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Gamil Mohammed Al-Amrani  
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**MULTIPLE LITERACIES, FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES  
ARAB STUDENTS AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES**

MULTIPLE LITERACIES, FRAGMENTED IDENTITIES  
ARAB STUENTS AT AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies

By

Gamil Al-Amrani  
Taiz University  
Bachelor of Arts in English Literature and Linguistics, 2002  
University of Arkansas  
Master of Arts in Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies, 2007

August 2011  
University of Arkansas

## **ABSTRACT**

This dissertation is a combination of ethnography and case study which describes the social and cultural context of literacy acquisition among Arab students at the University of Arkansas. I examine the power relations that define this minority group in the larger social context and describe how these relations shape, transform, and sometimes threaten their cultural identities in the classroom. The dissertation investigates the different social and cultural factors that facilitate or obstruct their learning process, factors such as age, gender, religion, and marital status. It explains how the students' acquisition of literacy exists within a larger dynamic process of social and cultural identification, assuming that cultural identity is a dynamic social construct that depends on the environment and setting. Finally, the dissertation describes the students' fears, hopes, and stereotypes, helping teachers recognize when there is a cultural problem and how to solve it in a culturally sensitive fashion.

This dissertation is approved for recommendation  
to the Graduate Council.

Dissertation Director:

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Dr. David Jolliffe

Dissertation Committee:

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Dr. Felicia Lincoln

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Dr. Mounir Farah

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**DEDICATION**

I dedicate this dissertation to the families who lost their dear ones in the revolutionary tsunami of 2011 that swept the whole Arab world. Your loved ones brought the best in us, reminded us of who we actually are, and restored our hope and dignity!

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

In “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” Spivak (1988) raises a philosophical question that continues to haunt many social and cultural conversations. The subaltern cannot speak, and once she speaks, she loses her subalternity. Spivak’s female subaltern, Bhuvaneshwari Bhudari, an active Indian nationalist, could not speak and committed suicide, transforming the dreadful social text of “sati-suicide” (an expression of wife’s grief) into a radical rejection of the colonial situation, and of the inaccurate representations of women in the dominant masculine discourse of her time. In the same way, minority groups have frequently been represented, spoken for, and ultimately silenced, further emphasizing their subordination. The modern social critic subconsciously objectifies the experience of the minorities, depicting them as victims of a linear dominating and hegemonic power of some external force, usually the majority. What is lost in these depictions is a deeper understanding of the ambivalence of the colonial situation, the anxiety of the dominant majority, and the power, diversity and resistance of minorities.

In schools, colonial cultural models of education have dominated western academia for decades. Standardized channels and codes of learning (dialects, exams, and publications) marginalize subaltern groups much further, creating a suffocating environment for the subaltern’s learning and economic advancement. On the other hand, literacy scholars have created a new paradigm of literacy studies, the ideological model of literacy, which emphasizes the social and cultural nature of learning processes and identity construction. The new paradigm of literacy studies expands the definition of literacy to include several social and cultural variables that contextualize the teaching-learning process. This new approach, though still another attempt by the intellectual left

to speak for the subaltern, strives to highlight minorities' perspectives about learning and the diversity of their population and expectations. Au, for example, (1993) observes that "literacy practices are very much a part of culture" (p. 34), and Gee (1990) emphasizes that "literacy has no effects--indeed, no meaning--apart from the particular cultural contexts in which it is used, and it has different effects in different contexts" (pp. 61-62). This dissertation analyzes the social and cultural conditions that surround the process of literacy (or more accurately literacies) acquisition among male Arab students at the University of Arkansas (female students are not included for some gender issues which will be explained later in the discussion). It investigates the different social and cultural factors that facilitate or obstruct their learning process, factors such as age, gender, religion, and marital status and explains how the students' acquisition of literacy exists within a larger dynamic process of social and cultural identification, assuming that cultural identity is a dynamic social construct that depends on the environment and setting. Then, the dissertation analyzes the power relations that define this minority group in different locations outside school and describes how these relations shape, transform, and sometimes threaten the students' cultural identities in the classroom. Finally, the dissertation describes the students' fears, hopes, and stereotypes, helping teachers recognize when there is a cultural problem and how to solve it in a culturally sensitive fashion.

## **RESEARCH BACKGROUND**

### **Who is an Arab?**

The question, "who is an Arab," represents one of the most controversial issues in Arabs' history. Several attempts to answer this question have concluded that Arabs are

the people who speak Arabic, inhabit the Arab Peninsula, the Middle East and North Africa, or come from Arabic speaking descendants. Still, these definitions are not satisfying. Can we call a Westerner an Arab just because he or she speaks Arabic? Or call the Copts of Egypt, the Berbers of Algeria, and the Kurds in Iraq Arabs given that they inhabit those Arab and Middle Eastern Countries? How much of an Arab remains in a third or fourth generation immigrant in the USA or Britain of Arab decedents (most of them do not even speak Arabic)? Some of these immigrants do not consider themselves Arabs anymore. These and many other questions remain controversial.

Some historians associate Arabism with Islam but fail to address Arab Christians and Arab Jews. Others define Arabs based on feelings and emotions: an Arab is a person who feels and behaves like one. For example, Jabra I. Jabra defines an Arab as “anyone who speaks Arabic as his own language and consequently feels as an Arab” (qtd. in Patai 13). This makes the term, Arab, as blurry and inconsistent as emotions can get. Finally, some elevate the term, Arab, from ethnic into a quality term where a person is called an Arab if he or she adheres to some of the core values of the Bedouin tribal society, values such as *Murūʿá* (ready response to help), *Nakhwa* (readiness to volunteer out of pride), *Wafāʿ* (a good deed is often repaid doubly), and *Maʿrūf* (disinterested help) (Hamady, 1960, pp. 29-30). According to these scholars, the quality of being an Arab can be lost if a person violates or fails to behave according to the ideal social and cultural codes of Arabism.

This study does not attempt to define the term, Arab; however, for some needed clarification later in the discussion, it summarizes some of widely known cultural markers of Arabism. First, a sense of Arabism undoubtedly exists that transcends all the

geographical, national and religious distinctions. Bernard Lewis defines an Arab as follows:

The Arabs may be a nation; they are not as yet a nationality in the legal sense. A man who calls himself an Arab may be described in his passport as of Syrian or Lebanese, Jordanian or Egyptian, Iraqi or Arabic nationality. There are Arab states, and indeed a league of Arab states, but as yet no single Arab state, of which all Arabs are nationals...But if Arabism has no legal content, it is none the less real. The pride of an Arab in his Arabdom and his consciousness of the bonds that bind him to other Arabs, past and present, are no less intense. (qtd. in Hamady 18)

Despite the dividing politics of Arab governments, and the international pressures and alliances, most Arabs dream of an Arab unity; some swear this unity will happen one day. Whether in the cold mountains of Yemen, or the hot deserts of Egypt and Sudan, a sense of pride of Arabism and a deep sympathy with Arabs' problems are widely felt; examples can be seen in angry street demonstrations in many Arab cities responding to any major political or military attack on the Arab land or people, or the 2011 Arab revolutions that spread and influenced each other, rejecting Arab dictators and political corruptions.

This sense of Arabism increases as Arabs cheer their history- the golden age of Islam (8th to 13th centuries), when the Islamic empires dominated most of the planet and pioneered in math, philosophy, science, arts, navigation and technology. When Arabs speak of Avicenna, al-kindi, Ibn khaldūn, Abbas ibn firnās, or Ibn al-Haitham their pride has no limits:

There are probably no people more proud or more convinced of the merits, and even superiority, of their religion, customs, tradition, and ways of life. Even the Bedouins, who live a hard life with few worldly goods or

comforts, are extremely proud of their background, freedom and self-dependence. (Lebkicher et al, 1952, p. 162)

In most of their conversations, Arabs express a sense of nostalgia, romanticizing their glorious past, traditional heritages, and ancient civilizations. They escape their harsh contemporary realities of divided politics, weak economies, and repressed cultures by reminding themselves, and the people around them, of their ancestors' greatness and the hope of regaining a fading glory.

In terms of their physical description, it is hard to make generalizations about their looks. Arabs have imported many genetic features of almost every race and ethnicity as a result of hundreds of years of Islamic empires ruling over different countries and regions, and during many regimes of colonization and invasions of Arab lands, producing a mixture of colors and shapes. However, the following passage summarizes the physical characteristics of most Arabs:

A Mediterranean [mostly an Arab] is a white man [though some Arabs are blacks, such as Sudanese] of variable stature-as whites go, usually short to medium. As a rule, his skin is some shade of white- from pink or peaches-and –cream to light brown. His body is relatively hairy; his head is covered a heavy growth of straight, wavy or ringleted hair, usually fine in texture. Ordinarily it is dark-black or brown. Blond hair may be seen but it is the exception. Every shade of color of the eyes appears among the Mediterraneans. Coal black is exceptional, a dark of medium brown most common. (Hamady, 1960, p. 21)

**Arabs and Tradition:** *“he who leaves his tradition is lost”*

Tradition in Arabic culture represents originality and authenticity. Social norms, personal behaviors, values, concepts about life, learning, and communication are mostly embedded in traditional molds that resist change. In his theoretical work, *al-Thābit wa al-Mutahawwil* (literally, “the constant and the changeable”), Ali Ahmed Said, commonly

known as Adonis, defines some of the major reasons behind such traditional “fixity” (Bhabha’s term meaning the unchangeability) of Arabs. Adnois argues that *al-Thabit* (the constant, the unchangeable tradition) is generated and maintained in the traditional religious Discourse<sup>1</sup>, the text, the authority, the power, and the whole system in general. In this religious Discourse (the Discourse of Islam), knowledge can be divided in three sections: First, there is the knowledge that God kept for Himself, and no human knows about it, such as the human soul, fate, His status and His shape; second, there is the knowledge that He bestowed on his prophets to teach their followers. In case of Islam, it is the Holy Quran and the *Sunnah* (the Prophet’s sayings and actions). Third, there is the knowledge that Muslim scholars can extract or illustrate through a close reading of the Quran, or the Sunnah, and real life experience. Islam emphasizes the responsibility of Islamic scholars to discover this knowledge and teach it to the public, on the condition that no science should go against the Islamic tradition as manifested in the first two branches of knowledge. Examples of forbidden knowledge might include magic, any philosophical questioning of God’s shapes and forms, and deforming God’s creations. Therefore, all knowledge comes from and according to some fixed traditional sources (The Quran, the Sunnah, and Muslim jurisprudence), and any change or a new source is considered a threat to the religious teaching. It is evident that the way to learn something begins in believing in the religious texts and sources. This perception of the perfection of tradition creates a fear of the new. Change means lack in tradition, a very threatening approach to the religious discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Gee’s concept of Discourse with a capital D, meaning not only the language but the other “stuff” that comes with it. The concept will be explained later in the literature review chapter.



