but it is a betrayal because he has not engaged with more serious issues, like anti-Arab racism.¹²⁸ Though she admires Nassar’s three dimensional characters, Shakir argues that Nasser has avoided ‘the hostility of bigotry’ and other issues that arise from cultural encounter.¹²⁹

On the other hand, Shakir commends works published in the 1980s by Arab American writers as testifying to ‘a sea change’ in the way Arab Americans began to perceive their identities and see themselves.¹³⁰ Shakir attributes the change of interests to the arrival of a new wave of immigrants from the Arab world who ‘rekindle[d] a sense of ethnicity in the established community and promoted a sense

¹²⁴ Evelyn Shakir, ‘Coming of Age: Arab American Literature’, *Ethnic Forum*, 13 (1993), 63-80 (p. 63).

¹²⁵ Shakir, pp. 65-66.

¹²⁶ Shakir, p. 67.

¹²⁷ Shakir, p. 69.

¹²⁸ Shakir, P. 69.

¹²⁹ Shakir, p. 70.

¹³⁰ Shakir, p. 70.

of kinship with the Arab world in general'.¹³¹ In addition to the concerns that permeate the works of ethnic literatures such as guilt, regret and walking the line between two cultures, literature produced by Arab Americans, Shakir maintains, is considerably defined by the Arab-Israeli conflict through its representation of the predicament of the Palestinians since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948.¹³²

Similarly, Lisa Suhair Majaj commends Arab American writers such as Diana Abu-Jaber, Elmaz Abinader, and Joseph Geha (whom Shakir calls the third wave of Arab American writers) because their employment of memory is not monolithic but 'facilitate[s] assimilation, ground[s] feminist critique, and make[s] possible transformative relations to ethnicity'.¹³³ In other words, Majaj praises these writers for their ability to turn to memory to negotiate a 'heterogeneous' ethnic identity that is 'engaged across cultural borders'.¹³⁴ In this context, Majaj believes that Arab American identity is best understood as a pan ethnic identity predicated, on the one hand, on common interests such as anti-Arab discrimination, stereotypes of Arabs in popular culture and the events in the Middle East and their repercussions in the US, and, on the other hand, a common identity based on an Arab cultural heritage relevant to contemporary Arab Americans.¹³⁵ Elsewhere, Majaj calls on Arab American writers to reflect their ethnic identities in their works and construct an Arab American ethnic identity in conjunction with other groups because the precarious position Arabs occupy in US discourses on race and ethnicity 'means that

¹³¹ Shakir, p. 70.

¹³² Shakir, p. 72.

¹³³ Lisa Suhair Majaj, 'Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory', in *Memory and Cultural Politics*, ed. by Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrettjr, and Robert E. Hogan (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1996), pp. 266-90 (p. 266)

¹³⁴ Majaj, p. 267.

¹³⁵ Majaj, p. 267.

Arab Americans may be unable to elicit responses to their concerns without affiliating with other minority groups.¹³⁶

Therese Saliba agrees with Majaj's argument and asserts that classifying Arabs as Caucasian/White covers over discriminatory and racist practices that define Arabs as 'Other' and serve to disempower them in their political struggles.¹³⁷ Saliba argues that the push for including Arab Americans within ethnic politics, ethnic studies, and feminist scholarship is 'a critical strategy for resisting invisibility'.¹³⁸ Literary and cultural productions by Arab Americans are sites for manifesting/contesting an Arab American identity and delineating its features. As my reading of *Arabian Jazz* shows, the divergent perspectives on the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in the racial and ethnic discourses in the US permeates Arab American literature in various ways. While Jemorah identifies as a black person in her confrontation with white American Portia, as I explain later, she refuses to marry half Native American Ricky Ellis. Jemorah's ambivalent reactions to non-whiteness shows, I argue, that for an Arab American, defining ethnic identity is mediated by the anomalous position Arabs occupy in American racial categorizations.

This position is reflected in the daily experiences of members of the community who engage with whiteness in heterogeneous ways. In a series of articles on Arab American activists, Lynn A. Staeheli and Caroline R. Nagel highlight the strategies of sameness and difference employed by Arab American activists. For example, Staeheli and Nagel argue that the multivalent nature of home upheld by

¹³⁶ Lisa Suhair Majaj, 'Arab-American Ethnicity: Location, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations', in *Arabs in America*, ed. by Suleiman, pp. 320-36 (pp. 325-26).

¹³⁷ Therese Saliba, 'Resisting Invisibility: Arab Americans in Academia and Activism', in *Arabs in America*, ed. by Suleiman, pp. 304-19 (p. 309).

¹³⁸ Saliba, p. 316.

many Arab American activists seems to have ‘enriched respondents’ sense of Americanness and their involvement in US politics’.¹³⁹ In ‘Citizenship, Identity and Transnational Migration: Arab Immigrants to the United States’, Nagel and Staeheli argue that their study of some aspects of the Arab American communities shows that concerns with both homeland and national integration are closely connected and ‘may simultaneously inform immigrants’ political activism’.¹⁴⁰ In this context, the authors distinguish between formal citizenship and substantive citizenship wherein the former refers to one’s legal status, whereas the latter represents ‘one’s ability to realise the rights and privileges of societal membership’.¹⁴¹ Nagel and Staeheli argue that their study of 52 Arab American websites reveals a belief by Arab Americans that by transforming the way that mainstream America thinks about Arab causes and the Arab world, ‘Arab immigrants will gain acceptance and full social and political membership in American society’.¹⁴²

Nagel and Staeheli’s argument draws our attention to the fact that Arab American communities have been subjected to a long history of stereotyping and distortion. Arab American writers have responded in various ways to issues of anti-Arab racism and stereotyping. As I show in Chapter Three, Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby’s works attempt to subvert some of the stereotypes commonly associated with Arabs in US popular culture. Through a strategy of intertextuality, Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* challenges stereotypes about Arabs in canonical texts and Hollywood productions. Similarly, Halaby’s *West of the Jordan* challenges these

¹³⁹ Lynn A. Staeheli and Caroline R. Nagel, ‘Topographies of Home and Citizenship: Arab-American Activists in the United States’, *Environment and Planning A*, 38 (2006), 1599-614 (p. 1612).

¹⁴⁰ Caroline R. Nagel and Lynn A. Staeheli, ‘Citizenship, Identity and Transnational Migration: Arab Immigrants to the United States’, *Space and Polity*, 8 (2004), 3-23 (p. 5).

¹⁴¹ Nagel and Staeheli, p. 5.

¹⁴² Nagel and Staeheli, p. 16.

stereotypes through a strategy of storytelling that reveals how the intersectionality of race, ethnicity, gender, age and social class affects the lives of Arab and Arab American women in a way that reflects the diversity of these women.

The ambiguous position that Arabs occupy in US ethnic and racial discourses influences the way Arabs in America define their identities and divides members of the community on their relationship with whiteness as I have explained above. Arab American literary and cultural productions become sites where the definition of an Arab American identity is contested. A closer look at these productions will enhance our understanding of the dynamics that influence an Arab American identity especially in its engagement with (non)whiteness. Although some critics have argued that Arab American women writers 'are consciously building bridges to other communities of colour',¹⁴³ I argue that a closer look at Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* may show that we need to further investigate this statement and look at how (un/consciously) Arab American writings may undermine this statement. The precariousness of an Arab American identity permeates the novel and creates ambivalence toward attempts by Arab American characters to align themselves with non-white characters. In other words, the ambiguity of the position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in the US is reflected in the ambiguity of *Arabian Jazz*'s position toward the people of color it portrays.

The novel has been lauded by most critics for its attempt to define an Arab American identity within US discourses on ethnicity and multicultural policies. Specifically, critics have hailed the novel for its attempt to create an alliance between

¹⁴³ Andrea Shalal-Esa, 'Arab-American Writers Identify with Communities of Color', *Al Jadid Magazine*, 9 (2003) <<http://www.aljadid.com/features/0942shalalesa.html>> [accessed 22 April 2009], para. 1 of 17.

Arab Americans and other marginalized groups in the US, particularly African Americans. In a well-constructed and supported linguistic reading of *Arabian Jazz*, Mazen Naous argues that improvisation is ‘an essential characteristic’ of jazz music that ‘manifests itself linguistically’ in the novel.¹⁴⁴ Matussem, Jemorah and Melvina’s straddling of two cultures, and two languages causes a need to improvise and intertwine their individual and collective identities as Arab Americans.¹⁴⁵ The linguistic blue notes in *Arabian Jazz*, Naous argues, at once draw attention to the precarious conditions of Arab immigrants in the US and improvise on the dominant white culture’s and minority cultures’ varying reactions to Arab presence at the site of struggle and negotiation. In this sense, like musical improvisation, Naous insists, the linguistic blue note in *Arabian Jazz* ‘operates at once inside and outside western culture’.¹⁴⁶ Naous concludes that through music, *Arabian Jazz* ‘creates social bonds that cross racial lines’.¹⁴⁷

Naous’ opinion is shared by a host of other critics who, to borrow Salaita’s words, agree that *Arabian Jazz* ‘contextualize[s] the Arab within a broader rubric of minority discourse’.¹⁴⁸ I want to argue that *Arabian Jazz* is however a slippery and ambivalent text. It is true that the novel highlights the ambiguous position that Arabs occupy in the US racial and ethnic discourses, but the novel does not succeed, I contend, in foregrounding a convincing alliance with other (non-white) ethnic groups. I argue that the racial and ethnic ambiguity itself prevents the novel, and the novelist,

¹⁴⁴ Mazen Naous, ‘*Arabian Jazz* and the Need for Improvising Arab Identity in the US’, *MELUS*, 34 (2009), 61-80 (p. 61).

¹⁴⁵ Naous, p. 61.

¹⁴⁶ Naous, p. 61.

¹⁴⁷ Naous, p. 76.

¹⁴⁸ Steven Salaita, p. 436. See also: Salwa Essayah Cherif, ‘Arab American Literature: Gendered Memory in Abinader and Abu-Jaber’, *MELUS*, 28 (2003), 207-29; Ibis Gomez-Vega, ‘The Memory of Loss in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz*’, *South Atlantic Review*, 72 (2007), 17-37, and Michelle Hartman, ‘“This Sweet / Sweet Music”: Jazz, Sam Cooke, and Reading Arab American Literary Identities’, *MELUS*, 31 (2006), 145-65.

from laying out a clear cross-ethnic agenda that situates Arabs in a non-white position. This ambivalence lies at the heart of the Arab American women novels and has, to some extent, curtailed the emergence of a clearly pronounced non-white Arab American literature.

Even post-9/11 Arab American literature has remained ambivalent to adopting a non-white ethnic identity as my reading of Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* shows. Unlike Arab British women's literature, which is marked from its inception by an otherness and consequently has foregrounded a need for a trans-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic coalition, Arab American literature has remained ambivalent to this issue and has focused instead on discussing the dynamics of Arab American communities whose members, I argue, do not fully perceive themselves as non-white. *Arabian Jazz* constructs the Ramouds as racialized others. It attempts to convey this theme by depicting how Matussem and his daughters are perceived as non-white by white characters. However, certain incidents in the novel indicate that the Ramouds do not necessarily perceive themselves as non-whites.

To begin with, several incidents in the novel highlight the ambiguity of the position Arabs occupy in the US racial and ethnic discourses. Speaking to Jemorah, Nassir Ramoud, a Cambridge-trained anthropologist, explains how the conflation of an Arab identity with a Muslim identity contributes to this invisibility. Nassir highlights his family's racialized history of immigration to the US:

'But most of the people who come to America, the immigrants, they think that this is just another place like home, a thing they will be able to hold and understand. [. . .] our family is *mejnoon*, you know? Crazy, nuts. Half Muslim, half Christian, they switch back and forth when the mood possesses them. Or they come to this country and pretend to be Presbyterians. Do you understand any of this?' (p. 339, italics in original).

Although humorous in tone, the quotation draws our attention to the role that religion has historically played in constructing the anomalous position Arabs occupy in debates on multiculturalism and ethnicity in the US. Nassir's question at the end of the quotation is of paramount importance. As the case of George Dow and those of other Arab immigrants in the early twentieth century show, religion played a decisive role in granting/declining citizenship to Arabs. The Ramouds' experience becomes a metaphor for the ethnic/racial ambiguity of the Arab position in the US. While some other characters see the Ramouds as non-whites, the Ramouds themselves do not seem to identify themselves as non-whites.

The neighborhood in which the Ramouds live is entirely white (p. 90). It is possible to argue that Abu-Jaber places the Ramouds in a white neighborhood to foreground their strangeness and to highlight anti-Arab racism. While this argument is valid, I believe that placing the Ramouds in a white neighborhood may indicate that the Ramouds perceive themselves as whites, and hence, they find their settlement in this neighborhood convenient. In fact, the Ramouds feel comfortable in this neighborhood. They have plenty of friends and they easily socialize with their neighbors. The honorary white status Arabs have might have influenced the novelist in this choice, making it natural to place the Ramouds in a white neighborhood.

Unlike the lively and socially dynamic Ramouds, the two Native American characters who live in this white neighborhood are silent characters and incapable of communicating with others.¹⁴⁹ Unfortunately, *Arabian Jazz*, a novel purported to

¹⁴⁹ Specifically, Ricky Ellis' Native American mother and grandmother are sketched out as cartoons. Ricky's grandmother is denied the agency of speaking and communicating with others and is introduced to us as a part of the house's furniture (p. 272). She is even reduced to an animal. She seems to gnaw bones that she keeps under her pillow (p. 273). Her daughter is even rendered as a wild

foreground Arab links with people of color, does not seem capable of positively portraying these two characters.¹⁵⁰ The two characters disappear to give space to more charismatic white characters, like Matussem's band mates. Matussem's band is exclusively white. If this is read as Matussem's attempt to break his isolation and dismantle his strangeness by forging connections with other people, then the links he manages to establish are with a group of *white* men. This actually undermines Salaita's argument that 'Matussem's music transcends national boundaries [. . .] through allow[ing] ethnic particularity to reach beyond its own boundaries'.¹⁵¹

Moreover, although the novel constantly attempts to emphasize that Matussem is a 'darky foreigner' (p. 89), Matussem compares himself to Italian actor Rodolph Valentino (p. 45). Furthermore, upon his return from Jordan, Matussem is surrounded by his daughters and all-white band mates. Matussem says: "'You girls and this guys my family'" (p. 350).¹⁵² In fact, Matussem and his daughters perceive themselves as whites. Although reviewers seem to agree that Jemorah definitely perceives herself as a black person, citing her confrontation with Portia as an example, I think that a closer look at the Jemorah-Portia encounter reveals *Arabian Jazz's* inherent contradictions to issues of race and ethnicity.

Portia, Jemorah's boss at the hospital, tells Jemorah that her problems stems from having an Arab father. Portia declares herself as a "'grade-A all American'"

animal on the run 'off the Onondagan reservation in Nedrow' (p. 273). She is a careless person who is 'capable of sitting and playing endless games of solitaire in the kitchen' (p. 274). Just like her mother, she is denied the agency of speaking. Ricky remembers that '*she had never talked much*' (p. 274, emphasis added). The reader is not given any chance to identify with her nor her mother. Both Mary Lu and her mother are demonized.

¹⁵⁰ In *Arabian Jazz*, other people of color, especially African Americans, are pushed to the margins. African Americans appear as cleaners in the hospital and as owners of the bakery.

¹⁵¹ Salaita, p. 440.

¹⁵² Matussem does not even feel that he has links to Jordan: "I can't stay away; I am going crazy there" (p. 350).

while she describes Jemorah as ““the one with problems”” (p. 293). Arabs, Portia insists, ““aren’t any better than Negroes”” (p. 294). This confrontation has been viewed as a climactic moment that exposes anti-Arab racism and links Arab Americans to other ethnic groups. In this way, the confrontation contextualizes Arab experiences in the US within a broader history of racism and xenophobia that Arabs share with people of color. Pauline Kaldas, for instance, argues that Portia’s enclosed office represents ‘the rigid stereotypes that frame her understanding of American society’ and Jemorah’s (lack of) place in it.¹⁵³ Salaita describes the confrontation as a metaphor of ‘a white mold that reflects the traditional American metanarrative of forced assimilation’.¹⁵⁴

I argue, however, that this encounter reflects the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in the US. Moreover, the episode and the consequent incidents reflect the ambivalent position that the novel itself takes on this issue. It is possible to argue that by likening Matussem to a negro, the novel seems to equate Arab Americans to African Americans, strengthening the possibility of creating an ethnic identification and alliance based on a common history of racism. However, unlike, African Americans, Arabs can still pass as whites. Portia advises Jemorah to make her name Italian or Greek (p. 294). By emphasizing the possibility of passing as a white person through adopting an Italian or a Greek name, the novel seems to connect the racialized history of Arab immigration and settlement in the US to that of immigrants from southern Europe. In other words, instead of highlighting the relationship between Arab Americans and African Americans as victims of political, social and cultural marginalization in the US, this incident invites the reader

¹⁵³ Pauline Kaldas, ‘Beyond Stereotypes: Representational Dilemmas in *Arabian Jazz*’, *MELUS*, 31 (2006), 167-85, p. 178.

¹⁵⁴ Salaita, p. 437.

to think that Arabs, like other southern European immigrants, can be assimilated in the US mainstream.

Jemorah's response to Portia needs to be carefully examined because, I believe, it is ambivalent and contradictory:

‘My father’s mother *was* black.’ The statement came from the back of Jem’s throat, so sudden she hadn’t known she was going to say it, the words like iron. Jem leaned back on her elbows, locking them against her shaking. ‘Yeah, a former slave. She married her master who had twenty-six other wives. They were black, brown, and yellow, and some didn’t even *have* skin’ (p. 295, italics in original).

Michelle Hartman argues that ‘Jemorah’s sassy response’ is meant to ‘state an identity in relation to that of her boss who defines herself aggressively as white’.¹⁵⁵ In this context, Hartman asserts that Jemorah proudly ‘claims a black identity’.¹⁵⁶ However, I think Jemorah does not mean to identify herself as a black person. The quotation itself makes clear that Jemorah’s words were ‘so sudden she hadn’t known she was going to say it’ (p. 295). She does not seem convinced of what she is saying. In this way, Jemorah’s response is self-defeating because it is predicated on stereotypical notions of polygamy and slavery that are commonly associated with Arabs in US popular culture. At best, Jemorah’s reaction can be seen as an angry response with no political implications.

Her identification as a black person is, in fact, tenuous and transient. Driving home after this confrontation, Jemorah remembers Aunt Fatima’s words: “‘This [the US] is not our place, not our people’” (p. 298). Fatima’s stipulation begs the question, ‘Where is our place? Where are our people?’ For Fatima, the Greek bakery, Thanatoulos Bakery, is strongly associated with her home country of Jordan. It is

¹⁵⁵ Hartman, p. 155.

¹⁵⁶ Hartman, p. 155.

even more comfortable than home itself because visiting the bakery does not involve re-living the painful memories of her childhood:

Everyone spoke Greek and customers got what they wanted by pointing. Fatima was comfortable there; they lived and communicated in the same way her family in Jordan had, jostling, deliberately following each other around. They screamed at each other in a torrent of words that was their regular tone of voice [. . .] the place allowed her to visit *home* without feeling the pain that it had held for her (p. 365, emphasis added).

Seen from this context, Jemorah's decision to drive past the Greek bakery after her confrontation with Portia symbolically represents her visit to what her aunt considers home (p. 298). In this sense, the novel hints that in response to the anti-Arab racism Jemorah encounters in her confrontation with Portia, Jemorah resorts to a southern European cultural heritage for comfort. In other words, just as Portia defines herself as white, so does Jemorah who defines herself as white through linking her identity to a southern European cultural heritage. The link is further boosted by highlighting a Christian cultural heritage. The sign on the closed doors of the bakery which reads 'LeVar's First Communion' (p. 298) and the frequent references to Jemorah as Lazarus of Bethany (p. 310) reinforce Jemorah's entitlement of belonging to a white community through her affiliation with Christianity, just as earlier Arab immigrants and writers gained acceptability to mainstream America through presenting themselves as Christians.¹⁵⁷ Seen from this perspective, Jemorah's identification with blackness evaporates and is replaced by a strong identification with a southern European and Christian cultural heritage.

¹⁵⁷ Surprised that her father has climbed the roof of their house to chant a Muslim prayer call, Melvina, the most American of the family, shouts at her father: "But you're not even Muslim! Your family is Syrian Orthodox," Melvie shouted. "The whole neighborhood can see you up there chanting prayers" (p. 355). Melvina is emphasizing that the Ramouds are Christians because Christianity is her key to whiteness. In this sense, Melvina's fear that the neighbors will see her father identifying himself as a Muslim through chanting a Muslim prayer call is the fear of being identified as non-Christian, and hence non-white. Melvina's fears of being excluded from a larger white community is predicated on a dominant discourse in the US that Nadine Naber refers to in her article 'Ambiguous Insiders' as "the racialization of religion" (p. 52).

Similarly, Fatima, seen by most critics as the preserver of the Arab heritage in the novel,¹⁵⁸ is attached to a southern European and Christian heritage. Although for the past year, the bakery has been run by an African American family, Fatima keeps referring to it by its original Greek name, *Thanatoulos Bakery*. The bakery is the place where Fatima articulates her thoughts about her identity and her relationship to other ethnic groups. Fatima wonders if the bakery has become a more dangerous place ‘with a *black* family in charge’ (p. 366, emphasis added). A few lines down, Fatima nostalgically remembers the ‘shreds of *Greek, Albanian, or Lithuanian* drinking songs as she drove past’ the bakery (p. 367, emphasis added). Fatima seems to be strongly attached to a southern European cultural heritage. The novel constantly invites us to locate Arabs’ experiences in the US in relation to a southern and eastern European immigration and settlement experiences in the US rather than to Asian or African American ones.

In fact, Fatima has remained suspicious of an Asian family who has owned the bakery for eight months:

‘These not American way,’ she told Zaeed after purchasing some of their butter cookies. ‘Too much smiles and knowing English. I feel they stabbing me with needle-eyes in the back.’ She ended up throwing the cookies out after crumbling each one in search of drugs or razors (p. 366).

Kaldas, however, argues that Fatima’s critique of the Asian Indian family ‘redefines American culture as one that requires the infusion of non-Western culture in order to

¹⁵⁸ Salwa Essayah Cherif argues that Fatima ‘seems to find relief in being attached to her roots and in trying to preserve traditional Arab values’ (p. 212). Similarly, Nayef Ali Al-Joulani argues that ‘Fatima holds strongly to traditional Arab views’ (p. 644). On the other hand, Kaldas argues that ‘Fatima is perhaps the character who understand [sic] most fully the multicultural nature of the United States, with its possibilities and limitations’ (p. 182). In different ways, Cherif, Al-Joulani and Kaldas invite us to consider Fatima’s identity as a site of defining Arabness in a multicultural America. See: Nayef Ali Al-Joulani, ‘Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Arabian Jazz: An Orphic Vision of Hybrid Cultural Identity*’, *Neophilologus*, 94 (2010), 637–52.

survive'.¹⁵⁹ As a person obsessed with her cultural identity, as other critics have argued, I believe this quotation reveals Fatima's attempt to dissociate herself from a non-white ethnic identity and stitch herself to a southern European identity represented by the Greek bakery. Fatima's conceptualization of Arabness and otherness stems from the ambiguity that Arabs occupy in US discourses on ethnicity and multiculturalism. This is reflected in Fatima's engagement with other social issues and her membership in cultural institutions.

For instance, Fatima aspires to join the Ladies' Pontifical Committee. The head of the committee, Mrs. D. Hind Abdulaboud, defines her committee as 'preservers of Arabic culture and party throwers, immigrant sponsors, and children-police' (p. 52). The Pontificals define themselves as "[a] Welcome Caravan" and "Stars of Bethlehem" (p. 52). The name of the committee and its epithets explicitly draw on Christian traditions, implying that as Arabs, they are part of a larger white Christian community. In this sense, the committee (and to some extent the text itself) seems to reflect a tendency by early Arab American authors to stress the aspects of their culture that are acceptable to Americans and to downplay those aspects of their culture deemed alien to Americans. As Majaj points out, early Arab immigrant authors have 'stressed their Christian identity [and] their geographical origin in the "Holy Land"' to gain admission and appeal to the white Christian America.¹⁶⁰

In fact, a careful look at the goals and aims of the committee reveals its exclusionary nature:

¹⁵⁹ Kaldas, p. 183.

¹⁶⁰ Lisa Suhair Majaj, 'Arab Americans and the Meanings of Race', in *Postcolonial Theory and the United States*, ed. by Amritjit Singh and Peter Schmidt (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2000), pp. 320-37 (p. 328). See also: Geoffrey P. Nash, *The Arab Writer in English: Arab Themes in a Metropolitan Language, 1908-1958* (Brighton and Portland, Oregon: Sussex Academic Press, 1998).

After all Mrs. D. Hind Abdulaboud pointed out, they were ambassadors to the United States of America, with personal connections to the *Lithuanian League*, the *Catholic Youth Organization*, the *Greek Mothers*, the *Malaysian Socials*, the *B'nai B'rith*, and most important of all: the *Daughters of American revolution* (52, emphasis added).

Apart from mentioning only one non-white ethnic group (the *Malaysian Socials*), the list does not include any African American organization. The groups that the Ladies' Pontifical Committee identifies with are predominantly white Judeo-Christian groups. It is surprising that a novel that highlights an African American cultural artefact in its title, fails to include the name of a single African American cultural institution in its body.

Fatima's eagerness to join the (ideologically white-oriented) Ladies' Pontifical Committee is replicated by her desire to marry off her niece, Jemorah, to a middle class (read: white) Arab man. In fact, the groom whom Fatima brings to Jemorah, Salaam Alaikum, a Muslim Arab university professor, tells Jemorah that he loves "Emerson, Thoreau, Gibran, Dickinson [and] Whitman" (p. 63). Apparently, Salaam Alaikum places Gibran among white poets. He does not mention a single African American bard. By declaring his love of these white poets, including Gibran, Salaam Alaikum presents his credentials as a white person who certainly wins Fatima's approval. This tendency to locate Arabs in a white context informs the novel's depiction of Arab immigration to the US. Although the novel rightly attributes the immigration of some Palestinians to the US to the creation of the state of Israel and the fear of some Palestinians that they would be annihilated,¹⁶¹ the entry to the US for Palestinians, according to the novel, seems to have been smooth and seamless. Fatima and her husband, we are merely told, 'planned to emigrate' to the

¹⁶¹ For instance, in 1948, Israeli militiamen massacred more than 250 Palestinians in Deir Yasin, near Jerusalem. This massacre led to the immigration of Palestinians to neighbouring countries. See: Mark A. Tessler, *A History of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP, 1994).

US (p. 120). The use of the phrase ‘planned to emigrate’ glosses over the complications involved in immigrating to the US. Because of the novel’s persistent location of the experiences of Arabs within a southern European framework, the novel is unable to capture the hardship and humiliation that the Palestinians had undergone to enter the US.

Ernest McCarus’ book, *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, illustrates how even in academic circles Arab immigration to the US is perceived as part of a wave of immigration from southern Europe to the US at the beginning of the twentieth century. The book is one of the first attempts to delineate various aspects of the experiences of Arab Americans, including early experiences of immigration and settlement in the early twentieth century to the US. The first article in the collection is on the experiences of immigrants from eastern and southern Europe to the US. Eva Veronica Huseby-Darvas argues that although there were tremendous variations among the new immigrants, i.e. those who immigrated to the US in the late nineteenth century between 1880 and World War I, immigration officials ‘recklessly [. . .] lumped’ them together.¹⁶² Just as the experiences of early Arab immigrants to the US are framed within an eastern and southern European context in McCarus’ book, *Arabian Jazz* continually locates Arab identity within a non-black ethnic identity. In fact, it is only towards the end of the novel that an anti-Arab racism is distinguished from racism directed at other groups, including southern Europeans.

Towards the end of the novel, the Ramouds go on a picnic to the Onondagan Park. At the park, two young men with ponytails and beards stop to eat with the

¹⁶² Eva Veronica Huseby-Darvas, “‘Coming to America’: Dilemmas of Ethnic Groups since 1880s’, in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. by McCarus, pp. 9-21 (p. 11).

Ramouds upon Matussem's invitation. Before they leave, the two young men ask the Ramouds: "So what *are* you all anyway? I-talians? Wetbacks?" (p. 361, italics in original). When Matussem reveals his ethnic identity, the two men seem disgusted, "Arabs, Jesus fucking Christ. And we ate their food" (p. 361). While the incident shows the porosity of racial identities and that Arabs are usually conflated with Italians and Mexicans because of their physical features and skin color, it also indicates that when visible, Arabs are not welcome in the white circle. The novel engages here with two dominant positions held by Arab activists, academics and researchers on the sources of anti-Arab racism in the US.

On the one hand, Helen Hatab Samhan argues that anti-Arab prejudice has its roots in politics rather than the traditional motives of racial hierarchy.¹⁶³ Samhan argues that this 'political racism' results from the Arab-Israeli conflict and is encouraged by pro-Israeli organizations and individuals with the political motive of 'monopolizing' the discussion of the Middle East in the US, particularly 'in the realm of public information and public policy'.¹⁶⁴ On the other hand, Nabeel Abraham argues that anti-Arab racism is not entirely political in its orientation. One source, Abraham argues, is the ideologically motivated violence which includes '[a]nti-Arab attacks instigated, sponsored, and organized' by the Jewish Defense League (JDL) and other Jewish extremist groups.¹⁶⁵ Another source, Abraham maintains, is anti-Arab xenophobia which is a 'locally inspired hostility and violence' that accompanies the ethnic visibility of Arabs, Muslims, and people of

¹⁶³ Helen Hatab Samhan, 'Politics and Exclusion: The Arab American Experience', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 16 (1987), 10-28 (p. 11).

¹⁶⁴ Samhan, pp. 11-12.

¹⁶⁵ Nabeel Abraham, 'Anti-Arab Racism and Violence in the United States', in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. by McCarus, pp. 155-214 (p. 180).

Middle Eastern descent.¹⁶⁶ The third type of racism, according to Abraham, is ‘spawned by political ignorance, false patriotism, and hyper ethnocentrism [. . . and] tends to be spontaneous, reactive and episodic’.¹⁶⁷

Whatever the reasons for anti-Arab racism, the novel seems to highlight the Ramouds’ experience as metonymic of Arab experience in the US. Jemorah’s decision to pursue her higher education becomes emblematic of this experience too. Driving home after the incident, we are told that Jemorah ‘had recognized, as the hiker turned to face her, the mystery of this hate, something she could crack only by going into it: back to school’ (p. 362). In fact, Jemorah’s decision to go back to school precludes her marriage to half Native American Ricky Ellis. Although Salaita argues that the Jemorah-Ricky love relation represents an ‘inter-ethnic communalism’,¹⁶⁸ the novel does not fully accommodate this relationship as Jemorah does not accept Ricky’s proposal for marriage and prefers to pursue her education. The collapse of this promising cross-ethnic tie represents the novel’s failure to properly foster a cross-ethnic link.¹⁶⁹

The Ramouds’ experience is an example of the ambiguous space that Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in the US that renders them invisible. I would like to now turn to Nadine Naber’s seminal essay, ‘Ambiguous Insiders: an Investigation of Arab American Invisibility’ to draw on some ideas for my concluding remarks. Naber argues that a number of paradoxes shape and causes the

¹⁶⁶ Abraham, p. 188.

¹⁶⁷ Abraham, p. 193.

¹⁶⁸ Salaita, p. 436.

¹⁶⁹ In fact, as Ricky Ellis proposes to Jemorah, he is portrayed as a person who lacks confidence and self-respect. He is depicted as self-contemptuous, credulous, unreliable and childish in a way that gives Jemorah’s decision to decline his marriage proposal credence: ‘Okay. I know I’m a risky person. [. . .] I don’t know. Maybe we could get married. I wouldn’t say that I’d exactly been planning for it. Hell, it *might* be fun, marriage. We could get a big cake’ (p. 371, italics in original).

invisibility of Arabs in the US. First, the diverse Arab American community is lumped together as generically Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim. When the US is involved in a military action against any Arab country, anyone who may be identified as an Arab, Muslim, or Middle Easterner living in the US may be targeted as a terrorist-enemy because anti-Arab imaging removes all traces of diversity in the Arab American community. Second, Naber argues, Arab Americans are racially white, but not quite. According to the US Census Bureau, Arab Americans are defined as Caucasian/White. However, in many social contexts they are perceived and defined as non-whites.

Third, Islam, Naber maintains, is used as a means of racializing Arab Americans. As Muslims are being portrayed as terrorists, it is primarily ‘the distorted use of Islam, rather than phenotype’, that marks Arabs in the US as non-white others.¹⁷⁰ A fourth paradox that enhances the invisibility of the Arabs in the US is the intersection of religion and race. For Arab immigrants, the organization of difference according to religious categories has conflicted with the US social structure that organizes difference according to race/ethnicity.¹⁷¹ In short, the racializing system in the US, reinforced by the US media, has racialized Arabs in the US ‘according to a unique and contradictory process, resulting in their white but not quite racial/ethnic status’.¹⁷² Moreover, the Arab American community’s internal dissimilar and constantly shifting fabric contributes to the complexities of classifying this community.¹⁷³

¹⁷⁰ Naber, p. 53. Naber refers to this process as “the racialization of religion” (p. 52).

¹⁷¹ Naber, p. 54.

¹⁷² Naber, p. 56.

¹⁷³ Naber, p. 56.

In addition to Naber's argument I would like to suggest that these paradoxes have also contributed to shaping Arab American literature by restraining Arab American novelists from adopting a clear stance towards the relationship between Arabs and (non-white) ethnic groups. Abu-Jaber's novel, while commended by many critics as attempting to seek an alliance with other ethnic groups in the US, particularly African Americans, remains framed by an indecisive attitude towards (non-white) ethnic groups in the US. In this context, what Abu-Jaber says in an interview with Robin Field is quite revealing. Abu-Jaber states that after the publication of *Arabian Jazz*, many people wrote to her 'who were from different cultural backgrounds and said, "I'm not Arab, I'm *Italian*, but I have a grandmother just like this' or, "I've got a *Lithuanian* Aunt Fatima".¹⁷⁴ Just as some of the Arab American characters in *Arabian Jazz* perceive themselves as whites by unwittingly dissociating themselves from blackness, Abu-Jaber here seems to be celebrating the success of her novel by showing how other Europeans have identified with Arab characters. If, as other critics have argued, *Arabian Jazz* connects Arab Americans to African Americans, then the link, I think, is at best tenuous.

Michelle Hartman argues that the ways in which minority groups in the US 'identify and affiliate with or dissociate and distance themselves from African Americans is centrally important to staking their claims to a position in US society'.¹⁷⁵ Arab Americans 'are no exception', Hartman maintains.¹⁷⁶ In this context, Hartman argues, black music offers 'a powerful and positive symbolic site' for Arab Americans to invoke links with African Americans which 'underl[ie] a shared understanding through culture rather than establishing a bond between the two

¹⁷⁴ Field, p. 210-11, emphasis added.

¹⁷⁵ Hartman, p. 147.

¹⁷⁶ Hartman, p. 147.

groups which is only based on shared oppression'.¹⁷⁷ Reading jazz as a symbol of and a metonym for African America, Hartman argues that *Arabian Jazz* states that Arab Americans 'identify with African Americans'.¹⁷⁸

Andrew Shryock downplays this identification because it is '[r]estricted largely to media of popular music, film, and other expressive arts-and kept away from areas of marriage choice, residence, civic association, or church/mosque membership'.¹⁷⁹ Even after 9/11, Shryock maintains, links between Arab American cultural productions and African American cultural heritage are skin-deep:

[I]dentifications with 'blackness' among Arab Americans resemble those prevalent in the larger society: namely, (1) avid consumption of black entertainment culture, especially its transgressive and oppositional forms, and (2) selective imitation of the models for minority politics black Americans have created over the last century.¹⁸⁰

Nagel and Staeheli's tellingly titled article on Arab American activists "'We're Just Like the Irish": Narratives of Assimilation, Belonging and Citizenship amongst Arab-American Activists' shows the extent to which many Arab Americans perceive themselves as whites and frame their immigration and settlement experiences within a European ethnic and racial context. Comparing themselves to Irish immigrants to the US, Arab activists emphasize that, like other immigrants who were initially viewed as incapable of assuming the rights, responsibilities, and values of American citizenship, Arab Americans would be seen as 'belonging, as American, and as full members of the polity' and that it is only 'a matter of time, educating the public, and

¹⁷⁷ Hartman, p. 148.

¹⁷⁸ Hartman, p. 156.

¹⁷⁹ Andrew Shryock, 'The Moral Analogies of Race: Arab American Identity, Color Politics, and the Limits of Racialized Citizenship', in *Race and Arab Americans*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 81-113 (p. 101).

¹⁸⁰ Shryock, p. 101.

hard work'.¹⁸¹ In short, some Arab Americans do not seem to perceive themselves in the same political or cultural position as Asians, Chinese, Africans or Latin Americans.

While *Arabian Jazz* is not strictly appropriating an African American cultural artefact to promote itself, I argue that it does not succeed in establishing a solid relationship between Arab Americans and African Americans, or indeed any other minority group. Instead, just like the precarious position Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in the US, the characters in *Arabian Jazz* seem to be ambivalent about constructing their identities as non-whites. Their conceptualization of their identities problematizes their position and eventually curtails them from entirely identifying themselves as non-whites. Although Matussem is infatuated by jazz, he lives in a white neighborhood and his band mates are all white. In the same way, in spite of the fact that the local bakery has been owned for some years by an African American family, Fatima insists on referring to it as the Greek bakery. Similarly, even though Jemorah tells Portia that her father's mother is black, Jemorah turns down a marriage proposal from half Native American Ricky Ellis.

In a word, the Arab American characters that the novel depicts remain hesitant about entirely adopting a black identity, of developing connections with a minority culture replete with its history of marginalization. This indeterminacy lies at the heart of Arab American literature. Unlike Arab British authors whose writings show more ambitious and nuanced attempts to identify with people of color, Arab American writings are permeated by the ambiguous space Arabs occupy within the US racial hierarchies. As my reading of Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* has shown,

¹⁸¹ Caroline C. Nagel and Lynn. A. Staeheli, "We're just Like the Irish": Narratives of Assimilation, Belonging and Citizenship amongst Arab-American Activists', *Citizenship Studies*, 9 (2005), 485-98 (p. 486).

for Arab British to identify with people of color is not an option. Rather, it is a survival strategy. The Salma-Parvin relationship gives the former the air she needs to breathe, the bread to eat and the water to drink. The Salma-Parvin relationship echoes a theme prevalent in the works of Arab British women writers of breaking through racial and color boundaries. I turn now to the works of Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela to explore what I see as a tendency by Arab British women writers to positively represent trans-cultural and cross-ethnic alliances and coalitions. The attempts of asylum seeker Salma to identify with the displaced and the marginalized parallel and, in different ways, echo Soueif and Aboulela's protagonists' endeavors to identify with people of color and engage in a constructive trans-cultural dialogue.

Chapter Two

Arab British Women Writers and Transnational Feminisms: Fruitful Dialogues?

2.0 Introduction

As seen in the previous chapter, the works of Arab British women novelists exhibit a tendency toward instigating dialogue with other minority and ethnic groups. Unlike Arab American literature, which tends to explore issues and problems associated with the Arab American community such as stereotyping and anti-Arab racism, literature written by Arab British women writers has mainly focussed on exploring the relationship between Arab and non-Arab characters. The two different experiences of immigration and settlement of Arabs on the two sides of the Atlantic have differently influenced and shaped the literature produced by the two sets of authors. This chapter focuses on the works of two Arab British women writers: Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela. Through analyzing Soueif's *The Map of Love* and Aboulela's *Minaret*, I will focus on the way the two writers foreground trans-cultural dialogues and cross-ethnic identifications. In their novels, the two novelists present themes of love, marriage, travel, exile, and immigration and highlight the fertility of cross-cultural encounters. In the works of the two writers, the ethnic borderland is presented as a site of female solidarity and empowerment.

Soueif's two novels *In the Eye of the Sun* and *The Map of Love* were published in 1992 and 1999, respectively. Her two collections of short stories *Aisha* and *Sandpiper* were published in 1982 and 1996. Aboulela has published three novels and one collection of short stories. The novels are *The Translator* (1999), *Minaret* (2005) and *Lyrics Alley* (2010). The short story collection is *Coloured Lights* (2001). In this chapter, I will examine one novel by each writer: *The Map of Love* and *Minaret*. The plots, themes, characters and settings of the two novels invite us to

question and scrutinize the viability of feminism as a transnational movement.

Through the cross-cultural encounters that thematically and structurally permeate the two works, Soueif and Aboulela participate in current discussions on feminism as an international movement that simultaneously challenges gender inequality and addresses socio-economic and political differences among women. Moreover, the two novels valorize *direct experience* and cross-cultural dialogues as strategies that aid in the removal of obstacles and hurdles that obstruct the progress of transnational feminist movements.

My readings of *The Map of Love* and *Minaret* come within the larger picture of delineating thematic differences between Arab British and Arab American women writers as a result of different localized experiences in the hostland. In this context, I suggest that Arab women authors who live (in part) in Britain and use English as a vehicle of expression have shown a tendency in their fiction to go beyond the ethnic borders and barriers in order to facilitate a dialogue with other groups. This tendency, while it varies in detail from one woman author to another depending on her social, political and ideological stance, can be found in the works of most Arab British women writers. This is in contrast, I believe, to a tendency in the works of Arab American women writers to employ different literary strategies to subvert stereotypes commonly associated with Arabs in the US and to look closely at Arab communities from within.

Thematically, Soueif and Aboulela focus on the significance of trans-cultural dialogues and cross-ethnic alliances. As characters encounter one another, they explore their different experiences but also reflect on their commonalities. Through travel, immigration and exile, women from different cultural backgrounds and social

classes interact, exchange ideas and contextualize their differences. Structurally, the novels move between two historically and geographically diverse settings but continually emphasize that the politics of location needs to be adequately addressed for any feminist movement to be successful.¹ Both novels highlight the importance of the existence of a certain basis for coalition and alliance. While Soueif's *The Map of Love* foregrounds travel and hybridity as a potential basis for a cross-cultural dialogue, Aboulela presents religion as a common denominator that bypasses ethnic differences and facilitates solidarity and camaraderie. In both cases, there is an emphasis on the fertility of the trans-cultural encounter as a site for constructing bridges of talks and widening the horizons of cohesion among women. Seen from this perspective, Soueif and Aboulela's works carefully navigate differences with a view to build commonalities.