Then, Adonis (1994) tracks the development of the Islamic Arabic history of knowledge and literature and argues that religious resources remained dominant. In his reading of some traditional texts, namely al-Shāfiyā and Ahmed's and others, he explains how some of the pillars of Arabic cultures (language, poetry, and politics) kept their traditional Islamic themes and content. First, language was very closely related to religion, mostly because the Quran is considered God's word. The Quran was delivered in Arabic and promised to keep Arabic alive until the Day of Judgment. The Quran came in a period when Arabic pre-Islamic poetry was the dominant literary genre. Pre-Islamic poets claimed to be the most eloquent speakers in Arabia, and the best of their poetry was written and posted as monuments on the walls of the wholly shrine in Makkah. However, the Quran was much more eloquent and miraculous to the most articulate Arab poet; it emerged as the best example of Arabic language and its perfect version (God's own words). This made the Quran the first and original source for all the Arabic grammars and linguistics that came after. Schooling and education have been based on reading this text; examples for grammar and style have always come from Quranic verses. For decades, Arabs have judged the articulation and fluency of Arab poets by the closeness and the "correctness" of their language, in comparison to the ultimate fluency of the Quranic text.

On the other hand, according to Adonis, there is al-*Mutahawwil* (the continually changing), which is represented in some political movements, literary productions, and secular philosophies that broke from the traditional religious texts. These new movements and ideas were always suppressed by the dominant religious Discourse. Adonis celebrates these trends and movements of innovations, which began as early as the time of the

Prophet Mohammed's death (632 AD); for example, the Aws and Khazraj (two tribes in al-Madinah) claimed the Caliphhood, because they were the first two tribes to collectively believe in the Prophet and support Islam. However, their wish was denied, and the Caliphhood remained in the *Quraishi* tribe of Mohammed. Then, some other conflicts and political movements resisted the dominant religious Discourse. Some of these movements appeared after the assassinations of the second, third, and fourth Caliphs. Then, a divide happened between Sunnis and Shiites that still exists today, based on the argument that Caliphhood has to remain in the Prophet's family, Ali and his sons (the Prophet's two grandsons). There were other resisting movements that reflected new ideologies; a good example is the mysticism and asceticism of Sufism, or Kharijites, one of the first rebel groups that "went out" against the Caliphhood of both Uthman and Ali. These movements and philosophies were always suppressed by the dominant religious Discourse, diminishing some and silencing others.

### **Social and cultural characteristics of Arabs**

In discussing the cultural and social characteristics of Arabs, I fear running the risk of generalization and stereotyping. However, I will attempt to summarize only a few of the commonly known behaviors that would be useful in my discussion of Arab students later in the study. First, a common cultural marker that unites Arabs is their language, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA). MSA is diglossic, meaning Arabs use two different languages: a colloquial version for speaking, and a formal standard version for reading, writing, and other formal registers. In some Arab countries, these two versions are almost two different languages. Colloquial versions are mostly pidgins and creoles of Arabic and other foreign languages or dialects as a result of direct contacts, for example,

Arabic and French in Morocco and Algeria, earlier French colonies. On the other hand, the standard Arabic version represents a modernized version of the Classical Arabic Language, the language of the Quran. It is the standard language for academia, publication, the media, and business. This standard version is identical in all Arab countries, creating one of the most important components of an Arab Identity.

Arabs rejoice their language, mainly because it is the language of the Quran (God's revelation to the prophet Mohammed through Gabriel). As I explained earlier, this sacred book was sent in Arabic as a linguistic challenge, and a prophet's miracle, to the dwellers of Makkah and the Arabian Peninsula, who claimed to be the masters of Classical Arabic linguistics and poetics as reflected in their pre-Islamic poetry: "Indeed we have sent it down as an Arabic Quran, in order that you may learn wisdom" (Quran 12:2). Then, God challenges them to imitate the Quranic verses:

And if you are in doubt about what We have sent down to our servant (Prophet), then produce a chapter like it and call your witnesses besides Allah if you are truthful. But if you do not do it, and you can never do it, then fear the Fire whose fuel is men and stones, prepared for the disbelievers. (Quran 2:23-24)

Islamic history is full of stories and anecdotes of people converting to Islam, enchanted after listening to some verses from the Quran. This connection between Arabic language and the Quran constitutes a long lasting relation; "Indeed we have sent down the Reminder, and surely we will preserve it" (Quran 15:9).

During the Golden Age of Islam, Arabic language spread into many countries and regions, achieving an international status. Believers of the new religion had to learn

Arabic for their religious duties, mainly the recitation and memorization of Quran for the daily prayers. Moreover, most Muslims believe that Arabic is the language of paradise, or the language in which God spoke to Adam. The Prophet Mohammed said “I love the Arabs for three things: because I am an Arab, because the Quran is Arabic and because the tongue of those who go to paradise, once in paradise, is Arabic” (Ibn Manzur, 1955, p. 7). The philologist, al-Tha‘ālibī explains this further;

Whoever loves the Prophet loves the Arabs, and whoever loves the Arabs loves the Arabic Language in which the best of books was revealed.

..Whomsoever God has guided to Islam...believes that Mohammed is the best of prophets...that Arabs are the best of people [though Islam negates any ethnic superiority of Arabs over non-Arabs]...and that Arabic is the best of languages. (qtd. in Patai 44)

Most Arab intellectuals, writers, and philosophers believe, even swear, that Arabic with its abundance of imagery, figures of speech, and diction is the most poetic and beautiful language in the world. Patai (1973) expresses his views about Arabic language,

I can attest from my own personal experience that no language I know comes even near to Arabic in its power of rhetoricism, in its ability to penetrate beneath and beyond intellectual comprehension directly to the emotions and make its impact upon them. (p. 48)

Some socio-linguists, especially those who believe that linguistic behaviors affect how people think and behave, conclude that the linguistic nature of Arabic Language has affected some traits in the Arab personality and behaviors, mainly the emotional nature of Arabs and their tendency to exaggerate and elaborate in both speaking and writing. For

example, Atiyah argues that “It is a characteristic of the Arab mind to be swayed more by words than by ideas, and more by ideas than by facts” (qtd. in Patai 48). Similarly, Philip K. Hitti states,

No people in the world has such enthusiastic admiration for literary expression and is so moved by the word, spoken or written, as the Arabs. Hardly any language seems capable of exercising over the minds of its users such irresistible influence as Arabic. (qtd. in Patai 49)

A close analysis of Arabs’ conversations and presentation can support these conclusions. For example, the Arab, before he speaks of his history or culture, starts his sentence with the phrase, *‘andina Ihna al-Arab*, which literally means “as for us, we, the Arabs.” Whether in the market or at one’s home, the Arab loves negotiations, bargaining and debating. A simple friendly invitation to a dinner goes as follows;

A: We would love you to have dinner with us tonight?

B: Thank you very much; I really cannot do it this time; I have to do some work.

A: Come on! You are already here, and the food is almost ready.

B: I swear I would love to stay, but I really have to do something important.

A: No way! What do you want people to say about us? We let you go without dinner! Besides, you have not been to our place since ever!

B: OK! If you insist!

This insistence and negotiation might seem unnecessary to the western observer; however, for the Arab, it is the most important part of the invitation. A knows that B has nothing to do and would love to stay for dinner, but B can not immediately accept the invitation and has to create a situation where A insists, maybe swears, to convince him. In

such a conversation the word, no, has no negative meaning but becomes a form of negotiation and politeness. In the same way, Arabs value words as much as actions; a nice word or gesture is as good as a good deed, and vice versa regarding bad words. Many a time a word begins a fierce fight or ends in a long lasting friendship.

In the social life, the Arab is part of a larger group, a family, a tribe, and a community. He is always expected to help his fellow members, to answer their questions, to invite them to his house and to get invited. His sense of devotion and loyalty to the family or the tribe is deeply mixed with a sense of dependency, gratefulness and mutual trust. He shares with his Arab fellows what he has and expects to receive something in return.

This communal cohesion of the Arab society dictates most of its rules, behaviors and values. The Arab behaves according to public pressure and expectations. Codes of Arab morality, such as Sharaf (honor and reputation), 'Ird (sexual behavior of women), Rujūlah (manliness), and Karāmah (dignity) are all decided by the public opinion of other members of the tribe or community. The Arab shapes his social life and actions along with what his society expects from him and avoids, or at least hides, those desires or actions that bring social criticism and shaming. Repeatedly, an Arab invites people when he cannot afford it, rejects an invitation when he badly needs it, or suppresses his emotions just to please his community. Hamady (1960) illustrates how Arab women are more comfortable in foreign environment, when they are unknown:

Women who usually live in segregation do not hesitate to take off their veil and to mix with the men in the company of foreigners. They trust that

their own people would not know that they were violating their custom and blame them for doing so. (p. 38)

This collective social morality holds every member of the group responsible, not only for his own actions, but for his other fellow members as well. Thus, the Arab is always judgmental of himself and of others. There are no boundaries between him and the other members of the family or the tribe. They visit each other without any previous notice, discipline each other's children, make comments about personal stuff, and ask personal questions (Hamady, 1960, p. 33).

In terms of gender, Arab society is largely a masculine society. Gender roles are intricately connected to the tribal nature of Arab society, to the Islamic jurisprudence regarding gender duties and responsibilities, and to the social and cultural codes of behaviors. Men largely dominate most of the academic, business, and social aspects of everyday life. They provide for and protect the family, while women, including those who have jobs, take care of housekeeping, mothering, and childrearing. Men maintain their power and honor as much as their women follow the social, cultural and sexual codes prescribed by their society. The worst nightmare for an Arab is to see his women breaking these codes, especially the sexual ones, and the best weapon against his enemies is to find any means to shame their women. Consequently, honor crimes (men killing relative women, mostly daughters and wives, for some sexual transgression), though not common in modern Arab cities, still dominate Arabs' conversations and behaviors.

Finally, the Arab's sexual behavior and sexual honor ('Ird) control most of his actions and behaviors. Though the discourse of sexuality is consistently repressed as taboo (Arabs avoid talking about their sexual needs and desires in public), it seems that

sexuality surfaces in most of their daily talks and actions. Their honor is judged by their sexual restraint, their shame by sexual transgression; they praise or shame each other based on the chastity of their women, and they dress according to the sexual and gender rules. (Women have to cover most of their bodies.) Edward Atiyah, discussing some of the Arabs' social and cultural behaviors, concludes as follows:

There was one that overshadowed them all, the One, the Sin of Sins, Sex. Sex, I gradually imbibed the notion, was altogether something to be ashamed of, a thing to be kept in the dark. In the bonds of holy matrimony it might become just permissible, a sort of legalized offense; but outside those precincts, even a kiss was a pretty scarlet affair, unless with a view to immediate marriage... The net result of all these influences had been to develop in my mind a general and acute feeling of shame about the whole subject of sex, sex in all its aspects, legitimate and illegitimate. It had seemed to me that even when you were married you could not approach the matter save in an apologetic matter. In my first days at school I was too shy even to mention girls. (qtd. in Patai 129)

These social and cultural characteristics of Arabs are not identical in all Arab societies. Codes of sexuality and gender, for example, are enormously different in many Arab countries due to some complicated social and cultural networks, such as the dominating religious conservative discourse in Saudi Arabia, tribalism in Yemen, or the multiculturalism of Lebanon and Morocco. However, I believe such a brief summary of Arabism facilitates the discussion in the rest of this dissertation and explains how different groups of Arab students shape their identities in the new environment, The University of Arkansas.

### **Arabs and Education**

The earliest forms of literacy in a traditional Arab Muslim family are mostly religious. Arab Muslims (Muslims in general in this respect) think of learning a religious duty. Children at 6 or 7 years old are encouraged to read and memorize some Quranic



verses to do their daily prayers. This religious discourse continues through formal schooling as well. In many Arab countries, teachers are always equated with prophets, courses that teach grammar and linguistics use Quranic verses as examples for the discussion, and heroes and good characters in the literature stories are all Muslims, Christians, or at least good citizens who manifest obedience, cleanliness, honesty and common goodness.

However, formal schooling (education), in many modern Arab states, is perceived as a means to achieve some social and economic advancement, mainly job pursuits and economic prosperity. The goals of public education, as Graff (1979) explains it, are to “include the inculcation of habits and values, social discipline, work preparation, cultural hegemonization, literacy, and the establishment of hegemony among the population” (p. 155). Education is meant, as Gramsci states, to “create new and higher types of civilizations; of adapting the civilization and the morality of the broadest popular masses to the necessities of the continuous development of the economic apparatus of production” (qtd in Graff, 1979, p. 28). One of these social control applications of education is the development of the standard national language, the language of the elite and the socially and economically more powerful. This national language, in many Arab countries, is Modern Standard Arabic.

### **Arabs and English Language**

Although Modern Standard Arabic is the official language for education, English or French are introduced early in educational systems of many Arab countries; in some private schools, the whole curriculum is taught in English or French. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia, and many other Gulf countries, English is introduced in schools at the fourth

grade. Besides, English dominates most of the daily activities in media, business, and academia. Graduate studies in engineering, technology and medicine are taught in English for the availability of resources. Finally, as English dominates the international discourse (a global lingua franca), a command of English usually means a chance at a better job, especially in business, media, or technology.

This ongoing emphasis on the importance of English creates an immense interest and an unshaken investment in education and scholarship in English-speaking countries such as Canada, the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. Receiving a college degree from a western university, especially from the United States or Britain is a dream to many Arab youth. Despite the high costs of tuition fees and living expense in many western countries, many Arab governments send their students annually. For example, Saudi King Abdullah signed a cultural educational exchange program with the United States, paying full scholarships for almost 15,000 students in 2006, with minimum annual funding for each scholarship of \$31,000 (Conroy, 2006, p. 1). Of course, the number of Saudi students at American universities has significantly increased in the last four years. Similarly, Arab students are pouring into American colleges from other Gulf and Arab countries, mainly United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, and Egypt. Besides these governmental scholarships, many Arab students come on their own personal funding or through some cultural exchange programs and scholarships (Fulbright, Ford, Clinton, and graduate assistantships) and pursue their college education in the United States.

### **Arabs as a Minority in the United States**

Arab students are one of several minority groups in the United States who generally lack a sense of “recognition” from the dominant culture. Hegel (1931),

describing the psychology of the oppressed, argues that for any individual to have a human identity, he must be equally recognized by other members in his society. This recognition can be absent, or rather unbalanced among different social groups. Minorities have to recognize the existence of the majority, while their own identities, most of the time, remain questioned or unnoticed. Consequently, as they work to exist within the dominant culture, they reshape some of their social and cultural identities in accordance with the hegemony of the majority, beginning with a total compliance to the subversive supremacy of the new linguistic system, their second language, in this case, English. Not only do they need to speak and perform most of their daily routines in English, they need to change the ways they think, feel and express themselves. Ahmed (1992) explains,

The liberal university is usually, for the nonwhite student, a place of desolation, even panic; exclusions are sometimes blatant, more often only polite and silent, and the documents of one's culture become little sickles to clear one's way through spirals of refined prejudice. Most such students never quite manage to break through these ambiguities of enticement and blockage; some return, but many get lost in the funhouse of disagreeable habitations and impossible returns. (p. 84)

Examples of these exclusions can be seen in the way their names, dress, behaviors, rituals, social and religious activities are perceived by the dominant culture. Students usually mention how their American peers pronounce their names, or inquire about their dress and behaviors. Moreover, their second language schooling is usually contextualized within the dominance of L2 culture and politics. Street (1995) defines this literacy as a “[d]ominant Literacy...where some degree of indigenous differentiation of power and control means that the recipients of literacy campaigns are in practice experiencing ‘foreign’ cultural forms” (p. 37). Therefore, these minority groups are always in a process of negotiation between their home cultures and what the dominant school culture dictates.

At the University of Arkansas, student minority groups make up to 15.5 % of the total enrollment: students from foreign countries 5.4%; African Americans 5.3%; Hispanics 4.0%; Asian Americans 2.4%; two or more races 2.2%; Native Indians 1.6%; and Hawaiians 0.1% (U of A Report of Enrollment, 2010). They respond to the dominant culture of school in many ways and forms, ranging from an almost total resistance to an unexpected approval of it. Those who resist (in some cases, it is only some members within a particular group) see in the dominant culture a threat to their existing social and cultural identities (for example, the religious identity of a conservative Muslim student); therefore, they attempt to avoid contact with the majority. They adhere to their cultural traditions, use their first language for most of their daily activities, and live in as much cultural isolation from the dominant culture as possible. Generally, this avoidance results in literacy resistance in school as well. On the other hand, some minorities, or a few members in a particular minority group, accept, and sometimes even celebrate, the dominance of the majority and subsequently adapt their local social and cultural identities to find a place in the “new” culture. They keenly acquire the new linguistic system, eventually to the neglect of their L1, drastically change their looks and behaviors, and compromise most, if not all, of their social and cultural identities.

Unlike other minority groups, Arab students, as a minority, are very distinctive for many reasons. First, they are widely misrepresented in the dominant mainstream culture, and their cultural and religious identities are frequently attacked in public discourses and the media. They are regularly portrayed as anti-American terrorists, and their social and cultural practices become highly questionable. In the 2008 presidential elections, Barack Obama had to confront the rumors that he was a Muslim (coming from

a Muslim father) to prove his Americanness and patriotism, even though millions of Muslims are citizens of the United States. Recently, Islam and Islamic mosques have become a hot topic in the popular media and political discourses, especially with a recent proposal to have a mosque at “Ground Zero” (few blocks away from the World Trade Center which was attacked on 9/11). In addition, there are several threats of burning mosques and the Quran in many areas in the United States. Television shows and newspapers show passengers leaving an airplane or customers evacuating a mall because a Muslim is praying or has a long beard. Negative images of Arabs and Muslims are widespread in TV dramas, talk shows, newspapers, literature, and computer games. Hollywood has mercilessly damaged the reputation of Arabs and Muslims in several movies that depicts terrorists reciting the Quran or speaking Arabic before any terrorist act- “Executive Decision,” “Delta force,” “True Lies,” and “Back to the Future,” to name a few. After 9/11, there have been many hate crimes and discrimination against Arabs and Muslims (Ibish, 2003). Security measures and immigration laws have created many impediments for Arabs coming to the United States for study or work (Haddad, 2005).