As two Arab British women writers, Soueif and Aboulela, themselves first generation Arab immigrants to Britain, engage with issues of living in diaspora in a productive way. Unlike Arab American women novelists who tend to concentrate on the incongruities and paradoxes of Arab American communities, Soueif and Aboulela's central themes revolve around issues of trans-cultural dialogue and cross-ethnic identifications. The Arab women characters they present are keen on linking their experiences to those of women from other cultural backgrounds. In this sense, Soueif and Aboulela reflect on their own experiences of being Arabs in Britain in order to explore the possibility of creating a common ground for partnership among women from different cultures. The hyphenated identities of both authors as Arab

¹ Aboulela's *Lyrics Alley* might be an exception. It is set in pre-independence Sudan and is thematically different from Aboulela's previous two novels in the sense that there is no one major character in the novel. Instead, we have four main characters whose experiences are not portrayed in a cross-cultural encounter, but are based on the daily intersections of class, gender, religion, nationality and politics in pre-independence Sudan.

British are of great importance in creating a space for the two cultures to interact. Given the historical, political, cultural, military and economic exchanges between the two cultures through trade, cultural borrowing, and geographical proximity, colonialism and modernity, feminism and Islam become intricately-linked sites for exploring commonalities rather than valorizing difference in the works of the two Arab British authors. The plots, themes, settings and structures of the works of the two writers reflect this continuing process of cultural exchanges.

In an interview with Claire Chambers, Aboulela asserts that for her 'instead of having Islam as part of the culture, [she is] consciously presenting it as a faith'.² In this sense, Soueif's engagement with Islam is different from Aboulela's though it is important to note that they are both interested in promoting their Arab-Islamic cultures and exploring the commonalities with other cultures. However, in this chapter, I will also need to look at the ways in which connectivity and dialogue is achieved through different means by both writers, thus revealing a tendency by Arab British women writers to open dialogues of talks with non-Arab communities in Britain. While I am not trying to collapse the differences between the two writers, I would like to point out that the two authors follow relatively different approaches towards achieving similar goals; namely to highlight the importance of trans-cultural and cross-ethnic dialogues in establishing coalitions and alliances.

In fact, Geoffrey Nash emphasizes the differences between Soueif and Aboulela. He argues that while 'Soueif's writing remains inimical to dialogue with contemporary Islamist thinking [. . .], Aboulela's text[s] refute deconstructionist dogmas of absence, and draws Western emptiness into a rooted Islamic-African

² Claire Chambers, 'Interview with Leila Aboulela', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 3 (2009), 86-102 (p. 94).

core'.³ In this context *The Map of Love* and *Minaret* represent, to use Leila Ahmed's words 'the two divergent strains of feminism' in the Arab world: namely secular feminism and Islamic feminism.⁴ Ahmed argues that one branch has been the dominant voice of feminism in Egypt and in the Middle East for most of the twentieth century, and the second has remained an alternative, marginal voice until the last decades of the century.⁵ Ahmed explains that secular feminism in the Middle East has been generally affiliated with the westernizing, secularizing tendencies of society and predominantly the tendencies of the upper, upper-middle, and middle-middle classes. Islamic feminism, on the other hand, has articulated its agenda within native, vernacular, Islamic discourse - typically in terms of a general social, cultural, and religious renovation.⁶

Nevertheless, the thematic overlaps between the two authors eclipse their differences. As Arab British novelists, the two writers draw on their Arab-Islamic heritage and their experiences in Britain to foreground trans-cultural dialogues and cross-ethnic alliances. Both writers valorize different forms of feminist activism as fields for alliance building. I argue that secular feminism and Islamic feminism in the Middle East have influenced each other as many researchers point out. Margot Badran, for instance, asserts that secular feminism and Islamic feminism are 'porous and indeed from the start Muslims' secular feminism/s included an Islamic reformist strand and Islamic feminism/s are also situated in the real world'.⁷ Elsewhere, Badran insists that secular feminism and Islamic feminism in the Middle East 'flo[w]

³ Geoffrey Nash, 'Re-siting Religion and Creating Feminised Space in the Fiction of Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela', *Wasafiri*, 35 (2002), 28-31 (pp.30-1).

⁴ Leila Ahmed, *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1992), p. 174.

⁵ Ahmed, p. 174.

⁶ Ahmed, pp.174-75.

⁷ Azza Basarudin, 'Re-defining Feminism/s, Re-imagining Faith? Margot Badran on Islamic Feminism', *Al-Raida*, 109-110 (2005), 57-65 (pp. 61-62).

in and out of each other'.⁸ In short, Badran contends that 'secular feminism is Islamic and Islamic feminism is secular'.⁹

Similarly, Lila Abu-Lughod argues that in our discussion of feminism in the Arab World we should transcend the West-East binary opposition 'that posits a rigidly distinct West and East and assumes the crude dynamics that correspond to this division'.¹⁰ Abu-Lughod proposes studying the relationship between the colonizing or dominant Europe and the colonized or aspiring Middle East as a site of hybridization and transformation that is 'so crucial to gender and the politics of feminism' in the Middle East.¹¹ For Abu-Lughod, the feminist movements in the Middle East 'are rooted in sets of [European] ideas' that are part of a modernity which is both related to Europe and developed in particular ways in the region.¹² All these forms of feminism in the Middle East, Abu-Lughod argues, are products of complex histories and the projects of modernity that have been central to the region and their stories should be told 'in all their messiness and contradictions'.¹³ Seen from this perspective, the thematic commonalities between the works of Soueif and Aboulela are more than the differences. In other words, the Islamic feminism of Aboulela is permeated by secular feminism in the way that the secular feminism of

⁸ Margot Badran, 'Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond', *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies*, 1 (2005), 6-28 (p. 12).

⁹ Badran, p. 12. Badran likens the interconnectedness of secular feminism and Islamic feminism to the description of Islam 'as *din wa dunyá*, to translate the phrase, [Islam] joins "religion and the world"' (p. 12).

¹⁰ Lila Abu-Lughod, 'Introduction: Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions', in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. by Lila Abu-Lughod (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1998), pp. 3-31 (p. 21).

¹¹ Abu-Lughod, p. 21.

¹² Abu-Lughod, p. 22.

¹³ Abu-Lughod, p. 25.

Nawal al-Sa'dawi, Fadia Faqir and Ahdaf Soueif is influenced by Islamic feminism.¹⁴

As two transnational movements that bypass ethnic and racial differences, Islam and feminism, I argue, are two major subjects that need to be explored in the works of Soueif and Aboulela. In fact, in the works of the two authors Islam and feminism are intricately linked. Since the two novelists write in English, we might rightly conclude that the audience being addressed is an international one. Taking into consideration the plots of the two novels which intricately involve Arab and non-Arab women and portray the experiences of these women in the socio-historical contexts in which they live, the two novels enter into a dialogue with the precepts of feminism. In other words, through the portrayal of different women and their differing experiences, the two novels explore the tenets of feminism, its variants and its relationship to Islam, modernity, globalization, colonialism and imperialism. In the two works, the authors foreground differences in social classes, history, cultural backgrounds, religion and political ideology in ways that invite us to question the limits of (Western) feminism and examine how Arab women writers approach it. Through depicting the experiences of Arab and non-Arab women and exploring the fertility of trans-cultural and cross-ethnic encounters, Soueif and Aboulela reflect a tendency in Arab British women literature to foreground coalitions and alliances that bypass national, racial and ethnic boundaries.

¹⁴ Another example of the fluidity of the Islamic/secular feminist movement in the Arab world can be found in Amin Malak's approach to Soueif's works in his book *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English*. In explaining the criteria for his text selection, Malak argues that one of the criteria is that the authors he selected 'have been influenced by [Islam] to such a degree that it has represented a significant inspirational source for them' (p. 2). Malak's eighth chapter of the book (pp. 127-150) analyzes Soueif's works. See: Amin Malak, *Muslim Narratives and the Discourse of English* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2005).

2.1 Transnational Feminisms Demystified: Power Relations, Representation, and Understanding

Before providing an overview of some of the recent discussions on transnational feminist movements, I would like first to explain how I am using this term. The feminist movements I seek to foreground are not only fully aware of the imbalance of power relations between ‘First World’ and ‘Third World’ countries, but they are also alert to the fact that other factors, such as social class, religion and education, embody challenges that need to be addressed for local activism plans to succeed and for mobilizations of international issues to gather momentum. For feminist movements to be effective, powerful and attractive worldwide, feminists should, as Grewal and Kaplan clearly point out, ‘continually question the narratives in which they are embedded, including but not limiting [themselves] to the master narratives of mainstream feminism[s]’.¹⁵ The scholarship of feminist movements take onboard Robert Stam’s argument about scholarship in the multicultural academy, whereby scholarship is ‘not to completely embrace the other perspective, but at least to recognize it, acknowledge it, take it into account, see oneself through it, and even be transformed by it’.¹⁶ In other words, maintaining dialogue with different conceptual and ideological movements is the cornerstone for progressive liberal movements, including feminism(s).

However, constant engagement with other movements is one of the main challenges that transnational feminist movements may encounter in various forms

¹⁵ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, ‘Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity’, in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 1-33 (p. 18).

¹⁶ Robert Stam, ‘Multiculturalism and the Neoconservatives’, in *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, ed. by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1997), pp. 188-203 (p. 201).

and at different levels. The argument that Chandra Talpade Mohanty made in her classic essay 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourse' highlighted 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 accuses Western feminists of assuming '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)'.¹⁷

This image, Mohanty adds, is constructed 'in contrast to the (implicit) self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern'.¹⁸ 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'.¹⁹ Mohanty 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'.²⁰ Thus, Mohanty calls for 'careful, historically specific generalizations responsive to complex realities'.²¹

To sum up, Mohanty believes that 'a transnational anticapitalist feminist critique, one that draws on historical materialism and centralizes racialized gender'

¹⁷ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 2003), p. 22.

¹⁸ Mohanty, p. 22.

¹⁹ Mohanty, p. 39.

²⁰ Mohanty, p. 39.

²¹ Mohanty, p. 39.

can be useful for analyzing how capitalism and its various relations of rule differently affect the lives of women in the world.²² It is worth quoting her at length here because of her influence on other advocates of transnational feminisms and because it is her theoretical framework that informs much of my analysis of the two novels under examination:

Activists and scholars must also identify and reenvision forms of collective resistance that women, especially, in their different communities enact in their everyday lives. It is their particular exploitation at this time, their potential epistemic privilege, as well as their particular forms of solidarity that can be the basis for reimagining a liberatory politics for the start of this century.²³

Mohanty focuses here on local forms of resistance that can be the basis for global feminist movements. As I will argue, the works of Soueif and Aboulela show, through their plots, structures and characterization, how transnational movements need to be attentive to the interconnectedness of social, economic, political and historical issues that contribute to the oppression of women in various parts of the world at various levels. This approach helps feminists better understand the local forms of resistance against multifaceted and interconnected forms of oppression.

In this sense, an understanding of the socio-economic, political and historical situation in which Aboulela's protagonist Najwa in *Minaret* has chosen to be a devout Muslim in diaspora dismantles, to use Moghissi's words, 'the assumption that Islam is a blanket under which people from Islamic cultures are huddled together regardless of their regional, ethnic, cultural, class and gender differences'.²⁴ In other words, Najwa's religiosity in *Minaret* could be seen as a form of resistance to global

²² Mohanty, p. 231.

²³ Mohanty, p. 236.

²⁴ Haideh Moghissi, 'Women, War and Fundamentalism in the Middle East', *Social Science Research Council* <http://essays.ssrc.org/sept11/essays/moghissi_text_only.htm> [accessed 10 July 2010], para. 5 of 11.

economic and political forces that uproot her from her home country and render her a helpless refugee in London. In this context, Islam offers Najwa a shelter to re-compose herself and connect with other women who give her the help and affection she desperately craves.

Deepika Bahri shares Mohanty's concern about the status of women under the current wave of capitalism and globalization. Bahri argues that '[u]nder the contemporary circumstances of globalization and the almost complete sway of capitalism world-wide, the condition of women has become a more urgent issue than ever'.²⁵ While she concedes that the world has become more interconnected economically and politically in a wave that severely disenfranchizes 'Third World' women, Bahri urges us to reflect on the issues of representation, colonial relations and gender inequalities as sites of manifesting 'the Foucauldian nexus between knowledge and power' since 'those with the power to represent and describe others clearly control how these others will be seen'.²⁶ Bahri's comments remind us of Spivak's provocative question 'Can the subaltern speak?' in her eponymous essay and how the representation of 'Third World' women can be highly problematic as I have explained in my discussion of Faqir's *My Name is Salma*.

The Map of Love seems to engage with the question of representation cautiously. The novel gives space for the less privileged women to speak. Through their interaction with Amal, the upper-middle class protagonist who has just returned to Egypt after an estrangement and separation from her English husband, women of lower classes voice their opinions on several domestic and international issues. As

²⁵ Deepika Bahri, 'Feminism in/and Postcolonialism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Literary Studies*, ed. by Neil Lazarus (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004), pp. 199-220 (p. 201).

²⁶ Bahri, pp. 203-5.

Amin Malak explains, Amal's friendships with the peasants in her ancestral village, Tawasi, and Tahiyya, the doorman's wife in her building in Cairo 'redres[s] the balance in the novel by allowing space and forum for figures outside the privileged political and cultural elite'.²⁷ Similarly, Isabel, an American journalist and Amal's future sister-in-law, befriends Um Aya, the wife of the museum's doorman. Um Aya gives Isabel a wise piece of advice on her relationship with the man she loves to which Isabel carefully listens. In this respect, the novel not only breaks through class barriers, it also creates an atmosphere where cross-cultural boundaries are negotiated among women of different classes. Malak rightly argues that 'there is a conscious design operating here to give voice to ordinary, yet, intuitively astute, people and to let them air their concerns directly, effectively, and, at times, humorously'.²⁸ In representing women of different backgrounds, *The Map of Love* highlights the problematics of handling difference.

In what may seem an engagement with Mohanty's call for feminists to recognize difference and to properly investigate the local conditions that converge in oppressing women, Ien Ang argues that '[t]aking difference seriously necessitates the adoption of a politics of *partiality* rather than a politics of inclusion' by constructing

²⁷ Amin Malak, 'Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity: The Fiction of Ahdaf Soueif', *Alif*, 20 (2000), 140-183 (p. 156).

²⁸ Malak, p. 146. It is important to remember here Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj's warning on how works by 'Third World' women are received in the West. Amireh and Majaj postulate that contexts not only significantly influence how specific works are read, but they also have an effect on, and even determine 'which texts are translated, marketed, reviewed, and taught, and which issues are prioritized' (p. 3). Amireh and Majaj maintain that 'the history of the reception of "Third World" women's texts in the West reflects in miniature the history of the relations between "First" and "Third World" women' (p. 6). It is with this warning in mind that we need to ground our analysis of literature produced by 'Third World' women and published in the West. See: Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj, 'Introduction', in *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, ed. by Amal Amireh and Lisa Suhair Majaj (New York & London: Garland Publishing Inc., 2000), pp. 1-26.

the ‘limits’ of feminism’s own field of political intervention.²⁹ Ang argues that a politics of partiality ‘accepts the principle that feminism can never ever be an encompassing political home for all women’ because ‘for many groups of “other” women other interests, other identifications are sometimes more important and politically pressing than [. . .] those related to their being women’.³⁰ Though seemingly Ang’s argument can be seen as contradictory to Mohanty’s perspectives, I think it is better to look at it as cautionary and instructive. In this sense, Ang’s argument on the limits of feminism as a political movement encourages feminists to be more adaptive, flexible and wary of reaching a deadlock.

Ang’s caveat is similar to Caren Kaplan’s engagement with Adrienne Rich’s concept of the politics of location in the sense that both critics, i.e. Ang and Kaplan, caution against an uncritical appropriation of ideological and political forms of expression. Kaplan argues that questions of location are more useful when they are ‘used to deconstruct any dominant hierarchy or hegemonic use of the term gender’.³¹ On the other hand, a politics of location is not useful when it is construed to be the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be re-established and reaffirmed. Discourses of location, Kaplan warns, can be used ‘to naturalize boundaries and margins under the guise of celebration, nostalgia, or inappropriate assumptions of sameness’.³² In short, a politics of location, Kaplan asserts, ‘is also

²⁹ Ien Ang, ‘I’m a Feminist but . . . “Other” Women and Postnational Feminism’, in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2003), pp.190-206 (p. 204, italics in original).

³⁰ Ang, p. 204.

³¹ Caren Kaplan, ‘The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Practice’, in *Scattered Hegemonies*, ed. by Grewal and Kaplan, pp. 137-51 (p. 139).

³² Kaplan, p. 139.

problematic when it is deployed as an agent of appropriation, constructing similarity through equalizations when material histories indicate inequities'.³³

Ang and Kaplan's warnings encourage us to be suspicious of utilizing analytical tools to flatten differences. Analytical tools and concepts, like the politics of location, are useful when we employ them 'to destabilize unexamined or stereotypical images that are vestiges of colonial discourse and other manifestations of modernity's structural inequalities'.³⁴ Approached with suspicion and continually questioned, these tools can help us recognize and work on the complex relationships among women in different parts of the world. In this sense, we need to thoroughly contextualize the experiences of different women in *The Map of Love* and *Minaret* to avoid hasty judgements on their actions. In this sense, Amal's choice to live in her native village of Tawasi and Najwa's decision to wear the hijab can be seen as efficient strategic options based on their localized experiences. In this context, the historical and socio-economic contexts of their experiences offer clues to understanding their decisions. In this sense, our understanding of the historical context under which Amal and Najwa take their decisions represents a useful employment of the politics of location.

Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan state that it is imperative to address the historical context in which women live as well as the international economic hegemonies that influence their lives. They maintain that transnational feminist practices require a kind of '*comparative* work rather than the *relativistic* linking of "differences" undertaken by proponents of "global feminism"' who construct 'a

³³ Kaplan, p. 139.

³⁴ Kaplan, p. 139.

theory of hegemonic oppression under a unified category of gender'.³⁵ Through these comparative practices, the tiniest details come under scrutiny and they may become a basis for a socio-political-situated feminist movement. *Scattered Hegemonies* is a call for feminists to utilize a postmodern discourse by offering critiques of economic and cultural conditions that govern the lives of millions of women worldwide.

Grewal and Kaplan state:

Without an analysis of transnational scattered hegemonies that reveal themselves in gender relations, feminist movements will remain isolated and prone to reproducing the universalizing gestures of dominant Western cultures.³⁶

Grewal and Kaplan's argument is quite useful for understanding the transnational feminist agendas that I believe underlie the two novels under study in this chapter. In Soueif's *The Map of Love*, the willingness of Anna, the upper class English woman, to listen to other voices in order to understand the different context under which Egyptian women live enables her to connect with these women and capture the underlying similarities and differences that link her experience as an upper class English woman to the experiences of her Egyptian peers. Similarly, in Aboulela's *Minaret* a western feminist might not appreciate at first Najwa's seemingly backward position of wishing to be an obedient Muslim housewife, but an investigation of Najwa's experience as a woman in exile might help contextualize the specificity of Najwa's needs and goals. Better still, a western feminist will accept the existence and viability of an Islamic feminist movement that can be understood, in the words of Azza Basarudin, 'as one strategy for Muslim women to struggle for women's rights from within an Islamic paradigm that is compatible with indigenous

³⁵ Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan, 'Introduction: Transnational Feminist Practices and Questions of Postmodernity', in *Scattered Hegemonies*, ed. by Grewal and Kaplan, pp. 1-33 (pp. 17-18).

³⁶ Grewal and Kaplan, p. 17.

socio-cultural and religious locations'.³⁷ In this sense, a comprehensive understanding of the needs of women and the local and global impediments that prevent them from realizing their goals and that collectively contribute to shaping women's experiences in different parts of the world is an essential requirement for building globally influential feminist movements.

2.2 First-hand Experience, Understanding and Transnational Feminisms in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*

The Map of Love tells the story of Lady Anna Winterbourne, an English widow whose husband dies of depression after participating in the English military campaign on Sudan in 1899. Prompted by her father-in-law's anti-colonial sentiments, she sets sail to Egypt in an attempt to understand the nature of a country, and more significantly of a nation, that has attracted several invaders throughout history. It is not an accident then that she falls in love and marries one of the Egyptian upper-class nationalists. Though her marriage puts her in an unenviable position with regard to other English people, she manages, with the help of her husband's sister, Layla al-Baroudi, to set up an efficient network with other Egyptian women. Anna bears witness to a society in the process of social, economic and political upheaval of which she keeps an accurate record. Upon the assassination of her husband (and upon his wish), she returns to England with her daughter.

One hundred years later, her great granddaughter, Isabel, prompted this time by her love for Omar al-Ghamrawi flies to Egypt with Anna's trunk and forges a strong relationship with his sister Amal despite the apparent age difference. If Anna's sojourn in Egypt exposes the follies of British colonization, Isabel's experience in Egypt reveals the cruelty of American imperialism in the twentieth century and its

³⁷ Basarudin, p. 65.

concomitant hypocrisy. Through Isabel's interaction with Egyptian women of different classes, she becomes more and more aware of the heterogeneity of the Egyptian society and recognizes the various problems that affect Egyptian women differently based on their social class, education, religion and location.

The two interlocking stories of Anna and Isabel are not all about a victim-predator conflict - they also foreground the possibility of a cross-cultural dialogue through feminist movements or even movements that are based on mutual understanding and self-criticism. As the works of Mohanty, Ang and Grewal and Kaplan show, beside gender inequality, socio-economic and political differences need to be adequately addressed for a better understanding of the conditions that influence women's lives in different corners of the world. At the same time, the story is seen from the point of view of the highly educated upper-middle class Amal. Although, the novel privileges Amal in this sense, Amal's decision to settle in her home village of Tawasi and work closely with other villagers for a better future invites us to think of the possibilities embedded in a transnational feminist movement that is grounded in local politics. In other words, now that Amal lives with the villagers, she has the obligation and the opportunity to demystify, through her global connections, the real needs of her own people.

Soueif's *The Map of Love* has received some attention since its publication in 1999. Researchers, however, have not adequately addressed in depth the transnational feminist project informing Soueif's work. Most reviewers and critics have focussed on the cross-cultural encounter that the novel portrays and what it entails of linguistic and cultural hybridity. For instance, Joseph Massad states that 'Soueif's writing investigates the possibilities of cultural dialogue as well as the

politics of desire, both within and outside this dialogue'.³⁸ He goes on to say that '[c]entral to her investigations is the encounter of East and West, of Arabic and English, and of men and women in an intercultural context'.³⁹ Similarly, Catherine Wynne reads *The Map of Love* as a novel that attempts to explore the limits of the common ground, the Mezzaterra, through 'focus[ing] on [a] hybrid family'.⁴⁰ Wynne 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'.⁴¹ On the other hand, the employment of language in the novel has received much interest by researchers. For instance, Mohammed Albakry and Patsy Hunter Hancock examine 'code switching as a literary device' in the novel.⁴² The authors note that Soueif's employment of a 'foreignizing strategy' in *The Map of Love* 'could potentially function as a discourse of resistance within/to the dominant Anglo-American language and culture'.⁴³

Other critics have highlighted the feminist stance that the ending of the novel represents. For instance, Amin Malak approvingly, though succinctly, describes Amal's return to her village as Soueif's attempt to bridge 'the dislocations between a hybridized, privileged intellectual like Amal and the reality of her people'.⁴⁴ For Malak, it is through the inclusion of peripheral voices in the novel, represented by the women peasants in Amal's home village of Tawasi, that Soueif is trying to correct an anomalous Arab women's movement through a politics of inclusion.

³⁸ Joseph Massad, 'The Politics of Desire in the Writing of Ahdaf Soueif', *Journal of Palestine Studies*, 28 (1999), 74-90 (p. 74).

³⁹ Massad, p. 75.

⁴⁰ Catherine Wynne, 'Navigating the Mezzaterra: Home, Harem and the Hybrid Family in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*', *Critical Survey*, 18 (2006), 56-66 (p. 59).

⁴¹ Wynne, p. 65.

⁴² Mohammed Albakry and Patsy Hunter Hancock, 'Code Switching in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*', *Language and Literature*, 17 (2008), 221-34 (p. 222).

⁴³ Albakry and Hancock, p. 231.

⁴⁴ Amin Malak, 'Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity', p. 158.

Emily S. Davis, on the other hand, examines transnational links that permeate the novel by showing how Soueif employs the genre of romance for exploring themes that are not normally associated with the genre. Davis maintains that '*The Map of Love*'s yoking of romance to politics allows for an exploration of transnational political coalitions for which neither masculinist nationalist rhetoric nor colonialist fantasy has provided the space'.⁴⁵

Davis' reading implicitly reduces transnational links to a device employed by the author to transform the genre: 'This imagined progressive transnational community, while set up by conventions of romance, quickly disrupts both the obsessive heterosexuality and the nationalism *associated with the genre*'.⁴⁶ This is reinforced by Davis' drawing on a testimony by Soueif herself whereby Soueif explains that writing *The Map of Love* was motivated by her desire to transform two modes of representations that have been appropriated by colonialism, namely the romance and travel writing. Davis argues that it is important for us to understand the relationship between Amal and Anna to understand 'the book's reconfiguration of the romance'.⁴⁷ Davis' focus on the relationship between the two characters seems restricting here because Anna's activism and her attempts to clarify through her letters and journal entries the hypocritical nature and the brutal face of British colonialism to English readers seem to be read, understood and absorbed by Amal *only*.

⁴⁵ Emily S. Davis, 'Romance as Political Aesthetic in Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*', *Genders Online Journal*, 45 (2007) <http://www.genders.org/g45/g45_davis.html> [accessed 20 November 2007], para. 4 of 32.

⁴⁶ Davis, para. 11 of 32, emphasis added.

⁴⁷ Davis, para. 22 of 32.

Davis' reading encourages us to think *exclusively* of this relationship, namely of Anna influencing Amal to take action: '[Amal's] translation of Anna's past into her present [. . .] provide[s] her with a way back into [politics]'.⁴⁸ Davis insists that 'Amal's identification with *Anna* proves central to *Amal's political rebirth*'.⁴⁹ This reading, I argue, neglects how Anna influences (and is influenced by) Layla and Sharif's mother, Zeinab Hanim, a theme that reflects the novel's interest in exploring the limitations/horizons of transnational feminist movements. It also diminishes Isabel's role because it only focuses on how the *historical* narrative influences Amal only. Davis' reading is ultimately concerned with 'an atypical transnational family' rather than the activism of English, Egyptian and American women whose motivations and actions should be viewed as part of feminist movements worldwide.⁵⁰

Anna's story is not only a tale of an English widow who travels to Egypt in the late nineteenth century and falls in love and marries a member of the Egyptian landed gentry. It is also the story of her friendship with Layla, Anna's sister-in-law, which unveils various fallacies about the life of Arab women in that time: it is a story concerned with correcting several misconceptions that orientalists and orientalism have endeavored 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'.⁵¹ In this sense, Soueif's book reminds us of Sara Mill's argument that the writings of female travellers do not fit neatly into an orientalist framework

⁴⁸ Davis, para. 22 of 32.

⁴⁹ Davis, para. 22 of 32, emphasis added.

⁵⁰ Davis, para. 21 of 32.

⁵¹ Moore, p. 146.

and often 'constitute an undermining voice' within the colonial discourse.⁵² Mills highlights the uneasy and somewhat contradictory position Western female travellers have occupied in relation to colonial discourse:

[D]ominant 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.⁵³

Anna's honest description and interaction with Arab women reveal that the harem is not a place of licentiousness and sexual indulgences, but a secluded space where socially and politically active women discuss political and cultural matters in a safe and quiet environment. Soueif uses Anna's experience as an exemplar for a new generation of Western women at the end of the twentieth century, represented by Isabel, to show that a trans-cultural encounter can be a fertile ground for solidarity if approached with no preconceived assumptions and suppositions. In both stories, emphasis is on personal experience, interaction and dialogue. As Moore puts it, for Anna and Isabel 'the romantic appeal of Egypt, and the specific attractions of two Egyptian men, [. . .] become a point of entry to an *enhanced understanding of and commitment* to that country'.⁵⁴

The Map of Love itself is the result of a combined effort by Anna, Isabel, Layla and Amal, four women of four different generations and cultural backgrounds. As Moore argues, the novel 'foregrounds positive affiliations between Egyptians, British and American women intra- and inter-generationally'.⁵⁵ It also shows how important it is for women to tell their stories and to pass on their experiences to

⁵² Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), p. 91.

⁵³ Mills, p. 91.

⁵⁴ Moore, p. 147, emphasis added.

⁵⁵ Moore, p. 151.

future generations. As Mariadele Boccardi rightly argues, ‘it is in the gynealogical succession that knowledge becomes possible in spite of the discontinuity between the past and the present’.⁵⁶ It is through *storytelling* that women come to know each other better. Amal, who has just left her English husband and was about to bury herself alive, works hard to re-construct the story: the omniscient narrator tells us that ‘[a]cross a hundred years the woman’s [Anna’s] voice speaks to her – so clearly that she cannot believe it is not possible to pick up her pen and answer’.⁵⁷ By using journals and letters, ‘Soueif creates private documents which impel the provision of contextual information’.⁵⁸ In fact, Amal plays an important role in providing contextual information. She becomes more and more interested and involved:

I am obsessed with Anna Winterbourne’s brown journal. She has become as real to me as Dorothea Brooke. I need to *fill in the gaps*, to know who the people are of who she speaks, paint in the backdrop against which is living her life here on the page in front of me (p. 26, emphasis added).

I argue that the novel develops and nourishes a cross-cultural as well as a transnational identification. The novel seems to emphasize that gaps across time and space can be bridged and overcome if there is a will. The novel shows that difference, as Moore reminds us, ‘can be infinitesimally reduced until it turns out to be not so very different at all’.⁵⁹ This is what Amber E. Kinser calls for in her essay ‘Multi-voiced Feminism is Messy and Vibrant’. Kinser argues that feminists need to fin[d] ways to hear multiple, divergent and even discordant voices with clarity and

⁵⁶ Mariadele Boccardi, ‘History as Gynealogy: A.S. Byatt, Tracy Chevalier and Ahdaf Soueif’, *Women: A Cultural Review*, 15 (2004), 192-203 (p. 193).

⁵⁷ Ahdaf Soueif, *The Map of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 1999), p. 4. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

⁵⁸ Moore, p. 148.

⁵⁹ Moore, p. 157.

resonance'.⁶⁰ Kinser suggests that feminists 'retrain [themselves] to hear the cacophony in *new ways*, sometimes to allow for a little discord, other times to focus on underlying rhythms'.⁶¹ *The Map of Love* seems to celebrate this 'cacophony' by creating lengthy cross-cultural, cross-class and cross-cultural/class dialogues. This vision is an explicit call for exchanging ideas and thoughts, understanding each other's interests and concerns, and resisting socio-political, ideological and cultural impediments that slow down progressive moves.

Widowed Anna, allured by Fredrick Lewis' oriental paintings, gets interested in exploring the East. Though her interest is grounded in orientalist discourse, *she does* question the existence of the world Lewis depicts: '[a]nd I wondered, as I had wondered before, is that a world which truly exists?' (p. 46). This sense of scepticism sets Anna apart from other orientalists and shows how open-minded she is. 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.⁶² In other words, Anna's desire to visit Egypt 'has its roots in an image of orientalist art'.⁶³ Valassopoulos rightly argues 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'.⁶⁴ Valassopoulos' analysis

⁶⁰ Amber E. Kinser, 'Multi-voiced Feminism is Messy and Vibrant', *Women and Language*, 26 (2003), 110-15 (p. 110).

⁶¹ Kinser, p. 110, emphasis added.

⁶² Anastasia Valassopoulos, 'Fictionalising Post-colonial Theory: the Creative Native Informant?', *Critical Survey*, 16 (2004), 28-44 (p. 34).

⁶³ Valassopoulos, p. 35.

⁶⁴ Valassopoulos, p. 35.

valorizes both Soueif's aesthetic representation and Anna's open-mindedness, two issues that I think intertwine to highlight the novel's feminist thematic manifestation.

Ironically, Anna's first encounter with Arab women in Egypt strongly resembles an orientalist scene. After being kidnapped by two Egyptian nationalists who mistake her for a youthful Englishman, Anna writes in her journal:

I woke up from what must have been a deep and peaceful slumber and my first thought on waking was that I had slipped into one of those paintings the contemplation of which had given me such rare moments of serenity during the illness of my dear Edward (p. 134).

The comforting effect these paintings have had on Anna during the illness of her late husband paves the way for a constructive trans-cultural dialogue Anna is about to enter with Layla. The first words Anna exchanges with Layla are significantly in French which is presented 'as a third language that short-circuits the political power imbalance between English and Egyptian characters'.⁶⁵ By doing so, Soueif makes Anna gain the respect and sympathy of both Layla and the reader. On the one hand, she is speaking a neutral language, not that of the dominant culture; on the other hand, she is making every effort to communicate with a woman from a different culture, and in this case, a woman from the dominated culture.

By neutralizing language, Soueif makes the cross-cultural dialogue non-hegemonic, a feminist technique 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'.⁶⁶ This encounter is fruitful for both Anna and Layla. Layla, the novel seems to suggest, is Anna's mentor to Arab culture. Layla, to

⁶⁵ Moore, p. 151.

⁶⁶ Soueif, *Mezzaterra*, p. 8.

use Shao-Pin Luo's words 'guides' Anna 'towards compassion and understanding of Egyptian life, Egyptian women and Egyptian culture'.⁶⁷ Layla becomes a 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 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.

Anna's readiness to understand and respect the particularity of Arab culture is echoed a hundred years later by Isabel's donning suitable clothes when she accompanies Amal to the more conservative village of Tawasi. Amal admires Isabel's accommodating move: 'She worked it out for herself. She had seen the groups of tourists in the old city, in the Bazaar, their naked flesh lobsterlike in the heat, the locals either staring or averting their eyes as they passed by' (p. 165). Moreover, when Amal and Isabel meet the women in Tawasi, Amal introduces Isabel as her brother's fiancée although the two are not officially engaged (p. 174). Isabel endorses Amal's words because any other non-marital relationship would be considered as unacceptable and could offend the peasant women's feelings and contradict 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 readiness and open-mindedness that make her see cultural differences and accommodate them within her experience. This incident may indicate that the more a feminist movement is sensitive to cultural nuances and 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.

⁶⁷ 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), 77-104 (p. 92).

As Cheryl Johnson-Odim reminds us, difference is an elusive and relative concept. Johnson-Odim argues that in addition to gender and class relations which are the main sources of oppression of impoverished and marginalized Euro-American women, race relations and often imperialism are ‘added dimensions [that] produce a different context in which Third World women’s struggles must be understood’.⁶⁸ Feminism, Johnson-Odim argues, must be a comprehensive and inclusive ideology and movement that incorporates yet transcends gender-specificity. Johnson-Odim warns that if feminist movements do not address themselves to issues of race, class, and imperialism, ‘[they] cannot be relevant to alleviating the oppression of most of the women of the world’.⁶⁹

However, this does not entail that a ‘First World’ woman should ignore her own needs or sacrifice her own demands. Kinser stresses that openness to multiplicity of voices does not mean that, in the interest of listening to others, one silences their own or allow others to silence them.⁷⁰ Instead, feminists, Kinser argues, should fully attend to these ‘dialectical tensions’ because they will produce ‘a complex but vibrant body of ideas that [each feminist] can [. . .] inform and critique and emulate’.⁷¹ In *The Map of Love*, the relationship between Anna and Layla at the beginning of the twentieth century as well as the relationship between Isabel and Amal at the end of the century are sites where differences are explored, contextualized and utilized to create similarities. Anna and Isabel continually reflect

⁶⁸ Cheryl Johnson-Odim, ‘Common Themes, Different Contexts: Third World Women and Feminism’, in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. by Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington, IN: Indiana UP: 1991), pp. 314-27 (p. 314).

⁶⁹ Johnson-Odim, pp. 321-22.

⁷⁰ Kinser, p. 112.

⁷¹ Kinser, p. 115.

on these differences and use them as a means of identifying with Layla and Amal respectively.

Indeed, difference is a thorny issue that needs to be addressed adequately for feminist movements to be appealing to women in different parts of the world. At the heart of difference lies the question of race and color. Ann Russo urges white feminists to analyze their relationship to race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality since this is a prerequisite to developing a feminist theory and organizing around specific issues. For white women to be involved in a movement which speaks from and to the commonality as well as diversity among women, Russo argues, it is necessary for them to acknowledge their privilege, understand how the conditions of their lives are connected to and made possible by the conditions of other women's lives, and ultimately 'use what they have gained from that privilege in the service of social change'.⁷² Russo believes that only when white feminists cease to make non-white women 'fundamentally different and opposed, then white women can work more effectively *with* women, not *for* women of colour'.⁷³ The connection with non-white women, Russo adds, should be 'one of mutual desire and need, not pity or arrogance'.⁷⁴ One way of achieving this goal, Russo argues, is to make contextualized links between the experiences of white women and non-white women whereby the similarities and differences among women make white feminists more able to connect with women of color and make them feel less different.⁷⁵

⁷² Ann Russo, "'We Cannot Live Without Our Lives': White Women, Antiracism, and Feminism', in *Third World Women*, ed. by Mohanty, Russo and Torres, pp. 297-313 (p. 299).

⁷³ Russo, p. 303, italics in original.

⁷⁴ Russo, p. 307.

⁷⁵ Russo, p. 308.

The novel seems to engage with this argument and build on it through the actions and statements of the characters. For instance, as Isabel accompanies Amal to her home village of Tawasi, she constantly questions her relationship with Amal, a questioning that sometimes amounts to mistrust: 'But as the city had retreated further and further behind them, Isabel had felt herself grow - not uneasy, but somewhat less assured' (p. 166). As if remembering Russo's stipulation of not letting go of her own needs, Isabel feels that 'she [has] delivered herself over into the hands of Amal al-Ghamrawi and it [is] like being a child again' (p. 170).

These two incidents may be read in conjunction with the opening pages of the novel where it is Amal who is suspicious about the goals of Isabel's journey to Egypt: 'Amal could not pretend she was not wary. Wary and weary in advance: an American woman - a journalist' (p. 6). Amal is 'predisposed to doubt Isabel's objectives in coming to Egypt'⁷⁶ and expects Isabel to question her about concepts that are commonly misrepresented in the West about Arab women. The novel seems to portray these moments of suspicion and mistrust on both sides as positive signs for building a lasting and unwavering solidarity between the two women, not a hasty and shaky relation based on unrealistic and romantic notions of sisterhood. In this sense, the novel rightly argues that a coalition based on unquestioned assumptions of sisterhood ends up being built on 'an intrinsic difference' between 'First' and 'Third World' women, to use Amireh and Majaj's phrase.⁷⁷

During Isabel's visit to Tawasi and through her conversations with peasant women which are made possible due to the presence of interpreter/translator Amal, difference seems to transform itself into a ground for exploring commonalities. The

⁷⁶ Moore, p. 147.

⁷⁷ Amireh and Majaj, p. 8.

encounter becomes a fruitful and mutually beneficial meeting. As the women begin to explain to Isabel that the US is involved in shaping their lives through the direct and indirect demands it makes of the Egyptian government, Isabel understands that as a US woman journalist, she can help other women in the ‘Third World’ by campaigning to avert her country’s policies that negatively influence them:

‘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 –’ (p. 176).

Indeed, Isabel experiences *first-hand* some of her country’s oppressive practices and its hypocritical calls for implementing Western democracy in the ‘Third World’. Ironically, while the US government proclaims itself as international guardian of the developing world, it simultaneously helps repressive governments and anti-democratic regimes in the Middle East. Amal translates to Isabel the witchcraft-like-hunt in Tawasi following the terrorist attacks on Luxor tourist sites:

‘[T]hey say if the police go looking for someone and they don’t find him, they *take his women: his wife, his sister, his mother*, whatever. And they hold them till he gives himself up.’
Isabel has nothing to say. Arrest warrants. You have the right to remain silent – nothing of what she knows holds here (p. 186, emphasis added).

The two different realities that present themselves to Isabel reveal the oppressive and democratic approaches employed by Egyptian and US governments respectively but they do not create in Isabel a sense of intrinsic difference from Egyptian women nor do they thwart her from understanding the different experiences of these women. On the contrary, the novel encourages the reader to make connections across space and time.

The novel makes clear the connections between US imperialism at the end of the twentieth century and British colonialism one hundred years ago. A century ago, Anna has witnessed the hypocritical and false allegations of the British Empire's civilizing mission and the white man's duty to rescue the less-developed nations. When Anna tries to inform Lord Cromer about her Egyptian friends' desire to educate women, Lord Cromer, claiming to know Egypt better, dismisses as nonsense this idea (p. 248).⁷⁸ Lord Cromer's claims of knowing Egypt more than the Egyptians themselves is predicated on a British colonialist discourse promoted by British colonialist officials that 'justifies the necessity for British occupation of Egypt [. . .] and make[s] such questions as [Egyptian] inferiority and [British] superiority seem petty ones'.⁷⁹

Anna's experience undercuts Lord Cromer's claims and exposes his hypocrisy, narcissism and ignorance. In her journal, she documents the atrocity committed against the peasants of the village of Denshwai by Lord Cromer. She identifies with women of the village of Denshwai (p. 429). As an Egyptian nationalist leader who seeks to expose the oppressive and hypocritical nature of British colonialism, Sharif Basha's suggestion to Anna shows to what extent Anna, the Englishwoman, can help alleviate the wounds of her Egyptian peers: "'The only way we can bear this is to make it work for us. [. . .] *Your friends in London* will help us'" (p. 434, emphasis added). Sharif Basha's emphasis on making this incident known to people in Britain through Anna's connections speaks volumes of the

⁷⁸ Leila Ahmed argues that the activities of Lord Cromer exemplify how, when it came to the cultures of other men, white supremacist views, androcentric and paternalistic convictions, and feminism came together in harmonious and actually entirely logical accord in the service of the imperial idea (p. 152). Lord Cromer who presented himself as this champion of the unveiling of Egyptian women was, in England, founding member and sometime president of the Men's League for Opposing Women's Suffrage.

⁷⁹ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin Books, 2003), p. 32.

importance of transnational networks in unveiling localized forms of resistance. In this sense, Isabel's and Anna's experiences in Egypt are 'grounded [in] particularized analysis linked with larger, even global, economic and political frameworks', to use Mohanty's words.⁸⁰

The novel highlights these links through the attempts of Anna and Isabel to *understand*, from their positions as outsiders, the experiences of Egyptian women. In this way, the novel engages with the problematic of addressing differences among women from different cultural backgrounds. This trans-cultural identification is emphasized by contrasting an Egyptian woman's relation to politics with her English counterpart. Anna compares and contrasts her own life before her trip to Egypt to that of her mother-in-law Zeinab Hanim and reflects on the fact that the latter's life was determined by her husband and son's involvement in politics:

How I wish it were possible to say 'Enough of politics', truly and forever. I find myself thinking sometimes of life in London, occupied with nothing more than choosing the day's menu, attending to the children and doing old things about the house. Perhaps walking in the Park (p. 434).

By juxtaposing two different experiences, the novel brings into dialogue two different perspectives. Difference becomes a site for understanding the needs of each other and finding a way for cementing coalitions, echoing Mohanty's postulation that in knowing differences 'we can better see the connections and commonalities because no border or boundary is ever complete or rigidly determining'.⁸¹ In this sense, when experienced first-hand, questioned, and examined carefully, differences can be utilized as points of identification.

⁸⁰ Mohanty, p. 223.

⁸¹ Mohanty, p. 226.

Anna's ability to see how the political activism of Zeinab Hanim's husband and son against colonialism has influenced her life indicates that Anna is properly contextualizing the experiences of other women outside the mantra of gender oppression. By highlighting how nationalist and political concerns invade the private life of Zeinab Hanim, Anna is foregrounding difference as a site of examination and investigation. Indeed, the novel seems to present Anna's sojourn in Egypt as a site of examining and investigating markers of difference, such as the veil and the harem. Wearing the veil during the trip to Sinai gives Anna a new perspective and a new world view. This helps her understand why some Arab women may wear the veil since it gives them more freedom to move within space. She no longer looks at the veil only as a sign of an oppressive Muslim patriarchal practice as many orientalist have promoted:

[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 (p. 195).

In the novel, Anna wears the veil as a disguise, and her outlook remains that of an upper class English woman. However, her ability to understand the empowering dimension of her experience of wearing the veil makes her identify with other Arab women. She celebrates her invisibility because the veil gives her the chance to see and not be seen, to observe how others, especially the English, look while she is completely hidden. Moore argues that by wearing the veil, Anna 'complicate[s] associations between visibility, vision, and authority'.⁸² Similarly, Wail S. Hassan describes this incident as the 'unexpected reversal of the gaze' and argues that although 'seen as a sign of Muslim women's invisibility and

⁸² Moore, p. 149.

voicelessness, [the veil] becomes an authorizing presence for Anna and a condition of her seeing and speaking'.⁸³ If Anna's *first-hand experience* of donning the veil helps her view it as an invigorating 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.

Anna starts visiting high-class Egyptian women and finds out the harem is a cultural forum and a space where women freely discuss their future and their positions in the nationalist movement. In a letter to her father-in-law, Sir Charles, Anna reveals to him that a different and congenial feminist movement is maturing in Egypt. Anna explains that Egyptian women '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' (p. 237). Significantly, this testimony takes the form of a letter where Anna shows her admiration for this movement though its interests are different from the contemporaneous Western feminist movement. Anna shows her understanding of the socio-historical conditions under which these Arab women live, and consequently, she appreciates the different trajectory this feminist movement is taking.⁸⁴

⁸³ Wail S. Hassan, 'Agency and Translational Literature: Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*', *PMLA*, 121 (2006), 753-68 (p. 762). For a discussion of how the veil came to be associated with a relentless Arab patriarchy under the British colonial rule of Egypt, consult Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam*. Ahmed argues it was in the colonial context that the links between the issue of women and the issues of nationalism and culture were permanently forged. It was at this point that the veil emerged as a potent signifier whereby the issue of women fused with issues of class, culture, and politics (p. 129).

⁸⁴ For a full discussion of the feminist movements in Egypt at the beginning of the twentieth century, see Leila Ahmed's *Women and Gender in Islam*, especially chapters 8 and 9. These two chapters explore various aspects of the different feminist movements in Egypt at that time. Women's literary, intellectual, and social life began a period of enormous vitality, during which varieties of feminist

Soueif creates a situation where Anna listens from behind the *mashrabiyya*⁸⁵ to a discussion by some of the most eminent nationalist and religious leaders about the status of women. Layla points to Qassim Amin's new book, *Al-Mar'ah al-Jadidah* (The New Women) while she and Anna listen, unseen by the speakers, to a serious debate over the liberation of women in Egypt. Anna realizes that the nationalist and religious leaders agree on improving women's position, but each leader has a different way. In the meeting, eminent religious leader, Muhammad 'Abdu, expresses progressive Islamic views that undermine Lord Cromer's claims that religious leaders will never agree to the liberation of Egyptian women. 'Abdu advocates a gradual process of liberation that starts with giving girls the right to go to schools (p. 381).⁸⁶

Reading the above scene, one might get the impression that Egyptian women in the historical narrative are powerless, being only a subject of discussion by nationalist and religious leaders. In other words, the novel might be accused of disempowering Egyptian women since their future is left at the hands of religious and nationalist male leaders. However, the novel undercuts this assumption in several places. Zeinab Hanim expresses her own sympathies for Anna when Sharif Basha

activism emerged. Ahmed also delineates the differences between the two major feminist movements at the time. The first movement was headed by Huda Sharawi, while the other one was headed by Malak Hifni Nassef.

⁸⁵ *Mashrabiyya*: 'The ornate wooden screen that protects the privacy of the balconies in traditional houses' (p. 524). Soueif provides a glossary of some Arabic words she uses in the novel.

⁸⁶ As a fictional piece of work, *The Map of Love* does not explain all the divergent opinions on the subject of the liberation of women in the early twentieth century because the subject got entangled with other issues such as nationalist discourses and resisting British colonialism. The novel might be accused of valorizing one perspective while dimming others. However, I think the novelist tries to include as many voices as she can within the limits of the plotline. Indeed, Leila Ahmed argues that Qassim Amin's demand of the abolition of the veil and the fundamental changes in culture and society he proposes are the two major points that made his book controversial (p. 145). Amin's book, Ahmed argues, rearticulates - in a native voice - the colonial thesis of the inferiority of the native and Muslim cultures and the superiority of the European perspectives (p. 162). Ahmed agrees with the opinion that Amin's book was the fruit of discussions on the subject by several individuals, whose ideas Amin then threw together (p. 159). One chapter, Ahmed acquiesces, is distinctly different in both tone and content and could have been written by 'Abdu since it valorizes Islamic perspectives (pp. 159-61).

asks for his mother's opinion on his plan to marry Anna. Zeinab Hanim explains to him at length Anna's hard position if she accepts his proposal:

'For her [Anna], her whole life will change. Her people will be angry with her. And the British will shun her. And even if they soften, it will be difficult for her, as your wife, to visit them or receive visits from them. She will be torn off from her own people. Even her language she will not be able to use –' (p. 281).

The care and love that Zeinab Hanim feels toward Anna is further boosted after Anna's marriage to Sharif Basha. Anna writes in her journal of her relationship with Zeinab Hanim: 'A most gentle friendship is growing between us, based [. . .] on shared tasks and these mornings spent together, and each day I am sensible of the happiness our arrangement has brought her' (p. 350). The two do not share a language to speak in, but they share understanding, love and care.⁸⁷

Listening, speaking and storytelling are important in setting up a feminist solidarity that is based on understanding. It can bridge the cultural and temporal gaps. This is reinforced by Amal's thinking about who else has read Anna's journal, which she conceptualizes as a means for communicating across time: 'For the sense of Anna speaking to me – writing it down for me – is so powerful that I find myself speaking to her in my head. At night, in my dreams, I sit with her and we speak as *friends and sisters*' (p. 306, emphasis added). Through these dialogues that are scattered all over the text, Soueif creates many situations where what we can call transnational feminist solidarity is of paramount importance. Parallel to this, a local feminist activism is of no less importance. Amal's role in reconstructing the story of

⁸⁷ To some extent, this feminist solidarity is reflected in the contemporary narrative in a conversation between Isabel and Um Aya in an incident that exists only in the former's mind. Nevertheless, if anything, it confirms how women across different countries can still identify with each other and seek each other's help in spite of the fact that they do not share a common language. In fact, Isabel finds the missing part of the hybrid tapestry that her great grandmother wove a hundred years ago in her bag after her encounter with Um Aya. This can be seen as the fruit of a cross-cultural dialogue.

Anna at the beginning of the twentieth century is pivotal. At the same time, her commitment to help other Egyptian women is also crucial. She soon realizes that the local and the global are interconnected. She finds that it is her duty to move to her home village of Tawasi to be with her own people for '[t]here is so much she can do, so much she can *give*, so much she can *learn*' (p. 279, emphasis added).

Amal, the Western-educated intellectual, is self-reflexive and shows a great deal of flexibility: her willingness to do, to give, to take and to learn is pivotal in the context of a feminist movement that is adaptive and dynamic. For example, following the Luxor bombings, the police arrest a number of men from Tawasi. Amal does her best to secure the release of the men by using her connections with Tareq 'Atiyya, a multi-millionaire with excellent ties to people in authority. As the subject of a potential marriage between Tareq 'Atiyya and Amal is raised in front of the women, the novel gives the subaltern a position from which to speak. For example, the women, old and young, literate and illiterate and married and single, voice their opinions about polygamy and the impression the reader has is that some of these women find polygamy plausible within certain conditions:

'So I steal a man from his hareem? I destroy her life?' [Amal asks].
'And why should her life be destroyed? She's in her house and you in yours. And if she doesn't like it she can say so and she has her children and her apartment and her alimony' (p. 446).

By giving voice to the marginalized to express their opinions on one of the issues that is commonly taken to represent a repressive Muslim patriarchy, i.e. polygamy, the novel is offering the reader a chance to view this issue from a different perspective. In this sense, the novel contextually translates one marker of difference over which feminists disagree. As Hassan argues *The Map of Love* is a translational text which 'operat[es] on several levels of mediation and contestation

[and] alternat[es] between autoethnography and the rewriting of metropolitan narratives from the perspective of imperialized societies'.⁸⁸ The novel, to quote another critic, '[does] not only challeng[e] the erasure of women from the historical and artistic record but [it] also presents an alternative ethics for approaching narratives about others'.⁸⁹

In this sense, *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'.⁹⁰ One way to look at Islamic feminism, Cooke argues, is to consider what it means to have a double commitment: on the one hand, to a faith position, and on the other hand, to women's rights both inside the home and outside. This linking of apparently mutually exclusive identities can become a radical act of subversion.⁹¹ It is here that I turn to Leila Aboulela whose engagement with feminism is clearly informed by Islam. Like Soueif's novel, Aboulela's *Minaret* foregrounds cross-ethnic and trans-cultural alliances. As Arab British novelists, Aboulela and Soueif uphold boundary-crossing and seek common grounds for transnational dialogues.

⁸⁸ Hassan, p.755.

⁸⁹ Davis, para. 29 of 32.

⁹⁰ Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (London & New York: Routledge, 2001), p. 59.

⁹¹ Cooke, pp. 59-60.

2.3 An Oxymoron Demystified: Islamic Transnational Feminism in Aboulela's *Minaret*

Aboulela's *Minaret* carefully plots the two parallel narratives of an upper class Sudanese girl who experiences the trauma of exile in the bloom of her youth. The first is the story of Najwa, the spoilt and ignorant Westernized university girl whose luxurious life relies on her father's controversial political career; the other, is that of a deserted and exiled Najwa who seeks to cope in very difficult circumstances in London. The story moves between 1984 and 2004 and chronicles Najwa's pre- and post-exile attitudes towards the people around her. In Sudan, Najwa cherishes Westernized high-life parties and enjoys companionship with equal peers. She has vague and unclear thoughts about women beyond her social circle.

Though she momentarily reflects on a photo of Iranian women in chadors, she and her friend Randa find more substance in gossiping. In 1984, Najwa's private life is shattered by a coup d'état in Sudan. Later, her father is found guilty and executed. In London, Najwa faces a radically different reality. Her brother, Omar, is jailed for stabbing an undercover policeman. Her mother's health rapidly deteriorates and she dies. Najwa finds herself cut off from her cousins who are no longer interested in her and she tries to fill the void by keeping in touch with other fellow Sudanese exiles. Najwa reconnects with Anwar, her leftist colleague at the University of Khartoum. Believing that Anwar will marry her, Najwa spends her money on his postgraduate studies.

Gradually, Najwa discovers that Anwar is not interested in marrying her. She also discovers the futility of her attempts to re-construct the past. Encouraged by the warm feelings of a number of Muslim women from the Regent's Park Mosque who volunteer to wash and coffin her mother upon her death, Najwa begins to listen to a

distant voice that she identifies with her home country, Sudan. She begins to visit the mosque and befriends new Muslim women of different nationalities and ethnic backgrounds. In a word, Islam ends Najwa's ordeal of being isolated through providing her with a new network of friends whose camaraderie is based on faith. Aboulela here explores the possibility of an Islamic sisterhood against the allegiances based on nationality and social class. Becoming a better Muslim is the common interest that ties Najwa to other Muslim women at the Regent's Park Mosque. It is significant that Najwa's *personal and first-hand experience* of slipping down the social ladder plays a fundamental role in her understanding and appreciation of the appealing power of Islam in an age of advanced capitalism.

Towards the end of the novel, Najwa tells her friend Shahinaz, a South Asian British woman with three children, that she wants to be a concubine of the family of her lover, Tamer, 'like something out of *The Arabian Nights*, with life-long security and a sense of belonging'.⁹² Just as a reader could be astounded by Egyptian women's apparent support for polygamy at the end of *The Map of Love*, the reader of *Minaret* might be surprised by Najwa's statement. If we do not situate the arguments of the peasant women and that of Najwa within the socio-political conditions under which these women live, we risk missing the point that the two texts are trying to make. For Najwa, who has suffered from instability and alienation, becoming a

⁹² Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005), p. 215. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text. I think it is important to point out here that the cover of the paperback edition of *Minaret*, published by Bloomsbury in 2006, portrays a woman wearing *niqab* (which covers the entire face except for the eye slits). The novel does not make any mention of Najwa wearing *niqab*. Interestingly, the hardcover edition of the novel, published by Bloomsbury in 2005, features the portrait of a woman who is wearing *hijab* (the headscarf) and *jilbab* (ankle-length, long-sleeved, loose-fitted dress). For more details on Muslim women's dress code, see: Fadwa El Guindi 'Veiling Resistance', in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory*, ed. by Lewis and Mills, pp. 586-609. See also: Leila Ahmed's *Women and Islam*. Probably, the cover of the novel reminds us of Amireh and Majaj's argument on how marketing strategies influence the reception of 'Third World' women in the 'First World' in *Going Global*.

concubine is a solution that gives her security in a capitalist country that has little to offer an uneducated foreign housemaid. Seen from this perspective, we, at the same time, heed Kaplan's call to consider the politics of location as '[a] sit[e] of historicized struggles'.⁹³

In addition to understanding these conditions, a properly contextualized reading of Najwa's decision invites us to look at certain principles within Islam as strategies of resistance that Muslim women employ. The novel presents Islam as the basis for a feminist movement which enables Najwa 'to fight off the anonymity of being a migrant in Britain'.⁹⁴ Margot Badran urges us to consider the socio-historical conditions that contributed to the rise of Islamic feminism. Women, both secularists and religiously oriented, grew increasingly concerned by the imposition and spread of a conservative reading of Islam by Islamist movements (which emerged in the early 1970s) and found it urgent to respond to this form of Islamism 'in a progressive Islamic voice'.⁹⁵ This is linked to the disappointment with secular regimes in the Middle East that failed to deliver democracy to its people.

Moreover, by the latter decades of the twentieth century, education had reached more women than ever before extending across classes and well into rural areas. In some parts of the Middle East, women were also gaining access to education at the highest levels in the religious sciences. The emergence of Islamic feminism coincided with the spread of electronic technology that circulated information and ideas freely and rapidly through cyberspace.⁹⁶ By the start of the

⁹³ Caren Kaplan, *Questions of Travel: Postmodern Discourses of Displacement* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1996), p. 149.

⁹⁴ Nash, *The Anglo-Arab Encounter*, p. 150.

⁹⁵ Badran, p. 9.

⁹⁶ Badran, p. 9.

1990s, Badran maintains, it was becoming increasingly apparent that women were 're/visioning a new feminism through their fresh readings of the Qur'an'.⁹⁷ In the novel, Najwa expresses her disappointment with the political instability in her country: 'Coup after coup - one set of people after another - like musical chairs' (p. 139). Through portraying the cycles of violence that mar the political life in Sudan and their ramifications on the lives of women, *Minaret* presents Islamic sisterhood as a house of social stability and emotional nurture.⁹⁸ Displaced from her homeland, Najwa finds social and psychological security in the Regent's Park Mosque.

Elsewhere, Badran argues that Islamic feminism has articulated a strong position on gender equality, enunciating the full equality of women and men in public and private realms.⁹⁹ Emphasizing the interconnectedness of secular and Islamic feminisms in the Middle East, Badran argues, 'Islamic feminism is radicalizing secular feminism, [. . .] pushing it beyond its previous limits and limitations'.¹⁰⁰ Similarly, Majid Anouar argues that 'the feminist project is challenged with the monumental task of contesting [. . .] simultaneously and

⁹⁷ Badran, p. 9.

⁹⁸ *Minaret* highlights the role played by politics in the works of 'Third World' writers. The daughter of a high-ranking Sudanese official, Najwa grows up with secularist and nationalist discourses. Rejecting these discourses at a later stage in her life represents the failure of these discourses to compete with an Islamic discourse in diaspora that bypasses ethnic and racial differences. In a way, the novel seems to engage with Fredric Jameson's claim that '[a]ll third-world texts are necessarily [. . .] national allegories, [. . .] particularly when their forms develop out of predominantly Western machineries of representation, such as the novel' (p. 69). See: Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 65-88. See also: Aijaz Ahmad, 'Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the "National Allegory"', *Social Text*, 17 (1987), 3-25.

⁹⁹ Basarudin, p. 61.

¹⁰⁰ Basarudin, pp. 61-62. For a discussion of the overlap between secular feminism and Islamic feminism in the Middle East, see: Lila Abu-Lughod 'The Marriage of Feminism and Islamism in Egypt: Selective Repudiation as a Dynamic of Postcolonial Cultural Politics', in *Remaking Women*, ed. by Abu-Lughod, pp. 243-69. Abu-Lughod contends that although liberal secularists and Islamists in Egypt conceive themselves as oppositional voices on women rights and questions, '[the] two sets of politically motivated culture producers can be thought of as in dialogue with each other' (p. 248). Abu-Lughod maintains a comparison between their output on women suggests that there are 'surprising areas of overlap' despite the fact that the two groups define their projects and agendas quite differently vis-à-vis modernity and the West (p. 248).

dialectically [. . .] global capitalism [and] a male-dominated and historically entrenched version of Islam'.¹⁰¹

In this context, Majid argues that in order for a feminist movement to provide 'a new revolutionary paradigm', it should articulate 'an Islamically progressive agenda - democratic, antipatriarchal, and anti-imperialist'.¹⁰² For Majid, a progressive Islam, empowered by the equal status and dynamic contributions of women and extending full rights to minority groups, is a 'way to break away from Eurocentric structures and redynamize progressive non-Western traditions in a genuinely multicultural world'.¹⁰³ In what seems to be a response to Mohanty's call of finding ways to subvert global capitalism's influences on women, Majid insists that an Islamic feminist movement 'may well be one of the best platforms from which to resist the effects of global capitalism and contribute to a rich, egalitarian polycentric world'.¹⁰⁴

Majid's argument of envisioning in Islam a powerful stance to resist capitalism and globalization forces is quite useful in framing our reading of Aboulela's *Minaret* since the novel highlights the dilemma of an uprooted Muslim woman who has slipped down the social ladder in a capitalist society. If Suad Joseph criticizes Majid's argument as leaving 'unsketched' the structure of the house of Islam he calls for,¹⁰⁵ Aboulela's novel presents a practical example of what an Islamic feminist movement is capable of offering its adherents to subvert capitalist

¹⁰¹ Majid Anouar, 'The Politics of Feminism in Islam', *Signs*, 23 (1998), 321-61 (p. 324).

¹⁰² Majid, p. 324.

¹⁰³ Majid, p. 325.

¹⁰⁴ Majid, p. 355. Majid's essay has generated a number of responses. In one response, Ann Elizabeth Mayer accuses Majid of 'offering a pseudofeminism, a feminism reconstituted by foes of women's rights' (p. 370). Mayer's response is published in the same issue of *Signs*, pp. 369-77.

¹⁰⁵ Suad Joseph, 'Comment on Majid's "The Politics of Feminism in Islam": Critique of Politics and the Politics of Critique', *Signs*, 23 (1998), 363-69 (p. 369).

forces of hegemony. In *Minaret*, Islam criss-crosses social class and ethnic boundaries and creates an environment that enables Najwa to survive through a network of sisterhood support.

The way *Minaret* portrays how Islam provides a ground for a feminist solidarity and support network, reminds us of Cooke's argument that Islamic feminism is not oxymoronic. In particular, Cooke's criticism of intellectuals like Haideh Moghissi who are sceptical of the intellectual and political viability of Islamic feminism is relevant here.¹⁰⁶ Cooke argues:

[These intellectuals] have juxtaposed two mutually exclusive rigid ideologies, the one secular and the other fundamentalist and misogynist, and they have correctly concluded that an identity based on bringing these two incompatibles together is impossible.¹⁰⁷

For Cooke, however, Islamic feminism 'does not describe identity, but rather an attitude and intention to seek justice and citizenship for Muslim women'.¹⁰⁸ Islamic feminists, Cooke insists, link their religious, political, and gender identities to 'claim simultaneous and sometimes contradictory allegiances' in their endeavors to resist globalization, local nationalisms, Islamization, and the practical system that pervades them all.¹⁰⁹ In this sense, *Minaret* can be seen as performing an Islamic feminist standpoint.

The novel carefully contextualizes Najwa's embrace of Islam. Her experience in diaspora and the chaos she has undergone motivate her to seek an alliance to survive in a highly competitive and capitalist society. Between the Najwa of 1984 and Najwa of 2004, lies an abyss of exile, the humiliation of menial work and the

¹⁰⁶ Cooke, p. 59.

¹⁰⁷ Cooke, p. 59.

¹⁰⁸ Cooke, p. 61.

¹⁰⁹ Cooke, p. 60.

loss of close relatives and friends. During this descent, Claire Chambers argues, ‘an unfurling religious understanding sustains Najwa and consoles her for her losses’.¹¹⁰ The novel portrays Islam as a common interest that can function as a basis of coalition among women of different origins and classes in the age of globalization and capitalist expansion. As Geoffrey Nash notes, in Aboulela’s fiction ‘emergent Islam [. . .] is itself a riposte to westernising globalisation’.¹¹¹ In *The Translator* and *Minaret*, Nash maintains, hybridity and acculturation are the main features of the Islam that both protagonists adopt.¹¹²

In spite of Nash’s words of praise, Aboulela’s novels have also received less positive criticism. Wail S. Hassan argues that Aboulela’s *The Translator*, *Coloured Lights* ‘and to a lesser degree her latest novel *Minaret* (2005) explicitly evoke [Sudanese novelist Tayeb] Salih’s fiction, model themselves after it, and yet depart from it in significant ways’.¹¹³ Hassan claims that Aboulela rejects Salih’s ‘progressive stance on gender and political agency’ and he likens her ideological stances to those of Islamic extremists.¹¹⁴ Hassan’s reading of Aboulela’s fiction forecloses and ignores the healthy dialogue that takes place among the characters on Islam and current issues like feminism, gender and diaspora. In this respect, Hassan disapprovingly states that ‘[the] spiritual growth [. . .] is the only guarantee of a happy ending of Aboulela’s Muslim fiction’.¹¹⁵ Hassan makes this statement with reference to the Najwa-Tamer’s romance. Hassan insists that in Aboulela’s fiction

¹¹⁰ Claire Chambers, ‘Recent Literary Representations of British Muslims’, in *Mediating Faiths: Religion and Cultural Change in the Twenty-first Century*, ed. by Michael Bailey and Guy Redden (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), pp. 175-88 (p. 182).

¹¹¹ Nash, *The Anglo-Arab Encounter*, p. 150.

¹¹² Nash, p. 150.

¹¹³ Wail S. Hassan, ‘Leila Aboulela and the Ideology of Muslim Immigrant Fiction’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 41 (2008), 298-319 (p. 298).

¹¹⁴ Hassan, p. 299, emphasis added.

¹¹⁵ Hassan, p. 309.

‘love as a private sentiment is not a paramount value but one that is subordinated to religious principles’.¹¹⁶

Hassan seems to ignore the fact that Najwa’s commitment to Islamic principles has rescued her from a state of loss through her solidarity with other Muslim women. Hassan’s outlook towards the role of Islam in the novel appears to be one-dimensional. His failure to bring into play Najwa’s powerful Islam-based relationship with other Muslim women only serves to convey the wrong perspective that Islam is an obstacle that stops Najwa from interacting with non-Muslims. Nowhere is Hassan’s narrow interpretation of Aboulela’s fiction more apparent than in the following quotation:

The version of Islam propagated in Aboulela’s fiction (and this is where she differs radically from Salih) involves a complete disavowal of personal liberty as incompatible with Islam, of feminism as a secular and godless ideology, of individual agency in favour of an all-encompassing notion of predetermination and political agency as well.¹¹⁷

Hassan’s insistence on the incompatibility of Islam and feminism forecloses the possibility of appreciating the Islam-based camaraderie that bypasses social class and ethnic differences and rescues Najwa from loss. For Hassan, Islam and feminism are mutually exclusive.

Hassan’s one-dimensional look at Aboulela’s fiction ignores Cooke’s argument that ‘Islamic feminism is not an identity but rather *one of many possible speaking positions*’ that enables Islamic feminists to emerge into representation from the margins.¹¹⁸ It is not surprising that Hassan assuredly concludes that ‘Aboulela’s

¹¹⁶ Hassan, p. 309.

¹¹⁷ Hassan, p. 313.

¹¹⁸ Cooke, p. xxvii, emphasis added.

Islamism and the fiction that embodies it ultimately remain reactive and in some ways regressive'.¹¹⁹ Hassan's insistence on turning Aboulela's protagonists into villains springs from his refusal to fully contextualize the Muslim female experience in diaspora. Hassan declines to acknowledge that Najwa is at the receiving end of Islamophobia. On the contrary, he accuses her of being an isolationist who refuses to integrate into the larger society.

Ironically, Hassan regards Najwa's ex-boyfriend, Anwar, 'as the only character who comes close to expressing feminist views (notwithstanding his treatment of Najwa)'.¹²⁰ While acknowledging Anwar's maltreatment and abuse of Najwa, Hassan seems to consider Anwar as a champion of (secular) feminism. Hassan blames Najwa for the fallout of their relationship and he forgets that Najwa has found the stability and security she needs in the company of the caring Muslim women of the mosque who, unlike Anwar and other Sudanese fellows in Britain, have not let Najwa down. Islam has provided Najwa the basis that she needs and the common ground for her relationship with other Muslim women. Hassan's words and apparent prejudice against Najwa's position in the text stem primarily from his refusal to acknowledge that Islam can provide a fertile ground for a feminist agenda that bypasses national and linguistic barriers.¹²¹

¹¹⁹ Hassan, p. 316.

¹²⁰ Hassan, p. 315. It seems that Hassan wants to find a justification for Anwar's maltreatment of Najwa. This reflects Hassan's Islamophobic and patriarchal perspectives.

¹²¹ Some critics seem to support Hassan's reading of Aboulela's fictions. See: Nadia Butt, 'Negotiating Untranslatability and Islam in Leila Aboulela's *The Translator*', in *Transcultural Modernities: Narrating Africa in Europe*, ed. by Elizabeth Beckers, Sissy Helf and Daniela Merolla (Amsterdam & New York, NY: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 167-79. Butt insists that in Aboulela's fiction 'sites of multiple cultural encounters are reduced to the singular space of an Islam that celebrates singleness' (p. 170).

In fact, Islam provides ‘a terms of reference or consolation’ for Aboulela’s characters in diaspora.¹²² It also supplies individual Muslims with a point of contact with the outer world. By foregrounding Najwa’s ability to identify with other Muslim women with whom she does not share a common language, *Minaret* highlights the fact that Islam can act as a bridge that breaks through isolation and loneliness in diaspora. In this case, Islam not only shapes ‘an emerging awareness of difference’,¹²³ as Nash argues, but it also offers a basis of commonality. In other words, the novel is more concerned with exploring the interstices of the experience of a contemporary Muslim woman in the West. Nash argues that ‘Aboulela does not structure her women’s experience into explicit form of feminist resistance such as might be found in al-Sa’dawi or Faqir’.¹²⁴ Nash maintains that ‘Aboulela’s discourse is never stridently feminist nor does it set out to condemn male Muslim practice per se’.¹²⁵ What Nash is trying to draw our attention to, I believe, is that Aboulela’s fiction endows women with the power to resist and transform certain lived experiences through their Islamic faith. In other words, Aboulela’s fiction can be read as a site where Islamic feminism as outlined by the works of Cooke, Badran, Anouar and Ahmed plays a central part.

In fact, Nash’s description of Aboulela’s writings echoes the arguments of Cooke, Badran and Abu-Lughod in many ways:

In her encoding of ‘Islamic’ messages within her fiction Aboulela is no less beholden to Western discourse than Soueif. Her fiction represents not so much a species of Islamic ‘writing back’ to Western society, as an exercise in acculturation to globalisation conducted

¹²² Nash, p. 136.

¹²³ Nash, p. 136.

¹²⁴ Nash, p. 141.

¹²⁵ Nash, p. 141.

from within the territory of the dominant discourse(s) since the language of encoding is English.¹²⁶

Nash's argument that Aboulela's writing embodies a process of hybridization and cultural exchanges resembles Cooke, Badran and Abu-Lughod's stipulations that emphasize the entanglement of Islamic feminism and secular feminism in the Middle East.

In an interview, Aboulela asserts that she intended *Minaret* to be 'a kind of Muslim feminist novel, and girly or womanly as well'.¹²⁷ 'The female protagonist', Aboulela maintains, 'is disappointed in the men in her life [. . . and] relies on God and on her *faith*'.¹²⁸ In fact, faith comes to Najwa through the other Muslim women she meets at the mosque. In this sense, the mosque is not only a place to practice faith, but it is also a place to make social connections that bypass social class divisions, language barriers and ethnic borders. In this sense, the novel is drawing our attention to the importance of a very Islamic institution from which women have been excluded and to which Islamic feminists are increasingly gaining access as Leila Ahmed explains:

Now that women in unprecedented and ever-growing numbers are coming to form part of the intellectual community in Muslim countries – they are already reclaiming the right, not enjoyed for centuries, to attend mosque – perhaps those early struggles around the meaning of Islam will be explored in new ways and the process of the creation of Islamic law and the core discourse brought fully into question.¹²⁹

Just as Soueif's *The Map of Love* subverts some misconceptions about two symbols of Arab Muslim culture that have been associated in the West with a repressive patriarchal authority, namely, the veil and the harem, *Minaret* explores the crucial

¹²⁶ Nash, p. 143.

¹²⁷ Chambers, 'An Interview with Leila Aboulela', p. 99.

¹²⁸ Chambers, p. 99, emphasis added.

¹²⁹ Ahmed, p. 101.

role a mosque can play for Muslim women regardless of their social class, ethnicities, education and age.

Wearing the hijab at the mosque unifies women and gives them a sense of belonging. Without the hijab, ethnic differences seem to alienate Najwa from the Muslim women she knows. To celebrate Eid, women put on new clothes and take off their hijabs in the women's section of the mosque. Najwa reflects: 'This one looks Indian, as if the hijab had made me forget she was Indian and now she is reminding me – in the sari with her flowing hair and jewellery' (p. 186). Further on, Najwa notes: 'But it is as if the hijab is a uniform, the official, outdoor version of us. Without it, our nature is exposed' (p. 186). The hijab erases social class and ethnic differences. In this sense, the mosque is presented as the epicentre of an *Islamic transnational feminist movement* with the hijab as a symbol of unity.¹³⁰ The mosque is Najwa's point of reference for regulating her life and providing her a space for socializing. The mosque, as Claire Chambers points out, 'provides a sense of security, well-being and locatedness'.¹³¹

Through her contact with the Regent's Park Mosque-based 'multi-ethnic Muslim community', Najwa finds 'individual role models and exemplars'.¹³² For Nash this 'is indicative of a modern globalised environment'.¹³³ What needs to be emphasized here, I believe, is that the 'models and exemplars' Najwa admires are women rather than men. Nash does not emphasize the connection between Islam and an Islamic feminist agenda that the novel seems to advocate. In other words, the

¹³⁰ It is interesting that in the interview with Chambers (cited previously), Aboulela explains that she refers to the hijab as a 'uniform' because it 'put[s] a distance between you and other people' (p. 93). My reading of the hijab in this context is exactly the opposite, i.e. the hijab creates a sense of belonging, familiarity and commonality.

¹³¹ Chambers, 'Recent Literary Representations of British Muslims', p. 184.

¹³² Nash, p. 144.

¹³³ Nash, p. 145.

‘modern globalised environment’ Nash refers to seems to be rendered to the less informed reader in a masculine sense, while the true ‘modern globalised environment’ that attracts Najwa to Islam is represented by the vibrant and supportive Muslim women Najwa meets at the Regent’s Park Mosque. These women attract Najwa because they have offered their help at a point when the people Najwa has known for a long time seem to have abandoned her.

Najwa’s downfall into the world of menial work in London forces her to seek coalition with others: her attempts to reconnect with fellow Sudanese exiles such as Randa and Aunt Eva break down and is gradually replaced by a more stable, self-fulfilling Islamic feminist coalition.¹³⁴ Aboulela underscores that gender can never be the only basis for feminist solidarity unless other socio-economic determinants, such as social class, race, education and religion are taken onboard. In this sense, the novel reiterates Marnia Lazreg’s criticism of Western feminists who have promoted universal conceptions of individual and institutional change ‘modelled after their own societies’.¹³⁵ Specifically, Western feminists fail to appreciate that their own cultures and societies form the implicit context for changes they hold up for Other women to emulate. Lazreg stipulates that ‘what the triumphant feminist discourse

¹³⁴ The peculiar position of Sudan as an Arab country in Africa is relevant to the discussion here. While the Sudanese are darker in skin than Arabs in North African countries, for instance, they are lighter in color than Africans in other African countries. To fully appreciate the novel’s agenda of transcending social class differences and ethnic origins, I would like to refer to an interview made by sociologist Caroline Nagel with a middle class Sudanese woman refugee in London. Like Najwa, this refugee was from a prosperous background in Sudan. The refugee tells the interviewer that she rejects colour-based identities despite feeling that she is considered ‘black’ in British society. Raised in a middle-class household with the belief that she, as an Arab, was superior to the ‘Africans’ of southern Sudan, she is disturbed by the thought that she is now black. Nagel argues that rather than searching for commonality with other black groups, the interviewee has chosen instead to avoid association with them. This interview shows how, from a middle class Sudanese Arab perspective, blackness is constructed as a stigmatized category. Islam, *Minaret* seems to argue, erases these differences and hence can be a basis for a transnational feminist movement. See: Caroline Nagel, ‘Constructing Difference and Sameness: the Politics of Assimilation in London’s Arab Communities’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 25 (2002), 258-87.

¹³⁵ Marnia Lazreg, ‘The Triumphant Discourse of Global Feminism: Should Other Women Be Known?’, in *Going Global*, ed. by Amireh and Majaj, pp. 29-38 (p. 30).

addresses is not diversity as such, in-itself, but difference from-itself; it seeks to obliterate that which is different from itself as if this act were a necessary condition of its own reproduction'.¹³⁶ What Lazreg criticizes, then, is a discourse that employs difference as a means of exclusion.

Similarly, Haideh Moghissi criticizes the ideologically driven or uninformed arguments by some left-oriented and feminist intellectuals in the West, who, in the name of multiculturalism and respect for difference, 'endorse indigenous solutions for indigenous problems'.¹³⁷ Moghissi argues that this 'indigenized version of "Feminism"' excludes core ideas of feminism, such as self-autonomy, gender egalitarianism, justice and sexual democracy.¹³⁸ Moghissi criticizes this tendency which, she notes, is increasingly observable in academic and non-academic writings because it helps reactionary religious regimes in the Middle East and the Muslim World 'to wall themselves off against internal and external challenges and impose their views and their own outdated moral standards on others in the name of Islam'.¹³⁹

Aboulela's novel engages with these questions by offering a nuanced representation of Najwa's life pre- and post-exile. In *Minaret*, Islam is reconciled with feminism within a diasporic space. The Najwa of 1984 was very happy with her social position, being a member of the upper-class elite in Sudan: 'Was I not an emancipated young woman driving her own car to university? [. . .] that should make me feel good about myself' (p. 10). Her social class-consciousness makes it difficult

¹³⁶ Lazreg, p. 30.

¹³⁷ Anastasia Valassopoulos, 'Dialogue Section: Arab Feminist Research and Activism: Bridging the Gap between the Theoretical and the Practical', *Feminist Theory*, 11 (2010), 117-20 (p. 126).

¹³⁸ Valassopoulos, p. 126.

¹³⁹ Valassopoulos, p. 126.

for her to set up serious relationships with other girls at the university outside her upper-class circle. Referring to two girls who study at the same department, Najwa's outlook is crucially informed by her social class status as a member of Khartoum's upper class: 'They were provincial girls and I was a girl from the capital and that was the reason we were not friends' (p. 14). The novel here is foregrounding the idea that being a woman does not and cannot be the sole common ground for identification, alliance and a lasting relationship. Within the same country, other issues like social class, region and religion influence friendships and social contacts. That Najwa is unable to identify with the way these girls are dressed speaks volumes about the power of social class and ideological affiliations. In this sense, the novel contributes to the ongoing discourses on the relevance of feminism to women of different cultural backgrounds.

Years later, Najwa ponders how she used to take her experience as the norm for measuring the achievements of other girls at the university. In other words, Najwa's ignorance of the socio-economic background of other Sudanese girls has made her make generalizations about them and their needs. Here, I turn once more to Johnson-Odim's argument:

[W]omen can embrace the concept of gender identity, but must reject an ideology based solely on gender. Feminism, therefore, must be a comprehensive and inclusive ideology and movement that incorporates yet transcends gender-specificity.¹⁴⁰

Through depicting Najwa's tendency to dissociate herself from the provincial girls at the university, *Minaret* shows that gender cannot be the only basis for creating a progressive social movement. Najwa is unable to recognize the needs of other

¹⁴⁰ Johnson-Odim, pp. 321-22.

Sudanese women because her class affiliation supersedes her gender membership. However, her painful experience of exile makes her reconsider her outlook.

Najwa used to think that higher education means the same thing for all Sudanese girls: 'I was in university to kill time until I got married and had children. I thought that was why all the girls were there but they surprised me by caring about their education, forging ahead with their jobs and careers' (p. 102). Najwa and these girls belong to the same generation, but they are markedly different in their socio-economic conditions. Through Najwa's re-assessment of her past opinions and thoughts about other women now that she herself has become an 'other' in exile, the novel shows how significant it is to take onboard the *different* experiences of women within the *same* nation. That Najwa is Sudanese does not mean that her aspirations and concerns represent those of all Sudanese girls of her generation. Social differences, especially social class, crucially inform each character's stances and beliefs.

This idea is further developed by introducing Lamya, a London-based rich PhD Arab student, and her mother, Doctora Zeinab. Although Najwa shares with them the same language, i.e. Arabic, their relationship is that of employer and employee. When Najwa gets a job as their maid and babysitter, she expresses her hope to become close to Lamya, but she acknowledges that Lamya 'will always see my hijab, my dependence on the salary she gives me, my skin colour, which is a shade darker than hers' (p. 116). Najwa realizes that barriers of social class, ideological beliefs, nationality, ethnicity, race and level of education cannot be easily erased. For Lamya, the hijab stands as a marker of inferiority and a working class status. This association is reinforced towards the end of the novel when one of

Lamya's friends, dressed in hijab, arrives at the party and starts stripping to the standing ovation of other friends. Najwa discovers that this girl is wearing the hijab as a fancy dress: 'Her smile and her gestures are theatrical; everyone is looking at her' (p. 222).

The Islamic dress is an object of ridicule and laughter. The association of a religious marker with a low social position seems to sanction the laughter among the upper class Arab Muslims.¹⁴¹ Najwa herself has discussed the Islamic dress years ago with her same upper-class childhood friend, Randa. Just as *The Map of Love* invites the reader to look with fresh eyes at two symbols of Arab Islamic culture that have been misrepresented in the West, *Minaret* here offers the reader an opportunity to look at the hijab from a different perspective. In this sense, the novel urges the reader to *consider* the socio-historical and political implications of the hijab, and consequently, it participates in ongoing debates among feminists on the need to ground analysis in a carefully constructed context that encompasses socio-historical, political, religious and economic elements in addition to gender issues.

Prior to 1985 in Sudan, Najwa and Randa have common interests like music, dancing and swimming and they move within the same social circle. However, when they look at Iranian girls marching in black chadors, Randa describes them as

¹⁴¹ One needs to bear in mind the argument that Leila Ahmed has made in her book *Women and Gender in Islam* about the socio-historical context in which the Islamic dress evolved and gained meanings. Ahmed links the evolution of the Islamic dress for both men and women (al-ziyy al-islami) with the growth of Islamist groups in Egypt in the 1970s (p. 217). Ahmed argues that al-ziyy al-islami does not resemble traditional dress, even though traditional dress fulfils the requirements of Islamic modesty because in modern times traditional dress has come to be confined to the lower classes and the peasantry; traditional dress therefore identifies the wearer as from these classes, whereas al-ziyy al-islami, which might be seen as a democratic dress, erases class origin (p. 221). In this sense, the Islamic dress can be seen as the uniform, not of reaction, but of transition (p. 225). The novel here seems to foreground the ambivalence toward the Islamic dress from the perspective of upper class people since the Islamic dress seems to flatten social class differences. In this sense, by wearing the hijab as a fancy dress, Lamya's friend is trying to, to use a Freudian term, sublimate her fears of the Islamic dress by turning it into a joke and an object of ridicule.

“[t]otally retarded,” while Najwa seems confused and ambivalent (p. 29). Najwa and Randa’s reactions to the photo are different. By zooming on this superficially steady, but deep-down unquestioned and untested, relationship, the novel opens the way for examining the ties among same-class women. If these relations are based on a common ground, to what extent can they resist unexpected and unforeseen changes? Randa asserts that the women in chadors are “crazy” and asks “[h]ow can a woman work dressed like that? How can she work in a lab or play tennis or anything?” (p. 29). On the other hand, Najwa asks “[w]hat do we know [about Islam]? We don’t even pray” (p. 29). This becomes a recurring question in the novel.