This discourse of representations and misrepresentations of the Orient (Arabs and Muslims in particular) is not a new one. Edward Said (1978) argues that the western image of East, the “other”, has always been a history of misrepresentations. He claims that this history is mostly a creation of the western mind, or at least a political appropriation of eastern history, culture, and art to serve the interests of the westerners’ realization and definition of the self, as well as an extension of economic and political power. The Orient, according to Said, is “a fragment of a text” (p. 177). Easterners are

depicted as weak and cowardly, illiterate and uncultured, primitive and undisciplined, emotional and hyper-sexual, and most emphatically, dark, mysterious, and exotic. Arabs and Muslims are presented as anti-Semitic and anti-American, and Islam is seen as a major threat to Christianity. In Said's words, Islam in the west is always presented as "a lasting trauma" (p. 59).

At universities, there seems to be little attention and scholarly research about Arab students. Existing studies about Arabs and Arab Americans deal mainly with their social exclusions, racism, Islamophobia and discrimination in the West, especially after 9/11. For example, Wray-Lake et al (2008) describe how the American media depiction of Arabs and Muslims as enemies to the United States have changed the lives of Arab Americans; Duderija (2007) argues that Muslim identity as a minority in western dominant discourse undergoes certain changes and modifications. Sarroub (2002) explains how Yemeni girls at Southeastern Michigan live in what she called "In-Between" the two worlds of school and home. And finally, Zine (2001) describes how the Muslim youth in Canada negotiate their identities regarding their gender, race, and religion.

Similarly, few studies have been conducted about Arab students' literacy acquisition and schooling, some of which include many misunderstanding and generalization. In the very few studies that included Arab students at American universities, Arab students are frequently described as a homogenous group. For example, Reid (1987), studying the learning style preferences among students, concludes that Arabs are strong visual learners. Meleis (1982) explains some of the social problems and dilemmas of Arab students in the west, assuming that all Arabs share what he called

the “social properties that represent a core of Arabism” (p. 3), not to mention Kaplan (1966) who classifies, or rather generalizes, “oriental” students’ patterns of thoughts in writing as indirect and circular, in comparison to the straightforward style of thought of the native English writer. Therefore, there is a dire need to study closely the social and cultural factors that dominate the processes of learning among this social group in a predominantly western culture. This dissertation analyzes such diversity, explaining the social and cultural problems that might be an obstacle to their learning and the processes of their identity construction both in school and in the larger social context.

In the next chapter, I situate my dissertation in the new literacy paradigm, citing major research and similar studies that emphasize the importance of the social and cultural dimensions of literacy acquisition. I also use the postmodern, postcolonial, definitions of identity that emphasize the dynamic and continuous process of identity construction.

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

### The New Literacy Studies

This dissertation is situated within two closely related theoretical discourses, namely the ideological model of literacy studies and the post-modern, postcolonial, definition of identity. Unlike the traditional model of literacy which describes literacy exclusively in linguistic and cognitive terms, the new paradigm of literacy studies defines literacy as socially and culturally bound. It acknowledges the multiple and complicated nature of literacy acquisition, as well as the different shapes and forms of literacy activities as proposed by the social and cultural contexts. This model highlights minorities' interests and simultaneously questions the supremacy of the dominant white middle class model of literacy. For example, Gee (1999) defines the new approach to literacy studies as,

The New Literacy Studies approach literacy as part and parcel of, and inextricable from, specific social, cultural, institutional, and political practices. Thus literacy, is, in a sense, multiple: literacy becomes "different" literacies," as reading and writing are differently and distinctively shaped and transformed inside different socio-cultural practices. Additionally, these socio-cultural practices always have inherent and value-laden, but often different, implications about what count as "acceptable" identities, actions, and ways of knowing. They are, in this sense, deeply "political." (p. 356)

Street (1995) describes literacy practices as the "behavior and the social and cultural conceptualizations that give meaning to the uses of reading and/or writing" (p. 2). He defines at least six characteristics of the ideological model of literacy:

1. It assumes that the meaning of literacy depends on the social institution in which it is embedded.
2. Literacy can only be known to us in forms which already have political and ideological significance, and it cannot be separated from their significance.



3. The practices of reading and writing that are taught in any context depend upon the aspects of the social structure.
4. The processes in which reading and writing are learnt are what construct their meanings for their practitioners.
5. There is no single literacy, but multiple literacies
6. Researchers who tend towards this model acknowledge the problems of the autonomous model. (Collins 54)

Similarly, Au (1998) defines learning as a process of social negotiations that involves many emotional and motivational factors. Millard (1997) argues that factors such as family, friends and peers can influence the person's attitudes towards reading. Nieto (1999) explains that "learning emerges from the social, cultural, and political spaces in which it takes place and through the interactions and relationships that occur among learners and teachers" (p. 3). She adds that some cultural groups "do not conform to the way that schools define learning" (p. 67). Finally, Ferdman (1990) claims that a certain connection exists between literacy and culture, explaining how the latter defines the person's perception about the former.

In this dissertation, the concept of literacy acquisition goes beyond the students' formal reading and writing activities at school to incorporate all the social and cultural practices and activities that include reading and writing, and how they are utilized and invested to meet this group's social and cultural needs. Heath (1980) argues that "community study of reading and writing practices suggests that definitions of literacy cannot be based on formal schooling alone" (123). Therefore, literacy in English, especially with Arab group, does not only mean reading and writing English texts, but living and communicating everyday needs in English, activities that include reading medical reports, paying bills, opening bank accounts, filling various applications, shopping online, making reservations, reading traffic signs, reading and writing about

religious texts, legal documentation, personal and social communication and networking. Au (1993) defines literacy as “the ability and willingness to use reading and writing to construct meaning from a printed text, in ways which meet the requirements of a particular social context” (p. 20). Similarly, Graff (1979) defines such literacy as:

The essential knowledge and skills which enables one to engage in all those activities in which literacy is required for effective functioning in one’s group and community, and whose attainments make it possible for one to continue to use these skills towards one’s own and community development. (p. 3)

According to Heath (1980), these literacy activities are shaped by the need and preference of the members of society; for example, in her study of the Cherokee community, she argues:

When the population recognized that they remained poor despite their sons’ learning to read and write, they withdraw from literacy and maintained it for only selected purposes in religious ceremonies...The Cherokee do not expect all the members of their community to become literate; instead certain individuals who play specific roles become literate, so that virtually every household has access to someone who can read and write. (p. 126)

In addition, Heath (1980) defines seven functions and uses of literacy: first, “instrumental” functions which include all the practical uses of literacy in life such as writing checks, reading traffic signs, or paying bills. Then, there is the “social-interaction,” uses that include social communication and networking through greeting cards, and text messaging. The third function of literacy is “news-related,” functions that include decoding important news information and alerts. Fourth, there are “memory-supportive” uses that include calendaring, noting, and archiving. Fifth is “substitutes for oral messages,” functions that include any written message that replaces an oral one, such as a parent’s message to a child. The next function of literacy is “provision for a

permanent record,” which includes all the legal documents such as birth certificates, loans, mortgages, and contracts. The last use of literacy is “confirmation,” which consists of reading and writing activities that has to do with faith and religious discourse.

In this new literacy model, Graff (1979) unveils some of the “literacy myth” that has been embedded in the traditional definitions and practices of literacy. He argues that there is a social and cultural dogma that literacy and advancement go together; the former initiates and perpetuates the latter. Literate people are always portrayed as good, prosperous, and ambitious while illiterates are negatively re-presented as poor, doomed and as social and cultural threats to civilizations; examples can be seen in associating illiteracy with criminality, misbehavior, and public unruliness. Illiterates are seen as inferior, “alien to the dominant culture, and discursive to the social order” (p. 51). Moreover, illiteracy is always viewed as the culture of poverty. On the contrary, his study proves that the case of literacy and development is much more complicated than these assumptions. In his study on the three cities of Hamilton, London, and Kingston in Ontario, he explains that illiteracy was not the dominant factor behind the social disadvantage of many illiterate groups in those cities. He explains, with quantitative figures and numbers, that some of these groups, though illiterate, have progressed in the social hierarchy, owned some properties, and secured a better future for their kids. On the other hand, literacy in many other cases did not help advance the social conditions of other groups, or at least some of them; it did not add any progress in their wealth and social rank due to many other reasons, most remarkably race, sex, ethnicity, and religion.

There is a sense of the hybrid nature of literacy that is accumulated from the different experiences of reading and writing in a person’s life: Collins (2003) argues the

plurality of literacy, explaining that “there is no single literacy, instead a multiple of practices and values that get the same label” (p. 3). Brandt (2001) argues that different social groups have different social needs and preferences, and accordingly their definitions of literacy vary from one social group to another:

Studies in psychology, anthropology, linguistics, child development, and critical education have provided persuasive evidence that literacy abilities are nested in and sustained by larger social and cultural activity. (p. 3)

Contemporary literacy learners- across positions of age, gender, race, class, and language heritage-find themselves having to piece together reading and writing experiences from more and more spheres, creating new and hybrid forms of literacy. (p. 75)

To analyze these multiple literacies in their social contexts, I will use Gee’s concept of Discourse: According to Gee (1989), a Discourse with an upper case D is more than just a linguistic term; it includes all

[w]ays of being in the world; they are forms of life which integrate words, acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities as well as gestures, glances, body positions, and clothes. (p. 6)

Gee (1989) later explains that a Discourse is a situated use of language in a particular social context:

a discourse is a socially accepted association among ways of using language, of thinking, feeling, believing, valuing, and of acting that can be used to identify oneself as a member of a socially meaningful group or ‘social network’, or to signal (that one is playing) a socially meaningful ‘role’. (p. 143)

According to Gee, these Discourses are ideological, self-defining, group solidifying, aggrandizing, marginalizing, and closely related to the structure and hierarchy of power in a particular society: “in socially situated language use, one must simultaneously say the ‘right’ thing, do the ‘right’ thing, and in saying and doing express the ‘right’ beliefs, values and attitudes” (p. 140).