In exile, Najwa’s relationship with Randa disintegrates gradually as Randa climbs up the social ladder with her Western-based education. In spite of her education, Randa still adheres to the stereotypes about Muslim women in Western universities, “[t]he sight of them wearing hijab on campus irritates [her]” (p. 134).¹⁴² Najwa goes back in time and remembers when she was a student: ‘I remembered the girls in Khartoum University wearing hijab and those who covered their hair with white *tobes*. They never irritated me’ (p. 134). Najwa ultimately realizes that Randa and she ‘only had the past in common’ (p. 236). Similarly, Najwa’s relationship with Syrian Orthodox compatriot Aunt Eva is based on a common past. After the death of her mother and the imprisonment of her brother, Najwa finds solace in keeping company with her Syrian Christian compatriot, Aunt Eva because she feels so nostalgic for Khartoum and ‘need[s] to sit within range of her nostalgia’ (p. 143). Eventually homesick Najwa becomes Aunt Eva’s de facto servant. The novel portrays Najwa’s relation with Aunt Eva as based on, to borrow

¹⁴² However, in a later communication with Najwa from Edinburgh before their relationship entirely breaks down, Randa tells Najwa that ‘[s]he had done her best to fast in spite of having to sit for her finals’ (p. 235). She even celebrates the Eid with ‘other Sudanese students in Edinburgh’ (p. 235).

Aboulela's words in an interview with Anita Sethi, a 'pointless' sense of homesickness and nostalgia.¹⁴³

At this stage, Najwa seems to rotate in an orbit that includes Muslim, Christian, Marxist and capitalist Sudanese expatriates. Najwa renews her relationship with Anwar, a leftist Sudanese activist with nationalist views. While he is contemptuous of the black chadors the Iranian girls don, he hypocritically tells Najwa that "Arab society is hypocritical [. . .] with double standards for men and women" (p. 175). He is unable to understand that the dress code is a sign of Iranian women's alignment to the Islamic revolution against Western intervention. It represents, to borrow Fadwa El Guindi's words on the phenomenal spread of Islamic dress among Egyptian women in the mid seventies, an 'affiliation of an Islamic identity and morality and a rejection of Western materialism, consumerism, commercialism and values'.¹⁴⁴

Anwar is unable to see or comprehend Najwa's metamorphosis. He only sees Najwa as an ahistorical figure who is incapable of change and lives outside time:

His first impression of me was the one that had endured. The university girl with the tight, short skirt who spoke private-school English, who flirted and laughed, was daring and adventurous. 'I've changed, Anwar.'
'No, you haven't. You're just imagining.' (p. 224).

Anwar does not understand that Islam means a lot to Najwa now. He does not see that through her relations with other Muslim women at the mosque, Najwa has escaped social isolation. Being a member of a group has put an end to Najwa's

¹⁴³ Anita Sethi, 'Keep the Faith', *Observer*, 5 June 2005, p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ El Guindi, p. 591. Some lower middle class women adopt the Islamic dress because it helps them save money, others wear it to avoid harassment on public spaces and public transport. See: A. L. Macleod, *Accommodating Protest: Working Women, the New Veiling, and Change in Cairo* (New York: Columbia UP, 1991).

chaotic life. Donning an Islamic dress has brought Najwa a sense of relief and self-confidence: ‘Around me was a new gentleness. The builders who had leered down at me from scaffoldings couldn’t see me any more. I was invisible and they were quiet’ (p. 247).¹⁴⁵ By wearing the hijab, Najwa, to borrow Claire Chambers’ words, ‘recognizes the subtle allure of concealment’.¹⁴⁶

Just as Soueif’s Anna tells her English readers through her letters and journals that the veil is liberating and hence helps to remove it from its consistent association with Muslim patriarchal oppression, the novel here demystifies the hijab and renders it a source of comfort. Through highlighting this aspect of the hijab, the novel is writing back to some unexamined assumptions in some feminist circles about the nature of the hijab. In this sense, the novel is entering into a dialogue with other feminist movements. Aboulela seems to suggest that there is no point in trying to ignore and transcend differences among women of different cultural backgrounds because they do exist. Instead, feminist movements need to engage in conversations and listen to different voices. The novel seems to urge feminists to find ways of hearing ‘multiple, divergent and even discordant voices with clarity and resonance’.¹⁴⁷ According to Kinser this can be achieved if feminists retrain themselves ‘to hear the cacophony in new ways, sometimes to allow for a little discord, other times to focus on underlying rhythms’.¹⁴⁸ Kinser explains that these ‘concordant’ or ‘discordant’ voices are ‘interdependent [...] and heuristic’ and hence feminists should not think of differences as something either fixed or blended

¹⁴⁵ In the interview with Chambers, Aboulela mentions that she meant to use the word ‘invisible’ in a completely positive sense in *Minaret*, specifically to mean that Najwa ‘was no longer having to put up with the way men were looking at her, and all that’ but this word ‘seems to have been misinterpreted’ (pp. 91-92).

¹⁴⁶ Chambers, ‘Recent Literary Representations of British Muslims’, p. 187.

¹⁴⁷ Kinser, p. 110.

¹⁴⁸ Kinser, p. 110.

together nor as something that can always be transcended, but as something that needs to be engaged with seriously and profoundly.¹⁴⁹

Aboulela presents Najwa's experience to her readers, and in particular, to western feminists as an example of what Islam could mean to Muslim women. The novel makes clear that Najwa's religiosity, like that of the young Egyptian women El Guindi refers to, is not imposed on her by any religious authority or any oppressive masculine regime; on the contrary, it is a personal choice based on experience and self-fulfilment. By foregrounding the context in which Najwa adopts Islamic dress code, the novel invites the reader to view Najwa's act as a way to subvert a hostile diasporic experience. Like Soueif, Aboulela is laying great emphasis on the importance of understanding how women's localized experiences trigger variant forms of resistance.

Najwa's respect for the Muslim women of the Regent's Park Mosque stems from the support and help they offer her following the demise of her mother. For instance, Wafaa, one of the four women from the mosque who washed and shrouded Najwa's mother, frequently phones Najwa and enforces Najwa's sense of belonging to a community of Muslim women of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds. Shirley Hughes points out that Wafaa stirs Najwa's 'dormant religious yearnings'.¹⁵⁰ However, to attribute Najwa's religiosity to a yearning from the past is to miss the point about the socio-historical context in which Najwa embraces Islam, namely, the intersectionality of social class, gender and diaspora. At first, Najwa sees Wafaa (and

¹⁴⁹ Kinser, p. 111.

¹⁵⁰ Shirley Hughes, 'Minaret', *Wasafiri*, 47 (2006), 85-7 (p. 85). Hughes refers to Najwa's envy of her female colleagues at the University of Khartoum wearing Islamic dress because they have something that Najwa lacks: 'I envied them something I didn't have but I didn't know what it was' (p. 134).

other religious women) ‘through Anwar’s eyes; a backward fundamentalist, someone to look down on’ (p. 179). Later on, Wafaa becomes Najwa’s teacher and guide.

Najwa’s point of view needs to be heard, examined and discussed at length before it is judged. The novel seems to suggest that the hijab, controversial as it is, needs to be seen from multiple perspectives. Just as the hijab needs to be examined carefully, we should also evaluate the significance of the other major Islamic symbol in the novel, the mosque. By narrating some of the scenes at the mosque, the reader senses how happy Najwa is and how self-fulfilled she feels. Describing her participation in a Tajweed class,¹⁵¹ she states that the ‘concentration on technique soothes [her]; it make [her] forget everything around [her]’ (p. 74). At the mosque, Najwa celebrates the Eid with her fellow Muslim women. She has a sense of belonging, a sense of being part of a group: ‘I am happy that I belong here, that I am no longer outside, no longer defiant’ (p. 184). She is glad to forget her past and to become a member of a new group that cherishes her and emotionally supports her:

What they could see of me was not impressive: my lack of religious upbringing, no degree, no husband, no money. Many warmed to me because of that, they would talk about themselves and include me as someone who lives on benefit or came from a disadvantaged home (p. 239).

Still, Najwa is aware of the differences among Muslim women: everyone has her own experiences and perspectives on life. For example, when she compares herself to her Qur’an teacher, Um Waleed, Najwa emphasizes that ‘[t]heir natures are not harmonious; [they] orbit different paths’ (p. 185). Nevertheless, it is their interest in religion that brings them all together.

¹⁵¹ Tajweed (in Arabic) means (Qur’anic) recitation.

It is in the mosque that the social hierarchies and class differences appear insignificant. Najwa speaks warmly about the wife of the Senegalese Ambassador whose driver used to drop off Najwa at home during the month of Ramadan. This woman knows nothing about Najwa other than her name. She does not know her past nor her family's history because this is unimportant in this context of camaraderie. Najwa finds 'no need' to tell her because they 'had come together to worship and it [is] enough' (p. 188). Just as the friendship between Anna and Zeinab Hanim in *The Map of Love* transcends language barriers, the friendship between Najwa and the wife of the Senegalese Ambassador bypasses language barriers: 'We hardly talked and she instructed her chauffeur to drop her first' (p. 188). Compared to other identity markers, Islam surpasses differences such as language, ethnicity, race, nationality and social class and provides a basis for solidarity and sisterhood.

Shirin Edwin compares Aboulela's fiction to that of other Muslim African writers like Senegalese writer Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Nigerian Zaynab Alkali. Edwin shows that '*African* writers have successfully articulated the complex nature of Islam in *African* women's lives to caution against hastily judging and dismissing it as an unimportant factor'.¹⁵² Edwin's insistence on reading Aboulela's *Minaret* as a book written by a Muslim African writer eclipses two elements that are at the heart of the novel, namely, Najwa's nationality as an upper class Sudanese woman whose mother tongue is Arabic and Najwa's experience of exile. Failing to locate these two issues in the novel, I argue, contributes to a partial understanding of the appealing power of Islam to Muslims in diaspora. For instance, that Najwa's best friend at the end of the novel is a South Asian British Muslim woman who does not speak Arabic

152 Shirin Edwin, 'Veiling the Obvious: African Feminist Theory and the Hijab in the African Novel', *Third World Quarterly*, 29 (2008), 199-214 (p. 203, emphasis added).

illustrates the transnational nature of Islam that bypasses ethnic and racial barriers, a point that Edwin does not sufficiently engage with. Ultimately, Edwin's reading of the novel concentrates mainly on internal reasons that have prompted Najwa to put on the hijab 'as the culmination of her newfound sobriety and modesty' and as 'internaliz[ing] [. . .] its deeper religious significance'.¹⁵³ With its emphasis on Najwa's Africanness, Edwin's reading runs the risk of using the politics of location for 'the reflection of authentic, primordial identities that are to be re-established and reaffirmed' as Kaplan rightly warns us.¹⁵⁴

Indeed, Najwa's multi-layered identity is highlighted in several places in the narrative. Her identity is formed and re-formed through the intersectionality of gender, social class, religion, nationality, diaspora, ideological affiliations and politics. Arabic language, as a main component of Najwa's identity, becomes a site of contestation. In this context, Najwa does not look at Arabic-speaking Um Waleed as a friend, but only as a teacher: 'Strange that she is not my friend, I can't confide in her and when we are alone the conversation hardly flows' (p. 185). Language is relegated and faith is upheld. Marta Cariello invites us to view '[r]eligion as the place for identity formation'.¹⁵⁵ Religion, Cariello maintains, is both 'dispersed, transnational, interconnected, and global, and yet constitutes a local, always rooted and specifically – if not individually – constructed and experienced place'.¹⁵⁶ For Najwa, Islam is 'a central marker of identity in the fragmentary world of migration, asylum and family disintegration'.¹⁵⁷

¹⁵³ Edwin, pp. 212-13.

¹⁵⁴ Kaplan, *Questions*, p. 187.

¹⁵⁵ Marta Cariello, 'Searching for Room to Move: Producing and Negotiating Space, in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*', in *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, ed. by Al Maleh, pp. 339-50, p. 340.

¹⁵⁶ Cariello, p. 342.

¹⁵⁷ Chambers, p. 183.

Najwa's best friend in the mosque is Shahinaz, an Asian British housewife with three children. They communicate in English. Najwa is very happy to maintain this relationship with her:

Why Shahinaz chose me as a friend, and how Sohayl approved her choice, is one of these strokes of good fortune I don't question. *We have little in common*. If I tell her that, I think she will say, very matter-of-fact, 'But we both want *to become better Muslims*' (pp. 104-5, emphasis added).

The little in common they have is enough for setting up a friendship that is based on mutual interest; in this case it is religion. In this sense, the novel draws the reader's attention to the fact that religion overcomes language barriers and paves the way for solidarity, friendship and coalition among women. Seen from this perspective, Islam forms the basis of a support network that bypasses ethnic, language and social class barriers. However, the novel is keen to show that within this movement differences abound.

The views of Najwa and Shahinaz are not identical on all issues. For instance, Najwa's point of view on marriage is different from that of Shahinaz. Najwa confides in Shahinaz that she loves Tamer, who is nearly a decade her junior and talks about her wish to be his family's slave. Shahinaz reacts differently to this issue:

She says, 'When I think of a man I admire, he would have to know more than me, be older than me. Otherwise, I wouldn't be able to look up to him. And you can't marry a man you don't look up to. Otherwise, how can you listen to him and let him guide you?' (p. 215).¹⁵⁸

¹⁵⁸ I find it important here to say a few words on how the family is conceived and rendered in contemporary Muslim societies because while Najwa seems to subscribe to archaic and even fantastical notions of family order and structure, *the novel seems to invite us to question the authority of this order* through Shahinaz's response to Najwa. For an argument on the position of family in modern Islamic thought, see: Hibba Abugideiri, 'On Gender and the Family', in *Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century*, ed. by Suha Taji-Farouki and Basheer M. Nafi (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2004), pp. 223-59. Abugideiri argues that modernity, post-coloniality, globalization and Western cultural hegemony have all served as pretexts for the reinscribing of traditional notions of

Nevertheless, this difference in perspective does not ruin nor even shake the foundations on which their relationship is based. It is a healthy discussion that boosts their connections and cements their alliance. It is Shahinaz who remains Najwa's friend and confidante till the end of the novel. As the novel ends, the two women are praying together at Najwa's home and there is a hint that Najwa may join Shahinaz in going back to school (p. 275).

As Claire Chambers puts it, '*Minaret* opens as a typical novel of migration, but ends leading into another journey, one that is bound up with notions of belonging and coherence'.¹⁵⁹ It is interesting to compare this scene, which significantly closes the novel, to the scene where Amal al-Ghamrawi stands with the women of her village towards the end of *The Map of Love*. Both Najwa and Amal, who were quite hesitant and unsure of what to do, now know what their next step will be and they both confidently move on. Najwa has faith in Islam and finds a great relief in being one of the Muslim women at the mosque; Amal, similarly, decides to settle in her native village of Tawasi and to help her people as much as she can.

In two different ways, then, the two novels highlight the significance of trans-cultural and cross-ethnic/class dialogues and coalitions. They both uphold transnational feminist agendas that prioritize dialogue, understanding and engaging

family, and thus women's roles, within Islamic thought (pp. 246-47). Abugideiri maintains that the notion of marital complementarity, as conceptualized by twentieth-century Muslim thinkers, has, ironically, reified the notion of hierarchal gender difference, and thus gender inequality. Complementarity, as interpreted by this discourse, provides the Islamic pretext to duly restrict female legal rights within the family and expects the wife-mother to sacrifice those rights in the name of family cohesion (p. 242). See also: Ellen McLarney's critique of Hiba Ra'uf's *Woman and Political Work* in 'The Private is Political: Women and Family in Intellectual Islam', *Feminist Theory*, 11 (2010), 129-48. McLarney argues that Ra'uf makes the family the sphere of Islamic politics, and hence her argument 're-enacts secularism's division of spheres, sacralizing the affective bonds of intimate relations and making the family the domain of religion' (p. 130). McLarney maintains that by emphasizing the family as the domain of women's political work, Ra'uf reinscribes the family as a feminine sphere (p. 130).

¹⁵⁹ Chambers, 'Recent Literary Representations of British Muslims', p. 184. (p. 182).

discussion. The two Arab British women writers find in transnational feminisms a strategy to express their thoughts about the intersectionality of gender, social class, religion, politics, identity and diaspora. It is probably in the context of their hyphenated identity as Arab British that we would best understand the social and political significance of their projects. Although *Minaret* is set partly in London, it is not mainly interested in critiquing an Arab (Sudanese) community in diaspora (the way Monica Ali's *Brick Lane* does to the Bengali community in London, for instance).

Ahdaf Soueif and Leila Aboulela are both first generation Arab settlers in Britain. Their novels seem to reflect a tendency among some other Arab British writers to open corridors of dialogue with other communities in Britain. This tendency, which, I argue, is a partial by-product of their racialized immigration and settlement experiences, can be sharply contrasted with a tendency of Arab American peers to depict, examine and critique some aspects of the social life of Arab American communities, which in turn have different immigration and settlement experiences that intersect with issues of gender, race, religion, politics and class. It is to Arab American literature that I turn in the next chapter.

Chapter Three

Arab American Women Writers: Community, Daily Practices and Resistance

3.0 Introduction

In Chapter Two I pinpointed the transnational feminist agenda that underlies Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love* and Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*. My reading of the above two novels is partly informed by my approach to the two novelists as Arab British women writers. My argument is based on the idea that the works of the two authors, and indeed other Arab British writers, are influenced by racialized immigration practices and settlement experiences in Britain. As I argue in Chapter One, the two different immigration and settlement experiences of Arabs on both sides of the Atlantic have influenced the literary and cultural productions by Arab writers.

This chapter will concentrate on the works of Arab American women writers to show that, unlike Arab British women writers, Arab American women writers tend to employ literary strategies to subvert stereotypes commonly associated with Arabs in the US. They also tend to look closely at the Arab community from within in order to explore some of the problems that Arab Americans encounter. The image of Arab communities is central to the works produced by Arab American authors. This is in contrast to the literary productions of Arab British writers who tend to focus in their works on engaging with mainstream and/or other ethnic and minority groups. While the works of Soueif, Aboulela and Faqir are populated by non-Arab (white and non-white) characters who play major roles in the plots, characters in Arab American literature are mostly Arabs who seem to befriend and are befriended by white American characters. In other words, while non-white characters are centralized in the works of Arab British women writers, they are marginalized in the works of Arab American women writers.

In the first section, I argue that Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) enters into a dialogue with Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), Shakespeare's *Othello* (1603), Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969), George Melford's silent movie *The Sheik* (1921) and Edith Hull's novel of the same title (1919) in order to subvert misconceptions about Arabs in American literature and popular culture through a strategy of intertextuality. Building on structuralist, post-structuralist, feminist and post-colonialist schools of thinking, I will illustrate how, as an Arab American writer, Diana Abu-Jaber uses intertextuality as a creative strategy of resistance. In other words, *Crescent* engages with both Western and Arabic canonical texts and attempts to question some of the themes, issues, images, misconceptions and stereotypes imbedded in these texts. In this sense, Abu-Jaber explores a serious issue that members of the Arab American community encounter and partly causes their marginalization in the US social, political and cultural arenas.

Similarly, Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (2003) explores the contradictions and incongruities of Arab American communities to challenge stereotypes about Arab women whose figure in US popular representations 'harkens to the exoticism of distant cultures and places and suggests an irrationality that can be contrasted with the supposed order and rationality of Western liberal societies'.¹ Halaby adopts a literary resistance strategy of storytelling that enables Arab female teenagers to relay certain episodes from their lives in order to present their daily experiences and thus reveal how their cultural identities are shaped and re-shaped within Arab and Arab American cultural contexts. The novel, I suggest, presents multiple narratives that highlight the multiplicity of the experiences of teenage

¹ Ghazi-Walid Falah, 'The Visual Representation of Muslim/Arab Women in Daily Newspapers in the United States', in *Geographies of Muslim Women: Gender, Religion and Space*, ed. by Ghazi-Walid Falah and Caroline Nagel (New York: Guilford Press, 2005), pp. 300-18 (p. 318).

narrators. These narratives are then interwoven with the narratives of other Arab women of different backgrounds in order to illustrate how intersections of race, class, age, ethnicity and religion crucially inform the lives of Arab women.

Through their depictions of the experiences of Arab American characters, their emphasis on the hyphenated identities of these characters as Arabs and Americans and their engagement with the problems that characters of Arab descent encounter, the two novels are thematically different from the works of Arab British women writers. This difference, I argue, is the result of two different Arab immigration and settlement patterns on both sides of the Atlantic that manifest themselves in the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in both countries. To this end, I find it of great importance to explain the cultural, social and political context in which these two authors are writing.

In the following few pages, I will explore some of the concerns shared alike by Arab American writers and critics. The ambiguity that Arabs occupy in the ethnic map in the US - as I explain in Chapter One - makes Arab American communities invisible. According to the US official records, Arabs are considered white. However, this does not mean that they are part of mainstream culture. The socio-economic, political, religious and ideological dynamics of Arab American communities need to be adequately addressed and contextualized when discussing a literary work produced by an Arab American writer. Gender is another issue that needs careful examination and cautious theorization since it is one of the main battlegrounds on which the East-West cultural encounter is being staged.

In 'Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People', for example, Jack Shaheen argues that for more than a century Hollywood has used repetition as a

teaching tool, tutoring movie audiences by repeating over and over ‘insidious images’ of Arabs, eventually affecting honest discourse and US public policy.² Based on a study of more than 900 movies, Shaheen argues that filmmakers have collectively indicted all Arabs as brutal, heartless, uncivilized religious fanatics and money-mad cultural ‘others’.³ Shaheen argues that viewers, laughing at bumbling reel Arabs, leave movie theatres with a sense of solidarity, united by their shared distance from these peoples of ridicule.⁴ These movies, Shaheen warns, ‘effectively show all Arabs, Muslims, and Arab-Americans as being at war with the United States’.⁵ Shaheen warns that there is a dangerous and cumulative effect when these repulsive screen images remain unchallenged.⁶

While Shaheen focuses on how negative media representations of Arabs reflect on their lived experiences, other critics have emphasized the complexity of the context in which Arab American writers produce their works. Judith Gabriel argues that Arab American literary productions have to negotiate the ‘complex interlacing of the forces of identity and the forces of art’.⁷ Gabriel postulates that ‘it is difficult for Arab American writers to engage in serious self-criticism on such issues as gender inequities, racism, homophobia, classism’ because to cross these lines is to risk

² Jack Shaheen, ‘Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People’, *Annals of the American Academy*, 558 (2003), 171-93 (p. 172). Shaheen has also published a book and a documentary of the same title.

³ Shaheen, p. 172.

⁴ Shaheen, p. 177.

⁵ Jack Shaheen, ‘Hollywood’s Muslim Arabs’, *The Muslim World*, 90 (2000), 22–42 (p. 31).

⁶ Shaheen argues that the negative images are sometimes perceived as real portrayals of Muslim culture, which comes back to afflict Americans of Arab heritage as well as non-Arab Muslims in their dealings with law enforcement or judicial officials. For example, in January 1997, a judge in Dearborn was asked to rule whether an attorney could show *Not Without My Daughter*, a film portraying an Iranian man as a child abuser and child-kidnapper, to a jury deciding on a child custody case between an Arab American father and a European American mother. The judge allowed this film to be introduced in court (p. 36).

⁷ Judith Gabriel, ‘Emergence of a Genre: Reviewing Arab American Writers’, *Al Jadid Magazine*, 7 (2001) <<http://www.aljadid.com/features/0734gabriel.html>> [accessed 22 April 2009], para. 16 of 50.

alienation from community.⁸ Gabriel argues that the fear of disclosure ‘is often most paralyzing when it involves women’s issues, particularly those that involve inter-generational conflicts’ and identity-related debates.⁹ Gabriel maintains ‘that the Arab woman is *a construct of outsiders*, and [Arab American writers] are attempting to *reclaim* [. . .] *a multi-faced image*’ of the Arab woman.¹⁰ Without a carefully contextualized explanation and critique of Arab American literature, however, the attempts of Arab American writers to reclaim their voices and draw a realistic picture of their communities seem ineffectual. In other words, the works of Arab American writers need to be complemented with a literary criticism that explicates these works.

In this context, Steven Salaita calls on critics and scholars to develop a ‘critical matrix’ that is articulated from within the Arab American community and employs Arab artistic traditions as well as American ones.¹¹ Salaita argues that artistic growth ‘can play a crucial role in the external interpretation, acceptance, and humanization’ of Arab Americans and the Arab people as a whole.¹² For Salaita, Arab American literature and community are interconnected: ‘By exploring the community, Arab-American critics will find the relevance of the text, and the community will in turn sustain the criticism’.¹³ In other words, Salaita is urging critics to make clear the connections between Arab American literary productions and the context in which these works are produced. In this context, literary representations become one way of engaging with the issues that encounter Arab American communities.

⁸ Gabriel, para. 27 of 50.

⁹ Gabriel, para. 29 of 50.

¹⁰ Gabriel, para. 37 of 50, emphasis added

¹¹ Salaita, ‘Vision’, para. 1 of 22.

¹² Salaita, para. 2 of 22.

¹³ Salaita, para. 9 of 22.

Salaita's emphasis on community is of paramount significance for understanding the literary productions of Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* and Halaby's *West of the Jordan*. For instance, in Halaby's novel, Arab American communities are portrayed as heterogeneous and are divided by socio-economic differences such as gender, age and social classes. Understanding these differences helps the reader understand the way characters interact with their social environment. Through highlighting these differences, the novel foregrounds the cleavages in Arab American communities, engages with some of the issues that shape the experiences of Arab American characters and contributes to the current debate on the identity of Arab Americans. Similarly, while narrating a love story, *Crescent* employs a strategy of intertextuality to subvert stereotypes about Arabs and Arab Americans. We should remind ourselves, however, that the two works 'cannot be reduced to a sociological function, nor should [their] wider implication be limited', to borrow David Williams words on reading Arab American literature.¹⁴

The two novels raise questions on the role of Arab women writers in diaspora. As Taynyss Ludescher argues, when Arab American women attempt to criticize patriarchy, they are often accused of 'abandoning their own culture and adopting Western modes of thought'.¹⁵ Ludescher maintains that as any criticism of Arab patriarchy is viewed as a 'reinforcement of negative anti-Arab stereotypes', Arab American women writers 'run the risk of pandering to the commercial interests' of the Western marketplace.¹⁶ With these issues in mind, I will discuss how the two

¹⁴ David Williams, 'This Hyphen Called My Spinal Cord: Arab-American Literature at the Beginning of the 21st Century', *World Literature Today*, (2007), 55-63 (p. 62).

¹⁵ Taynyss Ludescher, 'From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature', *MELUS*, 31 (2006), 93-114, p. 106.

¹⁶ Ludescher, p. 107.

authors represent the experiences of Arab American characters and engage their readers ‘in activist and communal values’.¹⁷

3.1 Hybridity, Resistance and Intertextuality in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*

“Wait.” She [Sirine] constructs a chair and a table out of stacks of *Han’s* books. Before sitting, her uncle looks at them and says, “Let’s see, *The Iliad* and *The Collected Works of Shakespeare*. That will do nicely”.¹⁸

Here, Sirine, a half-Iraqi and half-American chef at a Middle Eastern café in California, is talking to her uncle, an Iraqi expatriate and a professor of Middle Eastern studies in an unnamed Californian university, as he visits his niece at her boyfriend’s unfurnished apartment. Sirine’s boyfriend, Hanif, commonly known as Han,¹⁹ is an Iraqi exile and a distinguished scholar at the Middle Eastern department at the same university. The conversation takes place immediately after Han’s sudden return to Iraq. Sirine’s uncle sits down comfortably *only* when Sirine makes him a makeshift chair out of a stack of books, among them Homer and Shakespeare. It is clear that Abu-Jaber’s text is deeply interested in issues of intertextuality. Here, I will look closely at instances of intertextuality in *Crescent* in order to show the importance of intertextuality as a strategy to subvert stereotypes about Arabs in American literature and popular culture. In this context, I argue that *Crescent* engages with a problem that faces Arab American communities, namely, stereotyping. In this sense, *Crescent* responds to calls by critics to seriously engage with the issues/problems facing Arab American communities.

¹⁷ Salaita, para. 10 of 22.

¹⁸ Diana Abu-Jaber, *Crescent* (Basingstoke and Oxford: Picador, 2003), p. 259, emphasis added. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁹ In the novel Hanif is called Han. It is only in Iraq that he is referred to as Hanif. Similarly, in *The Great Gatsby*, James Gatz changes his name to Jay Gatsby. It is only Gatsby’s father, Henry Gatz, who refers to him as Jimmy. Apparently, the two protagonists, Han and Gatsby, straddle two worlds: Han’s life is divided between his previous life in Iraq and his current life in the West. Gatsby’s past life, which is only remembered by his father, stands in a sharp contrast to his current life where everyone calls him Gatsby.

Crescent explores the life of the intellectual in diaspora. Among other themes, it attempts to give an insight into the quotidian issues that an exile encounters. Edward Said asserts that '[e]xile is strangely compelling to think about but terrible to experience'.²⁰ Exiled poets and writers, Said affirms, 'lend dignity to a condition legislated to deny dignity - to deny an identity to people'.²¹ Through Han's experience as an exile, Abu-Jaber throws light on the problems of displacement, exile and diaspora in the present global scene 'with its modern warfare, imperialism, and the quasi-theological ambitions of totalitarian rulers'.²² The above episode points to the significance of intertextuality, hybridity, translation, cross-cultural encounters and adaptation in the life and works of diasporic academics and creative writers. Not only does this incident suggest that there is always a process of borrowing, influence and interaction between different cultures, but it also highlights the role that the in-between intellectual plays in translating these cultures and drawing on them simultaneously, or as Sirine's uncle puts it in the above quotation, 'nicely'.

Crescent is of epic stature in size, events, characters and themes which include political, social, literary, cultural, historical and religious matters. As an Arab American text, *Crescent* enters into dialogue with both Western and Arabic canonical texts and attempts to question some of the themes, issues, images, misconceptions and stereotypes imbedded in these texts. In this way, the novel, to borrow Taynyss Ludescher's words on Arab American literature produced in the 1990s, puts a 'human face' on Arab American communities.²³ I suggest that Abu-

²⁰ Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays* (London: Granta Books, 2000), p. 171. See also: Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual: The 1993 Reith Lectures* (London: Vintage, 1994).

²¹ Said, p. 175.

²² Said, p. 174.

²³ Ludescher, p. 106.

Jaber draws on Fitzgerald's depiction of Gatsby as a romantic and an idealist lover in order to construct a parallel contemporary Arab character.²⁴ Both characters are caught between a past that haunts them and a present that they try hard to live with. Han's continuous nostalgia towards Iraq, his awareness of the opportunities his experience in the West have opened for him, and his love for Sirine, look similar to Gatsby's unwavering belief in his dream to marry Daisy and recreate the past. The hardships that both Han and Gatsby undergo create an affinity between the two of them in a way that links Han's past to Gatsby's. Drawing on this canonical text to create a parallel between a charismatic American character and an Arab one, the novel draws a realistic picture of members of the Arab American community in a way that makes them acceptable members of the larger American community.

Once this affinity is established and reinforced, Abu-Jaber, I propose, draws on another important Western text - not to create an analogy this time - but to question some stereotypes that have become gradually affiliated with Arabs. *Crescent* engages with Shakespeare's *Othello*. The contradictions that characterize *Othello* and make the play one of the most academically critiqued plays in literary history, alert us to some of the traits associated with Arabs/Moors such as jealousy, belief in superstitions and irrationality. I argue that *Crescent* attempts to subvert

²⁴ Although in this section I concentrate on the romantic and idealist sides of both Han and Gatsby because I believe this forms a crucial component of Abu-Jaber's intertextual strategy to present a lovable Han who is worthy of the (American) reader's sympathy and identification, other similarities between *Crescent* and *The Great Gatsby* exist. For example, towards the end of *Crescent*, Abdelrahman Salahadin tells Dino (a Rudolph Valentino-like Hollywood star) of his intent to return home once he sees the crescent moon. Abdelrahman Salahadin says: "You know, sometimes a fella's got to know when to go home" (p. 329). Similarly, following Gatsby's death, Nick decides to return home: "So when the blue smoke of brittle leaves was in the air and the wind blew the wet laundry stiff on the line I decided to come back home" (p. 140). In both cases, (cultural) signs play a crucial role in determining the time of returning home. Another sign that I find important in both novels is the swimming pool. In *Crescent*, Han and Sirine's first lengthy meeting takes place around Lon Hayden's swimming pool during a Hollywood star-studded party. In *The Great Gatsby*, not only are the parties held around the swimming pool, but also it is where Gatsby is shot dead. In both cases, the pool gains significance because some of the major events take place around it.

these misconstructions - mainly through presenting Han as an admirable lover and academic. Han is a contemporary educated Arab man whose love for Sirine is not marred by jealousy, superstition or irrationality. Through interpolating *Othello* and representing Han as a charismatic character, *Crescent* alerts the reader to the fact that Arabs and Americans of Arab descent have been unfairly demonized and stereotyped. In this way, the novel seeks to reinstate Arab American communities within the larger US community. At the same time, the novel enters into dialogue with an Arab novel that attempted to interpolate Shakespeare's *Othello* in the sixties: Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969).

In *Crescent*, the presence of a dynamic, articulate and a quick-witted mother, Aunt Camille, seems to be in sharp contrast with an absent and superstitious mother that Shakespeare merely alludes to and a helpless and silent mother that Salih briefly sketches. Unlike the unnamed mothers of Shakespeare's *Othello* and Salih's Mustafa Sa'eed, Aunt Camille refuses to be silenced and roams the earth in search of her missing son. Through Aunt Camille, *Crescent* shatters the image of the helpless and victimized Arab woman propagated by US literary and popular culture.²⁵ Through her mythical adventures, she emerges as a full character that challenges the marginalization that both Shakespeare and Salih relegate her to. Through presenting Han and Aunt Camille as venerable and articulate Arab characters, *Crescent* engages, though briefly, with an early twentieth century Hollywood production that has relied for its success on propagating stereotypes about Arabs, namely, *The Sheik*.

²⁵ My analysis of Halaby's *West of the Jordan* will focus on subverting stereotypes about Arab women through portraying the heterogeneity of their experiences.

Abu-Jaber's allusion to George Melford's *The Sheik* (1921) towards the end of the novel is both sagacious and well-contextualized.²⁶ The film, based on Edith Hull's novel of the same title published in 1919, is one of the most popular films of the period. It has captured the attention and the admiration of millions of viewers by its depiction of the oriental desert and the portrayal of an exotic landscape that feeds on the desires and fantasies of the audience.²⁷ However, the film is predicated on an orientalist discourse that demonizes Arabs, presenting them as treacherous, savage, superstitious, jealous, and promiscuous. As this film has played a great role in perpetuating a number of misconceptions about Arabs at a critical stage in American history, Abu-Jaber leaves her engagement with it until the end of the novel. Part of the novel's mythical plot portrays the adventures of the blue Bedu who can be seen as the Bedouin tribe of *The Sheik*. However, it is not until page 289 that we are *directly* told that Abdelrahman Salahadin, the protagonist of the mythical plot in the novel, goes to the auditions of *El Shaykh*, a film to be produced by Hollywood. It is at this moment, I propose, that the reader looks back at some of the incidents, re-evaluates them, and contrasts the portrayal of Arabs in *Crescent* and *The Sheik*.

Through its attempt to subvert stereotypes about Arabs and Americans of Arab descent, *Crescent* engages with one of the serious issues that Arab American communities encounter. Abu-Jaber employs her creative writing skills in the service of her community. In writing about Arab American communities from within,

²⁶ *Crescent* draws the reader's attention to the role that Hollywood productions play in influencing public opinion through the novel's repeated references to the images screened on the TV set in Nadia's Café. Abu-Jaber also refers to Peter O'Toole and *Lawrence of Arabia*. I will concentrate only on *The Sheik* because, like *Crescent*, *Othello* and *Season*, it deals with the theme of a mixed marriage/relation and it echoes some of the events in *Crescent* like kidnapping, slavery and superstitions.

²⁷ For more details on how the desert romance has played a crucial role in fostering a Western discourse on the Orient, see: Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994).

Crescent, to use Ludescher's words, represents 'a new sophisticated form of literary analysis [. . .] to engage in communal self-criticism'.²⁸ In this sense, Abu-Jaber responds to a call on Arab American writers by Gregory Orfalea to combine inner and outer torment, to examine the everyday experiences and to chronicle the quotidian practices of Arab Americans. Orfalea urges Arab American writers and critics to explore the multiplicity of the Arab American experience through discussing issues of class and gender among other social variables in their communities.²⁹ Thematically, through representing the daily experiences of members of the Arab American community and presenting them as ordinary American citizens, *Crescent* subverts stereotypes about Arabs and Arab Americans propagated by US literary and popular productions. Structurally, the novel employs a strategy of intertextuality to achieve this goal.

Graham Allen's *Intertextuality* offers an in depth historical introduction and an informative analysis of the development of the concept of intertextuality in structuralist, post-structuralist, feminist and post-colonialist schools of thinking. Building on this, I will illustrate how post-colonial writers, in this case Arab women writers, use intertextuality as a strategy of resistance. In particular, I highlight Abu-Jaber's employment of intertextuality (and hypertextuality) as a device to challenge misrepresentations of Arabs in American newspapers, TV shows and films.

The practice and theorization of intertextuality is associated primarily with post-structuralist thinkers. Julia Kristeva argues that a text is 'a mosaic of quotations;

²⁸ Ludescher, p. 108.

²⁹ Gregory Orfalea, 'The Arab American Novel', *MELUS*, 31 (2006), 115-133 (p. 127).

any text is the absorption and transformation of another'.³⁰ In his seminal essay 'Death of the Author', Roland Barthes affirms that literary texts are no longer the product of an author's original thoughts. Barthes argues that the writer's 'only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them'.³¹

Graham Allen defines intertextuality:

An utterance, such as a scholarly work, may present itself as an independent entity, as monologic (possessing singular meaning and logic), yet it emerges from a complex history of previous works and addresses itself to, seeks for active response from, a complex institutional and social context.³²

That utterances are dialogic is very empowering from a post-colonialist point of view. It reiterates Homi Bhabha's postulation that colonial discourse is marked by fractures and slippages whereby the subject in the dominated culture 'can destroy narcissistic authority through the repetitious slippage of difference and desire'.³³

Crescent employs intertextuality as a strategy of literary resistance. *Crescent* skilfully blends a realist plot set in the 1990s with a mythical one. The two plots run parallel and at several points echo each other. The realist plot takes place in Los Angeles and Iraq and focuses on the love story between Han and Sirine. As Han and Sirine fall in love, other issues arise, including Han's sudden return to Iraq. After a couple of years, Han phones Sirine, possibly from America. Other characters get involved in this love story too. Nathan Green, an eccentric American photographer,

³⁰ Julia Kristeva, 'Word, Dialogue and Novel', in *The Kristeva Reader*, ed. by Toril Moi (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), pp. 75-99 (p. 34).

³¹ Roland Barthes, *Image, Music, Text*, trans. by Stephen Heath (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), pp. 146-47.

³² Allen Graham, *Intertextuality* (London & New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 19.

³³ Bhabha, *Location*, p. 129.

falls in love with Han's sister Leila during a visit to Iraq, without Han's knowledge. Their love story ends in tragedy and Nathan lives in regret for the rest of his life and blames himself for Leila's death. Another important character is Aziz, a famous Syrian poet who is secretly in love with Sirine. Aziz tries to dissuade her from her attachment to Han. Other characters include Um-Nadia, the charismatic, industrious and successful woman who efficiently runs the café, and her younger daughter, Mireille.

Sirine's uncle, who remains unnamed, is another primary character who provides the link between the novel's realist and mythical worlds. He relates the story of his cousin Abdelrahman Salahadin and his legendary mother, Aunt Camille. Abdelrahman Salahadin makes a living by selling himself to slave traders and then feigns drowning to escape. When he is abducted by mermaid Queen Alieph, Aunt Camille searches for him. She discovers that her son has become an actor in Hollywood. Abdelrahman Salahadin vainly seeks a key role in a movie called *El Shaykh*. As the role is given to an Italian actor, Abdelrahman Salahadin decides to return to his home where he plays Othello in Cairo. Ultimately, he is re-united with his mother who feels proud of him as '[s]he realized he'd spent his whole life acting: first as a drowned Arab, second as a drowned Moor' (p. 335).

The novel's reference to cultural productions like films and plays draws our attention to the cultural dialogue that *Crescent* foregrounds. Bill Ashcroft highlights the importance of interpolating the dominant culture's ideology through the acquisition of what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu calls cultural capital. Ashcroft argues that cultural capital 'provides comprehensive avenues to self-empowerment'

in the engagement with the dominant culture.³⁴ Moreover, Ashcroft pinpoints the significance of ‘the changes made to the system which provides the capital’.³⁵ Ashcroft underscores the role played by the intellectual in the dominated culture in acquiring, transforming and ultimately challenging the dominant culture in a way that ‘may lead to changes in the dominant culture itself’.³⁶ Interpolation, Ashcroft maintains, is a strategy that does not ‘asser[t] a unified anti-imperial intention, or a separate oppositional purity’.³⁷ On the contrary, it embraces the idea of multiplicity and plurality. In *Crescent*, interpolation is achieved through the employment of intertextuality. Through drawing on Western and Arabic canonical texts and Hollywood productions, *Crescent* can be seen as ‘a space in which a potentially vast number of relations coalesce’.³⁸

According to Kristeva and Barthes, intertextuality has nothing to do with influence, sources, ‘or even the stabilised model favoured in historical work of “text” and “context”’.³⁹ Similarly, Jonathan Cullar asserts that intertextuality is not a ‘source-hunting’ concept or strategy.⁴⁰ Cullar explains that the study of intertextuality ‘casts its net wider to include the anonymous discursive practices, codes whose origins are lost, which are the conditions of possibility of later texts’.⁴¹ Directly related to this discussion is the concept of adaptation. Why does an author draw on a particular source or a precursor text? What captures an author’s attention

³⁴ Ashcroft, p. 45.

³⁵ Ashcroft, p. 45.

³⁶ Ashcroft, p. 45.

³⁷ Ashcroft, p. 47.

³⁸ Allen, p. 12.

³⁹ Allen, p. 69.

⁴⁰ Jonathan Cullar, ‘Presupposition and Intertextuality’, *Comparative Literature*, 91 (1976), 1380-96 (p. 1383).

⁴¹ Cullar, p. 1383.

in the original work or mosaic of works? What are the implications and ramifications of adaptation from a post-colonialist perspective?

Linda Hutcheon finds a sort of pleasure which ‘comes simply from repetition with variation, from the comfort of ritual combined with piquancy of surprise’.⁴² In other words, people will be interested in watching/reading/listening to a work with which they are familiar and will be anxious to compare, contrast and spot the differences. This is true when the medium is changed: i.e. when a novel is filmed or turned into an opera. The way the plot is changed to serve the new medium captures the recipient’s attention and generates a curious ambivalence towards the work. As Hutcheon reminds us ‘[a]n adaptation’s double nature does not mean, however, that proximity or fidelity to the adapted text should be the criterion of judgment or the focus of analysis’.⁴³ *Crescent*, for instance, engages with *Othello* primarily through the re-writing of the handkerchief/scarf scene. By re-writing this scene, *Crescent* revises the Western canon and challenges stereotypes about Arabs as jealous, superstitious and irrational.

Hutcheon’s hypothesis is congruent with post-colonial perspectives because the hierarchal division insinuated by fidelity is being destabilized and disrupted, giving the post-colonial writers a free hand in re-moulding the raw material to serve their new purposes. As Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi argue, ‘[i]t is significant that the invention of the idea of the original coincides with the period of early colonial expansion, when Europe began to reach outside its own boundaries for

⁴² Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Adaptation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.

⁴³ Hutcheon, p. 6.

territory to appropriate'.⁴⁴ Thus, as part of the post-colonial revisionary program, the concept of the original is being questioned and challenged because it is in some ways an imperialist invention. Bassnett and Trivedi urge researchers to 'cal[l] into question the politics of canonization and mov[e] resolutely away from ideas of universal literary greatness'.⁴⁵ Just like translations, adaptations are of paramount importance in post-colonial discourse not only because they are 'wilful reinterpretations for a different context' and can lead to 'hybrid works', but also because they 'disrupt elements like priority and authority' and 'destabilize both formal and cultural identity and thereby shift power relations'.⁴⁶ Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* is an adaptation with subversive potential.

In fact, *Crescent* is set in the 1990s after the First Arab Gulf War when stereotypes about Arabs in America stridently re-surfed. Nadine Naber argues that '[t]he premiers of anti-Arab TV shows and films systematically coincide with specific US government intervention in the Middle East region'.⁴⁷ Naber contends that the 1990s 'brought movies that perpetuated anti-Arab images [. . .] including *Not Without my Daughter* (1991), *Aladdin* (1992), *True Lies* (1994) and *G.I. Jane* (1998)'.⁴⁸ These films played a crucial role in demonizing and conflating Arabs (and Muslims) and preparing public opinion for a potential American intervention in the Middle East. These films, I argue, have a negative influence on Arabs living in the United States. As Jack Shaheen puts it, '[r]epetitious and negative images of the reel

⁴⁴ Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi, 'Introduction: of Colonies, Cannibals and Vernaculars', in *Post-colonial Translation*, ed. by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), pp 1-18 (p. 2).

⁴⁵ Bassnett and Trivedi, p. 2.

⁴⁶ Hutcheon, pp. 151-74.

⁴⁷ Naber, 'Ambiguous Insiders', p. 45. See also: Shaheen, 'Reel Bad Arabs'.

⁴⁸ Naber, p. 45.

Arab literally sustain adverse portraits across generations’⁴⁹ and ‘encourage divisiveness accentuating [. . .] differences at the expense of those human qualities’ that tie people together’.⁵⁰

In their readings of *Crescent*, critics have sought to unveil how the novel attempts to make connections between Arab Americans and the larger American community through deploying common cultural traditions and practices. Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom, for instance, argue that ‘food functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory and exile’ in *Crescent*.⁵¹ They argue that *Crescent* ‘illustrates Appiah’s notion of cosmopolitanism’ especially during the conversation at the hybrid Thanksgiving dinner table.⁵² Similarly, Carol Fadda-Conrey argues that in *Crescent* Abu-Jaber attempts to include the ‘works by and about Arab Americans in the ethnic studies category, suggesting ways to bridge the barriers separating Arab Americans from other ethnic minorities’.⁵³ Like Mercer and Strom, Fadda-Conrey illustrates the importance of food as a metaphor for ‘the interconnections within the ethnic borderland between different ethnic characters’.⁵⁴ The essay concludes that the novel ‘encourages a search for commonality that is anti-essentialist’ through ‘an informed understanding of the inherent differences within and between ethnic communities’.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ Shaheen, ‘Reel Bad Arabs’, p. 176.

⁵⁰ Shaheen, ‘Hollywood’s Muslim Arabs’, p. 23.

⁵¹ Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom, ‘Counter Narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye’s Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*’, *MELUS*, 32 (2007), 33-46 (p. 33).

⁵² Mercer and Strom, p. 44.

⁵³ Carol Fadda-Conrey, ‘Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*’, *MELUS*, 31 (2006), 187-205 (p. 187).

⁵⁴ Fadda-Conrey, p. 201.

⁵⁵ Fadda-Conrey, p. 203. Other critics have focused on identity. For instance, Jopi Nyman argues that ‘the novel’s seemingly American story of the making of ethnic identity is positioned in a global framework of migration and diaspora’ (p. 182). See: Jopi Nyman, *Home, Identity, and Mobility in Contemporary Diasporic Fiction* (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009), especially chapter 10, ‘Writing Diasporic Identity in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*’, pp. 181-98. See also: Brinda J. Mehta,

The two essays offer very discerning readings of the novel. However, by concentrating on food as a potential bridge for cultural dialogue, Mercer and Strom offer a celebratory and gratifying interpretation of the concept of cosmopolitanism that fails to address some of the major tensions in the novel. For example, that Han feels displaced in America although he lives with the woman he loves may point to a breakdown in the discourse of cosmopolitanism that needs appropriate explanation and contextualization. It is true that the preparation and consumption of food provides an opportunity for people to talk about their cultures in an attempt to understand each other's difference, but it is perhaps a step too far to agree with Mercer and Strom's claim that the Thanksgiving feast, a dinner party at Sirine's uncle's house to which people from different cultural backgrounds are invited, is emblematic of the theme of the novel. This statement, I propose, underestimates the novel's attempt to engage with other issues such as the misrepresentation of Arabs in literary and popular productions in the US, hybrid identities and the complexities of exile. Some episodes in the plot that I shall return to later point to misunderstandings and misapprehension between characters from different cultural backgrounds.⁵⁶

On the other hand, Fadda-Conrey focuses on the realist plot to support her argument that the novel portrays the ethnic borderland as 'a constructive space in which interethnic ties between and within different communities of color could be

'The Semiosis of Food in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*', in *Arab Voices in Diaspora*, ed. by Al Maleh, pp. 203-35. See also: Nouri Gana, 'In Search of Andalusia: Reconfiguring Arabness in Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*', *Comparative Literature Studies*, 45 (2008), 228-46.

⁵⁶ The disagreement between Han and Nathan over the latter's approach to photography is a case in point. Although Nathan's gallery is supposed to highlight the misery of Iraqi people under the US sanctions, Han thinks that Nathan is an opportunist who uses these photos for career progress. At the same time, the American woman who disdains Han for shouting at Nathan does not realize that these photos stir Han's feelings of nostalgia for his family and his country. These moments of tension and rupture suggest the difficulty of embracing cosmopolitanism in celebratory tone. Let us not forget that during the Thanksgiving party Sirine loses the scarf that Han gives to her as a present, an episode that creates a rift between the two.

established and maintained'.⁵⁷ Not only does her reading render the mythical plot redundant, but it also flattens Han who, as an intellectual in exile, deserves more attention. Understanding Han's perspective is quite important to understanding what it means to be displaced, dislocated and othered. As Said argues, an exile has 'a double perspective that never sees things in isolation'.⁵⁸ Not only is Han an exile, he is an intellectual in exile. His restlessness speaks volumes of the unattractive and unspoken realities of diaspora. Intellectuals, Said maintain, 'tend to see things not simply as they are, but as they have come to be that way'.⁵⁹ With his visions and opinions, the presence of an intellectual exile like Han in *Crescent*, invites the reader, and indeed the critic, to question rather than celebrate an overly positive idea of cosmopolitanism and inter-ethnic dialogue.

From the start, Abu-Jaber tries to build an aura around Han, aligning him not only with Gatsby but also with Ulysses. Six pages into the novel, Sirine's uncle states that Han is "[I]ike Ulysses" (p. 19). Later on, Um-Nadia tells the policemen who frequent her café that "[i]f this was the time of Salah al-Din [,] Han would be a famous general" (p. 70).⁶⁰ An important scene takes place in Beverly Hills, where the head of the Middle Eastern Studies Department, Lon Hayden, throws his annual party on the first Friday in September. The setting, the lavishness of the party and the fact that Lon Hayden's 'wife is a casting director for big action movies' (p. 30) remind the reader of the parties thrown by the protagonist of *The Great Gatsby* and

⁵⁷ Fadda-Conrey, p. 187.

⁵⁸ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, p. 44.

⁵⁹ Said, p. 45.

⁶⁰ Salah al-Din is a Muslim leader from the north of Iraq who liberated Jerusalem from the Crusaders in the twelfth century.

frequently attended by a number of Hollywood stars.⁶¹ In spite of the presence of all these stars, Han remains a central figure in the party. He is a charismatic person who seems to attract people's attention:

The party has gotten crowded and there's a press of people all around him – she [Sirine] thinks there is something about him that makes people want to stand close. He smiles as people approach and inclines slightly toward everyone who talks to him, as if he were intrigued, a little bit in love with each of them (p. 32).

Crescent creates an atmosphere reminiscent of *The Great Gatsby* in order to juxtapose the love story between Gatsby and Daisy to that of Han and Sirine, thus drawing the attention to the romantic side of Han. Nick Caraway uses subtle language to describe his initial impression of Gatsby's distant silhouette the first time he sees him:

[F]ifty feet away a figure had emerged from the shadow of my neighbor's mansion and was standing with his hands in his pockets regarding the silver pepper of the stars. Something in his leisurely movements and the secure position of his feet upon the lawn suggested that it was Mr Gatsby himself.⁶²

Similarly, in *Crescent* Han '[is] standing on the far end of one of the pool-lagoons lit by rose-colored spotlights in a way that seems deliberately American: loose tan shorts, sandals, a fluid yellow shirt' (p. 32).

While *Crescent* may not be directly referring to *The Great Gatsby*, it none the less invokes some episodes from Fitzgerald's book and is hence 'inevitably involved in the performance of textual echo and allusion'.⁶³ That Han is dressed in a

⁶¹ In one of Gatsby's parties, 'Tom and Daisy stared, with that peculiarly unreal feeling that accompanies the recognition of a hitherto ghostly celebrity of the movies' (Fitzgerald, p. 84). In *Crescent*, Sirine 'sits on the edge of a cluster of movie people slouched in lawn chairs' (p. 30). Moreover, the narrator tells us that '[t]he house and its grounds are so vast, partygoers seem to appear out of nowhere, strolling around bends in the lawn' (pp. 30-31).

⁶² Scott F. Fitzgerald, *The Great Gatsby*, introd. by Ruth Prigozy (Oxford & New York: Oxford UP, 2008), p. 20.

⁶³ Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 4.

deliberately American way and is portrayed as a charismatic character who is modelled after Gatsby invites the reader to reflect on the life of a member of the Arab American community with empathy away from popular representations of Arabs and Americans of Arab descent as the enemies of the US nation 'who are bent on terrorizing civilized Westerners, especially Christians and Jews'.⁶⁴ Han, to borrow Abu-Jaber's words in an interview with Robin E. Field 'is meant to be representative of a specific kind of very literate, sophisticated Arab man [. . . not] represented in [. . .] media'.⁶⁵

Gatsby has gained a universality made possible via films and adaptations. Ruth Prigozy argues that 'to call someone "Gatsbyesque" is immediately to define an individual in terms of his capacity for hope, his romantic idealization of experience'.⁶⁶ Prigozy maintains that media representations have helped the dissemination of this romantic figure that comes to represent the American nation. Prigozy asserts that Gatsby's dream 'is the dream of Everyman [. . .] It is also the dream of those young people caught between two worlds'.⁶⁷ *Crescent* draws on the universality of Gatsby's dream, his romanticism and the sense of fragmentation he lives with. The reader feels the state of displacement and homelessness that Han experiences, "For a moment-for a moment, I forget where I was. I forgot that this was America. I was on the banks of the Tigris" (p. 177).

Han's childhood in poverty seems to parallel Gatsby's. Han's family 'didn't have enough money for his textbooks (p. 205). Similarly, Gatsby's father, Henry

⁶⁴ Shaheen, 'Reel Bad Arabs', p. 172.

⁶⁵ Field, p. 219.

⁶⁶ Prigozy, pp. vii-viii.

⁶⁷ Prigozy, p. xxxiv.

Gatz, reveals to Nick that Gatsby's family "was broke up".⁶⁸ Both Han and Gatsby are disciplined and self-made characters: the timetable Henry Gatz shows Nick reveals that Gatsby is an organized and a dedicated person the way that Han's insistence on studying under street lamps shows his resolve and diligence. *Crescent* here invites the American reader to identify with Han as a self-built Arab man who has grown up in penury and desolation. In other words, Gatsby's romanticism is also echoed in Han's delicate and sensitive character in such a way that challenges stereotypes about Arab men. Just as Gatsby, to use Prigozy's words, '[has] literally patched himself together out of popular ideas and books about self-improvement',⁶⁹ Han has made himself and built his career with his bare hands. Like Gatsby, Han is delicate, idealistic and romantic.⁷⁰

In the character of Han, exile and displacement mix with romantic love and idealism. Han lives like a nomad. He has not furnished his flat because buying furniture represents "a commitment [. . .] to a place", a notion that he has never entertained (p. 60). Han feels at a loss in the city where he lives. He finds it difficult to locate Sirine's home although she lives close to his flat. Apologetically, Han tells Sirine that he does not "get the geography of this town [. . .] things keep swimming around [him]" (p. 65). Han is a tormented figure. For him, "[t]he fact of exile is bigger than everything else in [his] life" (p. 152). Nevertheless, Han's sense of

⁶⁸ Fitzgerald, p. 137.

⁶⁹ Prigozy, p. xxvii.

⁷⁰ Mystery surrounds Gatsby till his death the way that mystery surrounds Han throughout the novel. For instance, the relationship between Han and his American benefactor, Janet, is presented in a way that parallels Gatsby's ties with Dan Cody and Meyer Wolfshiem. Janet funds Han's study at a private school in Cairo (p. 218). Ever since, Han has "turned into something different than [he] was born to be" (pp. 220-21). Similarly, in *The Great Gatsby*, Wolfshiem claims that he made Gatsby "out of nothing" (p. 136). While some believe that Gatsby is "a German spy", others think that he served in the American army during the World War I (pp. 36-37). Similarly, some people think that Han is a spy for "The C.I.A., the Iraqis, whoever", while others believe that he is "one of Saddam Hussein's secret sons" (p. 290).

displacement does not reflect adversely on his love for Sirine. In spite of his anguish and pain, he is a romantic lover.

Han's ability to immerse himself and his beloved in a romantic world is an image that the novel adroitly highlights. Han invites Sirine to dinner in the first of a series of dates. When she knocks on the door, '[h]e looks as if he can't quite believe she's standing there' (p. 57).⁷¹ As he prepares the meal, the legendary Lebanese diva Fairuz sings and the narrator tells us that 'Han looks excited - his skin slightly damp and pink from the kitchen heat' (p. 58). We follow with admiration Han's treatment of Sirine as his queen, placing the food with care and love in her mouth (p. 61). As they sit on the balcony '[t]he moon comes out and turns red' (p. 62). In this romantic atmosphere, Sirine starts to ask Han questions about his past: 'She stays too late, *drunk on Han's stories*' (p. 64, emphasis added). It is here, I argue, that *Crescent* starts to engage with a foundational Western text that has perpetuated, whether consciously or unconsciously, anti-Arab images and thoughts.⁷² Specifically, *Crescent* enters into dialogue with Shakespeare's *Othello*.⁷³

In fact, Desdemona falls in love with Othello through listening to his adventures that he narrates to her father:

Othello: [. . .] This to hear
Would Desdemona seriously incline,
But still the house affairs would draw her thence,
Which ever as she could with hasted dispatch
She'd come again, and with a greedy ear

⁷¹ A reminder of the Gatsby-Daisy reunion in Nick's house where Gatsby "'act[s] like a little boy"' because he cannot believe that he is re-united with Daisy.

⁷² As Sirine enters Han's flat, 'the word *Africa* comes to her head' (p. 57). I discuss the intertextual significance of this quotation in more detail later.

⁷³ Critics extensively have written on the attempts to adapt *Othello*. See: *Post-colonial Shakespeares*, ed. by Ania Loomba and Martin Orkin (London & New York: Routledge: 1998). It is not my intention here to engage with these critics. I will concentrate on the way *Crescent* engages with *Othello*.

Devour up my discourse.⁷⁴

Desdemona's interest in listening to Othello's stories is, according to Patricia Parker, 'a characteristic of early modern preoccupation with the ocular, an appetite which, as with appeal of prodigy and "monster" literature, involved the hunger to "know" as a desire to "see"'.⁷⁵

Drawing on some motifs that are central to *Othello*, *Crescent* starts to challenge some orientalist stereotypes that tie Arabs to jealousy, superstition and irrationality. As a play that has been repeatedly adapted and re-interpreted, *Othello* has created and reinforced misrepresentations of Arabs/Moors. As Emily C. Bartels argues, at the same time that Shakespeare was writing his plays, 'English discourse was [. . .] already filled with stereotypes of Africans as embodiments of evil, blackened by sin, driven by lust, and hungry for murder and revenge'.⁷⁶ I suggest that these stereotypes have gained more currency and standing in contemporary life and we still encounter them in popular culture and mass media. In fact, in an interview with Robin E. Field, Abu-Jaber states that she is interested in scrutinizing stereotypes about Arabs and Americans of Arab descent. Abu-Jaber asserts that she 'deliberately press[es] on these long-held clichés as a way of perversely testing them'.⁷⁷

In this sense, Abu-Jaber's method of dealing with stereotype is similar to Bhabha's approach of understanding it as a site of ambivalence. Bhabha argues that 'the stereotype is a complex, ambivalent, contradictory mode of representation, as

⁷⁴ William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. by E. A. J. Honigmann (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), I.3.146-51.

⁷⁵ Patricia Parker, 'Fantasies of "Race" and "Gender": Africa, *Othello* and Bringing to Light', in *Women, 'Race', Writing in the Early Modern Period*, ed. by Margo Hendricks and Patricia Parker (London & New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 84-100 (p. 87)

⁷⁶ Emily C. Bartels, '*Othello* and Africa: Postcolonialism Reconsidered', *The William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 54 (1997), 45-64 (p. 53).

⁷⁷ Field, p. 211.

anxious as it is assertive'.⁷⁸ Both Abu-Jaber and Bhabha call for the testing, challenging and questioning of stereotypes through entering the discourse that has created them. Abu-Jaber is interested in exploring the hidden side of the stereotype, while Bhabha wishes to investigate the anxiety and ambivalence behind its creation.

In this context, the adaptation of the handkerchief scene in *Othello*, which has been associated with belief in magic and superstition, becomes one of *Crescent's* attempts to examine stereotypes. Indeed, the handkerchief has become a synecdoche for the play. In the novel, the handkerchief is transposed into a scarf with red berries. Five pages are dedicated to describe how Han hands it over to Sirine with both of them testifying to its beauty and excellence. The whole scene is enveloped in a romantic atmosphere. The handkerchief's 'material is so soft between [Sirine's] fingers it feels like dipping her hand into water' (p. 131). Han explains to Sirine how his family sent it to him as a reminder of his country when he fled Iraq in 1980. The scarf gains supplementary magnitude as Han tells Sirine that "[his] mother was wearing this [the scarf] when [his] father fell in love with her" (p. 133). Han tells Sirine that the embroidery along the borders of the scarf is the traditional pattern of his mother's village and "[i]f you *study* them, you can figure out where a certain embroidery stitch has come from" (p. 133, emphasis added).

Han's emphasis on studying the scarf (i.e. subjecting it to scientific examination and observation) is different from the way Shakespeare describes Othello's handkerchief. Shakespeare's handkerchief has "magic in the web of it",⁷⁹ whereas Abu-Jaber's scarf is merely "a beautiful thing" (p. 133). The handkerchief/scarf is further centralized. Following the Thanksgiving dinner, where

⁷⁸ Bhabha, p. 100.

⁷⁹ Shakespeare, p. III.4.81.

people from different cultural backgrounds congregate at Sirine's uncle's house, Sirine loses the scarf. Unable to find it, Sirine 'makes everyone swear they won't breathe a word of this to Han' (p. 197).⁸⁰ Through highlighting the psychological pain that Sirine undergoes following the loss of her scarf, the novel draws the reader's attention to the significance of the scarf itself. In this sense, the relationship between *Crescent* and *Othello*, to borrow Julie Sanders' words on the relationship between intertexts and the referential process, 'extends beyond fragmentary allusion to a more sustained reworking and revision'.⁸¹ In other words, by rewriting the handkerchief scene, *Crescent* 'write[s] back to an informing original from a new or revised political and cultural position'.⁸²

Just as the loss of the handkerchief in *Othello* contributes to the tragic end of the play, tensions between Sirine and Han escalate due to the loss of the scarf and come to a climax during a photography exhibition held by Nathan.⁸³ When Han sees his cousin's photo in the gallery, he angrily accuses Nathan of violating his family's privacy for career progress (p. 244). Abu-Jaber shows characters both playing out and giving in to stereotypes. Han outrageously storms out of the gallery.⁸⁴ Sirine

⁸⁰ It is interesting that it is during the Thanksgiving party that Sirine loses her scarf because the complications that result point to the slippage in the cosmopolitanism that Mercer and Strom claim the novel embodies.

⁸¹ Sanders, p. 97.

⁸² Sanders, p. 98.

⁸³ Nathan's insistence on taking photos stealthily points to an anxiety that Bhabha highlights in his analysis of the stereotype. Bhabha argues that '[t]he strategy of the stereotype, as a form of (mis)recognition, depends on staging an encounter with "otherness" in an airless space of fixed coordinates' (p. 110). However, Han's shouts of protest and rejection disrupt this process. Han's shouts, to borrow Benita Parry's words, seem to 'write an alternative text – with whose constructions Bhabha declines to engage' (p. 26). For a criticism of Bhabha's theory of disrupting the dominant discourse by adapting it, see: Benita Parry, *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique* (London & New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁸⁴ That Um-Nadia describes Han's attitude as a typical Arab behavior (p. 245) indicates that some members of the Arab American community believe in these stereotypes. As Jack Shaheen argues in 'Hollywood's Muslim Arabs', stereotypes are self-perpetuating and can 'lower self-esteem' (p. 23). Elsewhere, Um-Nadia warns Sirine not to disclose to Han the fact that she had sex with Aziz because, Um-Nadia maintains, being an Arab, Han may kill Aziz: "Habeebti, you would not believe in ten

dashes out to find him, only to be confronted with an enraged Han: ‘He continues to stare at her, not speaking, [. . .] His skin flashes, a metallic glint in his eyes. “Where is it?” he says’ (p. 245). The description of Han’s behavior is in synch with the stereotypical notion that Arabs are hot-tempered and irrational, reminiscent of post-colonial critiques of the consequence of *Othello*. This view is further enforced when Han seeks the scarf: “I trusted you with that one thing. Just that one small thing, Sirine.” [. . .] “How could I have been such a fool?” [. . .] “How could I have trusted something so precious with someone like *you*?”” (pp. 245-46, italics in original).

When Desdemona tells Othello that she does not have the handkerchief with her, Othello bursts out in anger:

Othello: That is a fault: That handkerchief
 Did an Egyptian to my mother give,
 She was a charmer, and could almost read
 The thoughts of people. She told her, while she kept it
 ’Twould make her amiable and subdue my father
 Entirely to her love; but if she lost it
 Or made a gift of it, my father’s eye
 Should hold her loathed and his spirits should hunt
 After new fancies.⁸⁵

In the two works, anger and rage control the Arab/Moor man. However, in *Crescent*, the Han-Sirine’s conversation downplays the superstitious element that Shakespeare makes so central to his drama.⁸⁶

million years what people are still like” (p. 262). The novel is highlighting the fact that stereotypes are self-perpetuating.

⁸⁵ Shakespeare, III.4.57-65.

⁸⁶ One can even find more parallels between the plots of the two works. Aziz, the Syrian poet, frames the Han-Sirine love affair in a superstitious context. In an Iago-like move, Aziz tells Sirine, she has “simply fallen under [Han’s] spell” (p. 249). Moreover, Aziz uses some of the animal imagery that Roderigo and Iago use when they describe Othello. Aziz likens Han to a sad zebra that allures virgins (p. 249). In fact, Aziz is repeating Iago’s description of Othello an “old black ram,” (I.1.87) and a “Barbary horse” (I.1.110). Actually, Aziz reinforces the stereotypical image of Arab men as jealous as he warns Sirine not to tell Han about the night Aziz and Sirine spent together: “You know these Arab guys. They get jealous and murder people with their bare hands” (p. 250). Murdering with bare hand can be a reminder of the final scene of *Othello*, whereby Othello strangles Desdemona. Just as

Crescent is interested in investigating some of the stereotypes that have been commonly associated with Arabs via popular culture in the US. As Nabeel Abraham argues, like other types of racism, anti-Arab stereotyping ‘permeates’ mainstream cultural and political institutions and organizations, but unlike other forms of misrepresentation, anti-Arab stereotyping is ‘tolerated by mainstream society’.⁸⁷ By engaging with a foundational text like *Othello*, *Crescent* challenges some of these images and exposes their falsity. Irrationality and belief in superstitions - two major images on which the representation of Othello is predicated - are challenged in *Crescent*. In this sense, *Crescent* interpolates *Othello* through a process of adaptation and appropriation. As Jonathan Cullar notes, intertextuality ‘is not without direct practical consequences’ as ‘[i]t leads one to think of a text as in dialogue with other texts, an act of absorption, parody, and criticism’.⁸⁸

The novel, however, challenges these stereotypes. Han, with whom the reader must have identified as a romantic protagonist, calls Sirine and apologizes to her. He is ashamed of his behavior at the gallery. He appears sensitive, romantic and noble. For Han, the scarf does not have the same magical meaning that Othello attaches to the handkerchief. Han assures Sirine that “[a] scarf is a scarf [. . .] You, on the other hand, are the whole world” (p. 252). The novel portrays Han as a realistic person who understands what might have happened.

While the realist plot interpolates *Othello* through portraying Han as a charismatic character whose love for Sirine is not marred by belief in magic and

Um-Nadia is complicit in reinforcing stereotypes about Arabs as I explained previously, so are other Arabs like Aziz. The novel here explores the self-perpetuating nature of the stereotype and reveals how members of the Arab community subscribe to these clichés.

⁸⁷ Abraham, p. 159.

⁸⁸ Cullar, p. 1383.

superstitions, the mythical plot interpolates *Othello* through the character of Aunt Camille who stands for Othello's absent mother. However, in order to interpolate Shakespeare's (lack of) representation of Othello's mother, *Crescent* engages with Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North*,⁸⁹ an adaptation of *Othello* that, unfortunately, leaves Othello's mother marginalized and silent. In this sense, *Crescent* pursues a double-fold mission: subverting stereotypes about Arab men in the Western literary canon, represented by *Othello* (and its adaptations) and challenging stereotypes about Arab women in the Arab literary canon, represented by *Season*. In this sense, Abu-Jaber performs her 'social agenda [. . . of] trying to counteract the media portrayals - the terrorist for the Arab man and the oppressed, hidden, exotic Arab woman' through portraying Arab men and women 'in terms of diversity and humanity'.⁹⁰

As an Arab American writer, Abu-Jaber is drawing on both the Western and Arabic canon. Some of the motifs that she employs in *Crescent* seem familiar for readers of Salih's *Season*.⁹¹ The novel tells the story of a brilliant Sudanese youth who moves to Britain in the 1920s. The two women with whom he has sexual

⁸⁹ Further references to this book will be abbreviated as *Season*.

⁹⁰ Field, p. 219. In fact, novel shows its interest in challenging the misrepresentation of Arabs as terrorists in the opening pages of the novel. The police turn at Nadia's Café, then called Falafel Faroah, and ask the Egyptian cook 'if he knew of any terrorist schemes' (p. 8). On the next page, the omniscient narrator also tells us that when Sirine looks at the faces of Arab immigrants and students at the café, she only sees vulnerable people: 'Sometimes she used to scan the room and imagine the word *terrorist*. But her gaze ran over the faces and all that came back to her were words like *lonely*, and *young*' (p. 9, italics in original).

⁹¹ In *Crescent*, as Sirine visits Han's house for the first time, the omniscient narrator describes in some detail Han's flat, which significantly lacks furniture: 'For some reason the word *Africa* comes into [Sirine's] head' (p. 57, italics in original). This scene may remind the reader of Mustafa Sa'eed's description of his all-African house in London "'as the den of lethal lies that [he] had deliberately built up, lie upon lie'" (p. 146). This scene, I argue, establishes a *direct* link between *Season* and *Crescent*. Other motifs include drowning and slavery. Sa'eed is believed to have drowned during one of the Nile's floodings. In *Crescent*, Abdelrahman Salahadin fakes drowning as a job. Sa'eed's mother, we are told, is a slave and so is Abdelrahman Salahadin's mother. However, *Crescent* does not attempt to re-write *Season*, but it, I argue, engages with Salih's portrayal of Sa'eed's mother who stands, in turn, for Othello's mother.

relationships commit suicide, while he kills his wife. After serving seven years in jail, Mustafa Sa'eed returns to Sudan, marries and leads a quiet life in a small village at the bend of the Nile. However, as the unnamed narrator returns home after finishing his studies in Britain, he meets Mustafa Sa'eed. Sa'eed reveals part of his past to the narrator and gives him the key to his room of secrets. Shortly after, Sa'eed is reported to have *drowned* himself in the Nile, an episode that *Crescent* re-enacts through Abdelrahman Salahadin's repeated fake drowning. The narrator makes it his responsibility to unveil Sa'eed's enigma and tell it to us.

Salih's novel attempts to re-write *Othello*. During his trial for murdering his wife, Mustafa Sa'eed says, "I am no Othello. Othello is a lie"⁹² Salih sees it as his duty to historicize the cultural background from which Othello/Sa'eed hails. Jyotsna Singh argues that Mustafa Sa'eed 'mimics' Othello 'by self-consciously enacting the sentimentalized stereotypes of Orientalism'.⁹³ Barbara Harlow considers the novel as a sort of '*muaradah*', an Arabic term used to describe 'a formula whereby one person will write a poem, and another will retaliate by writing along the same lines but reversing the meaning'.⁹⁴ Most critics who have approached Salih's novel have focussed on the Sa'eed/Othello relation influenced presumably by the fact that Salih, in his retaliation, concentrates on the image of Othello himself.⁹⁵ In other words, because the Sa'eed-Othello doubling-up lies at the heart of *Season*, most critics have

⁹² Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North*, trans. by Denys Johnson-Davies (London, Penguin Books, 2003), p. 95.

⁹³ Jyotsna Singh, 'Othello's Identity, Postcolonial Theory, and Contemporary African Rewritings of *Othello*', in *Women, 'Race'*, ed. by Hendricks and Parker, p. 295.

⁹⁴ Barbara Harlow, 'Othello's Season of Migration', *Edebiyat*, (1979), 157-75 (p. 162).

⁹⁵ One can argue that Mustafa Sa'eed remains enigmatic the way Gatsby, Ham and Othello are. The unnamed narrator of *Season* asserts that Sa'eed's identity is inscrutable. One person says that he was an agent for the British during their occupation of Sudan and that he was employed "on dubious missions to the Middle East" (pp. 55-56).

focussed on exploring this relationship within the colonial/postcolonial context and neglected to study other marginal characters like Othello/Sa'eed's mother(s).

Season does not attempt to rescue Othello's mother whom Shakespeare banishes and cruelly associates with magic and superstition. Sa'eed's mother is mentioned three times in the novel. Describing his relationship with his mother to his confidant, Sa'eed states that "circumstances had chanced to bring" them together.⁹⁶ The second time Sa'eed's mother is mentioned is when he tells her about his plans to go to school, to which she remains numb and dumbfounded.⁹⁷ The third time, it is reported that Sa'eed's "mother was a *slave* from the south".⁹⁸ The way in which the mother figure is presented in *Othello*, *Season* and *Crescent* encourages us to compare and contrast their *raison d'être*. Othello's mother is absent, Sa'eed's is present/absent, and Abdelrahman Salahadin's is fully present and, significantly, humanized by being given a name.

If Shakespeare associates Othello's mother with magic and superstition,⁹⁹ Salih describes Sa'eed's mother as "a slave" and renders her silent and helpless.¹⁰⁰ *Crescent*, however, transforms this slave into articulate and resourceful Aunt Camille, "the freed Nubian slave" (p. 24). She roams the earth and breaks all the borders in search for her son, Abdelrahman Salahadin, who, we are told, has "an incurable addiction to selling himself and faking his *drowning*", a reminder of Sa'eed's fake identity and his much-speculated death by drowning in the Nile (p. 5, emphasis added). *Crescent* constructs the character of Aunt Camille out of fragments gathered

⁹⁶ Salih, p. 19.

⁹⁷ Salih, p. 21.

⁹⁸ Salih, p. 54, emphasis added.

⁹⁹ Othello tells Desdemona that his mother's handkerchief has 'magic in the web of it' (III.4.71) that was given to her by an 'Egyptian [. . .] charmer' (III.4.58-9).

¹⁰⁰ Salih, p. 54.

from Shakespeare and Salih. Through Aunt Camille's travels, *Crescent* significantly transforms the Western epistemological knowledge of time and place. As we join her in her journeys to Syria, Egypt and deep into Africa, oscillate with her between the 13th, 19th and 20th centuries and meet people like Sir Richard Burton, not only do we share with her stories from the Arab and Islamic culture, but we also hear alternative and untold narratives about modern Arab nations as they fall under the spell of colonization, Orientalism and degradation.

The stories we hear disrupt colonial historical discourses. For instance, the narrator explains in a mirthful tone that the name of Lake Tanganyika can change into Lake Victoria 'depending on which direction you're coming from and *whose villages you're pillaging*' (p. 127, emphasis added). In this sense, *Crescent* highlights the fact that colonialism has manipulated history through a process of re-naming.

According to Ashcroft:

To be incorporated into the Western history is, by definition, to be located at its edges, to be the site of uninteresting 'events,' of a marginal reality which has little to contribute to general understanding of the world.¹⁰¹

Through the vibrant, eloquent and ingenious Aunt Camille, not only is *Crescent* interpolating history as a modern Western episteme, but it is also re-inscribing a feminist point of view of history that is often neglected.

Crescent is interpolating the historic discourse by entering it, 'disrupt[ing] its discursive features and reveal[ing] the limitations of the discourse itself'.¹⁰² For instance, the novel shows the unspoken fact that Aunt Camille inspired Sir Richard Burton to translate *The Thousand and One Nights*: 'In her slow and very nice and

¹⁰¹ Ashcroft, p. 92.

¹⁰² Ashcroft, p. 103.

deliberate way, Aunt Camille began to take up space in Burton's imagination' (p. 99). The novel highlights the untold and unacknowledged role that Arab women have played in a process of cultural exchange. In this sense, the novel, to borrow Sanders' words on employing intertextuality as a strategy of transformation, 'highlight[s] troubling gaps, absences, and silences within [. . .] canonical texts'.¹⁰³

More significantly, Aunt Camille is portrayed in a way that challenges Western presumptions of Arab women as oppressed by Islam and patriarchy.¹⁰⁴ In an interview with Andrea Shalal-Esa, Abu-Jaber affirms that: 'I feel like if there's a choice [. . .] between speaking and suppressing yourself that inevitably you have to speak'.¹⁰⁵ Abu-Jaber creates a fluent Aunt Camille, who unlike Othello/Sa'eed's mothers, refuses to be silenced. Aunt Camille is resourceful enough to enchant Sir Richard Burton and forces him to show her the way to the source of the Nile (where she has been told that she can find out her son's whereabouts).¹⁰⁶ Faced with the eloquence and intelligence of Aunt Camille, the great British traveller is helpless, powerless and frail. His wife negotiates on his behalf the terms and conditions of his release since Burton 'was not too sure he wanted to be released' (p. 112). In this sense, *Crescent* reverses popular representations of Arab women in the US as 'covered in black from head to toe, [. . .] uneducated, unattractive, and enslaved

¹⁰³ Sanders, p. 98.

¹⁰⁴ *Crescent* presents other powerful Arab women in the novel, like Rana and Um-Nadia, whose actions and thoughts subvert misconceptions about Arab and Muslim women. Um-Nadia for instance owns a café and when CIA agents show up at her café following the Second Arab Gulf War between 1991-92, she 'chase[s] them off the premises flapping her kitchen towel at them' (p. 9). My analysis of Halaby's *West of the Jordan* examines how the novel subverts misrepresentations of Arab women through a strategy of storytelling that foregrounds diversity and undermines the monolithic image of Arab women as helpless.

¹⁰⁵ Andrea Shalal-Esa, 'Diana Abu-Jaber: The Only Response to Silencing . . . is to Keep Speaking', *Al Jadid Magazine*, 8 (2002), 1-5 (p. 4).

¹⁰⁶ This is also a reminder of the place where Sa'eed has purportedly downed himself.

beings'.¹⁰⁷ In fact, the Arab women that *Crescent* portrays are lively and vigorous. On the one hand, they seek to challenge stereotypes about their Arab American communities. On the other hand, they are politically and socially active members of the larger US community.¹⁰⁸

In the same interview, Abu-Jaber expresses her concerns regarding the portrayal of Arabs on TV and in newspapers in the US. She tells Shalal-Esa that 'Arab-Americans have been so maltreated by the media, their image has been so dark'.¹⁰⁹ In alluding to George Melford's *The Sheik*, a 1921 Hollywood production based on Edith Hull's 1919 romance of the same title, *Crescent* engages with the power of the media to construct strong and long-lasting stereotypes. In *Crescent*, Abdelrahman Salahadin walks on the stage (at the start of his acting career) to audition for *The Sheik* and all the Italian actors fall silent. Everyone knows that he should be the star of the film except Abdelrahman Salahadin himself (p. 289). After all, the narrator muses, 'someone with actual dark skin might run amok, do something unpredictable' (p. 288).¹¹⁰ *Crescent's* engagement with *The Sheik* highlights the role this film has played in perpetuating stereotypes about Arabs. As one of the earliest Hollywood productions, *The Sheik* has indeed been 'influential in affecting cultural norms and discussion outside the cinema'.¹¹¹ As Shaheen puts it, '[e]ver since the camera began to crank, the unkempt Muslim Arab has appeared as an uncivilized character, [. . .] starkly contrasting in behavior and appearance with

¹⁰⁷ Shaheen, 'Hollywood's Muslim Arabs', p. 26.

¹⁰⁸ For instance, in a meeting of Arab women attended by Sirine, the women discuss 'whether they'll participate in a campus sit-in to protest the occupation of the West Bank, whether they'll donate baked goods to the Lutheran fund-raiser, and whether they'll appear on a local TV news show to discuss the negative portrayal of Arabs in Hollywood films' (p. 159).

¹⁰⁹ Shalal-Esa, p. 4.

¹¹⁰ See Shaheen's 'Hollywood's Muslim Arabs' for a discussion on how Arab American actors like Nicholas Kadi 'are obliged to play terrorists and to demean their heritage' (p. 32).

¹¹¹ John C. Eisele, 'The Wild East: Deconstructing the Language of Genre in the Hollywood Eastern', *Cinema Journal*, 41 (2002), pp. 68-94 (p. 77).

the white Western protagonist'.¹¹² In presenting members of the Arab American community as vulnerable American citizens, *Crescent* puts 'a humane face' on Arab Americans and counteracts negative representations of Hollywood films.¹¹³ As Steven Salaita reminds us, stereotypical images of Arabs have made their 'acceptance in circles beyond their own [. . .] a serious concern'.¹¹⁴ In this sense, *Crescent* translates Salaita's call on Arab American writers to 'humanize the Arab peoples and make their stories accessible to other communities'.¹¹⁵

The Sheik's plot is quite simple: an independent and emancipated English woman, Lady Diana, decides to go to the Arab desert against her brother's wishes. She is kidnapped by Sheik Ahmed who (in the novel) rapes her several times. During her stay (as a hostage), she starts to fall in love with her Western-educated captor. However, she is kidnapped again by a villainous chief, Sheik Omeir, who attempts vainly to rape her. Finally, Sheik Ahmed rescues her and slays her abductor. She discovers to her great relief that Sheik Ahmed is not an Arab after all: he is in fact half-British and half-Spanish.

Both the novel and the film, while painting an image of the Orient that appeals to the recipient's fantasy and exotic imagination, attaches several stereotypes to Arabs such as jealousy, promiscuity and the belief in superstitions.¹¹⁶ Billie Melman affirms that the novelist's attention to the tiny details in portraying an exotic landscape like the desert is a prerequisite to the success of the novel since this assures the reader of the writer's knowledge of the subject matter. Melman contends

¹¹² Shaheen, p. 25.

¹¹³ Shaheen, p. 26.

¹¹⁴ Salaita, 'Vision', para. 6 of 22.

¹¹⁵ Salaita, para. 16 of 22.

¹¹⁶ The same stereotypes that *Othello* perpetuates.

that 'the wilder and the more fatuous the fantasy, the greater the pain that is taken to authenticate it'.¹¹⁷ These scenes establish the writer as 'the omnipresent traveller-narrator' and consequently, transmute the stereotypes she perpetuates to credible facts.¹¹⁸ The novel abounds with images that portray Arabs as superstitious. The French traveller Raoul de Saint Hubert, for instance, tells Lady Diana that the advent of Sheik Ahmed's mother "had taken hold of the *superstitious* Arabs".¹¹⁹

In his adaptation of the novel, Melford adds two scenes and intensifies the plot by ending the film, to Lady Diana's and the audience's great relief, on the discovery that Sheik Ahmed, played by Italian actor Rudolph Valentino, is not an Arab. Unlike the novel, the film opens with Sheik Ahmed and his tribesmen going to an Arab-exclusive party at a casino where they gaze at belly dancers and gamble on/for women. The second addition is the marriage fair scene where Arab men choose from the abundant voluptuous Arab women on offer. Combined with the rape threats (in the film) that Lady Diana has to contend with, the two scenes portray Arab men and women as promiscuous, sexual maniacs and constantly hot. This is part of a larger pattern that Ella Shohat and Robert Stam mark out in *Unthinking Eurocentricism*. Black/Arab women are depicted as hot while White women are frigid:

The hot/frigid dichotomy implies three interdependent axioms within the sexual politics of colonialist discourse: first, the sexual interaction of Black/Arab men and White women can *only* involve rape (since White women cannot possibly desire Black or Arab men); second, the

¹¹⁷ Melman, Billie, *Women and the Popular Imagination in the Twenties: Flappers and Nymphs* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 96. The novel, *The Sheik*, is full of passages that describe the desert in a way that addresses the reader's fantasy and imaginations. For instance, Lady Diana 'loved the endless, undulating expanse stretching out before her [. . .] and then the desert grew level again and quite suddenly she could see for miles' (p. 70).