### **Identity Construction Theory**

The second theoretical approach adopted in this study employs a post-modern definition of identity and identity construction. Definitions of identity range from the traditional meanings of fixed, social, cultural, mostly historical, notions of the subject to a post-modern, deconstructive notion of an endless continuum of performative changes of the self. Hall (1996) summarizes these two sides of identification as:

[the traditional definition] a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation... [Unlike the postmodern] a discursive approach [that] sees identification as construction, a process never completed-always ‘in process.’ (p. 2)

Identity according to Hall is a complicated notion of attachment and detachment at the same time, not the linear narration of the self unfolding from the beginning to the end of its history, or the collective self which “can stabilize, fix or guarantee an unchanging ‘oneness’ or cultural belongingness underlying all the other superficial differences” (p.

4). Identities are produced within discourses of power and difference:

I use ‘identity’ to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate’, or speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be spoken. (Hall, 1996, p. 6)

This concept of the continuous performative nature of identity as a result of the social and cultural context is emphasized in many recent studies. For example, Aronowitz and Giroux (1991) assert that factors such as race, class and gender can have different effects on identity constructions in different social contexts. Egan-Robertson (1998) defines identity as "the intersection of a myriad of complex sociological factors (e.g., race, class, gender)" (p. 455). Mishler (1999) argues that identity is the "dynamic organization of sub-identities that might conflict or align with each other" (p. 8). Gee (1990) describes identities as "the different ways of participating in different sorts of social groups, cultures, and institutions, for example ways of being a 'good student,' an 'avid bird watcher'" (p. 1). Our identities are shaped by how we see ourselves, and how the world sees us, particularly through certain features such as religion, race, gender, age, social and cultural status, and sexual orientation (Erikson, 1968; Tatum, 1997). Sarup (1996) argues that "identity is a construction, a consequence of interaction between people, institutions and practices" (p. 11). Bakhtin (1981) suggests that we are constructed through the many internal dialogues and voices that we have encountered in the past. And finally, Anzaldua (1999) emphasizes the same Bakhtinian philosophy when she states that "we are clusters of stories we tell ourselves and others tell about us" (p. 15).

### **Identity Construction in a Post-Colonial Discourse**

In case of Arab students, it is useful to look at their identities as hybrid and amalgams of the different historical, social and cultural sites of contact and power relations that define their local (home) identities and those identities developed at western schools. For example, many of these students have come from countries which were

colonized by some western powers, for example Lebanon, Morocco, and South Yemen. Many of them have incorporated cultural and linguistic identity markers before their arrival at the new environment (universities in the US, for example), and many have developed their own impressions, stereotypes and expectations about the west. Bhabha (1994) advances this argument of the mixedness and impurity of cultures:

What is theoretically innovative and politically crucial is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes of cultural differences. These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood-singular or communal- that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining society itself. (pp. 1-2)

Bhabha's significance lies in his critical look at the boundaries, the *liminal*, between the colonizer and the colonized, an in-between space that rejects the traditional Manichean divide between a powerful dominant colonizer and a subordinate powerless colonized, or as a straightforward oppression of the colonized by the colonizer. This traditional approach, according to Bhabha, is not productive since the ultimate result of such analysis is to expose the colonizer as morally inferior or "the simple inversion of the relation between the oppressor and the oppressed" (p. 19). This view affirms the homogeneity of both camps. Therefore, Bhabha's research stresses the negotiation between, not the negations of, the colonizer's or the colonized's cultural identities:

The 'true' is always marked and informed by the ambivalence of the process of emergence itself, the productivity of meanings that construct counter knowledges in medias res, in the very act of agonism, within the terms of negotiation (rather than a negation) of oppositional and antagonistic elements. (p. 22)

According to Bhabha, accepting those differences between cultures and calling them diversity is a half-way project in discovering those identities. He argues that we

need to study those differences and create some conflict in order to find a better explanation of who we are and how we are different. It is the entertaining of differences without imposing hierarchies (a reference to the traditional divide between the colonizer and the colonized):

The concept of cultural difference focuses on the problem of the ambivalence of cultural authority: the attempt to dominate in the name of cultural supremacy which in itself is produced only in the moment of differentiation. (Bhabha, 1997, p. 34)

This theory of the liminal can be applied to the study of minorities in a dominant culture, where cultural influence and exchange can be seen in both camps.

Similarly, language becomes a central issue in constructing the social and cultural identities of Arab students, assuming that English has a colonizing history in many Arab countries. The amount of English or Arabic spoken by these students in different social contexts defines them differently in different context. Fanon (1976), in his research of the psychology of the colonized, argues that “to speak means to be in a position to use certain syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of civilization” (p. 18). He explains how language (in this case it is French) can emphasize certain identities: the “black man is supposed to be a good nigger” (p. 35). And this goodness, for the white man, comes from living among the whites, speaking their language, acquiring their culture and tradition, and at the same time divorcing anything that relates him to his black origins. Fanon (1976) explains, “There is nothing more exasperating than to be asked: ‘how long have you been in France? You speak French very well.’” (p. 35). Therefore, these students negotiate their



identities as they participate in literacy activities in both English and Arabic. Their involvement in a linguistic community defines the level of their relation to that group. Bourdieu (1977) explains the value of language use when individuals start a conversation:

Just as, at the level of relations between groups, a language is worth what those who speak it are worth, so too, at the level of interactions between individuals, speech always owes a major part of its value to the value of the person who utters it. (p. 652)

This dissertation analyzes the use of language (English and Arabic) as a dominant identity marker, the different social contexts where one or the two languages are used and the different power relations that such linguistic identification signifies.

Finally, there is the colonizing nature of learning and schooling in a dominant culture, especially to minority groups such as Arab students. Collins (2003) explains the power dynamics embedded in such educational systems:

The colonizing effort was all too often written not as a history of capitalist expansion, but as a massive, entirely laudable, educational enterprise bringing enlightenment and religion to those left behind in the civilization process. Such history masks the actual history of political and economic domination, sanctioned by church and crown, which resulted in the destruction or radical transformation of indigenous cultures throughout the non-western world. (p. 121)

The Arab community considered in this study acquires English literacy in a different, more dominant culture. In this case, it is the dominant evangelical protestant (mostly Baptist) culture of the University of Arkansas. The change of culture creates two main obstacles: First, there is a sense of culture discontinuity between the student's home culture and the culture of the second environment where L2 literacy and learning are

taking place. This theory of cultural discontinuity argues that there could be a possible mismatch between the school culture and the student's home culture that might create some problems in classroom, meaning that the student's journey to school is a journey from one world to another.

### Chapter III: Methodology

Before I describe the environment of the study and the community involved in this research, I explain in this chapter the different processes I used for data collection and data analysis. This dissertation is a combination of ethnography and case study. I had started this study two years before I began writing the dissertation. I adopted the tools of critical ethnographic method, field notes and interviews, described by Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw (1995); Hammersley and Atkinson (1995); and Spradley (1979). I applied a wide methodological approach that relies on thick description (Geertz, 1973) based on thorough observation, formal interviews, and informal conversations. Emphasizing the theoretical and practical nature of ethnographies, Clifford and Marcus (1986) describe ethnography as

Actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion. It describes a process of innovation and structuration, and is itself part of these processes. (p. 2)

For data analysis, I used Gee's (1991) methods of discourse analysis where I transcribed the participants' conversations and interviews. Then I divided them into idea units and stanzas, coding and analyzing major references and themes. I then adopted what Gee (1991) calls "Building Tasks:" how language is used to build different situations and Discourses. These tasks include 1) significance; 2) activities; 3) relationships; 4) identities; 5) politics; 6) connections; and 7) sign/systems and knowledge. I used critical discourse methods (Fairclough, 1999, 2004; Gee, 2004; Rogers, 2004), analyzing the participants' speeches and the larger conversations and ideologies they reflect. I

examined and compared similar and discrepant themes and cases as they emerge from the interviews, field notes, and various artifacts to fulfill some triangulation purposes.

During the research, I was a participant observer of this community in three locations: the Mosque, the Arabic school, and the University of Arkansas Student Union. I have observed and interviewed only the male members of this community due to the very strict gender segregation rules in Arabic culture! The three locations have separate spaces for each gender, and gender rules are strictly followed. As a male researcher, I could not have any access to the female population in this community; therefore, my observations and conclusions are entirely limited to the male members of this community.

I selected the three locations because of the different literacy experiences they provided, the degree of comfort, and the number of gatherings I observed of community members. The first location is the Mosque, where most of the students attend regularly. It is a comfort zone to many of them and, as will be explained more fully later, has influenced several students' perceptions about learning. The second location is the Arabic School, a comfort zone for more conservative students and a representative model of their home culture. The third location is the Student Union, where many younger undergraduates express a great deal of comfort. It provides a counter-cultural model to the Arabic School and, from the religiously conservative students' perspective, poses a cultural threat to their home identities.

I believe I have the advantage of belonging to all three locations. I am a regular attendee of the Mosque and have served in many administrative positions, namely the treasurer, the public relation representative, and the organizer of most of the Mosque's

celebrations. My children attend the Arabic school, and I am present in most of its meetings and gatherings. My wife is a very active member in the Arabic school's activities. I am a regular visitor to the student union.

Both my wife and I are from Yemen, and we have lived in this community for five years. However, my methodical observation has started two years ago, taking systematic notes of many major events at the mosque, the Arabic school, and the student union. I recorded most of the activities and meetings in the mosque. I did not tape or take pictures of major religious activities because of the sensitive nature of these activities. However, I taped most of the social gatherings and other literacy activities at the three locations.