¹¹⁸ Melman, p. 96.

¹¹⁹ E.M. Hull, *The Sheik* (Marston Gate: Amazon.co.uk, 2006), p. 138, emphasis added.

sexual interaction of White men and Black or Arab women *cannot* involve rape (since Black or Arab women are in perpetual heat and desire the White master); and third, the interaction of Black or Arab men and Black/Arab women *also* cannot involve rape, since both are in perpetual heat.¹²⁰

In the film, Sheik Ahmed does not rape Lady Diana but in the novel he does several times. However, neither in the novel nor in the film does Sheik Omeir manage to rape Lady Diana in spite of his incessant attempts. It is not coincidental that by the time Lady Diana agrees to marry Ahmed she knows that he is half-British and half-Spanish. I argue that the fear of miscegenation pushes Hull to fabricate this (unconvincing) ending. At the beginning of the twentieth century, neither the film viewers nor the readers could accept a scene whereby the demonized native (represented by Sheik Omeir) rapes the English woman because this topples established racial hierarchies.¹²¹

Unlike the half-Spanish half-British Sheik Ahmed, the native Arab, Sheik Omeir, is demonized throughout the entire novel/film. He is the epitome of an Arab male whose 'physical uncleanness' is associated with 'an inner depravity and lasciviousness', whereby '[t]he former is taken as an outward sign of the latter'.¹²² For Lady Diana, Sheik Omeir is 'indeed, the Arab man of her imaginings, this gross, unwieldy figure [. . .] his swollen, ferocious face seamed and lined with every mark

¹²⁰ Shohat and Stam, p. 157, italics in original.

¹²¹ In *Othello*, Iago and Roderigo make viable capitalizations on miscegenation to prevent the Othello-Desdemona marriage: Othello does not consummate his marriage to Desdemona. In Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales*, The Man of Law tells the story of, Constance, the daughter of the Roman Emperor. She is sent as a bride to the Sultan of Syria. However, just like the Othello-Desdemona marriage which remains unconsummated, Constance remains a virgin for the villainous mother of the Sultan murders her son and banishes Constance. Hull is merely following the path set by Shakespeare and Chaucer in disallowing a mixed-race relation due to, I argue, an (un)conscious fear of miscegenation.

¹²² Melman, p. 99.

of vice'.¹²³ He is exactly the opposite of Sheik Ahmed 'of whose habits she had been forced into such an intimate knowledge'.¹²⁴

Steven C. Caton, describes *The Sheik* as 'one of the hottest best-sellers of all time on both sides of the Atlantic'.¹²⁵ Melman contends that '[t]he first filmed version of *The Sheik* was seen by 125 million viewers'.¹²⁶ She maintains that the novel's success was 'phenomenal' and it prompted 'writers and publishers to emulate E. M. Hull's pioneering formula of rape-cum-redemption in the Sahara'.¹²⁷ Jessica Taylor asserts that the film and the novel have contributed to creating the sheikh romance genre and more importantly 'the sheikh hero has continued on as a staple of the romantic fiction industry', with 'Harlequin (for example) publish[ing] at least one sheikh romance every few months'.¹²⁸ *The Sheik* is a romance about a mixed marriage/relationship and inter-racial relations. This reflects the central theme in the other two works that *Crescent* interpolates, namely, *Othello* and *Season*. The film dramatizes the exotic adventures that appeal to Desdemona and the English women Sa'eed seduces.

Crescent engages with this novel/film in different ways. The mythical plot in *Crescent* attempts to challenge stereotypes about Arabs in a humorous way. The blue Bedu that Aunt Camille meets in her travels impressively speak Italian and Arabic just like Sheik Ahmed's tribesmen who speak French and Arabic. They have

¹²³ Hull, p. 123.

¹²⁴ Hull, p. 125.

¹²⁵ Steven C. Caton, 'The Sheik: Instabilities of Race and Gender in Transatlantic Popular Culture of the Early 1920s', in *Noble Dreams, Wicked Pleasures: Orientalism in America, 1870-1930*, ed. by Holly Edwards (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2000), pp. 99-117 (p. 99).

¹²⁶ Melman, p. 90.

¹²⁷ Melman, p. 91.

¹²⁸ Jessica Taylor, 'And You Can Be My Sheikh: Gender, Race, and Orientalism in Contemporary Romance Novels', *The Journal of Popular Culture*, 40 (2007), 1032-1051 (p. 1037). In fact, *The Great Gatsby* itself makes a reference to "the Sheik of Araby" in presenting the Gatsby-Daisy past love affair (p. 62).

accumulated enough Western cultural capital to confidently talk about Hollywood and Richard Burton. They trade in ‘frankincense and not in goats or camels or the usual smelly beasts of the Bedu [. . .] and they smel[l] of their incense’ (p. 194). The beautiful odor of the blue Bedu contrasts with the stink of Sheik Omeir who ‘reek[s] of sweat and grease and ill-kept horses, the pungent stench of the native’.¹²⁹

Crescent invites the reader to re-assess the delusory pictures that *The Sheik*, as a novel and a film, promulgates and circulates. Aunt Camille spends quite a long time with the blue Bedu, but she is neither raped nor sexually-harassed. On the contrary, the whole tribe escort her to her hometown of Aqaba before they continue their travel. In fact, by foregrounding the actions and codes of honor that govern the blue Bedu’s behaviors, the novel is centralizing the tribes people who are merely part of the novel/film’s setting/decor. In a reference to Hollywood’s films of the desert, the omniscient narrator in *Crescent* tells us ‘[n]o one particularly care[s] about the Arabian-of-Arabia, they car[e] about the Irishman who came dressed in Arab’s clothing and the English director’s idea of desert music’ (p. 306).¹³⁰ As Abu-Jaber re-writes some of the scenes of *The Sheik*, she makes ‘a joint political and literary investment in giving voice to those characters [. . . who] have been oppressed or repressed in the original’.¹³¹ In this sense, *Crescent* voices the concerns of members of the Arab American community who have been historically pushed to the margins of the nation by being rendered as demonized others.

¹²⁹ Hull, p. 125.

¹³⁰ As John C. Eisele rightly points out, ‘[t]he cultural impact of *The Sheik* has been the subject of many analyses concentrating on the figure of Rudolf Valentino as an icon of (a somewhat “feminized” masculinity’ (p. 78). In fact, discussing a film that portrays Arabs, Caton focuses on *the actor* rather than on what is being acted. What interests Caton is whether Valentino, an *Italian* actor, fits/does not fit in the US racial discourses of the time (p. 114). For Caton the misrepresentation of Arab characters is not as important as Valentino’s position in the US ethnic and racial discourses.

¹³¹ Sanders, p. 98.

That Abu-Jaber keeps her engagement with the film until the very end of the novel is strategically/logistically helpful. However, her success in exposing the perpetuating stereotypes this film has created depends heavily on her strategic employment of intertextuality throughout her work. Sirine's uncle tells her in the last few pages that stories "can point you in the right direction but they can't take you all the way there" (p. 330). In this sense, *Crescent's* success in subverting these stereotypes relies on how successful and convincing Abu-Jaber is in delineating Han's character in a Gatsby-like fashion. Through relating *Crescent* 'to a whole series of other works', to borrow Jonathan Cullar's words, Abu-Jaber's intertextual strategy helps subvert stereotypes about Arabs and Americans of Arab origin.

Because, as Gregory Orfalea argues, 'humanness has been so lacking in American novels that treat Arabs in English [. . .] the Arab American novelist has indeed a mission beyond the normal one of making moving art'.¹³² An Arab American novelist's aim, Orfalea maintains, is to reveal 'what the stereotyper wants to blur'.¹³³ By challenging these stereotypes, *Crescent*, to paraphrase Orfalea's words, 'is giving birth to images of humanness' about Arab Americans.¹³⁴ *Crescent* presents a realistic image of Arab American characters in a way that makes Arab Americans acceptable members of the larger US populations. If Abu-Jaber shows that US popular representations render members of Arab American communities in stereotypical images, Laila Halaby examines from within some of the incongruities and contradictions of these communities through a technique of storytelling that highlights the intersectionality of gender, religion, age, social class, nationality, identity and diaspora.

¹³² Orfalea, p. 117.

¹³³ Orfalea, p. 117.

¹³⁴ Orfalea, p. 117.

3.2 Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan*: Structure, Youth Identity, Diaspora and 'the Arab Woman'

If Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* is concerned - as the previous section of this chapter has demonstrated - with subverting misconceptions about Arabs in American literature and popular culture through a strategy of intertextuality, Arab American novelist Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* highlights the heterogeneity of the experiences of Arab women through an interconnected web of young Arab women's narratives. In particular, I argue that through storytelling the four narrators in the novel relay certain episodes from their lives to present their daily experiences and to show how the intersections of gender, race, class, ethnicity and religion crucially inform the lives of Arab (young) women, whether in Palestine or in America. As Steven Salaita points out, 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'.¹³⁵ The structure of the novel, I suggest, is based on presenting a number of episodes that crucially inform the identities of the four teenage narrators within an Arab and Arab American cultural context. As Gilroy reminds us, investigating cultural identity provides a way of comprehending the interplay between 'our subjective experiences of the world and the cultural and historical settings in which that fragile subjectivity' takes shape.¹³⁶ Identity, Gilroy maintains, is '*always particular*, as much about difference as about shared belonging'.¹³⁷

¹³⁵ Steven Salaita, *Arab American Literary Fiction, Cultures, and Politics* (New York & Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p. 132.

¹³⁶ Paul Gilroy, 'Diaspora and the Detours of Identity', in *Identity and Difference*, ed. by Kathryn Woodward (London, Thousand Oaks, CA, & New Delhi: SAGE Publications Ltd, 1997), pp. 229-343 (p. 301).

¹³⁷ Gilroy, p. 301, emphasis added.

Hala, Mawal, Soraya and Khadija are maternal teenage cousins of Palestinian origin.¹³⁸ Through their maternal links, the four narrators show how women genealogically preserve the connections between scattered relatives and maintain a diasporic grid of ties. As James Clifford puts it, diasporic experiences are ‘always gendered’.¹³⁹ Clifford argues that women in diaspora ‘connect and disconnect, forget and remember, in complex strategic ways. [. . .] *Community* can be a site both of support and oppression’.¹⁴⁰

That the novel is narrated by teenage girls indicates a preoccupation with youth and indirectly, future diasporic generations and their politics. In addition, women of different ages and backgrounds also tell their own tales through the stories narrated by the four maternal cousins. *West of the Jordan* leaves no character dehistoricized: there is always a story to be told and a narrative to be related. By showing the heterogeneity of the experiences of these girls, the novel contributes to deconstructing the image of a helpless and victimized Arab woman prevalent in US popular representations. In this way, the novel ‘seek[s] to challenge simplistic readings of Arab women’s lives that would privilege gender above all other categories of analysis’.¹⁴¹ As Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba argue, by situating the practices of Arab women within the complexities of modernity, globalization, diaspora and post-colonial experiences, texts written by Arab women ‘have helped to dispel the persistent orientalist fascination with Arab women that reduces their lives

¹³⁸ Check the family tree diagram on the website of Beacon Press which can be accessed on <<http://www.beaconpress.org/client/readguide/8359rg.cfm>>.

¹³⁹ James Clifford, ‘Diasporas’, *Cultural Anthropology*, 9 (1994), 302-38 (p. 313).

¹⁴⁰ Clifford, p. 314, emphasis added.

¹⁴¹ Majaj, Lisa Suhair, Paula W. Sunderman, and Therese Saliba, ‘Introduction’, in *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women’s Novels*, ed. by Lisa Suhair Majaj, Paula W. Sunderman, and Therese Saliba (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse UP, 2002), pp. xvii-xxx (p. xix).

to gender and sexual oppression under the purportedly unchanging, backward traditions of Arab-Islamic society'.¹⁴²

Sudesh Mishra hails works of diaspora critics based on 'perform[ing] an archaeology on specific diasporas'.¹⁴³ Mishra valorizes the works of some sociologists that '[move] away from inter-diasporic to *intra-diasporic analysis where the stress falls on the specific archives* that attest to historical and other differences within particular diasporas'.¹⁴⁴ Mishra praises 'attempt[s] to think through the internal contradictions within diasporas in historical-economic terms that keep in view the political aspects of their multiple engagements in the various contexts and territories'.¹⁴⁵ For Mishra, 'emphasis on *individual life histories* where different practices and identities are dialogically co-present' frames 'an alternative historical narrative to the one based on grand events'.¹⁴⁶

In *West of the Jordan* the stories the cousins narrate are seemingly unrelated. However, a closer look at the structure of the book reveals that these stories are linked in a peculiar way. Hala's narrative is by far the most coherent and sequential, while the stories of Khadija, Soraya and Mawal challenge linearity through highlighting certain key episodes in their lives. However, put together, the stories reveal each character's connection to/understanding of particular episodes/concepts in her life, and consequently, give an insight into her identity. Each chapter narrated by one of the girls is given a concept-based title. As we read the story, we perceive how each of these girls understands this concept, responds to it and how it plays a

¹⁴² Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba, p. xix.

¹⁴³ Sudesh Mishra, *Diaspora Criticism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2006), p. 18.

¹⁴⁴ Mishra, p. 117, emphasis added.

¹⁴⁵ Mishra, p. 121.

¹⁴⁶ Mishra, pp. 124-27, emphasis added.

role in shaping her character at this critical stage in her life. The novel is trying to explore the pressures that second-generation youths face – young people whose parents are defined as foreign, immigrants and newcomers. Through showing how the lives of these girls have been differently shaped, the novel, structurally, emphasizes the heterogeneity of Arab women experiences. As Parama Sarkar puts it, *West of the Jordan* ‘creates fissures in the stereotypical homogenized representation of Orientalist/Arab women as submissive and overtly sexualized beings’.¹⁴⁷

3.3 The Story of Hala

As the novel opens, we see Hala sitting uncomfortably in her no-frills seat onboard an Amman-bound Royal Jordanian flight from the United States where she has been living with her maternal uncle, Hamdi, and his American wife, Fay. Hala’s father, Abu-Jalal, collects her from the airport and drives her home. For a couple of weeks, Hala lives as a stranger in her home, trying to avoid clashes with her older sister, Latifa. Hala’s only solace during her stay is the memory of her late mother. A fortnight after her arrival, she meets Sharif, an older maternal cousin, who has just returned to Jordan after spending some years working in Europe. Sharif re-kindles Hala’s recollections of her early days in Jordan by taking her on tours to different sites in the country.

Eventually, Sharif declines to marry Hala, citing their differing life experience as an obstacle to any future happiness. After profoundly considering Sharif’s point of view, Hala realizes that her stay in the US has changed her. She looks at her multiple experiences in the US and in Jordan through a positivist attitude and is reconciled with her past. Returning to the US, Hala sits comfortably in her

¹⁴⁷ Parama Sarkar, ‘*West of the Jordan*’, *MELUS*, 31 (2006), 263-65 (p. 264).

airplane seat and wears a *roza* with the map of Palestine hanging around her neck.¹⁴⁸ In the US, she decorates her room with photos of Middle Eastern cities. Hala realizes that she is a hybrid, a person whose identity is an amalgamation of cultural exchanges. Through focussing on Hala's character development, the novel invites us to view the concept of identity as, to quote Gilroy, 'the compound result of many accretions. Its protean constitution does not defer to the scripts of ethnic, national, "racial" or cultural absolutism'.¹⁴⁹

3.4 The Stories of Soraya, Mawal and Khadija

Hala's story is regularly interrupted by the seemingly-fragmented stories of her maternal cousins: Soraya, Khadija and Mawal. Soraya narrates eight stories that reveal aspects of her inner life, her dreams and causes of her frustration. In 'Fire', for instance, she relates her disappointment at the insult her Puerto Rican friend receives from Soraya's uncle at an Arab wedding. By highlighting this incident, the novel engages with the practices of grown up members of the Arab American community and examines their influences on Arab American youths. Soraya realizes that her uncle's behavior is based on his sense of superiority as a man. As a young woman, Soraya feels marginalized and suppressed. This sense is further explored in 'Visas', which tells the story of a Palestinian man who comes to the US on a student's visa but never leaves the US. He consistently avoids Arab communities. However, one day he is beaten by a group of drunken white American men because they think he is Mexican. In this way, the story reinforces Soraya's feelings of marginalization as an Arab who does not belong to the US nation. Although separated by other stories of

¹⁴⁸ *Roza*: A traditional Palestinian women's dress.

¹⁴⁹ Gilroy, p. 323.

Hala, Mawal and Khadija, read together, 'Fire' and 'Visas' illustrate the way Soraya perceives her identity as a racialized other: an Arab American woman.

A few of the stories are set in Palestine and tell the stories of Mawal and other Palestinian women. In 'Nawara', for example, Mawal introduces her Palestinian village and its people through telling the reader some information about where her village is located and what it is famous for. In 'Crossing', she tells us the story of a Palestinian woman who returns from Jordan after marrying off her daughter to a Jordanian man. This woman bears witness to how the Israeli occupation humiliates Palestinians on a daily basis. Through its portrayal of the lives of three generations of Palestinian women represented by Mawal, her mother and her grandmother, the novel 'creates a different kind of social history that reflects the diversity of Palestinian women'.¹⁵⁰ Mawal's stories highlight the socio-political issues that influence Palestinian women's lives and 'capture personal moments that constitute the basic outline of [. . . their] agonizing history'.¹⁵¹

Similarly, Khadija reveals crucial episodes in her life through her stories. I will discuss Khadija's stories in more detail towards the end of this chapter, where I show how the structure of the novel is based on crucial episodes that inform the narrators' lives. The episodic structure of the novel says something about the girls' experiences. By putting the stories of each narrator together, the reader explores various aspects of the girls' lives and sees how the daily experiences of these girls shape their identities as female members of their community. In exploring the socio-economic and geopolitical dynamics of Arab American communities and its

¹⁵⁰ Sarkar, p. 265.

¹⁵¹ Amal Talaat Abdelrazek, *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* (Youngstown, NY: Cambria Press, 2007), p. 128.

transnational links, Khadija's stories, and indeed the novel 'challenge and re-write traditional boundaries of gender, nation, and community'.¹⁵²

3.5 Reviews of *West of the Jordan*

Sneja Gunew invites us to carefully examine how women writers in diaspora 'assert, negotiate, and contest multiple political ideas of home across time, history and geography'.¹⁵³ *West of the Jordan* profoundly engages with the dynamics of Arab American communities. The novel highlights the importance of women through showing the significance of matrilineal links in connecting Arab families. In this sense, the novel engages with discussions on the status of women in Arab communities (in diaspora). The story titled 'Mothers', narrated by Khadija, focuses on women who maintain ties between the various families. The novel here offers up a matrilineal approach to understanding the dynamics of the Arab family that seems to challenge the patrilineal pattern that ordinarily characterizes the structure of the Arab family, according to sociologist Kristine Ajrouch.¹⁵⁴

West of the Jordan is discussed in Amal Talaat Abdelrazek's recent book *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossings* in which she highlights how being in-between cultures influences the works of Leila Ahmed, Mohja Kahf, Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby.¹⁵⁵

¹⁵² Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba, p. xviii.

¹⁵³ Sneja Gunew, 'Resident Aliens: Diasporic Women's Writing', *Contemporary Women's Writing*, 3 (2009), 28-46, p. 29.

¹⁵⁴ Kristine Arjouch, 'Family and Ethnic Identity in an Arab-American Community', in *Arabs in America*, ed. by Suleiman, pp. 129-39 (p. 130). I will discuss this point in more detail later.

¹⁵⁵ See also: Marta Bosch, 'The Representation of Fatherhood by the Arab Diaspora in the United States,' *Lectora*, 14 (2008), 101-12. As the title suggests, Bosch focuses only on fathers in three novels: Alicia Erian's *Towelhead*, Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan*, and Diana Abu-Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*. Bosch argues that the Arab and Arab American fathers that these novels portray are placed between traditional and more liberal models of masculinity. This results, Bosch concludes, 'in different performances of their role as fathers' (p. 111). See also, Steven Salaita's brief discussion of the novel in his recent book *Arab American Literary Fiction, Cultures, and Politics*.

Abdelrazek notes that *West of the Jordan* effectively points out the complexities of the identities of Arab women ‘physically and psychically displaced in America and in Palestine’ who ‘go through different experiences of displacement, experiencing forms of rootlessness’.¹⁵⁶ She explains that whether in Palestine or in America, for all women in the novel, ‘no place is completely itself and no place is completely other’.¹⁵⁷ According to Abdelrazek, ‘the fragmented narratives’ of the four characters ‘reflect the fragmented history and fluctuating movement’ of Arab women in ‘a split’ world.¹⁵⁸

Abdelrazek argues that Mawal feels homeless and rootless and ‘has no choice’ but to accept her position as a displaced Arab woman in a location that ‘imposes’ gender and political ‘imprisonment’ on her.¹⁵⁹ Similarly, she describes Soraya as a ‘fragmented’ character who does not manage to fit into the in-between space as a hyphenated Arab American woman.¹⁶⁰ Soraya, according to Abdelrazek, is ‘fully aware of her situation as in-between hybrid who does not completely belong in either culture’.¹⁶¹ Khadija, Abdelrazek argues, is ‘a displaced hyphenated’ person who belongs to neither the Arab culture nor the American culture.¹⁶² Her story, Abdelrazek maintains, ‘is a story of loss: loss of a homeland, of dignity, of self-confidence, and of dreams’.¹⁶³ In contrast, Abdelrazek argues, Hala is ‘[t]he most developed character’ in the novel.¹⁶⁴ She maintains that Hala’s sojourn in Jordan and then her return to America is an enabling journey because she can now ‘experience

¹⁵⁶ Abdelrazek, p. 123.

¹⁵⁷ Abdelrazek, p. 124.

¹⁵⁸ Abdelrazek, p. 124.

¹⁵⁹ Abdelrazek, p. 139.

¹⁶⁰ Abdelrazek, p. 140.

¹⁶¹ Abdelrazek, p. 147.

¹⁶² Abdelrazek, p. 151.

¹⁶³ Abdelrazek, p. 152.

¹⁶⁴ Abdelrazek, p. 153.

her duality not as an alienation and rupture but as an empowering hybridity, seeing the connection and the continuities between the two poles of her identity'.¹⁶⁵

Abdelrazek does not take into account the fact that the main characters are teenagers and not grown women who have yet to experience more of life and of their particular conditions. I argue that the different experiences these girls undergo and the way they engage with these experiences contribute to informing their very different identities. Thus, a spectrum of diasporic possibilities opens up before us, revealing that even within a tightly knit community there is space for individualism and distinctness. Abdelrazek's approach runs the risk of what Majaj describes as 'minimizing [the] complexity' of Arab American identities.¹⁶⁶ The intersectionality of gender, ethnicity and social class needs to be adequately addressed in the discussion of the hyphenated identities of Arab Americans, especially since they occupy 'a contested and unclear space' within American racial and cultural discourses as I have shown in Chapter One.¹⁶⁷

A closer reading of the novel reveals that all the characters undergo significant changes and their identities are malleable and shifting rather than static and anchored. As Sneja Gunew argues, cultural identity and cross-cultural experiences need 'to be anchored in temporal and spatial specificities'.¹⁶⁸ Women writers in diaspora, Gunew maintains, contest multiple political ideas of home across time, history and geography.¹⁶⁹ As Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba note, Arab women literary productions 'underscore [. . .] the complexities of the postcolonial

¹⁶⁵ Abdelrazek, p. 170.

¹⁶⁶ Majaj, 'Arab Americans and the Meanings of Race', p. 332.

¹⁶⁷ Majaj, p. 320.

¹⁶⁸ Gunew, p. 29.

¹⁶⁹ Gunew, p. 29.

contradictions experienced and voiced by Arab women writers'.¹⁷⁰ These experiences, I believe, lie at the heart of Halaby's novel. I propose that by fully concentrating on the daily experiences of each adolescent narrator, including the stories they listen to and pass on, the novel demonstrates the complexity of the identities of Arab and Arab American young women. With its emphasis on young adults, the novel, I argue, acts as a fictionalized prelude to understanding the dynamics of the lives of Arab women in diaspora. As Mishra reminds us:

[D]iaspora criticism is at its strongest when taking stock of the varieties of historical continuity and rupture that exist (1) within and across the different diasporas, (2) within and across their cultural and aesthetic practices, and (3) between a single diaspora and its cultural aesthetic creations.¹⁷¹

While the novel is trying to challenge the stereotypical homogenized representations of Arab women, it shows, as Steven Salaita puts it, 'nothing, human or geographical, ever descends into a tidy stereotype'.¹⁷² The novel delves into the particularities of each character in order to explore their gendered specificities within a larger context of identity, such as Arab American or Palestinian. In an interview with Steven Salaita, Halaby asserts:

I find it endlessly interesting to explore people's paradoxes and try to understand their motivations, to look not just at the character of this moment in this scene, *but how the character got there, what influenced the character*, and what choices the character made prior to the reader meeting up with her/him.¹⁷³

Halaby's philosophy of representation seems to foreground the context that has influenced a character's identity and informed their behaviors. Halaby's

¹⁷⁰ Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba, p. xix.

¹⁷¹ Mishra, p. 175.

¹⁷² Salaita, 'Interview with Laila Halaby', para. 2 of 8.

¹⁷³ Salaita, para. 2 of 8, emphasis added.

characterization strategy echoes Bhabha's criticism of the notion of fixity and determinism which he articulates in conjunction with his explanation of the concepts of hybridity and 'Third Space':

The concept of a people is not 'given', as an essential, classed-determined, unitary, homogeneous part of society *prior to a politics*; 'the people' are there as a process of political articulation and political negotiation across a whole range of contradictory social class.¹⁷⁴

In *West of the Jordan*, while Hala, Mawal, Khadija and Soraya negotiate their spaces in diaspora, their identities are shaped and re-shaped on a daily basis. As Salaita puts it, the novel is 'a multivocal work' about a scattered family.¹⁷⁵ As young and old members of this family tell their stories, their different perspectives and opinions reflect their differing experiences and their multiple cultural identities.

3.6 Arab Youths, Identity, Diaspora and Everyday Practices

The novel appropriately focuses on a group of girls who are exploring the world for the first time. Sociologists Sharon McIrvin Abu-Laban and Baha Abu-Laban argue that 'to be a member of the youth generation [. . .] is often associated with personal concerns about acceptance and sense of place beyond the circle of the family.'¹⁷⁶

Coupled with a diasporic experience, adolescence becomes an even more complicated phase in life. Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban's words need to be read in tandem with Avtar Brah's discussion of the concept of diaspora space as a site where 'multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed'.¹⁷⁷

Brah asserts that diaspora space is a site of 'infinite experientiality, the myriad

¹⁷⁴ Jonathan Rutherford, 'Third Space: Interview with Homi Bhabha', in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. by Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 1990), pp. 207-21 (p. 220, italics in original).

¹⁷⁵ Salaita, *Arab American Literary Fiction*, p. 131.

¹⁷⁶ Sharon McIrvin Abu-Laban and Baha Abu-Laban, 'Teens-Between: The Public and Private Spheres of Arab-Canadian Adolescents', in *Arabs in America*, ed. by Suleiman, pp. 113-28 (p. 113).

¹⁷⁷ Brah, p. 208.

processes of cultural fissure and fusion that underwrite contemporary forms of transcultural identities'.¹⁷⁸

The novel is interested in exploring the complications of being an in-between young woman where in-between points to both age and location. When Hala discovers towards the end of the novel that Sharif will not marry her, she seeks a confrontation with him. Sharif convincingly tells Hala: ““*You are seeing [the world] for the first time*””.¹⁷⁹ Hala is indeed seeing the world for the first time. She is exploring her surroundings, social concepts, her sexuality, and life at large for the first time. Like her three cousins Khadija, Soraya and Mawal, Hala is experiencing a world that she knows very little about. What is at stake here is Hala’s initiation into adulthood as well as entirely new surroundings. In an interview, Halaby says that by the end of the novel each character learns something new that will prepare her for adulthood:

Each one has had to deal with a blow to her security blanket, which has in turn launched her into adulthood or at least into accepting responsibility, or ownership, for where she is in life. Each one has learned about herself and her history and has had to come to terms with it a bit more.¹⁸⁰

As Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban remind us, ‘being “different” is not often perceived as a badge of honor by the young’.¹⁸¹ The novel explores aspects of Arab youth culture in ‘Visa’ where Soraya and Walid go out for a drink in a bar in California. In the bar a few drunken white men mistake them for Mexicans. Then, they beat Walid. Later, Walid and Soraya speak to the policewoman:

¹⁷⁸ Brah, p. 208.

¹⁷⁹ Laila Halaby, *West of the Jordan* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2003), pp. 199, emphasis added. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

¹⁸⁰ Anonymous, ‘An Interview with Laila Halaby’

<<http://www.beacon.org/client/readguide/8359rg.cfm>> [accessed 14 August 2009], p. 4.

¹⁸¹ Abu-Laban, and Abu-Laban, p. 113.

‘You got beaten up for being Mexican and you’re not Mexican? What are you?’
‘Palestinians.’
‘Well you got off pretty lucky then.’ The policewoman [said] (p. 59-60).

This incident, tragic as it is, prompts Soraya to think about her identity and the invisibility of Arabs on the US ethnic map. The policewoman thinks that it is lucky for Walid and Soraya not to be recognized as Palestinians because the white men, receiving information about Arabs and Palestinians from TV and newspapers which often render Arabs as threatening, would have acted even more violently towards them. As Salaita puts it, Walid and Soraya ‘experience a vitriolic example of anti-Arab racism that highlights its [. . .] propensity to totalize minorities as a homogenous threat to majoritarian supremacy’.¹⁸²

Moreover, the novel invites the reader to think about the damaging influences of misrepresentation in the portrayal of Arabs in Western popular culture.¹⁸³ Soraya wishes that Walid had beaten their assaulters, but she tells herself ‘that’s not what the *American movie* would show, would it?’ (p. 60). Soraya wishes she was a ‘superhero like in those cartoons’ to rescue Walid, but then she remembers that ‘*there aren’t any Arab ones*’ (p. 60, emphasis added). This incident shapes Soraya’s identity as a young *Arab* woman. This episode, I argue, is one of a series of events that shape Arab women identities within a larger context of communal identity. The structure of the novel, I believe, helps highlight how each incident leaves an imprint on Soraya’s identity. What does being an American mean to Soraya (before and after) this incident? What does the concept of the American superhero mean to this teenager? How does popular culture influence Soraya’s identity and indoctrinate her? By

¹⁸² Salaita, p. 135.

¹⁸³ This incident conceptually links *West of the Jordan* to *Crescent*’s concerns about misrepresentations of Arabs in US popular culture.

presenting this *archival history*, ‘the novel seeks to interrogate and critique ahistorical and overdetermined assumptions about Arab women, gender oppression and [foregrounds] the possibilities of resistance’.¹⁸⁴

The above experience, which Salaita describes as ‘the archetypal, though often unspoken, initiation into the process of Americanization’,¹⁸⁵ sheds light on elements that shape Soraya’s identity as an Arab American teenager. Another factor that informs Soraya’s life is the generational gap that separates her from her mother. For instance, Soraya’s first story, titled ‘Fire’, sheds some light on the generational differences among Arab women in diaspora. Watching a wedding video from Nawara, Soraya’s cousin Jaffer and his fiancée express their admiration of the girl dancing on the screen. Soraya’s mother feels uncomfortable because the girl the couple are talking about is her very daughter, Soraya. Soraya tells us that her mother is ‘mixed between angry and furious [. . . because she] always wants to do what’s just right and appropriate and doesn’t want anyone talking bad about her’ (p. 27).

Teenager Soraya is aware of the social and cultural pressures on her mother. She understands how her mother’s sense of belonging to the Arab community informs her behavior and almost forces her to mediate ‘discrepant worlds’.¹⁸⁶ Soraya recognizes how Arab American communities appropriate women ‘as [a] signifier of traditionalism [and a] reservoir of communal identity’, to use Mona Fayed’s words on how Arab women are expected to fit into nationalist narratives.¹⁸⁷ In contrast, Soraya is aware of her own position as ‘a new breed’ (p. 56). Soraya expresses her

¹⁸⁴ Majaj, Sunderman and Saliba, pp. xxix-xxx.

¹⁸⁵ Salaita, p. 135.

¹⁸⁶ Clifford, p. 314.

¹⁸⁷ Mona Fayed, ‘Reinscribing Identity: Nation and Community in Arab Women’s Writing’, *College Literature*, 22 (1995), 147-60 (p. 147).

refusal of the strict right/wrong dichotomy: 'I'm so sick of everything being *haram* or *halal*, but nothing in between. I am in between' (p. 117).¹⁸⁸ The juxtaposition of this generational gap and its consequential effects shows the novel's deep interest in exploring what Brah calls 'diaspora space'.¹⁸⁹

Brah asserts that diaspora space is the site of the immanence of the concepts of diaspora, border and socio-economic and political issues:

[D]iaspora space as a conceptual category is 'inhabited' not only by those who are constructed and represented as indigenous. In other words, the concept of *diaspora space* (as opposed to that of diaspora) includes the entanglement of genealogies with those of 'staying put'.¹⁹⁰

The generational gap between Soraya and her mother manifests itself clearly in their different reactions to the same situation. As Brah rightly points out, identity is constituted within every day experiences; in the daily stories 'we tell ourselves individually and collectively'.¹⁹¹ Brah urges us to study diaspora as a concept 'in which different historical and contemporary elements are understood, not in tandem, but in their dia-synchronic relationality'.¹⁹² Issues of gender, race, age, and nationality converge to form identity. The incident at the bar teaches Soraya that as an Arab American, she is a racialized invisible 'other'. Soraya's comments on her mother's behavior shows that she understands that being a woman in an Arab American community means to be less privileged and to abide by the rules laid out

¹⁸⁸ Halal: compliant with Islamic law/sharia. Haram is the opposite. In practice, the concepts of *halal* and *haram* are more socially and culturally, rather than religiously, sanctioned

¹⁸⁹ Brah, p. 181.

¹⁹⁰ Brah, p. 181, emphasis in original.

¹⁹¹ Brah, p. 183.

¹⁹² Brah, p. 190.

by community. Reading these incidents in tandem unveils Soraya's character 'in its historical specificity'.¹⁹³

3.7 Khadija: Space, Daily Experiences and Identity

Not only does the novel tell the stories of four young Arab cousins, it also tells the tales of other women of multifarious backgrounds within the narrators' stories. Superficially, the novel looks segmented and fragmented because the narrators Mawal, Khadija, Soraya and, to a lesser extent, Hala relate seemingly unconnected and unrelated stories. A closer look at the structure of the narratives reveals an underlying theme whereby women's genealogical links act as the connecting points between the stories and the characters. These stories show how the behaviors, and indeed the identities of these characters, are informed by the politics of location and everyday practices. In other words, the novel chronicles the minute events that gradually constitute the quotidian experiences of each of the four girls, including the stories they hear, see and re-tell. The novel's engagement with the experiences of adolescents is a strategic step towards drawing the reader's attention to the fact that girls have a record of their own unique experiences that are historically informed.

Khadija's first story 'Sand and Fire' introduces some of the issues that inform Khadija's behavior and stream her perception of the world.¹⁹⁴ Khadija thinks her name is causing her trouble in the US:

¹⁹³ Brah, p. 182.

¹⁹⁴ The title refers to the frustration and disappointment Khadija's father has experienced in the US. She tells us that he has 'many dreams that have been filled with sand' (p. 37). Khadija is aware of her father's self-made exile trap:

'My ache comes from losing my home,' my father tells us a lot. Part of me understands that, because I see him unhappy and feeling different than everyone else here, but part of me doesn't understand. I see my uncles and cousins and neighbors, and they seem to be doing just fine (p. 39).

Underlying Khadija's argument is her understanding of the multiplicity of experiences of Arabs in America. She questions her father's statement and compares him to her uncles. For Khadija, her

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 (p. 36, italics mine).

Khadija is highlighting her daily experience of dislocation and displacement through her American peers' inability to pronounce her name correctly: 'In America my name sounds like someone throwing up or falling off a bicycle' (p. 36). Her name becomes a site of conflict. Khadija is aware of the beauty of her name and its historical significance in the Islamic tradition. By presuming that had the original Khadija lived in the US, she would have changed her name, Khadija is highlighting the politics of location. Khadija is presented as a dynamic character. She links her reality to Arab Islamic history and heritage.

Khadija's attempts to change her name to Diana, for example, prove futile as her classmate, Roberta, informs her that she does not 'look like a Diana' (p. 37). Interestingly, Khadija introduces the reader to one of the most important sites where her identity is being shaped, school. As Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban note in their study on the behavior of Arab American youths in public and private spheres, school absorbs 'a massive' amount of time and energy of the young and strongly influences their behaviors.¹⁹⁵ School for Khadija is a vital place for questioning, exploring and coming to terms with her identity. It is not surprising, then, that Khadija's next story is about her experiences at school.¹⁹⁶

father's story is an individual story that displays only one side of the Arab American identity. See also: Bosch, 'The Representation of Fatherhood'.

¹⁹⁵ Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban, p. 117.

¹⁹⁶ Khadija's *first* story comes at the end of Part One and is separated from her second story 'School' by four stories: one story by Hala, two *long* stories by Mawal and one story by Soraya. This pattern shapes the structure of the novel. Still, I argue that the link between Khadija's first story 'Sand and Fire' and her second story 'School' is quite clear.

In 'School' Khadija tells us that her teacher, Mr. Napolitano, expects her to know more than other students because her parents are not American. Teachers, Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban maintain, 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.¹⁹⁷ Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban explain that the sense of the 'ethnocultural identity' of Arab youths in North America is shaped through the teachers' handling of the local playout of global upheavals.¹⁹⁸ For Khadija, school is a window to the outer world. Mr. Napolitano's insistence, though benevolent, on labelling Khadija as non-American, renders her as a racialized other and, as Salaita puts it, 'causes her to remain guarded against her ethnic origin'.¹⁹⁹

In fact, in her arguments with her teacher as well as with her mother, Khadija insists that she is American. School becomes an important outlet for Khadija. As Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban argue, within the school setting, females are 'less prone' than their male peers to be tied to friends who are of the same ethnic or religious background.²⁰⁰ Outside school, this pattern disappears. Although most males and females assert that they feel more comfortable with Arab peers, more females report that they feel comfortable with non-Arab peers because they feel 'a sense of personal freedom and individuality'.²⁰¹ School is a place where Khadija's identity is shaped and re-shaped. By focussing on certain episodes in Khadija's life, the structure of the novel seems to trace the influences that inform her life as an Arab American female teenager. As Paul Gilroy reminds us, identity is '*always particular*, as much about

¹⁹⁷ Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban, pp. 118-19.

¹⁹⁸ Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban, p. 119.

¹⁹⁹ Salaita, p. 135.

²⁰⁰ Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban, p. 120.

²⁰¹ Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban, p. 121.

difference as about shared belonging'.²⁰² Khadija's experiences at school greatly influence her identity as a racialized young Arab woman.

At school, Khadija tells us, she meets a Jewish boy, who tries to bring up similarities between Muslims and Jews. Michael tells Khadija that Jews face Jerusalem when they pray. When Khadija tells him that she does not know this, Michael explains that he did not know this until his grandmother passed away: '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' (p. 76). Through her contact with Michael, Khadija gets to know what it means to live in diaspora. Michael's remark is not just a funny statement: it is how a teenager looks, with a critical eye, at some of the constructs erected by adults. That Arabs and Jews face east when they pray points to the fact that in America (i.e. diaspora) they may find common grounds for camaraderie and solidarity instead of conflict.

Khadija's next story shows how her gender as an Arab American girl is a site of conflicting discourses of nationalism, traditionalism and Americanization. In 'Birthday', Khadija receives a diary as a gift from her uncle's American wife, Fay. Khadija translates Fay's letter to her mother:

In the card she sent with the diary, Auntie Fay wrote: 'The book is so you can write your secrets and no one will have to know them.' 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 (p. 104).

Khadija's mother's insistence on monitoring Khadija's behavior alerts us to the pressures on Arab women in diaspora as preservers of ethnic traditions. This theme is further highlighted when Khadija eavesdrops on a conversation between her aunt

²⁰² Gilroy, p. 301, emphasis added.

Maysoun and her sister-in-law whereby Maysoun criticizes Khadija's mother for letting her children speak English at home and for treating them like American children (p. 105). As a woman, Maysoun expects her sister to be a preserver of Arab culture, highlighting how 'the unholy forces of nationalist *bio*-politics intersect on the bodies of women [. . . for] the reproduction of absolute difference and the continuance of the blood line'.²⁰³ The story ends on Khadija's remark that 'it's better to be a boy [. . .] because then you don't have to spend all your time noticing what everyone does wrong' (p. 105). The story highlights Khadija's experience as a female Arab American teenager who is expected (by her community) to abide by traditional gender roles. As sociologist Kristine Ajrouch puts it, Arab American girls seem to feel pressure from their families to 'act honorably' since they 'bear almost the entire weight of maintaining' an Arab identity for their families and community.²⁰⁴

In this context, sociologist Nadine Naber coins the term 'Arab cultural re-authenticity' to delineate a strategy employed by some Arab families to 'simultaneously' preserve an Arab cultural identity and to assimilate to American norms of "'whiteness'".²⁰⁵ Naber explains:

Arab cultural re-authenticity [. . .] is [the] localized, spoken, and unspoken figure of an imagined 'true' Arab culture that emerges as a reaction or an alternative to the universalizing tendencies of hegemonic U.S. nationalism, the pressures of assimilation, and the gendered racialization of Arab women and men.²⁰⁶

²⁰³ Gilroy, p. 333, italics in original.

²⁰⁴ Arjouch, pp. 132-38.

²⁰⁵ Nadine Naber, 'Arab American Femininities: Beyond Arab Virgin/American(ized) Whore', *Feminist Studies*, 32 (2006), 87-111 (p. 88).

²⁰⁶ Naber, p. 88.

Naber's study highlights the process by which discourses of Arab cultural re-authenticity and American hegemonic nationalism 'police' Arab American femininities 'circumstantially', depending on the types of behaviors to be controlled within a particular location.²⁰⁷ Naber's essay attempts to disrupt the monolithic and homogenous image of Arab and Arab American women:

[F]eminist theory and practice vis-à-vis Arab American communities should take the specific ways that coordinates of race, class, gender, sexuality, religion, and nation intersect in different contexts seriously.²⁰⁸

Similarly, albeit fictionally, *West of the Jordan* draws the reader's attention to the intersectionality of race, social class, gender, age and identity in diaspora.

When in 'Social Studies', Khadija's mother asks Khadija to invite her friend Patsy to dinner, Khadija responds ambivalently to her mother's request:

'You shamed?' she [Khadija's mother] asked me in English, which made me feel pretty bad because it's sort of true. It's not that I'm ashamed, but there are things that an American wouldn't understand, like my mother's language or my father's yelling (p. 114).

Khadija's mother's anxieties spring mainly from her (in)ability to monitor her daughter's friendships at school. Put differently, Khadija's mother is glad that her daughter is making friendships with a white girl as long as this relationship is endorsed by her (Khadija's mother). I here turn to sociologist Jen'nan Ghazal Read's study on gender roles in Christian and Muslim Arab American families to explain Khadija's mother's behavior within a specific socio-economic context.

Read notes that there is 'considerable intra-group diversity' among Christian and Muslim Arab Americans in their social class backgrounds and subjective

²⁰⁷ Naber, p. 91.

²⁰⁸ Naber, p. 91.

feelings of religiosity and ethnicity.²⁰⁹ Read argues that Muslim respondents are ‘more gender traditional’ than non-Muslim Arab-American women, but rather than reflecting the impact of religious affiliation per se, the research finds that ‘differences in ethnicity and religiosity are more significant’.²¹⁰ Once these differences are considered, Read concludes, the influence of ‘Muslim affiliation on gender traditionalism’ fades away.²¹¹ Read’s argument seems to echo Brah’s stipulation on diaspora space ‘where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition’.²¹² Brah argues that ‘tradition is itself continually invented even as it may be hailed as originating from the mists of time’.²¹³

The novel is interested in exploring the shifting nature of the concept of tradition. In this context, Khadija’s stories ‘Traditions’ and ‘Sleeping Over’ give us more clues about the circumstances that inform Khadija’s mother’s ‘traditional’ gender role attitudes . I here argue that the ingenious structure of the novel - based as it is on concepts and episodes - enables the novelist to reveal how certain concepts inform her characters’ identities in order to stress the heterogeneity of Arab women’s experiences. The novel is interested in showing differences in order to draw a more realistic picture of Arab and Arab American women. As Orfalea argues, the closer an Arab American novelist ‘gets to what is real, the closer he [/she] gets to justice and

²⁰⁹ Jen’nan Ghazal Read, ‘The Sources of Gender Role Attitudes among Christian and Muslim Arab-American Women’, *Sociology of Religion*, 64 (2003), 207-22 (p. 210).

²¹⁰ Read, p. 218.

²¹¹ Read, p. 218.

²¹² Brah, p. 208.

²¹³ Brah, p. 208.

redemption'.²¹⁴ In this sense, *West of the Jordan* is a creative piece of writing that tries to explain specific experiences of Arab American characters to the larger American community.

'Traditions' is a continuation of 'Social Studies'. Patsy comes to dinner and Khadija is relieved to know that Patsy likes Arab food. Patsy then invites Khadija to dinner, but Khadija's mother insists on inviting Patsy's family first. She then allows Khadija to visit Patsy. Khadija's mother questions her daughter on the details of the visit upon her return. Khadija explains that her mother feels uncomfortable when she visits or is visited by her school mates since another girl had previously showed Khadija some pornographic pictures. During that visit, Khadija's mother kicked out the offending girl and slapped Khadija on the face. The episode reflects, to borrow Naber's words, 'the tense and often conflictual location of Arab American femininities at the intersections of two contradictory discourses: Arab cultural re-authenticity and hegemonic US nationalism'.²¹⁵ While Khadija's mother wants her daughter to interact with her larger community, she is wary of the outcome of this encounter, and hence, she continues to monitor her daughter. The novel here highlights some of the incongruities of Arab American communities in order to show how daily experiences shape the identities of Arab women/girls.

Khadija's next story 'Sleeping Over' is conceptually connected to 'Traditions'. Patsy invites Khadija over for a slumber party. However, Khadija's parents staunchly refuse. When she tells Patsy this, Patsy laughs:

'How are you ever going to have sex with a boy if you always have to sleep at home?'

²¹⁴ Orfalea, p. 117.

²¹⁵ Naber, p. 89.

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 (p. 173).

Soraya is another Arab American girl. Indeed, both Soraya and Khadija are Arab American girls, but they are not identical. The experiences of each are shaped by dissimilar circumstances, conditions and determinants.

As sociologists Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban illustrate, gender determines the reaction of parental expectations.²¹⁶ Comparing responses of male and female adolescents to certain school and social related activities, Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban maintain the girls' ethnocultural difference may be less amenable to concealment:

Compared with sons, daughters report less happiness with school, less involvement with parents, less television viewing, more household work, more travelling, and more attendance of public functions with parents (or being accompanied by parents).²¹⁷

Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban highlight how some social activities seem to be deemed appropriate by Arab American parents according to their children's gender. This distribution of roles invites us to consider Brah's call to analyze the relationality of the fields of social relations, subjectivity and identity alongside the concept of diaspora.²¹⁸ Through perceiving diaspora as 'embedded within multi-axial understanding of power', gender inequalities emerge as a fertile site for exploring the incongruities and contradictions of a diasporic community'.²¹⁹

In this context, Halaby seems interested in exploring how traditions influence the identities of members of the Arab American community. For instance, Khadija tells us that her father once punished her after a false tip by her brother. Nevertheless,

²¹⁶ Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban, p. 127.

²¹⁷ Abu-Laban and Abu-Laban, p. 127.

²¹⁸ Brah, p. 180.

²¹⁹ Brah, p. 187.

Khadija thinks that her father's prejudice against her does not spring from his hatred of her gender but 'because the sand sends him inside that small bottle of liquor he keeps locked in his toolbox and turns his insides into fire' (p. 174). In other words, Khadija is aware of her father is disgruntled because immigrating to the US has not put an end to his sense of perpetual displacement: this dissatisfaction propels his prejudice against his children, including Khadija. Khadija knows that her father is 'in an ambivalent position, where he can be both good and bad'.²²⁰ Khadija goes beyond the superficial 'male-chauvinism' rationalization. She thinks of her situation within the intersections of race, gender, social class, and diaspora. Just as Khadija's experiences within school influence her identity, so do her experiences as a girl within an Arab American family.

Sociologist Kristine Ajrouch argues that the family 'teaches' ethnic identity, and through that 'instilled' identity, the older generations try to control the actions of their offspring.²²¹ Ajrouch points out that the structure of the Arab family reflects its ethnic quality through two prominent features; it is patrilineal and extended.²²² Ajrouch argues that in a patrilineal type of family, all persons know which group they belong to because it is assigned by birth. Men and women have definitive rights and duties and the actions of individuals in the family come to represent the whole family.

As this patrilineal structure delineates that members of a family bear responsibilities for one another, Ajrouch points that families tend to take on an extended form, which in turn creates 'a communal quality' within the extended

²²⁰ Bosch, p. 106.

²²¹ Arjouch, p. 130.

²²² Arjouch, p. 130.

family.²²³ Males, for example, are usually responsible for supporting the family economically, while ‘females are in charge of and virtually embody family honor’.²²⁴ This responsibility, Ajrouch argues, makes the female ‘a fundamental and valued element’ to the creation and maintenance of an Arab ethnic identity.²²⁵

Khadija’s story ‘Mothers’ engages with Ajrouch’s postulation on the patrilineal organization of the Arab family by providing an alternative approach to understanding its dynamics. The story highlights the central role a mother plays in the life of an Arab and Arab American family. The stories of two mothers are juxtaposed in ‘Mothers’: Patsy’s absent mother and Khadija’s present mother. In ‘Mothers’, Khadija relates to us that her mother cryptically warns her not to have sex outside of wedlock.²²⁶ In a later scene, Khadija walks in on her friends Patsy and Michael making love. Appalled, Khadija goes home to her mother who gives her the emotional support she craves. Two days later, Khadija tells us that her mother has travelled to Palestine to see her dying mother (Khadija’s grandmother).

Khadija begs her mother to let her accompany her but her mother reminds Khadija of her responsibilities toward her younger brothers. Khadija tells us that without her mother their house is empty (p. 180). The presence of Khadija’s mother vis-à-vis the absence of Patsy’s mother is an unforgettable experience that greatly influences Khadija’s identity. Khadija shows an attachment to her mother. Khadija understands the reasons behind her mother’s ‘traditional’ behavior. In this way, the novel shows that adhering to traditions is not always a form of giving up on new

²²³ Arjouch, p. 131.

²²⁴ Arjouch, p. 131.

²²⁵ Arjouch, p. 131.

²²⁶ In ‘The Beautiful Gift’, Mawal tells the story of her friend Hanan. In this story, little Hanan rides Mawal’s bicycles, falls down and bleeds from between her legs. Hanan’s mother saves her bloody underpants and wraps them in a newspaper from the day of the accident “‘so when she gets married, she’ll have proof that she’s a girl!’” (p. 148).

experiences and freedoms. The absence of her mother makes 'Khadija understand and empathize with her mother's angst of transplanted life'.²²⁷

The matrilineal family pattern that the novel explores becomes clearer in 'Long Distance'. The story consists of only four short paragraphs. The long distance that the title of this story alludes to is the long physical and cultural distance between Khadija and her grandmother who lives in the Palestinian village of Nawara. The title of the story also refers to the discrepancy between male and female perspectives. Khadija's father's assumption that Khadija will not be able to communicate with her grandmother because the two speak two different languages represents narrow-minded male perspectives. Khadija's father does not realize that love, compassion and sympathy are all languages that bridge the gap between Khadija and her grandmother.

While the novel attempts to represent genealogical ties that connect women over long distances, it also shows how these attempts are thwarted. While Khadija's mother flies to Palestine and crosses long distances to be with her dying mother, Khadija's father's disrespect for his father functions in the opposite direction. They are physically close, but emotionally apart. In allowing for a variety of young voices to emerge, Halaby foregrounds some of these problems faced by the new generation of migrant families. These young women 'struggle to define themselves, asserting that their individual identities are inconceivable outside their location and its gendered, cultural, historical, racial, national and political context'.²²⁸

²²⁷ Sarkar, p. 264.

²²⁸ Abdelrazek, p. 125.

Khadija's last story 'Fire' sees Khadija take responsibility against her father's abusive behavior: 'I do what I have never done. I run to the phone and dial 911 like they say to do in school' (p. 207). Through standing up to her father and reassuring her little brother *in English*, I argue, Khadija is reconciled with her in-between identity. Although Abdelrazek insists that Khadija 'continues to exist unhomed, in-between cultures, secretly suffering from a sense of loss and displacement',²²⁹ I argue that, just like Hala, Khadija's character has developed over the course of the narrative, and therefore, it is simplistic to describe her as 'unhomed'.

The novel seems to point out that Khadija's transformation from a seemingly passive girl to an active and dynamic figure results from her accepting her identity as the site of intersections of gender, social class, age and diaspora. True to her words to her mother, 'I can be American and still be your daughter' (p. 74), Khadija shows a commitment to her family and her growing sense of self. Khadija's everyday experiences have shaped her character and helped channel her actions towards becoming an active member of her family. She is a girl who is starting to explore life and to accumulate knowledge about her life. Living in an Arab American community, Khadija creates her own space based on her daily experiences. The everyday events that she encounters and recounts to us distinguish her from other Arab American girls, like her cousin Soraya.

It is true that Khadija and Soraya share the common cultural space of an Arab American identity, but their economic, social and quotidian experiences are entirely different. The novel attempts to spell out these differences by telling stories based on the daily events in the lives of these girls. The structure of the novel, divided as it is

²²⁹ Abdelrazek, p. 159.

into multiple short stories recounted from different perspectives, highlights the often disjointed and variable experiences of Arab women/girls. The novel undermines one dimensional images of Arab women living in diaspora through depicting the heterogeneity of their experiences.

It is my contention that reading *Western of the Jordan* from this perspective helps us conceptualize the heterogeneity of the experiences of Arab women. A similar approach to the stories narrated by Hala, Mawal and Soraya will yield, I believe, a sort of an archival documentation of the daily experiences of each teenage cousin. Within a communal cultural identity, the reader can look at the specificity of the life of each narrator in a way that reflects the heterogeneity of the experiences of Arab women. An approach based on investigating and understanding the spatial and temporal circumstances under which these characters live can help contextualize their experiences in such a way that reflects the diversity of Arab women and subverts the stereotypical representations of Arab women in US popular culture which, to borrow Jack Shaheen's words, 'narrow [. . .] vision and blur reality'.²³⁰

The two novels discussed in this chapter show a preoccupation by Arab American women writers to challenge stereotypes about Arabs and Americans of Arab descent in popular representations in the US. In different ways, Abu-Jaber and Halaby's books attempt to employ literary productions as resistance stratagems to portray Arabs and Arab Americans as 'humans'. Unlike works by Arab British women writers which thematically focus on building bridges between Arab and non-Arab characters, novels by Arab American women writers tend to focus on finding ways to improve the image of Arab American communities. This difference, I argue,

²³⁰ Shaheen, 'Hollywood's Muslim Arabs', p. 26.

results from a historical process in which issues of race, ethnicity, immigration and cultural exchanges have intersected differently in both countries.

To conclude, I would like to pose the question of how the everyday experiences, and hence, the identities of Arab Americans, have been influenced by 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror and how these experiences have been translated into fiction. 9/11 was an event that by all accounts impacted on a wide cross section of Americans; from those directly affected to those Arab Americans who found themselves affiliated to terrorists. *West of the Jordan* scrutinizes the dynamics of Arab American communities. It focuses on the internal and external forces that converge in the formation of an Arab American identity. However, post-9/11 anti-Arab racism and violence demands us to re-consider how racial and ethnic affiliations are articulated in literary and cultural productions of Arab American authors. In my conclusion and through a reading of Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*, I will consider the consequences of this event on the identities of Arabs in diaspora.

Conclusion

4.0 9/11 in Arab British and Arab American literary productions

Since this study is interested in exploring how the socio-political contexts influence Arab literary productions on both sides of the Atlantic, I would like to now investigate how Arab British and Arab American women novelists have represented the experiences of Arab characters in Britain and the US after 9/11. This examination, I argue, further highlights differences between the two sets of writers as a result of their different immigration and settlement experiences in the two countries. I argue that the way characters are influenced by the events following 9/11 is linked to the precarious position that Arabs occupy in the racial and ethnic discourses in Britain and the US.

Arabs in Britain are culturally, politically and socially marginalized, a fact that is reflected in lumping them under ‘the Other-Other’ category in the 1991 Census in Britain, the first in British history to include questions about ethnicity and race. In the US, Arabs are given an honorary white category, being classified as Caucasian/White, a classification that, according to some Arab academics and activists, is meant to disempower Arabs and render them invisible. As a consequence, Arab literary productions on both sides of the Atlantic are sites where discourses on the precarious position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial hierarchies intersect with aesthetic representations. In this sense, a discussion of the ways in which the post-9/11 responses/events are represented reflects and enhances our understanding of the position Arabs occupy in discourses on race and ethnicity in Britain and the US.

I propose that since Arab British communities are not as politically, socially and culturally visible as other Muslim communities in Britain, novels written by

Arab British women novelists after 9/11 have not directly examined how the events on and after 9/11, as well as the war on terror, have impacted the Arab characters that they represent. In other words, the post-9/11 political, social and cultural repercussions are not fully investigated in most Arab British women novels written and published in the post 9/11 era. This tendency is in sharp contrast with novels written by writers from other Muslim communities in Britain. For instance, Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, published in 2003, explicitly represents the post-9/11 anti-Islam fervor that adversely affects the Bengali community in London.¹

It is interesting to note that novels written by Muslim women in Britain have either intentionally or unintentionally avoided *direct* discussions of 9/11. Here, I investigate why, on the other hand, Arab American novelists seem more engaged with this theme – all the while acknowledging that there is no authorial obligation to deal with these themes as though they were the only ones of interest to Arab and Muslim authors. Novels written by Arab British women novelists after 9/11 including Leila Aboulela's *Minaret* (2005), Fadia Faqir's *My Name is Salma* (2007) and Sabiha Al Khemir's *The Blue Manuscript* (2008) have showed scant interest in post-9/11 repercussions. Indeed, *My Name is Salma* and *The Blue Manuscript* are set in the 1990s.

¹ In addition to *Brick Lane*, Ian McEwan's *Saturday* (2005) and Patricia Duncker's *Miss Webster and Chérif* (2006) take place against the backdrop of 9/11 and the war on terror. Duncker's novel is more relevant here because it explores the concept of identity in the post-9/11 context and points to the incongruous position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in Britain. The novel, for instance, depicts the post-9/11 backlash on Arab students in Britain. While on a shopping and entertainment visit to London, Miss Webster and Cherif, a Moroccan undergraduate student, get robbed. The policemen, however, seems to turn the tables on Cherif and starts interrogating Miss Webster on Cherif's behavior and religious affiliations. The policeman tells Miss Webster that "[s]ince 9/11 and the terrorist attacks against our embassies we are investigating all foreign students who originate from volatile states. Mr. Al Faraj has been involved in a very odd incident" (p. 200). The odd incident Cherif (Mr. Al Faraj) is involved in is being robbed. As an Arab Cherif has become immediately a suspect. Although he is a victim of robbery, the policeman treats Cherif as a terrorist-suspect.

Whereas in Ali's *Brick Lane* Nazneen watches live reports of the 9/11 attacks on the TV, *Minaret* focuses on the psychological and spiritual transformation the protagonist undergoes due to living in exile and becoming a devout Muslim. Racists physically assault Aboulela's protagonist, Najwa, because she is wearing hijab, i.e. being a Muslim.² While on the bus, a drunken man spits at Najwa and says "You Muslim scum".³ This pattern is repeated in Robin Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus* (2008) wherein the protagonist, Sami, a second generation Arab British, becomes a suspect only when he adopts Islamic markers and behaviors such as growing a beard and going to mosque.⁴ In both novels, Najwa and Sami become the targets of racist attacks because they are Muslims rather than Arabs. As Sara Upstone puts it, British anti-terrorism discourses have identified the "next terrorist" [. . . as] an "imagined body" and an "imagined culture" [. . .] not just through where he/she is located but through his/her *appearance and way of life*'.⁵ In this sense, Najwa and Sami's decisions to adopt Islam as their way of life render them suspects and targets of hate crimes.

² Surely the war on terror is the unspoken background to this novel; without it, much of what occurs would have no meaning. What is interesting is that the novel does not explicitly mention the events of 9/11 or the war on terror. In her interview with Aboulela, Claire Chambers states that 'Aboulela portrays overt Islamophobia in post-9/11 London' (p. 88). It is quite interesting that the novel itself does not explicitly refer to 9/11 as an event. Chambers' comment is part of a tendency in academia to read literary and cultural productions by Arab and Muslim writers in post-9/11 as being somehow influenced by the deadly events and hence they depict the repercussions on Arab and Muslim characters. Chambers asks Aboulela why 9/11 is never mentioned, Aboulela replies that she 'want[s] to write about the average, devout Muslim and the dilemmas and challenges he or she faces' (p. 100). I think the fact that Najwa is a first generation Arab immigrant to Britain who is portrayed as not belonging to an Arab community is important. In *Brick Lane*, racists attack a visible Muslim community, i.e. the Bengali community. In *Minaret*, racists attack Najwa because she wears hijab, i.e. because she is Muslim.

³ Aboulela, p. 81.

⁴ In addition to taking Arab British novelists around seven years to write a fictionalized account of the post-9/11 backlash, the author of this novel is a male. This renders the novel beyond the scope of my study.

⁵ Sara Upstone, '9/11, British Muslims, and Popular Literary Fiction', in *Reframing 9/11: Film, Popular Culture and the 'War on Terror'*, ed. by Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell (New York & London: Continuum, 2010), pp. 35-44 (p. 35, emphasis added).

The responses of Arab British novelists to the events and consequences of post-9/11, I have noticed and will here argue, are markedly different from those of their Arab American counterparts. In this conclusion, I will focus on Laila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) because it is the first attempt by an Arab American novelist to represent the repercussions of 9/11 on Arab Americans. Aboulela's Najwa and Yassin-Kassab's Sami are harassed because of their visible religious affiliations. Unlike, Najwa in Aboulela's *Minaret* and Sami in *The Road from Damascus*, ethnic origin is highlighted in Halaby's portrayal of the post-9/11 experiences of Jassim and Salwa, a middle class Jordanian-Palestinian couple living in the US. As Georgiana Banita puts it, '[i]t is mainly as a result of *racial profiling* and sheer coincidence that Jassim and Salwa lose control of their lives'.⁶

The events of 9/11 are incorporated into the fabric of Halaby's novel. The consequences of 9/11 such as the apparent anti-Arab racism, the thorough FBI investigation of Halaby's protagonist Jassim's life and the threat to deport him as a consequence of this investigation, permeate the plot and to some extent determine the future of Jassim and Salwa. In this respect, the novel's themes are not far from those of Don DeLillo's *Falling Man* (2007) which opens with a scene from the 9/11 attacks on the Twin Towers and explores in depth the psychological consequences of these attacks on Keith Neudecker and other characters.

Before discussing *Once in a Promised Land*, I would like to briefly reflect on Yassin-Kassab's *The Road from Damascus*, which is the only novel by an Arab British writer that directly represents the repercussions of post-9/11 on Arabs in

⁶ Georgiana Banita, 'Race, Risk, and Fiction in the War on Terror: Laila Halaby, Gayle Brandeis, and Michael Cunningham', *Literature Interpretation Theory*, 12 (2010), 242-68 (p. 251).

Britain. The novel, I argue, reflects the precarious position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in Britain since Sami, a second generation Arab British, becomes a terror suspect when he adopts a visible Muslim identity. In other words, had Sami not grown a beard, he would have remained ethnically invisible and would not have been arrested and interrogated by the police. In this sense, the novel draws the reader's attention to the fact that Arab communities are not as visible as other Muslim communities in Britain, Arabs are perceived as a security threat once they adopt visible Islamic identity markers. By reflecting on how Muslim characters have been influenced differently by the post-9/11 backlash in Britain, the novel, by portraying the diversity of Muslim communities, helps 'destabilis[e] mainstream conceptions of Islam', as Nagel and Staeheli argue in their study on Arab British perspectives on religion, politics and the public.⁷

The Road from Damascus portrays the experiences of a number of Arab immigrants and their children who live in Britain. The novel concentrates on Sami, the son of a Syrian secular intellectual, born in Britain and studying for a PhD on Arabic poetry. He is married to Muntaha, the daughter of an Iraqi refugee. The novel is set in the few months leading up to 9/11. It highlights a tendency to religiosity among most of the characters. Each, however, has a different reason for turning to religion. Disappointed with his inability to write a cohesive and a convincing thesis, Sami gradually discovers the void inside him, resulting from his father's anti-Islam tutoring. Although Sami sometimes puts on a Palestinian *keffiyeh* and participates in anti-Israeli demonstrations, he remains politically invisible. Post-9/11, he becomes politicized when he grows a beard and goes to the mosque.

⁷ Nagel and Staeheli, 'British Arab Perspectives on Religion, Politics and "the Public"', p. 100.

The police arrest him on the suspicion that he is planning a terrorist act. When Sami tells the investigators, upon their request, that his parents are Syrians, they instantly identify Syria as a *Muslim* (rather than an Arab) country: ““Muslim country,” the [police]woman said, *as if listing charges*. “False name. Suspicious appearance and behaviour””.⁸ The police want to prove their suspicions by identifying Sami as a Muslim. That Syria is a Muslim country is of great importance for them because this proves that Sami is Muslim (and consequently they acted correctly by arresting him). On the other hand, being an Arab does not mean being a security threat. As Fred Halliday puts it, the widespread adoption of the term ‘Muslim’ in British discourses on migration, multiculturalism and integration ‘serve[s] to obscure or subordinate other forms of identity and association’.⁹ I argue here that because Arabs are not as politically, ethnically and socially visible as other Muslim communities, Sami’s identity is defined by the police as a Muslim terrorist rather than a British citizen of an Arab descent. The police’s behaviors reflect popular discourses in Britain in which an Arab identity is ‘submerged by an Asian-dominated British Muslim identity in the political sphere’.¹⁰

As the police interrogate him, Sami gradually realizes that they are interrogating him because he is a Muslim. He realizes that in the eye of the police he is a suspect because of ‘[t]he burden of the beard, [. . .] The burden of belonging’.¹¹ Jeff, the policeman, tells Sami: ““See it from our point of view. You were standing [. . .] outside the *mosque*, in a *suspicious* manner””.¹² Kate, the policewoman, adds:

⁸ Robin Yassin-Kassab, *The Road from Damascus* (London: Penguin, 2009), p. 333, emphasis added.

⁹ Halliday, *Britain’s First Muslims*, p. ix.

¹⁰ Nagel and Staeheli, p. 107.

¹¹ Yassin-Kassab, p. 333.

¹² Yassin-Kassab, p. 335, emphasis added. Significantly, the mosque is located on Brick Lane, known to some as Banglatown, which is the heart of London’s Bangladeshi-Sylheti community.

“And you have grown a rather thick *beard* recently, haven’t you?”¹³ While the incident suggests that the official law enforcers seek to redefine ideas of belonging - who is British - it also strongly suggests that Sami has become suspect because of his visible Islamic appearance. In other words, Sami’s appearance propels the police to transform his ethnic identity as an Arab to ‘a political identity as British Muslim’.¹⁴ This is entirely different from Halaby’s *Once in a Promised Land* where the victimization of Jassim is because of his ethnic origin. In other words, Jassim has become the center of an FBI interrogation because, to paraphrase the words of the secretary who tipped him off to the FBI, he is rich *Arab* man with an access to the city’s water supply.¹⁵

In fact, racial and ethnic discourses inform some essays that analyze Halaby’s novel. For instance, Georgiana Banita argues that ‘Laila Halaby at once denounces and internalizes racial profiling’ in *Once in Promised Land*.¹⁶ Banita maintains that as Jassim returns ‘the fearful, loathing gaze of anti-Arab racism [. . . , he] look[s] at himself through a hate-tinted lens [. . . and] internalizes the racist profiling to which he is outwardly subjected’.¹⁷ In this sense, Banita concludes, Halaby’s novel ‘productively assesses the overbearing moralism of racial profiling in the war on terror, especially in relation to its most vulnerable targets, citizens of Arab American

¹³ Yassin-Kassab, p. 335, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Nagel and Staeheli, p. 101.

¹⁵ It is interesting that Mohsin Hamid’s *Changez* in *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (2007) has been targeted by racists because he was mistaken to be a “[f]ucking Arab” (p. 134). This, I believe, is indicative of the conflation of Arab, Muslim, Middle Eastern and South Asian identities. Read together, *The Road from Damascus* and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* present two different racialization routes in Britain and the US. While in Britain, Arabs have been taken to be Muslims in the post-9/11 era, Muslims and South Asians are taken to be Arabs. While Sami is arrested because of his beard, *Changez* is targeted by racists because he looks Arab. It is also interesting to look at the similarities and differences between *Changez* and *Jassim*. To some extent, both share an upper-middle class status, but each responds to the post-9/11 events differently. See: Laila Halaby, ‘Return of the Native’, *Washington Post*, 22 April 2007 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/04/19/AR2007041903000.html>> [accessed 5 September 2008].

¹⁶ Banita, p. 244.

¹⁷ Banita, p. 249.

descent'.¹⁸ Other critics have argued that 'it would be clearly oversimplification to read the novel as an account of the post-9/11 victimization of Muslims in the West' because Jassim and Salwa's story is 'both implied in and develops independently of 9/11'.¹⁹

I argue that a combination of the above two approaches may be of use here. On the one hand, Banita reduces Jassim to a passive victim of racism and ignores his attempt to resist racial profiling and marginalization and his continuous efforts to assert his whiteness through befriending Penny, a white working class American woman. On the other hand, Tancke describes Jassim and Salwa as Muslims and hence her reading pays scant attention to the fact that Jassim and Salwa, by virtue of their Arab ethnic origins, occupy an indeterminate position in discourses of race and ethnicity in the US.

While Halaby's novel portrays anti-Arab attitudes post-9/11, I am more interested in exploring the responses of Jassim and Salwa, the main protagonists, to these hostilities in light of the precarious position Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in the US.²⁰ Many literary critics and academics of various disciplines have claimed that it is time for Arab Americans to forge coalitions with people of color in the US now that they have been subjected to racial profiling since 9/11. As I have argued in Chapter One, unlike Arab British novelists who have explored in depth themes and strategies of trans-cultural/cross-ethnic dialogues, Arab

¹⁸ Banita, p. 265.

¹⁹ Ulrike Tancke, 'Uses and Abuses of Trauma in post-9/11 Fiction and Contemporary Culture', in *From Solidarity to Schisms: 9/11 and after in Fiction and Film from Outside the US*, ed. by Cara Cilano (Amsterdam & New York: Rodopi, 2009), pp. 75-92 (p. 80).

²⁰ For reviews of *Once in a Promised Land*, see: Pauline Homsy Vinson, 'New Fiction and the Post 9/11 Arab American Experience', *Al Jadid Magazine*, 54/55(2006), 45. See also: Carolyn See, 'After 9/11, Suddenly Suspect', *Washington Post*, 2 February 2007 <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/01/AR2007020101878.html>> [accessed 3 March 2010].

American writers, by virtue of the ambiguous space that Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in the US, have remained ambivalent with regard to aligning themselves with other ethnic groups. Most Arab American characters are ambivalent towards people of color and unwittingly tend to perceive themselves as whites. In this context, it becomes important to examine whether or not the post-9/11 events have influenced the literary representation of Arab Americans' racialized experiences in substantial ways.

4.1 'White but not Quite' Revisited: Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land*

Jassim is a Jordanian hydrologist who lives with his wife Salwa, a US-born Palestinian banker and a part time real estate agent in Tucson, Arizona. As a hydrologist, Jassim is in charge of the city's water supply. The novel opens shortly before the deadly events of 9/11. Jassim practices his daily routine of swimming at dawn before he goes to work. Against Jassim's wishes, Salwa stops taking her contraceptives. She gets pregnant quickly but does not have the courage to tell her husband. Suddenly, she miscarries. Her miscarriage creates a gap between her and her husband. This gap is further widened by the two different opinions Jassim and Salwa hold on the nature of the 9/11 attacks and their consequences. Jassim continues his life, presumably unconcerned by the clear consequences of the events of post-9/11 on Arab Americans. He refuses to accept that the attitudes of people around him have changed since 9/11. On the other hand, Salwa becomes more and more irritated by the loss of her baby and the prevalent patriotism that pushes her to the margins and renders her outside the nation's borders.

As a result, Salwa begins to question the nature of her existence in the US. It is within this hostile atmosphere that Jake, a young (white) American part time

banker and drug dealer approaches Salwa. Jake is interested in Salwa because she looks exotic. Though everyone agrees that Jake is an odd person, Salwa remains blinded by her own nostalgia for home and her sense of loss and loneliness. Jake has sex with Salwa and boasts to his colleagues about his sexual conquests, though he does not name the woman he seduces. Salwa also benefits and willingly participates in the affair. When Salwa informs Jake that she has decided to return to Jordan, she discovers Jake's manipulative nature. High on drugs, Jake physically assaults Salwa.

Jassim, on the other hand, seems absorbed by the consequences of a road accident he has become involved in a few months after 9/11 that leads to the death of a teenager from an impoverished family. The inscriptions on the teenager's skateboard shows that the boy has harbored anti-Arab sentiments. Though the police declare Jassim innocent, the accident turns out to be a decisive point in Jassim's life. Heavily burdened by the accident, Jassim becomes obsessed with the world of the boy he has killed. He frequents lower class (white) American neighborhoods. He befriends Penny, a waitress at a café, who gives him the key to explore an American world he never knew existed. Meanwhile, a secretary at the company Jassim works for reports him to the FBI as a suspicious rich Arab man with access to the city's water supply. Jassim ultimately loses his job as he becomes the focus of an unjustified FBI investigation. Jassim's last few words to Penny, that he cannot stay in the country anymore because no one will employ him, encapsulate the dilemma of an upper-middle class professional deluded by the American Dream that mistakenly leads him to assume that he belongs in the US.

Once Jassim and Salwa feel that their affluent social position is threatened, each, differently, seeks to expand their narrow social circles. Critics have viewed

Jassim and Salwa's choices of new friends in post-9/11 'as a way of ameliorating the destructive impact of the event'.²¹ For instance, Tancke argues that since Jassim and Salwa are '[c]aught in an increasingly tangled web of half-truths, omissions, silence and fateful coincidence, both start seemingly random affairs with people that they have met by chance'.²² Similarly, Anastasia Valassopoulos argues that as Jassim and Salwa become 'victims of ethnic and cultural typecasting', they befriend 'minority figures [. . .] who have hitherto eluded them'.²³ Valassopoulos maintains that 'the persons they befriend are worlds away from the world that they have constructed for themselves'.²⁴ In this way, Tancke and Valassopoulos' readings invite us to scrutinize the bases on which these seemingly bizarre friendships are built.

While Penny and Jake are minority figures as Valassopoulos rightly points out since the first is a working class woman and the latter is a drug addict, the two still belong to the larger *white* American mainstream. Compared to Jassim and Salwa, who as Arabs are officially classified as whites but are popularly perceived as non-whites, Penny and Jake are at the centre of nation's *ethnic* fabric even though they are socially marginalized. In this sense, in the wake of a post-9/11 anti-Arab racism, Penny and Jake provide a lifeline to Jassim and Salwa to salvage their mainstream (read: white) status. Thus, the Jassim-Penny and Salwa-Jake relations, I contend, are not completely random but result from the intersectionality of the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in US racial hierarchies and socio-political conditions. As Amaney Jamal argues, post 9/11 some Arab Americans have felt that 'the white label

²¹ Tancke, p. 83.

²² Tancke, p. 84.

²³ Anastasia Valassopoulos, "'American Freedom: Purchase or Promotion?'" Negotiating Invisibility in Arab-American Writing', in *Creolising Europe: Colonial Ties, Diasporic Presents, Post/Migrant Futures*, ed. by Margaret Littler and Encarna Rodriguez (Liverpool: Liverpool UP, forthcoming), p. 12 of 16.

²⁴ Valassopoulos, p. 12 of 16.

has remained the one label that can protect [. . .] them from losing the semblance of “American” status’.²⁵ Jamal maintains:

If we look at the history of Arab American integration in the United States, it is rife with accounts of Arab Americans asserting their whiteness not only in relation to economic mobility and integration but also in relation to all things ‘American.’ In other words, for Arab Americans the words ‘white’ and ‘American’ are often experienced interchangeably.²⁶

Jassim initially tries to ignore the repercussions of 9/11 on him as an Arab. He continues to convince himself that his white-collar job and its concomitant social privileges will protect him from the surrounding hostilities. Gradually, he realizes that he is mistaken. As dominant representations of Arabs and Americans of Arab descent as un-American have increased since 9/11 as Jamal argues, ‘identification with white America has not resulted in Arab American acceptance as either white or American’.²⁷ Burdened by the fact that he has killed a boy in a road accident, Jassim begins to break his social isolation. It is a *white* working class woman that attracts him. Indeed, it is a white working class world that fascinates him. Interestingly, although he goes outside the closed upper-middle class circle he has been living within since he first came to the US, Jassim’s circle of ‘new friends’ remains exclusively white.²⁸ While Jassim remains resilient to the discourses that homogenize Arab Americans and render them collectively criminals and terrorists, he continues to perceive himself as a white person. It is my contention that Jassim’s decision to befriend a *white* American woman of a lower class needs to be read as a

²⁵ Amaney Jamal, ‘Conclusion: Arab American Racialization’, in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 318-26 (p. 320).

²⁶ Jamal, p. 320.

²⁷ Jamal, p. 320.

²⁸ In fact, his other only friend is his study mate and boss at the company Marcus. Marcus’ ancestors are Italians.

manifestation of a historical racialization process that has resulted in classifying Arabs in the US as Caucasian/White.

On the other hand, Salwa's reaction to post-9/11 and the effects that it seems to have had on how Arab Americans are perceived is markedly different. This is perhaps unsurprising because of the socio-political background she hails from. The daughter of working class Palestinian-Jordanian parents, a sense of displacement marks her life from the beginning. Alienated from her husband following her miscarriage and feeling suffocated by the exclusionary (white) American patriotism in the wake of 9/11, Salwa is attracted to a white young man. Her relationship with him is an unconscious attempt on Salwa's part to prove her Americanness through adopting perceived 'American' codes of behavior. Salwa even attempts to domesticate whiteness by trying to set up parallels between the most patriotic white Americans she knows and her relatives back home in Jordan. Indeed, Salwa harbors an ambivalent attitude towards other marginalized groups such as homosexuals and people of color. Her attraction to Jake is an attempt to cling to (white) American normativity and the mainstream. His Americanness becomes the yardstick with which she measures her identity.

Unlike Jassim, however, Salwa undergoes another transformation at the end of the novel that makes her question her social position. Once she discovers the reality of Jake's anti-Arab racism, Salwa decides for the first time to talk to the Mexican/Guatemalan gardeners whose presence she has repeatedly failed to recognize. The novel does not end on a celebratory note: rather it ends on an ambivalent note whereby Salwa, whilst willing to talk to them is, however, injured by Jake in the final scenes of the novel. In this sense, the novel shows how the

indeterminate position Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in the US impedes them from aligning themselves with non-white ethnic groups. At the same time, the novel seems to suggest that the identification with other ethnic groups might come late and at a very high price. As Lisa Suhair Majaj puts it, Arab Americans 'are conspicuously absent from discussions of white ethnicity, and are popularly perceived as non-white'.²⁹ In this sense, *Once in a Promised Land* investigates the outcomes of residing in this contested and unclear space on Arab Americans.

Nadine Naber describes the attacks of 9/11 as 'a turning point' rather than 'the starting point' of histories of anti-Arab racism in the US.³⁰ Naber argues that since 9/11, Arab and Muslim Americans have been lumped into a new racialized category that obscures the considerable diversity that exists within these populations. Newspapers, films and TV shows are powerful tools for disseminating the racializing of Arab and Muslim Americans and forming public opinions.³¹ In *Once in a Promised Land*, Penny, a working class white American woman, has 'become obsessed by it [the television] ever since the Twin Towers had been destroyed'.³² Discussing with her flatmate what the US government should do in the Middle East, Penny relies on images transmitted on the TV to articulate her ideas about Jassim:

²⁹ Majaj, 'Arab-Americans and the Meanings of Race', p. 329.

³⁰ Nadine Naber, 'Introduction: Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formations', in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 1-45 (p. 4).

³¹ For an examination of how Arab Americans and Muslim Americans are represented as racialized subjects in newspapers in the aftermath of 9/11, see: Suad Joseph, Benjamin D'Harligue and Alvin Ka Hin Wong, 'Arab Americans and Muslim Americans in *The New York Times* before and after 9/11', in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 229-75. For a detailed discussion of how films and TV shows in post 9/11 have demonized Arabs and rendered them enemies of the nation, see: Jack Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood's Verdict on Arabs after 9/11* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008).

³² Laila Halaby, *Once in a Promised Land* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007), p. 280. Further references to this book are given after quotations in the text.

Penny continued staring at the television. ‘The one has nothing to do with the other. And he’s from Jordan, not Afghanistan. Jassim is a good guy - he’s not like them, shouldn’t be judged like them. *But those people over there, they oppress women and kill each other. They’re the ones who should be bombed*’ (p. 281, emphasis added).

While Penny’s opinions are shaped by what she sees on TV, the discussion between the two women is part of a wider phenomenon that involves prime-time TV programs in the US.

Evelyn Alsultany argues that even when prime-time TV dramas, such as *The Guardian*, *The Education of Max Bickford*, and *7th Heaven*, seek to resist hegemonic configurations of the monolithic Arab Muslim terrorist, they ‘participate in reworking U.S. sovereignty through narrating ambivalence about racism in the case of Arab and Muslim Americans’.³³ According to Alsultany, not only do discourses of the nation in crisis trump the Arab American plight, ‘but also inadvertently support US government initiatives in the “war on terror”’.³⁴ For instance, discussing an episode of *The Practice* in which an airline seeks to bar Arabs from being passengers on their airplanes in the name of safety and security after 9/11, Alsultany argues that the judge’s verdict ‘that these times are unlike others and therefore normal rules do not apply’ legitimizes racism: sacrifices to Arab and Muslim American civil rights must be made in the interim.³⁵

Similarly, in the novel, when Jassim is fired from his job, Marcus, Jassim’s boss, seems to use the same logic that the judge has used:

³³ Evelyn Alsultany, ‘The Prime-Time Plight of the Arab Muslim American after 9/11: Configurations of Race and Nation in TV Dramas,’ in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 204-28 (p. 206).

³⁴ Alsultany, p. 208.

³⁵ Alsultany, pp. 215-16.

‘Bottom line, we’re going to lose the business if I don’t make an act of good faith to the people we do business with.’
‘And firing me is your act of good faith.’
‘Yes.’ Though he didn’t like the way that sounded (p. 297).

In sacrificing Jassim, Marcus is following an ambivalent line of thought that these TV dramas articulate, namely, that ‘racism is wrong but essential’.³⁶ Nadine Naber believes that official federal government policies such as special registration, detentions, and deportations have fostered this approach by constituting particular subjects as potential enemies within the nation. Although Naber argues that these potential enemies are specifically working-class non-resident Muslim immigrant men from Muslim-majority countries, the novel shows that upper and middle class professionals are not above suspicion.

According to Muneer Ahmad, the post-9/11 events have proven the attempt of Arab and South Asian elites to escape the debasement of race by way of class to be the impossibility that those in the working class have always known it to be. Still, Ahmad acknowledges that while profiling has affected all classes of Arabs and South Asians, it has not affected all classes equally.³⁷ As Naber argues, in the context of the war on terror, ‘subjects perceived to be “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” [are not only seen] as a moral, cultural, and civilisational threat to the “American” nation, but also as a security threat’.³⁸ Naber insists that the reproduction of government policies and media discourses in day-to-day interactions at work, on the bus, or on the streets were more violent and life threatening in working class urban locations than in upper-middle-class locations. As Naber argues, socioeconomic class has intersected

³⁶ Alsultany, p. 208.

³⁷ Muneer Ahmad, ‘Homeland Insecurities: Racial Violence the Day after September 11’, *Social Text* 72, 20 (2002), 101-16 (p. 111).