At the end of my observations, I conducted interviews and follow-up analyses with four selected Arab students (two older married graduates and two single younger undergraduates) from the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Morocco. I interviewed each student twice, in a semi-structured interview format (open-ended questions and unlimited answers by the subjects). The first interview addressed background information: age, citizenship, family, first experience in the United States regarding language, and cultural shock; the second addressed questions about their experience as ESL students, their cultural perspectives about classroom structure and teacher-student relations, and their fears, hopes, and other concerns regarding learning. Some of the interviews questions took the shape of scenarios where students explained their preferences regarding the nature of learning, teachers and texts, or in the shape of follow-up comments on behaviors I noticed during my observations. Both interviews were audio-taped and transcribed.

In addition, as a teaching assistant in the English Department, I teach and observe some undergraduate students, collecting several of their class assignments. I collect writing samples from the papers and dissertations I comment on for the graduate students, some of their scholarship booklets, photos and videotapes of some of their parties and other outdoor activities. I have collected data in different ways and forms for some triangulation purposes and to follow certain similar and different themes as they emerge in different contexts.

Lately, I have been appointed as the Brown Chair in English Literacy Program Associate for English Learners. My duties include helping and facilitating the learning process of Arab students at the University of Arkansas, as well as their children at Fayetteville public schools. As these students arrive at the University of Arkansas, I guide them through the orientation and registration procedures, the different academic and non-academic forms and applications, and the other requirements regarding learning and schooling in the University of Arkansas. I try to remain in touch with most of them during the first few months of their studies and assist them in solving some of the difficulties they face in the new environment. I facilitate the communication between Fayetteville public schools and the children's families, explaining to both parties the social and cultural implications of some of the learning activities and practices. I believe the participation and close contact I have with these students and their families have enhanced my observations and conclusions about their perceptions of literacy and life in general at the University of Arkansas.

In the following sections, I describe in details the Arab community in Northwest Arkansas and the environment in which I observed this community. I choose to observe

these students in three locations outside school which I will explain later. I also describe their behaviors and activities in the classroom as reported by them during the interviews.

### **Description of the Community**

The community considered in this study includes 87 students enrolled at the University of Arkansas as of Fall 2010 (U of A International Student Enrollment Report, 2010). These students are sponsored by different scholarship programs, in different disciplines and programs. Many of these students are enrolled in an intensive language program at the Spring International Language Center housed on the University of Arkansas campus, or in other similar institutes in the country; some take the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) as a partial requirement for the university admission, or have the test waived after finishing the sixth level of the intensive language program at Spring International (by agreement between Spring International and the University). Thirty four of these students are from Saudi Arabia, 19 from Jordan, 10 from Egypt, 8 from Kuwait, 4 from Morocco, 2 from Iraq, 2 from West Bank, 2 from Yemen, 1 from United Arab Emirates, 1 from Syria, 1 from Libya, 1 from Lebanon, and 1 from Algeria, and 1 from Bahrain (U of A International Student Enrollment Report, 2010). In this group, 56 students are graduate students (ages 26-35 years), and 31 undergraduates (ages 17-24). Thirty five of the graduates are married and have their families with them in Fayetteville, and their children attend Fayetteville public schools.

Most married graduate students from the Gulf countries (Saudi, Kuwait, United Arab Emirates, and Qatar) live in townhouses at the south-western part of Fayetteville, creating a small Arabic neighborhood. Many of their spouses attend the University of Arkansas, and their children go to the same schools or preschools, as they usually car-

pool their children's transportation. They are sponsored by their embassies, and their scholarships cover all their living expenses, tuition fees, insurance, and annual tickets to visit their home countries and return to school. They receive various awards and promotions according to their academic performance and research achievements. Single undergraduates from the same countries receive the same benefits, except for their annual allowances (married students received a 50% to 80% increase in their annual allowances based on the number of family members accompanying the student). Undergraduates live in small apartments in different areas in Fayetteville but often gather in one or two apartments during the weekends, playing games, watching movies, and having parties.

Students from Jordan, Syria, Egypt, Libya, and Morocco, graduates and undergraduates, are sponsored by different scholarships, for example, Fulbright, Ford and Clinton scholarships from the State Department, or the University of Arkansas (Assistantships and other financial aides) Some are sponsored by their families. They live in different areas in Fayetteville, mostly in small apartments. Most of them are married; their wives go to the University of Arkansas, and their children attend Fayetteville public schools.

### **The Environment of the Study**

#### **The Mosque**

Located on campus, the Mosque is the only Islamic center in Northwest Arkansas, and the place where most Muslims in this area meet, pray, and hold their religious and social celebrations. The most regular event in the Mosque is the five prayers of the day: Fajr, Zhur, 'Asr, Maghrib, and 'Ishā. A few members come to the first four prayers. However, a large number (especially the graduates) attend the 'Ishā



prayer. After every *Ishā* prayer, there is a small social talk for ten to fifteen minutes. The other major event in the Mosque is Friday prayers, around 1.30 pm every Friday. Almost every member of the community attends this event. The sermon is given in both Arabic and English, but prayers are always in Arabic.

The Mosque, a highly sex-segregated site, has two levels, one for men's prayers and gatherings, and the other for women's. Still, many small issues regarding "appropriate" dress, behaviors, and children's proper ages to follow gender rules remain a heated topic in the Mosque. Some of these differences come from the diverse social and cultural backgrounds of Muslims in this community (the community includes Muslims from the United States, Indonesia, Bangladesh, Iran, Morocco, Gulf countries, Syria, Lebanon, and many other countries). Arab students always congregate in small groups and have most of their conversations in Arabic; still, they frequently switch to English when they discuss university policies, exams, or other university business. Out of politeness, they switch to English whenever a non-Arab Muslim joins the conversation.

The Mosque has no assigned *Imām*, the person responsible for all the religious activities and prayer-leading; therefore, some qualified students (those who memorized chapters of the Holy Quran and have some knowledge of the Islamic jurisprudence) alternate in leading the prayer and giving the Friday sermon. However, there is no collaboration during the sermon or the prayer; only one student is assigned the Imam-ship every Friday. The first group, the graduates, often does the Imam-ship/teaching. They are eloquent in Arabic, memorize several chapters, if not all, of the Holy Quran, and constitute a majority of all the administrative committees in the Mosque: the board of trustees, the executive committee, the legislative committee, and the jurisprudence

committee. The Mosque carries out some other literacy events including Quran Recitation every Saturday night, reading from the Prophet Mohammed's Sayings (Haddiths) after every Ishā prayer, and summer Arabic School for children and non-Arab Muslim adults. Most of these literacy events, except the Friday sermon and some English explanations of the Prophet's sayings, are done in Arabic. The bilingual sermon raises some uneasiness among Arab Muslim students, especially new comers, who, due to a lack of proficiency in English, feel isolated during such a major religious event. One Saudi graduate student told me, "Now I realized what it means to be an Indian Muslim in Saudi Arabia during a Friday prayer."

The Mosque holds most of the religious and social celebrations of Muslims in this area. There are mainly two big celebrations (*Eids*) that the Mosque conducts: first, Eid al-Fitr, which comes after a whole month of fasting (Ramadhan), and the second, Eid al-Adha, the 10<sup>th</sup> day of Zul Hijjah (the twelfth month of the Muslim Calendar) which comes at the end of the annual Muslim Pilgrimage to Makkah, where Muslims sacrifice some livestock animals commemorating the willingness of Abraham to sacrifice his son to the obedience of Allah (God). In both occasions, Muslims in the area gather in the morning for a long sermon, the Eid prayers, and then a big breakfast. Then, they meet at the Eid night for some games and competitions, where gifts and greetings are usually exchanged. The mosque arranges for small parties when a new Muslim joins the community, especially those who convert from other religions, when a family receives a new baby, or when students first come to campus or complete a degree.

The community as a whole enjoys a relatively peaceful religious atmosphere. All members of this group are Muslims (no Arab Jews or Christians), a majority of Sunnis

and few Shiites. Both Sunnis and Shiites in this community practice their religious activities in the same Mosque, celebrate their religious and national holidays together at the Arabic School, and have intimate social relationships. Their religious solidarity is maintained partly as a reaction to the dominant evangelical protestant (mostly Baptist) culture of the University of Arkansas.

### **The Arabic School**

The second major location of research is the Arabic School, a small building located at the south-western part of Fayetteville, and funded through the Saudi Embassy. The school, which teaches Arabic and holds the community's meetings and social gatherings, consists of two apartments: one for boys' schooling and men's gatherings, and the other for girls' and women's. It teaches the Saudi Arabian elementary school curriculum, having the books shipped to the United States. Teachers use some chapters of the Holy Quran to teach the students reading and memorization, along with some basics of praying and worshipping. Some of the Saudi graduates are selected for the school administration work: a president, a vice-president, and a treasurer. The faculty includes male Saudi graduates teaching the boys, and their spouses or other Saudi women teaching the girls, particularly the wives who are not taking classes at the University. Faculty and administration staffs are paid for their work by the Saudi Embassy. Students in each classroom do not exceed four or five students. (In many cases, a parent teaches his or her own children.)

The school is used for prayers and social gatherings as well. Because of its location near their homes, graduates who live in the same area perform most of the prayers at the school (except the Friday prayer where everyone comes to the Mosque).

They often gather, inviting other Arab students to big dinners. These students have many meetings and parties, especially when a new student comes, graduates, or leaves the United States. All schooling and socializing in this site are performed in Arabic.

Many literacy activities are held in the Arabic school. In addition to the regular schooling schedule that the school maintains (teaching the Saudi Arabian curriculum), students from the Gulf countries gather to do their homework, discuss their readings, and plan their presentations and projects. There are meetings to discuss school policies, to elect school staff and to revise enrolments, curriculum and grading. Many parents meet to discuss their children's schooling (both in the Arabic and Fayetteville public schools), school applications, and problems. Some meet after prayers to discuss religious issues, to consult with each other regarding scholarships, projects, and everyday life. Others remain after prayers to recite the Holy Quran. For example, to refresh their memories, Yazan and Khalifa, two graduate students who memorized the whole Quran, recited and listened to each other after every Isha prayer.

In this location, food is important. In most gatherings and parties, people serve all the traditional dishes, giving the members of this community a taste of home. Graduates, who have their families with them, prepare traditional food such as Hummus, tabuleh, fava beans, different soups, kabsah, salads, and falafel. There are parties where they bake a whole lamb or cook fifty pounds of rice and chicken. They buy their meat from nearby farms, where they buy live domestic animals and butcher them according to the Islamic Law (*halal* meat), a major concern for the religiously conservative students.

### **The Student Union**

The third major location is the University of Arkansas Student Union. Located at the center of campus activity, the student union provides services for students, staff and faculty, housing several restaurants, cafés, shops, book stores, gift shops, computer labs, salons, banks, a technology center, a post office, a mini-cinema, and a theater. It consists of a multi-cultural center, several rooms for students' activities, offices for different student organizations, and administration offices. The union has two huge lounges (usually used for cultural activities such as music performances, dances, and fashion shows), a big TV room, and a full-size hall in which students study and socialize.

Many of the male undergraduates gather at the union during the day, sometimes at night, have some of their daily meals, and do their homework. They dress the way they like, usually in jeans and t-shirts, listen to popular western music, and “hang out” with girls; most of these activities are considered by the older, more religious, graduates as socially unacceptable, or even morally and religiously forbidden. In their conversations, especially with American friends, undergraduates are informed about local cultural events, restaurants in town, movies and video games. They are interested in events such as Thanksgiving, Christmas and Halloween (One student spent 100 dollars for a Halloween costume). Some of these undergraduates have nicknames: Mohammed becomes *Moh*; Isam, *Sam*, and Abdullah, *Abdool*. A few even change their names, for example to James or George. Furthermore, the student union has become an Arabic-learning environment, where American and international students meet with Arabs and practice their Arabic. The following is one observation of those settings:

Moh (a nickname for Mohammed) entered the Student Union, wearing a white Polo shirt and a pair of black jeans; his eyes were looking for something. He saw Ali and Sameer sitting with two international girls.

Moh joined the group. The group exchange two minutes conversation; then, they went back to study. Sameer was working on his laptop, with his headphone on. Ali and one of the girls were reading books and taking notes. Moh took his notebook and started writing. The other girl went to the lab. Ten minutes later, the girl in the lab returned. Moh joined her, and they left for a smoke. (*Field notes, 11/15/09*)

Literacy activities in the student union are diverse. Many students gather in groups and do their homework, presentations, and projects. Some believe that the student union is a good place to practice spoken English and to have conversations with native speakers. They make small groups and talk about school and other issues. Some students are assigned to watch a TV show or read a newspaper and write a summary or a critique about it. The student union TV room is the ideal place. Others stop between classes, talk about projects, exams and teachers, or just have some snacks. Many students prefer to study in the union, being closer to the union computer lab where students have access to the internet, printing and copy machines. The union has a technology center where students borrow laptops, cameras, projectors, and other study related technology.

In the following two chapters, I discuss the diversity of Arab community in Northwest Arkansas, the different processes of their identity formation and the way their identification process affects their literacy acquisition and social life at the University of Arkansas. In chapter four, for example, I emphasize the heterogeneity of this group by creating different cultural models that respond differently to the “new” environment (the University of Arkansas). Then, based on the discussion of these cultural models, I explain how these students respond to some literacy activities such as collaboration, study groups, teachers and texts. In the final chapter, I continue the conversation, explaining how these different social groups respond to the surrounding dominant

western culture, and how they react to some social and cultural issues such as gender and sexuality.

## **Chapter Four: Multiple Literacies, Fragmented Identities**

### **Identity Construction of Arab Students**

Previous research about Arab students in the west mostly depicts this group as homogenous and identical. Writing in response to the dominant western cultures, scholars seem to emphasize racial discrimination, Islamophobia, and minority representations, ignoring any discussion of these minorities' complex cultural backgrounds, ethnical differences, linguistic variations, class, gender, family, and religion. In many of these depictions, Arabs are assumed to share the same lifestyle, school experience, and cultural reactions. Similarly, in terms of their literacy, they are frequently labeled and classified into some similar and identical groups. Unfortunately, these presentations are not accurate. Within every minority, there are subdivisions of more or less powerful, more or less educated, upper and lower classes, religious conservatives and liberals. Among the Arab group considered in this dissertation, there is the religiously conservative, monolingual, married, upper class student and the liberal, bilingual, single, middle class other. There are many others in between, and some completely different. As these students come to the west, they form, and modify, their identities according to the new social and cultural challenges and expectations. Some reject the new culture, or a part of it, clinging to their traditional home values. Many celebrate the new environment and its freedom. They admire its fascinating advancements, cleanliness, friendliness, adventures, and experimentations, reshaping their identities and priorities. In the following section, I develop some personality models that reflect the diversity of this group. These models do not represent particular individuals, rather accumulative images and behaviors shared by several members in the community. I tried to avoid unique personal behaviors and listed



only common ones, each shared by a reasonable number of individuals. I need to emphasize here that these models are not the only ones in the community; these are just broad examples of noticeable differences.

The first group is the traditionalists, a religiously and culturally conservative group. Many of these students have just arrived at the new environment and are mostly married and enrolled in graduate programs. Most of them live in townhouses at the southwestern part of Fayetteville and are actively present in the Arabic School and the Mosque. The traditionalist carries his home traditions with him, his dress, habits, and worldview. To this group, tradition represents the highest qualities, originality, and the purest forms of literature and philosophy. The new to them is always unauthentic, less genuine, strange, threatening, and a deviation.

The traditionalist comes to the west for a necessity, mostly study or work, and he is determined to go back home someday. He has no ambition in pursuing naturalization process in the west and fears to bring up his children in it. Traditionalists are religious, and many of them are married. If a traditionalist is not married, he has a specific picture of a would-be partner, mostly a Muslim woman or a Christian willing to convert to Islam. He is ideological, having one worldview, one cultural model, and adheres to a strict dichotomy between right and wrong, acceptable and unacceptable, religious and irreligious. He is strict about traditional gender roles and sexuality and has little tolerance to opposite views; usually, he avoids conversations in these topics, except with some other fellow conservatives who share the same beliefs. He is private and sensitive about his views, and he does not accept compromise. He speaks Arabic in most of his daily activities, especially at home, and English only when he has to.

Traditionalists consider western culture as a threat to their home culture and fear any integration with it. They are active in Arabic and Muslim cultural and religious traditions, Eids, welcoming or farewell parties, and hospitality parties. The traditionalist is rarely social with foreigners. He spends most of his time with his family or his fellow conservatives, discussing the cultural “invasion” of the West, ridiculing some of the Western social and cultural aspects, or nostalgically remembering some back-home experience, activities or news. This type rarely participates in Western religious or cultural festivals, such as Thanksgiving, Easter, and Christmas. In the same way, he avoids any social activity in schools, no games, parties, or cultural events. His relations with Westerners are edgy and quick, and he does not have many Western friends. Omar, one of the traditionalists, said that he went to school only for class and spent the rest of his day with his wife and daughter.

In his shopping activity, he is careful about his religious dietary restrictions, no pork or any of its components. He does not consume alcoholic beverages. He is not a frequent restaurant diner, and he travels miles for *halal* meat and usually buys and butchers his own meat. He does not buy clothes with logos or pictures that violate his principles and values, such as nude pictures, animals, provocative statements. He checks trademarks and investigates where his money goes, and which causes it supports.

His children have to learn Arabic and Islamic traditions and values early at their age. He sends them to the Arabic School and other religious literacy activities at the Mosque, no matter how much it costs him. His daughters have to wear the veil as soon as they reach adolescence, if not before. He does not allow his children to participate in Western school cultural activities, such as Father’s Day, Mother’s Day, Halloween. He

does not celebrate birthdays or anniversaries. Yazan refused to send his four-year old daughter to a neighboring preschool. He believed that some of the school activities violated his principles, such as the video cartoons they show to kids which frequently have singing, dancing and other “foreign” cultural behaviors.

The second group is the westernizers<sup>2</sup>, students who try to escape the limiting social, cultural, and religious traditions of their home cultures. Their journey to the west is one of exploration and pleasure, a dream come true. Most of these students are the single younger undergraduates, living in apartments and university dorms. They gather dominantly in the university student union, the theater, gymnasium, and cafes. They have many parties and gatherings at their apartments during holidays, weekends, birthdays, and other occasions. The westernizer is ready to change; he is looking for change. Nabeel said, “The first thing I saw as I left the airport is a couple kissing each other, I loved it.” This comes as a reaction to the strict traditional cultural model that prohibits any public display of passion:

In a traditional Arab society, a man with his wife would never dream of walking together in the streets, side by side, let alone arm in arm or hand in hand. Such behavior would be considered an indecent display of intimacy whose proper place is at home, in the privacy of the bedroom.

(Patai, 1973, p. 131)

The westernizer strives to forget his painful past, to satisfy his unfulfilled wishes, and to restore his suppressed identities. He may change his name or picks a nickname. For

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<sup>2</sup> Westernizer, as a term, was originally used as a name for 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian intellectuals who believed that Russian development depends on importing some western ideas regarding liberal government and industrial economy.

example, Mohammed becomes “Moh”; Abdulrahman, “Abdool.” He claims another country of origin; a Moroccan or Algerian may claim that he is French; a Palestinian, Australian, etc. He pursues naturalization process through marriage or work-related visas. He clings to the new environment with his nails and teeth. He makes the second environment his ideal home, and fears returning to his native country.