³⁸ Nadine Naber, “‘Look, Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming!’ Cultural Racism, Nation-based Racism, and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11”, in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 276-304 (p. 280).

with race and gender as ‘dominant discourses tended to construct working-class masculinities as agents of terrorism and working-class femininities as passive victims of “the terrorist”’.³⁹

While Louise Cainkar agrees with Naber that racialization is a social and a historical process, she argues that the racialization process experienced by Arabs in the US differs in both historical timing and pretext from that of other minority groups in the US because the exclusion of Arab Americans from social and political privileges ‘postdates’ the historic exclusion of other marginalized groups.⁴⁰ Cainkar affirms that at its core, the social exclusion of Arabs in the US has been a racial project because ‘Arab inferiority has been constructed and sold to the American public using essentialist constructions of human difference’.⁴¹ Cainkar argues that the ways in which Arabs, Muslims, and people perceived to be Arabs and Muslims were held collectively responsible after the 9/11 attacks ‘should alone provide convincing evidence that their racial denouement had been sufficiently sealed before the attacks occurred’.⁴² Cainkar asserts that the violent act of any Arab or Muslim is rendered to represent entire societies and cultures and is portrayed as a mechanical, civilizational act.

³⁹ Naber, pp. 281-82. Linked to the representation of Arab and Muslim men as terrorists and Arab and Muslim women as passive victims is the representation of the terrorist as sexually and psychologically deviant. Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai argue that posters that appeared in midtown Manhattan only days after the attacks show a turbaned caricature of bin Laden being anally penetrated by the Empire State Building. The legend beneath reads, “The Empire Strikes Back” or “So you like skyscrapers, huh, bitch?” (p. 126). What these representations show, the authors believe, is that queerness as sexual deviancy is tied to the monstrous figure of the terrorist as a way to otherize and quarantine subjects classified as “terrorists”, and to normalize and discipline a population through these very monstrous figures (p. 126). See: Jasbir K. Puar and Amit S. Rai, ‘Monster, Terrorist, Fag: the War on Terrorism and the Production of Docile Patriots’, *Social Text* 72, 20 (2002), 117-48.

⁴⁰ Louise Cainkar, ‘Thinking Outside the Box: Arabs and Race in the United States’, in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 46-80 (p. 47).

⁴¹ Cainkar, p. 48.

⁴² Cainkar, p. 51.

This assumption underlies the FBI investigation of Jassim's actions. The questions that the FBI agents ask Jassim render him as the 'enemy within'. As Georgiana Banita puts it, the FBI agents 'reverses the normality/deviance opposition, seeing causality in inexplicable events and failing to find an explanation for occurrences that Jassim considers logical and related'.⁴³ In response, Jassim objects to the FBI accusations, pleading that being an Arab does not mean being a terrorist:

Jassim couldn't help himself. 'Means is one thing, motive is another. I am a scientist. I work to make water safe and available. I am a normal citizen who happens to be an Arab. Yes, I have access to the city's water supply, but I have no desire to abuse it. The mere fact that I am an Arab should not add suspicion to the matter' (p. 232).

The FBI agents, to use Banita's words, 'blow things out of proportion and create scenarios whose only merit is the unequivocal attribution of guilt' to Jassim.⁴⁴ The agents ignore Jassim's words of protest because they do not consider him as an individual of free will, but as a part of a collective racialized self.

In fact, as Suad Joseph explains, a 'damning designation' of the Arab 'as a not-independent, not autonomous, not-individual, not-free person' permeates 'scholarly and popular discourses on Arab religion, politics, and social order' in the US.⁴⁵ Joseph postulates that the construction of a citizen as 'a free individualist self' is represented in much popular and scholarly literature in the US 'as contrary to the Arab- self'.⁴⁶ These racialized misrepresentations have, according to Cainkar, 'established the preconditions for collective backlash after 9/11'.⁴⁷ Cainkar states that the backlash can be viewed as an act of defining the boundaries of whiteness and

⁴³ Banita, p. 248.

⁴⁴ Banita, p. 248.

⁴⁵ Suad Joseph, 'Against the Grain of the Nation – the Arab-', in *Arabs in America*, ed. by Suleiman, pp. 257-71, p. 258.

⁴⁶ Joseph, p. 259.

⁴⁷ Cainkar, p. 51.

argues that the imposition of collective guilt on Arabs and Muslims through public policies and popular actions is an outcome rather than a beginning of their racialization.⁴⁸ The discourse of security risk and assumptions about the innate characteristics of persons perceived to be Arabs and Muslims are institutionalized through homeland security and war on terror policies.⁴⁹

Cainkar's argument, insightful as it is, seems to eclipse the idea that Arabs are actively engaged in defining the boundaries of whiteness through their association with and dissociation from whiteness. Jassim's refusal to be pigeonholed as racialized potential terrorist in the above quotation is a case in point. Actually, a study conducted by Andrew Shryock in 2003 shows that Arabs are ten times more likely than the general population to call themselves 'other'. However, Shryock maintains, unlike many communities of color, Arabs are willing in large numbers to identify as 'white'.⁵⁰ Shryock argues that Arabs in the US are not discerned principally by themselves or others in relation to a color chart, much less a color line, 'but in relation to political boundaries and presumed loyalties that place Arabs and Muslims *outside* the American "racial hierarchy", with its recognizable patterns of abuse and redress'.⁵¹ Shryock maintains that the post-9/11 intensification of color

⁴⁸ Cainkar, p. 52.

⁴⁹ Cainkar, p. 60. Policies implemented by the US government after 9/11 include: detention, deportation and special registration. For the influence of these policies on people from the Middle East and South Asia, see: Salah D. Hassan, 'Arabs, Race and the Post-September 11 National Security State', *Middle East Report*, 224 (2002), 16-21. See also: Louise Cainkar, 'Post 9/11 Domestic Policies Affecting U.S. Arabs and Muslims: a Brief Review', *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, 24 (2004), 247-51. For a discussion of how the US federal government's response to 9/11 demonstrates the close relationship between immigration law and civil rights in the US, see: Susan M. Akram and Kevin R. Johnson's Akram, 'Race, Civil Rights, and Immigration Law after September 11, 2001: the Targeting of Arabs and Muslims', *NYU Annual Survey of American Law*, 58 (2001-2003), 295-355.

⁵⁰ Shryock, pp. 87-88.

⁵¹ Shryock, pp. 91-92, italics in original.

politics among Arab Americans is ‘an elaborately coded response to this exclusion’.⁵²

These discourses continually manifest themselves in the novel, especially in the thoughts and behaviors of Jack Franks, a retired army officer with a troubled personal past. Jack decides to keep an eye on Jassim and ultimately reports his movements to the FBI. Discourses of patriotism, othering and racialization all overlap in Jack’s decision:

These are some scary times we live in, he reasoned to himself. My number-one duty is to help protect my country. The president said that specifically, that it is our job to be the eyes and ears of the community. Besides, if it turns out to be nothing, then no harm done to anyone. Dammit, if you’re going to live in this country, you’re going to have to abide by the rules here.

Jack had no need to see beyond the act of what he was doing. For the first time in years he felt armed with a righteous and vital responsibility and therefore important, selfless (p. 173, italics in original).

Jack, to use Banita’s words, is a citizen ‘galvanized by Bush’s call to act as the eyes and ears of the government’.⁵³ While Jack senses the incongruity of this situation, he feels comfortable enough to report Jassim to the FBI because the US government, represented by the US president, has endowed him with the power to protect his country from foreigners and terrorists. The speeches of the president have inspired a feeling of pride in (white) Americans regardless of their class.⁵⁴

Similarly, through Penny, the novel seems to reveal the blindness that comes with patriotism and the consequences of a particular brand of propaganda. Though living in poverty herself, Penny nevertheless identifies with the nation through her

⁵² Shryock, p. 92.

⁵³ Banita, p. 246.

⁵⁴ See: Debra Merskina, ‘The Construction of Arabs as Enemies: Post-September 11 Discourse of George W. Bush’, *Mass Communication and Society*, 7 (2004), 157-75.

unwavering belief in the government's policy to wipe out terrorist hideouts outside the US. Penny's nationalist response to the president's speeches on American values of freedom and democracy is part and parcel of a long process of demarcating the borders of the nation through demonizing others:

If she had money she would have sent it to him [The US president]; if she had been younger, she would have enlisted, showed all those terrorists what Americans were made of, how they were continuing the great history of this country, getting out there and saving poor people from the oppression of living in their backward countries (p. 280).

Cainkar explains that the racialization of Arabs is tied to larger US global policies. The domestic aspect of this project is in the manufacturing of public consent which is needed to support, fund and defend these policies.⁵⁵ The mapping of cultural racism onto nation-based racism, Naber explains, has been critical in generating support for the idea that going to war 'over there' and enacting racism and immigrant exclusion 'over here' are essential to the project of protecting national security.⁵⁶

Penny has fully subscribed to the argument that the US is waging a war 'there' because the terrorists have attacked us 'here' and she feels proud of being American since this entails that she is a free and morally superior person. Here, Amaney Jamal's argument about the process of othering Arabs and Muslims is quite useful. Jamal asserts that in the case of Muslim and Arab Americans, Otherness is determined through a process by which the mainstream claims moral and cultural superiority in the process of producing an essentialized, homogenous image of Muslim and Arab Americans as nonwhites who are naturally, morally, and culturally inferior to real Americans. According to this logic, Jamal maintains, terrorism 'is not

⁵⁵ Cainkar, p. 49.

⁵⁶ Naber, "'Look, Mohammed the Terrorist is Coming!'", pp. 280-81.

the modus operandi of a few radical individuals, but a by-product of a larger cultural and civilizational heritage: the Arab and Islamic Other'.⁵⁷ Jamal maintains that the racialization of Arabs and Muslims by the mainstream, decades in the making, has manifested itself after 9/11 in support of discriminatory legislation and law enforcement.⁵⁸

Sawsan Abdulrahim reiterates the arguments made by Cainkar, Naber and Jamal that by virtue of their historical, cultural, and transnational connections to a perceived foreign enemy, Arab Americans are pushed outside the national consensus and marked as the “the enemy within”.⁵⁹ However, Abdulrahim argues that even in a post-9/11 political climate, Arab Americans continue to exercise individual and collective agency in organizing their relationship to whiteness. Abdulrahim argues that Arab Americans’ current interactions with political issues surrounding race and whiteness are neither monolithic nor homogenous, but are varied and contingent. Abdulrahim concludes that the process through which Arab immigrants in the US form racial identities ‘is highly subjective’ and that even racial marking of Arabs and Muslims in the post-9/11 environment ‘may not lead to a uniform and complete disillusionment with “whiteness”’.⁶⁰ That Arab Americans may not be naturally transforming to non-white racial subjects in the current political climate should be left open for exploration, Abdulrahim explains.

Abdulrahim’s argument reminds us that we need to adequately address the intersectionality of race, gender, class, religion, politics and ideology for a more

⁵⁷ Amaney Jamal, ‘Civil Liberties and the Otherization of Arab and Muslim Americans’, in Jamal and Naber, *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, pp. 114-30 (pp. 120-21).

⁵⁸ Jamal, pp. 126-27.

⁵⁹ Sawsan Abdulrahim, “Whiteness” and the Arab immigrant Experience’, in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 131-46 (p. 131)

⁶⁰ Abdulrahim, p. 145.

comprehensive examination of potential alliance building among the marginalized. In the novel, Salwa, aware as she is of anti-Arab prejudice, shows ambivalent attitudes towards the Mexican/Guatemalan gardener. Before Jake, the white American man with whom she has an affair, attacks her under the influence of drugs, Salwa seems to look derogatively at the Mexican/Guatemalan gardener. Salwa thinks that the Mexican/Guatemalan gardener is involved in the robbery of her car the last time she had visited Jake: ‘she wondered if he knew, or even if he had been responsible’ (p. 316). However, after Jake attacks Salwa and uses a racist discourse to insult her,⁶¹ she realizes that she is a racialized other and begins to identify with the Mexican/Guatemalan gardener: ‘In spite of the staccato way his words came at her and the thickness of his fingers, his *gentleness* overpowered her’ (p. 324, emphasis added). Salwa gradually realizes the geopolitical implications of the gardener’s attempt to rescue her: ‘He held her hand and squeezed, pumping *half a continent* of courage into her blood’ (p. 324, emphasis added).

Initially, the novel introduces the relationship between Salwa and the Mexican/Guatemalan gardener as a site of mistrust, conflict and disrespect. However, this relationship becomes one of interdependence and geopolitical identification. In this sense, the novel invites us to view the ethnic space as a site of contesting

⁶¹ Through Jake’s insistence on reminding Salwa of her Arabness while hitting, the novel draws our attention to the nature of this crime and invites us to think about it as a hate crime. At first the policeman states that Jake was “‘high [on drugs] as a kite” at the time he attacked Salwa, simplifying the crime and contextualizing it as a purely drug-related crime (p. 327). Later on, the policeman tells Jassim that it “‘was a crime of passion” (p. 327), hinting at a sexual affair. To understand Jake’s assault on Salwa, I believe we need to look at the broader picture in the plot and the overlapping discourses of patriotism, citizenship and anti-Arab racism. Muneer Ahmad argues that the hate crime killings before 9/11 were viewed as crimes of moral depravity, while the hate killings since 9/11 have been understood as crimes of passion, ‘[t]he passion in question is love of nation, the crimes a visceral reaction born out of patriotic fervor’ (p. 108). Seen from this perspective, I argue that Jake’s assault on Salwa can be viewed as his attempt to ‘defin[e] the boundaries of the whiteness’, to borrow Cankar’s words (p. 52). His insistence on reminding Salwa of her ethnic origin as an Arab is quite significant in this sense.

discourses. Indeed, we need to look at the rivalry among people of color to gain civil rights and access to the mainstream as a historical process dogged by conflicts and rifts as Muneer Ahmad explains. Ahmad argues that the events of post-9/11 exposed the precariousness of citizenship status for all people of color, immigrants and non-immigrants alike. The hate violence and racial profiling directed against Arabs, Muslims, and South Asians and the apparent African American and Latina/o support for the profiling of these communities provide an important example of how racial positions in the US have been reordered by 9/11, and how the citizenship status of all people of color has been further degraded.⁶²

Literature could be one of the channels for dialogue among people of color. In her discussion of how Arab American anthologies construct an Arab American identity, Michelle Hartman argues in ‘*Grandmothers, Grape Leaves, and Khalil Gibran: Writing Race in Anthologies of Arab American Literature*’ that *Food for Our Grandmothers* uses Arab American racialization as a tool in alliance building with other groups of color, while, at the same time, calling racial discourses into question. In this way, *Food for Our Grandmothers* engages with race and the racialization of Arab Americans and Arab Canadians in ways that can lead toward potentially more productive conceptualizations of Arab American identity.⁶³

Similarly, Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade argue that what South Asian Americans and Arab Americans share in their relations to the state is not just racial profiling but political profiling. It is on this basis that the affiliation between South Asian or Asian Americans and Arab Americans needs to be forged. These

⁶² Ahmad, p. 103.

⁶³ Michelle Hartman, ‘*Grandmothers, Grape Leaves, and Khalil Gibran: Writing Race in Anthologies of Arab American Literature*’, in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 170-203 (p. 201).

Asian/Arab American alliances are based on an understanding of the links between domestic crackdowns on immigrant rights and the globalization of the war on terror.⁶⁴

Once in a Promised Land seems to highlight the complexities involved in making these alliances. Salwa's upper-middle status may have influenced the way she has perceived the Mexican/Guatemalan gardener as a criminal. However, being herself a victim of a racist assault, Salwa shifts position. Still, the novel does not embrace a celebratory tone that romanticizes cross-ethnic dialogues and coalitions. As Naber warns, 'alliance-building is arduous work and is often tense and painful'.⁶⁵ Naber maintains that the aftermath of 9/11 affirmed historical polarizations of class, religion, and citizenship, particularly among communities targeted by 9/11 related bias, hate violence, and governmental policies. However, should post-9/11 circumstances be the point of reference for coalition building? Muneer Ahmad argues that Arab, Muslim, and South Asian communities have an opportunity to maintain the fight for all communities of color now that the enduring struggle against racial subordination has been visited upon them. Ahmad calls on communities of color in the US to forge necessary coalitions since these coalitions, Ahmad maintains, begin their work squarely within a framework of subordination inflected not only by race and immigration status, but by gender, class, and sexual orientation as well.⁶⁶

Steven Salaita, on the other hand, thinks that for Arab Americans a coalition with people of color should not be contextualized as a reaction to a single event, in

⁶⁴ Sunaina Maira and Magid Shihade, 'Meeting Asian/Arab American Studies Thinking Race, Empire, and Zionism in the US', *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 9 (2006), 117-40 (p. 126).

⁶⁵ Nadine Naber, "'So Our History Doesn't Become Your Future': the Local and Global Politics of Coalition Building Post September 11th", *Journal of Asian American Studies*, 5 (2002), 217-42 (pp. 237-38).

⁶⁶ Ahmad, pp. 111-12.

this case, 9/11. Instead, Salaita calls for challenging what he calls imperative patriotism: a particular type of discourse that, with technical and temporal variations, has existed continuously in the US. Salaita maintains that this term is drawn from a longstanding sensibility that nonconformity to whatever at the time is considered to be ‘the national interest is unpatriotic’.⁶⁷ According to Salaita, 9/11 did not really disrupt anti-Arab racism in any momentous way, but rather, it polarized attitudes that had been in place years before the word terrorism became common parlance. Salaita argues that since the racism Arab Americans face is also directed at other minorities, it seems only logical for Arab Americans to demystify the assumptions that underlie stereotypes commonly associated with Arab Americans and have been expressed through popular American culture in, among other media, television and film.⁶⁸ Salaita maintains that Arab Americans need to expose these stereotypes in conjunction with the minorities at whom racism has traditionally been directed to gain the type of recognition they actually seek, rather than unwanted post-9/11 platitudes.

Undoubtedly, *Once in a Promised* is a rich text. On the one hand, it represents the repercussions of 9/11 and post-9/11 on Arab Americans. On the other hand, it highlights the ambiguity of the position occupied by Arabs in US racial and ethnic discourses overall. The novel goes beyond representing the consequences on Arabs in the post-9/11 and, skilfully investigates (and complicates) the psychological, social, political and economic dimensions of the experiences of Arab Americans by questioning the concept of citizenship. The novel explores the intersections of class, gender and other socio-political factors with the post-9/11 epoch. However, I argue

⁶⁷ Salaita, ‘Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism’, p. 154.

⁶⁸ Salaita, p. 160.

where one might expect certainty towards the idea of coalition with people of color there is instead ambivalence. In this sense, the novel invites us to examine the consequences of the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses on the characters, mainly Salwa and Jassim and contributes to the ongoing debate on the components/features/limitations of the Arab American identity.

To start with, the prologue of the novel defines Salwa and Jassim as Arabs and Muslims and immediately introduces the discourses that lump Arabs and Muslims together as a homogeneous group: ‘Salwa and Jassim are both Arabs. Both Muslims. But of course they have nothing to do with what happened to the World Trade Center. *Nothing and everything*’ (pp. vii-viii, emphasis added). ‘Nothing and everything’ highlights the precarious position Arabs occupy in US racial hierarchies. Arabs are portrayed as a homogenous group with propensities for criminal conduct. As Susan M. Akram and Kevin R. Johnson stipulate, after 9/11, legislations passed by the federal government have ignored the view that individualized suspicion is necessary for police action, and therefore, have run afoul of the US Constitution.⁶⁹

The novel tries to draw attention to the fact that Salwa and Jassim are different because they have different socio-economic backgrounds. For instance, they disagree on their connection to the American life represented by the giant towels that Americans love:

‘They are as large as bedcovers,’ he [Jassim] had told Salwa when she bought a set for the first time.
‘They are luxurious,’ she had countered.
And therein lay their differences (p. 5, emphasis added).

⁶⁹ Akram and Johnson, p. 353.

Jassim and Salwa have different attitudes, different identities, different reactions to 9/11 and, as I will explain, different engagements with ethnic and racial discourses. The way Jassim and Salwa interact with whiteness is different. It is important to spell out these differences because they influence the way they interact with whiteness and respond to the events and the aftermath of 9/11, a difference that can be explained within a framework of racial and ethnic ambiguity that characterizes Arab experiences in the US.

Officially classified as whites, the experiences of Arabs and Americans of Arab descent do not necessarily reflect the privileges that whiteness promises. Leti Volpp argues that 9/11 facilitated the consolidation of a new identity category that grouped together persons who appear to be ‘Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim’. What has solidified this identity category is a particular racialization, wherein members of this group have been identified as terrorists, and disidentified as citizens.⁷⁰ In the American imagination, those who appear to be ‘Middle Eastern, Arab, or Muslim’ may be theoretically entitled to formal rights, but they do not stand in for or represent the nation. Instead, they are interpellated as antithetical to the citizen’s sense of identity. Citizenship in the form of legal status does not guarantee that they will be constitutive of the American body politic. In fact quite the opposite: the consolidation of American identity takes place against them.⁷¹

Jassim’s upper middle class status - gained by his white-collar job and his unwavering belief in the American Dream - makes him turn a blind eye to the potential deadly consequences of 9/11. Jassim continues to delude himself post 9/11

⁷⁰ Leti Volpp, ‘The Citizen and the Terrorist’, in *September 11 in History: A Watershed Moment?*, ed. by Mary L. Dudziak (Durham: Duke UP, 2003), pp. 147-162 (p. 147).

⁷¹ Volpp, p. 157.

by ignoring the harassment directed at him at work and in public spaces. He convinces himself that this has nothing to do with his ethnic origin (partly because he does not reflect on the significance of his ethnic origin). Jassim's response is to work even harder. At one point, Salwa tells Jassim about a call that she heard on the radio to round up Arabs in the US (in a fashion reminiscent of the infamous WWII internment of the Japanese). Jassim coolly changes the subject and turns to an article on recycling refuse. Ironically, the first words he mutters are: "The Japanese are incredible" (p. 58). That Jassim admires the Japanese for their technological advances but fails to relate to the horrible experience they had in the US during World War II, indicates that the scientist in Jassim, absorbed as he is in his work, cannot make any connection with the Japanese on the basis of a similar plight triggered by ethnic origin. Towards the end of the novel, Jassim reflects on the issues that have changed his life: "A dead boy and an incomplete fetus weigh[ing] the blood down with their unfulfilled promises" (p. 218). The post-9/11 backlash does not feature on his horizon.

Jassim's deluded belief in the American Dream renders the negative post-9/11 backlash irrelevant. If it affects him in any way, it makes him identify with disenfranchised *white* people. This explains his relationship with Penny. When Jassim feels that he is being harassed, he turns his attention to other white people for support. Jassim moves down the social hierarchy but remains affiliated with a white social group. It does not occur to him to make connections with other ethnic groups. His relationship with Penny can be understood, I argue, within the context of the precarious position Arabs occupy within US ethnic and racial discourses. Seen from this angle, Jassim's identity remains defined within a white social context, though

economically less privileged. Penny sympathizes with Jassim precisely because he is now a marginalized other, a fact that Jassim continually tries to deny. When she asks him “[d]o people give you a hard time these days?” (p. 165), Jassim stoically contends: “No, not so much” (p. 165).

Jassim’s self-delusion crystallizes when he and Penny come across a working class Jordanian couple at Wal-Mart. Jassim does not talk to them. Ironically, it is Penny who mouths a few words of sympathy with the woman in hijab, “I bet people give her a lot of grief these days” (p. 279). Jassim pretends not to have heard her comment. Jassim’s blindness to the plight of fellow Arabs from lower social classes indicates that he still locates his identity in a white context and obstinately refuses to align himself with people of color from lower classes. For Jassim, I argue, class supersedes color. That Jassim aligns himself with Penny and turns a blind eye to the working class Jordanian woman shows how self-constructed notions of upper middle class status and whiteness converge in shaping Jassim’s identity.

Through the different experiences of Jassim and Salwa, the novel complicates the relationship between citizenship and identity for Arab Americans. Misled by the security of his job and his high standard of living, Jassim thinks that he is a good US citizen, and consequently, is far from the government’s ‘witchcraft hunt’ for terrorists. Salwa, on the other hand, is more alert than Jassim to the fragility of her citizenship and is aware that citizenship for an Arab in America is not a guarantee against harassment and racist assaults. Salwa realizes that she does not represent the US nation and her citizenship can be stripped away from her easily.

Salwa’s gender and social class among other social realities set her apart from Jassim. While she gets married to Jassim and pursues her American Dream in her

own way, Salwa is attentive to the changes brought about by 9/11 on herself and other Arabs on different levels. Instead of absorbing herself in her work in order to cope with the post-9/11 hostilities, Salwa, avidly but aimlessly, tries to open Jassim's eyes to the dangers surrounding them. Their relationship begins to crumble when the two hold different views on the latest events. Salwa thinks that the post-9/11 war on terror is a justification to invade the Middle East and control its riches, but Jassim's lack of interest in her views deepens the rift that originated from Jassim's refusal to have children. Salwa turns to Jake to fill the void.

I argue that Salwa's miscarriage, estrangement from her husband, her nostalgia for her mother and sisters and the exclusionary nationalist discourses in the US post 9/11 have converged to disrupt Salwa's ongoing Americanization process and to highlight her non-mainstream status. Salwa's angry response to the white woman who refuses to work with her at the bank once she discovers that Salwa is an Arab, underscores Salwa's refusal to be pushed to the margins of the nation. Rendered as a racialized other, Salwa contemptuously and angrily asks the woman: "Would you like to work with a Mexican man or an American lesbian?" (p. 114). Instead of exposing the inherent racism in the white woman's deed, Salwa derogatively drags other marginalized groups into the picture. Here, I turn to Muneer Ahmad's argument about ethnic groups and citizenship in the US. Ahmad insists that immigrants are made American when they are racialized as subordinate. Ahmad explains:

We might think of the resulting racial hierarchy as a citizenship exchange market in which the relative belonging of any one racial or ethnic community fluctuates in accordance with prevailing social and

political pressures. What is more, communities of color learn the *imperative* of subordination of others.⁷²

In competing for Americanization, Salwa has first to dissociate herself from other minorities and then to subordinate them. Salwa's response reveals a tension that continues to characterize Arab relations with other ethnic groups. Through Salwa's angry reaction, the novel demonstrates, to borrow Banita's words, 'that after September 11, Arab Americans have fallen one step behind other social outsiders, being branded not only as second-rate citizens but also as social hazards'.⁷³

Seen from this perspective, Salwa's angry response to the woman's racist comment is then an attempt to defy an unexpected social downgrading. Just as her husband imagines that his white-collar job secures his white status, Salwa is not too different. The white woman's comment shocks Salwa because Salwa perceives herself as part of the mainstream. Salwa is doubly flabbergasted here because she is being racialized at the very place which provides her with the means to penetrate and subdue whiteness. When Joan, Salwa's boss at the real estate office, hands Salwa the US flags to put on her car, Salwa feels that she has been pushed to the margin. She realizes that mainstream Americans do not consider her part of them; rather they perceive her as a racialized other. Salwa ponders:

In the past month that distance had been stronger, an aftereffect of what had happened in New York and Washington, like the cars sprouting American flags from their windows, antennas to God, electric fences willing her to leave (p. 54).

Salwa feels abandoned because she is no longer part of the mainstream. She is seen by (white) Americans as a foreigner.

⁷² Ahmad, p. 106, italics in original.

⁷³ Banita, p. 246.

When she thinks about her life, Salwa identifies the post-9/11 anti-Arab prejudice as a major force of change. In this sense, she differs from Jassim who does not concede that the post-9/11 anti-Arab racism has influenced his life:

It was not just her Lie that had brought distance between her and her husband and surrounded them with tension, it was the *patriotic* breathing of those around them. *American flags* waving, pale hands willing them to go home or agree. Jassim didn't seem to be bothered, but Salwa could not tolerate it, those red, white, and blue fingers flapping at her, flicking her away (p. 185, emphasis added).

As the above quotation shows, the influence of the post-9/11 hostilities is felt by Salwa only as much as they distance her from the mainstream. In other words, the backlash disrupts Salwa's gradual admittance into whiteness originally facilitated by virtue of her upper-middle social class status.

Indeed, at the heart of Salwa's engagement with whiteness is her attempt to create parallels between the US and her country of origin in a way that transforms the very American concepts, people and cultural tokens to a version that accommodates her as a *white* American citizen:

Not for the first time Salwa wondered why Joan, who was so very American and patriotic, reminded her of someone from home. Not anyone in particular, just someone whose warm nosiness forced its way into your heart, whether or not you liked the person or agreed with her politics (p. 205).

While Bill Ashcroft might describe this passage as an empowering post-colonial strategy of transforming habitation, I argue that Salwa merrily associates Joan with home in spite of the latter's strong American patriotism because, unlike Petra, Joan represents sexual normativity. In other words, Joan is part of the mainstream to which Salwa wants to belong. This is in sharp contrast to Salwa's relationship with Petra, the white lesbian at the bank. Salwa dissociates herself from Petra because

Petra is sexually marginalized. When Petra tells Salwa that Molly, Petra's partner, was moving out with a man, Salwa is perplexed: "It must be awful." Really, how awful, and how odd to feel such *sympathy* and *disgust* all in one moment' (p. 183, emphasis added). Salwa thinks that she is part of the mainstream. Indeed, she refuses to be part of a stigmatized and a marginalized group. She identifies with a white heterosexual woman, but does not identify with a white lesbian.⁷⁴

It is in these circumstances that Jake and Salwa connect. Her relationship with him, I argue, becomes Salwa's unconscious attempt to reinstate herself as a white person:

Against all that she knew to be right in the world, and well aware that *as friends* was one of those lines Americans tossed back and forth without meaning, she entered his apartment and stood, awkward, out of place (p. 207, italics in original).

The text equates Jake with Americanness. Jake's behavior, physical appearance and life style are often described as American.⁷⁵ For instance, when Salwa enters Jake's apartment, she is astounded by the giant speakers. She mulls, "(what was it about Americans and speakers and music?)" (p. 207). When he offers her a drink, she asks herself "*What was the American obsession with ice cubes?*" (208, italics in original). After Jake kisses her at lunch time, Salwa tries hard to explain this incident in an American (read: white = mainstream) context: "Salwa tried to focus, to put her entire being into her work. That was the American way, after all, wasn't it?" (p. 189).

⁷⁴ After her miscarriage, when Salwa returns to work, she sees a group of children going to school. Salwa focuses her attention on a blond girl: 'That tiny one at the end, the one with thin *blond* hair pulled tight into rubber bands' (p. 100, emphasis added). That Salwa focuses on this blond girl may indicate that the baby she had miscarried could not have been too different from this *blond* girl. Seen from this perspective, Salwa seems to look at herself as a white person.

⁷⁵ In fact, Jake's parents are US diplomats. In other words, Jake does not represent America on the personal level, but certainly on the official level. He represents an all-American lineage.

However, once Salwa realizes the falsity of the American Dream and discovers that Jake is a drug addict who is actually manipulating her emotions, she begins to 'see' and somehow 'identify' with people of color (represented by the Guatemalan gardener whom she mistakes for a Mexican and suspects for breaking into her car). The first time she sees him, while going to Jake's flat, she barely notices him, barely sees him. She actually manages to see a tiny thing as the logo of the company on the pickup truck, but she fails to see the person standing in front of her (p. 206). The second time she sees him, however, she has mixed feelings towards him. On the one hand, she suspects him of breaking into her car. On the other hand, she contemplates the troubles he and his fellow gardeners have undergone to cross the borders and live in the US.

After being attacked by Jake, Salwa decides to speak to the gardeners and '*give them a smile*' (p. 320, emphasis added). This, as I have suggested earlier, can be read as an attempt to identify with people of color. Salwa's decision to talk to the gardeners comes on the heels of her discovery that she is a racialized other. She has proof of this in Jake's insistence on reminding her of her Arabness while hitting her (p. 322). This may indicate that Jake attempts to 'defin[e] the boundaries of whiteness', to borrow Cainkar's words.⁷⁶

Ironically, the minute Salwa identifies with people of color, Jassim firmly holds Penny's white hand, as if - to paraphrase a quote from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's*

⁷⁶ Cainkar, 'Thinking Outside the Box', p. 52. It is highly symbolic that Jake hits Salwa with the Japanese painting. While it may remind us of the horrors of the Japanese internment during the WWII and creates a parallel with the current plight of Arabs in the post-9/11, it also shows (symbolically) how the dominant group creates rifts among people of color by mobilizing them against each other as Muneer Ahmad argues in 'Homeland Insecurities'.

House - his very existence depends on it.⁷⁷ Penny and Jassim walk out of the restaurant “[a]rm in arm. *Linked outcasts*” (p. 324, emphasis added). Though he recognizes himself as an outcast, Jassim is happy to be a white outcast or at least linked/affiliated to whiteness. Thrown out of the more privileged white castle, Jassim clings to its margins. Salwa, on the other hand, realizes too late that she is not welcome at the white people’s party: she looks for other survival options. The novel seems to suggest that it is only at a moment of weakness, or probably, despair that the less privileged Arabs, represented by a displaced *woman*, *begin* to identify with people of color, while the more privileged Arabs, represented by a *man* who had seen better days, turn to lower class white Americans.

I would like to finish my analysis of *Once in a Promised Land* by referring to an article by Sarah M. A. Gualtieri in which she analyzes a historical incident that clarifies the ambiguous position Arabs have been occupying in ethnic and racial discourses since their arrival in the US. In ‘Strange Fruit? Syrian Immigrants, Extralegal Violence, and Racial Formation in the United States’, Gualtieri argues that a study of the history of ideas about Arabs in the US as a ‘race’ in the pre-World War II period is of great importance for understanding the ways in which Arab Americans have sought to position themselves within and benefit from racial hierarchies that perpetuate racist discourse, most frequently and detrimentally directed at African Americans. Gualtieri discusses the story of Nola Romey, a Syrian immigrant who

⁷⁷ ‘Nora, darling, you’re dancing as if your life depended on it’ (Act 2, Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*). These words are spoken by Torvald when Nora was trying to distract him from reading the letter (which reveals her forgery) by dancing with fervor, wildness and passion. Similarly, Jassim’s firm grip of Penny’s hand is an attempt to distract himself from facing the harsh reality of being non-white. Holding Penny’s hand is symbolically a survival strategy for Jassim just as dancing is a survival strategy for Nora in that scene.

was lynched by mobs in the early 1900s.⁷⁸ Gualtieri argues that Romey's death is not just one of these rare occurrences when mobs lynched white men as the *New York Evening Herald* viewed it because this view, Gualtieri maintains, misses the more complex work of race at this particular time and this particular place. Gualtieri argues that the events surrounding Romey's lynching 'reveal that the whiteness of Syrians is best conceived as being probationary, its credibility periodically called into question by government authorities and public opinions'.⁷⁹

According to Gualtieri, the response of the Syrian community, represented by the insistence of the Syrian newspaper *al-Shaab* that 'Syrians were *fully white*', shows that Romey's 'whiteness' mattered to Syrians because his lynching summoned fears among them that they had become, in that instant, surrogate blacks.⁸⁰ The case, Gualtieri argues, provides evidence as to how Syrians were racialized by dominant white society and reveals a history of conscious race-making on the part of Syrians, a history of defining their status as white in opposition to African Americans and Asian Americans. In this sense, Gualtieri argues, the lynching reveals that whiteness is not an ahistorical, self-evident category, but one that was historically constructed and contested, and which has had different implications for different groups.⁸¹

Amaney Jamal argues that after 9/11 Arab Americans have not only experienced an increase in discrimination but also have seen the legal system turn

⁷⁸ The practice of lynching, in which mobs of varying sizes seized persons, often while they were in police custody, and killed them, had been on the rise since the late nineteenth century, when the 'New South' began to adopt its infamous Jim Crow laws. These laws erected a stringent policy of racial segregation, disenfranchised blacks, and encouraged the exercise of frequent and horrific violence against those who allegedly violated community standards.

⁷⁹ Gualtieri, Sarah M. A., 'Strange Fruit? Syrian Immigrants, Extralegal Violence, and Racial Formation in the United States', in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 147-69 (pp. 154-55).

⁸⁰ Gualtieri, p. 165, italics in original.

⁸¹ Gualtieri, p. 166

against them. Not only is the denial of their Americanness more pervasive than ever, but the assumption of their guilt by ethnic association has never been more pronounced. Arabs and Muslims are seen and monitored as enemies residing within.⁸² Nevertheless, I argue that post-9/11 anti-Arab racism and violence has not led Arab Americans to completely disavow whiteness nor has it created a genuine desire to align themselves with people of color. The precarious position Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in the US has had a very long history. As a heterogeneous community divided by disparate socio-economic, political, ideological, religious and historical backgrounds and experiences, Arab Americans interact differently with whiteness. While Arabs unanimously condemned the terrorist attacks of 9/11, they have responded differently to the post-9/11 backlash and have expressed ambivalent attitudes towards their position in the ethnic and racial discourses in the US.

As Gualtieri puts it, the lynching of Nola Romey forms ‘part of the sediment on which later racialization projects were, and are, being built’.⁸³ This sediment, the novel shows, permeates Jassim and Salwa’s reactions to post-9/11 anti-Arab racism. Just as members of the Syrian community in Gualtieri’s article have insisted on identifying themselves as whites, Jassim and Salwa resist marginalization and assert their whiteness by befriending white people in post-9/11. In this sense, the post-9/11 anti-Arab racism may not necessarily lead to dissociation from whiteness; on the contrary, it might reinforce an attachment to it.

⁸² Amaney Jamal, ‘Conclusion: Arab American Racialization’, in *Race and Arab Americans Before and After 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 318-26 (p. 321).

⁸³ Gualtieri, p. 169.

4.2 Concluding remarks

I have concentrated in this thesis on exploring the thematic differences between Arab British and Arab American women writers. In particular, I have argued that these differences result from two different Arab immigration and settlement experiences on both sides of the Atlantic. In this way, Arab literary productions in Britain and the US engage with questions of cultural identity, ethnic and racial relations and the diasporic experience. The ambiguous position Arabs occupy in the ethnic and racial discourses in Britain and the US influences Arab British and Arab American literary productions in various ways.

While Arabs in the US are officially classified as Caucasian/White, they are popularly perceived as non-whites. On the other hand, an Arab identity in Britain is subsumed by a South Asian-dominated Muslim British identity. While Arabs occupy a contested and unclear space in studies on race and ethnicity in both countries, this position has differently intersected with Arab literary representations, socio-economic, political, historical issues and market and publishing interests in both countries. On the one hand, works by Arab British women writers show a tendency to explore trans-cultural and cross-ethnic alliances and coalitions in a more pronounced manner than those of their Arab American peers. On the other hand, Arab American women novelists have concentrated on exploring from within the contradictions of Arab American communities and tried to improve the image of Arab populations who have been subjected to a long term process of stereotyping in American literary and popular productions.

As I have shown in this thesis, the works of Arab British writers Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela and Fadia Faqir foreground trans-cultural dialogues and

cross-ethnic alliances. The Arab characters they portray cross cultural barriers and are involved in trans-cultural socio-political relations. Regardless of their social classes and their national origins, the protagonists of these writers productively enter the ethnic border zone and transform it into a fertile ground for solidarity with women from different cultural backgrounds. The works of Arab British women writers do not, in the name of unity and solidarity, gloss over socio-economic and political differences among the women they represent. In fact, difference becomes a site for investigating commonalities. In this sense, the works of Soueif, Aboulela and Faqir show a commitment to approaching the politics of location as a site for understanding particularized experiences within a global framework.

While the works of Arab American novelists Diana Abu-Jaber and Laila Halaby show an understanding of the significance of trans-cultural dialogues and cross-ethnic alliances, their works tend to explore from within the contradictions of Arab American communities. In this way, these authors strategically employ their creative skills to ‘humanize’ members of their communities by rendering them as normal American citizens. Through a strategy of intertextuality that interpolates the Western literary canon and Hollywood productions, Abu-Jaber presents her Gatsby-like idealist and romantic protagonist, Han, in a way that challenges misrepresentations of Arabs as jealous, superstitious and irrational. Similarly, by narrating the stories of four Arab girls who live in the US and Palestine, Halaby’s *West of the Jordan* reflects the heterogeneity of Arab women and demonstrates how the intersectionality of gender, class and age shapes their identities differently within a communal cultural context.

As all novels highlight the daily experiences of their protagonists and present their interactions with Arab and non-Arab characters, the reader is given a chance to examine the different socio-economic and political contexts in which these characters live. The different ways in which Arab immigrants have historically interacted with the socio-economic and political structures in their hostlands have influenced the way in which the aftermath of 9/11 is represented by Arab British and Arab American women writers. While Arab American novelist Laila Halaby sets her novel *Once in a Promised Land* in post-9/11 Arizona and investigates how the war on terror has influenced Arab Americans' ethnic identities, citizenships and socio-political beliefs, Arab British women writers have not yet explored these themes in depth.

I argue that this (lack of) representation partly reflects different racialization patterns that Arabs have undergone on both sides of the Atlantic. The long British colonial history in the Indian subcontinent and the 'complicated history of U.S. intervention in the Arab world'⁸⁴ have influenced in different ways Arab experiences in both countries post-9/11. As Arab communities are not as ethnically and politically visible as South Asian Muslim communities, a South Asian-dominated political Muslim British identity has become the focus of a popular and institutional anti-terror discourse in Britain. Arab Americans, on the other hand, have seen their ethnic identities and their Arab cultural heritage increasingly being transformed into a site of popular and institutional racism. As Amaney Jamal puts it, 9/11 'has put the spotlight on Arabs as never before'.⁸⁵

⁸⁴ Jamal, p. 322-23.

⁸⁵ Jamal, 'Conclusion', p. 322.

The differences between Arab British and Arab American writers need to be further examined. I propose that an investigation of the themes expressed by Arab British and Arab American men writers be carried out to enrich our understanding of the cultural commonalities and differences between the two sets of writers and to expand our understanding of Arab diasporic identities. In addition, an examination of specific themes in the works of Arab Australian writers like Nada Awar Jarrar and Randa Abdel-Fattah in conjunction with those of Arab British and Arab American writers would enhance our understanding of the concept of Arabness in the twenty first century. Arabness, I contend, can be scrutinized through examining how non-Arab characters are portrayed in Arab literary productions. Specifically, studying how Arab characters interact with white/non-white characters can be illuminating. In addition to these areas of research, I think it is quite important to investigate the way Arab masculinities have been represented by Arab women writers in diaspora pre- and post-9/11. While this project may require a large corpus of literary and cultural productions, I believe it will reveal significant aesthetic and cultural aspects of the role Arab women writers in diaspora play in reflecting and *shaping* contemporary Arab cultural identity.

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