This model is the least religious or does not practice religion. He questions most of the traditional religious views about life. He doubts his home religious restrictions, especially those related to alcohol drinking, dating, or marriage. He lives in a constant inner conflict between fear and desire. Ultimately, he abandons his traditional religious discourse and develops his own vision and personal interpretation of religion. He makes the rules as he goes, based on his needs, failures, successes, and experiences. He discusses his religious beliefs with people, only to get some self assurance from his fellow liberals. He enters the new environment with a secret pleasure of independence, a new sense of freedom, a total absence of religious and social restrictions. He has a strong desire for adventure and exploration, especially of the things that his traditional cultural and religious discourse forbids. He wears latest fashions, braces and tattoos. He may date, drink, and gamble (all considered irreligious in the traditional view).

The westernizer is young, mostly single, looking for romantic and sexual adventures. He is friendly, outgoing, bicultural, compromising, and has an enormous zest for life. He is active in the social and cultural activities in the new environment, an avid participant in most of these activities, and a frequent attendant of the city’s clubs, theatres, and restaurants. He celebrates Christmas, Thanksgiving, Halloween, anniversaries, and birthdays. *Zeppo*, for example, has two birthdays (one in every

calendar, the Gregorian and the lunar Islamic calendars), Nabeel has a party every Friday night, and Moh's apartment is never empty; friends come to smoke Hookah every night. The westernizer lives in continuous struggle, and an uneasy consciousness. He strives hard to become a western, but he never belongs. He is always different, and he loses a sense of his tradition in every endeavor. Stories of love stories ending in fights and jail are numerous.

This model is usually a womanizer; he has several girlfriends. He shows his girlfriend only to his close liberal friends. He seldom takes her to the mosque or the Arabic school, and never introduces her to Muslim wives in the area. However, she accompanies him to mixed parties. He excessively hugs and kisses her in public, annoying his single fellows. He is protective and jealous. He gets crazy if she shows care for anyone of his friends: he sees the lust in their eyes but cannot explain it to her. He teaches her about Islam, only the values he wants to change in her behavior or dress. She might refuse to change, or changes beyond what he wants. She might convert to Islam and become a threat to him, a painful reminder that he is everything that he should not be. He ultimately breaks up with her.

The third model is the ambivalent, a mixture of the first two models. He is moderately religious, practicing the basic religious activities, mostly the prayers; however, he abstains from any major violation of his religious belief. For example, he does not drink, gamble, or date. He is adamant about the importance of religion and teaches it to his children. He talks and explains his religion rationally, accepts other religious beliefs, and attempts to find a common ground. He has some reservations about his religion but is generally proud of it. He is a utilitarian, using his religion and culture

to advance his personal gains in the West. He builds on cultural and religious holidays to advance his agenda, increases his social networking, and receives more recognition in both communities. Fauzi, for example, dresses his traditional costume to the Eid prayer, extravagantly spends on the Eid party, and invites all his Western friends to a big dinner after.

This model seems to be successful in the west. He embodies what the new environment desires of him, the moderate reasonable other. He brings diversity, experience, and a fresh worldview; in addition, he is harmless, understanding and peaceful. Both at school and work, he is handy for any curious question about his ethnicity or religion, no matter how silly the question is. He is never angry. Westerners like him, because he understands their good intentions. If he is an academic, his works are usually about the East, or Islam, a glimpse to the East from a Western perspective. His works combine the two worlds; approving or criticizing one world or another becomes just a reaction. He asks the western's questions and answers them. He easily finds a job and publishes his works. As he advances, he becomes more argumentative, ultimately a narcissist. He does not like competition, especially from his own people, who react differently to his success: new-comers admire his success; his fellow ambivalents envy and hate him.

The ambivalent is usually middle aged. He has lived quite some in the new environment, and tastes the pleasure and pain, in both worlds. He is a family person. He brings his wife with him, finds a Muslim wife here, or marries a Christian woman and ultimately converts her. If she does not convert, he insists that his children become Muslims, at least in belief. His home combines his traditional valuables and other western

artifacts. He is traditional in issues related to family values, gender roles and sexuality, but shows some tolerance if his children violate them. For example, his wife and daughters can wear jeans and t-shirts; drop the veil or the niqqab, and/or attend their western friends' parties. He celebrates anniversaries, Valentines, and Thanksgivings. He, along with his family, is a frequent attendee of the city's cultural events, theatres, and restaurants. This model is usually careful about the Islamic dietary rules regarding pork and alcohol. However, he does not have a problem being in parties and gatherings where drinks and pork are served. He is uncaring about possible pork components in children candy, cooking oils, or other food items, as long as it does not say pork on the label. He buys his meat at the local store; it does not have to be *halal*. He has his philosophy, and religious resources, about how and what makes food *halal*.

In addition to the above three personality models, there is the role-player, who for some peer pressure or partner's expectation, plays the role of any of the above mentioned models or some different ones. He, usually a new comer, is oppressed in one or more cultural models, mostly in the religious discourse. He has many different lifestyles and easily adapts to any environment. Some of these role-players are married and their spouses belong to an opposite personality model. For example, Tamer , 50 years old, spends the night with his younger friends, drinking alcohol and playing poker; however, he changes his clothes, has some mouth fresheners, and goes home to his religiously conservative wife. Khalid, on the other hand, a very religious twenty-three-year-old undergraduate attends mixed parties and pretends that he has a girlfriend, just to fit in the culture of his young liberal friends.

Finally, Arab groups are much more complex and diverse; there are conservatives among the liberals and vice versa; there are the secretive and the rogue; the believer and the faker. There are mixtures of two or more models, and some entirely different. Besides, these personality models are not fixed and static; they keep changing based on experiences, situations and the length of stay in the USA. Many traditionalists have loosened their values to adjust to the new environment, in the same way that some Westernizers return to their home religious and cultural values after some cultural shock in the new environment! Moh stopped drinking after he had a fight in the bar where he “[was] almost killed!”

In terms of their literacy in school, their new identities shape their perspectives about the nature of learning, the role of teachers, texts, and their social and cultural involvement on campus. For example, religiously conservative traditionalists, who are deeply immersed in the literacy activities held in the Mosque and the Arabic school, still adhere to the lecture format, rejecting other learning activities that do not include the teacher, such as collaboration and study groups; they express a high respect (and fear) of the teacher, and an extreme sacredness of texts. Westernizers, on the other hand, express an enormous comfort in collaborative learning environment and study groups, welcome the friendly social nature of such learning activities, and use these social occasions to make more friendship. The following sections describe their literacy acquisition in more details.

### **Literacy Acquisition among Arab Students**

Here, I discuss the different responses of Arab students to literacy activities in the new environment, the University of Arkansas. For the purpose of discussion, I focus only



on two groups: the traditionalists, mostly graduate married students, and the westernizers, the younger undergraduates. The research shows that the literacy activities practiced in the Mosque, a shared location for both groups, parallel the students' responses to the role of teachers and the sacredness of texts in school. On the other hand, literacy activities in the two other locations, the Arabic school and the student union, reshape the two groups' perspectives about collaborative learning, study groups, classroom etiquette and college social life in general.

### **Collaborative Learning and Study Groups**

Yazan: I took this class (seminar) where the teacher basically did nothing. All he did was assigning chapters and groups. Then, every group gave a presentation on their assigned day, and the rest in the class talked and asked questions. Sometimes, the teacher commented, but most of the times he did nothing. Every time a student said something, I would look at the teacher if he would explain it or something, but most the times, he said nothing. Sometimes, two students would have an argument, and I would wait for the teacher to say who was right or not. Still, he did nothing. Sometimes, he would say both were correct!

When Arab students, especially those trained in the traditional lecture classroom, attend their first classes at the University of Arkansas, they experience a sudden change in the nature of learning, creating the first mismatch between their perception of learning and that of Western academia. In many of their classes at the University of Arkansas, they are asked to participate in a collaborative teaching-learning environment, which has been established as a principle of modern education for quite some time. Freire (1985) defines the role of learning as “not to consume ideas, but to create and re-create them” (p. 4). Bruffee (1985) adds that students should be given the opportunity to “gain authority over their knowledge and gain independence in using it” (p. 49). The teacher becomes a

“task setter,” a classroom manager, and a synthesizer (Wiener, 1986), while most of the learning process is expected from the students themselves.

Consequently, Arab students’ reactions, especially those of the traditionalists, range from a total disappointment in the educational system to some negative evaluations of both the classroom and the teacher. Many of them, as later confirmed in the interviews, agree on “the strange” nature of the new classroom. They look at the literacy activity in the Mosque, especially the Friday sermon, as the ideal learning environment where the teacher/Imam is always at the center, the source of information, and the controlling figure of the learning process. The rest of the students/worshippers should remain silent and “passive” recipients of his teaching: Freire (1970) names it “the banking concept of education” (p. 75). Their understanding of learning is deeply embedded in the hierarchal power of the lecture format. Yazan, (a graduate student from UAE) in the interviews explains that he feels “more comfortable ... when the teacher gives a lecture about the topic, explain things, and we listen and take notes.” Similarly, Sami (a graduate student from Egypt) emphasizes his preference for the lecture format, saying that it helps him “to concentrate and focus.” Other literacy events in the Mosque, such as Quran recitations, readings from the Prophet, or other social gatherings, are often shaped in a lecture format, where there is always emphasis on imitation, memorization and careful listening and understanding. They believe that a good student (like a good worshiper) should be a good listener, and a better grade/reward comes always from understanding and memorizing what the teacher/Imam says.

Similarly, they are taught in the religious discourse that literacy is always combined with discipline, and discipline starts in conducting oneself according to rules

and guidelines, the first of which is respecting the teacher and the lecture. For example, any talk during the sermon may invalidate the person's prayer and distract other's focus. Any commenting on, or questioning of, the teacher's information might revoke the sacredness of learning.

Codes of proper dress and behavior, including proper sitting, are stressed by both traditionalists and westernizers, though they were more emphasized among the traditionalists who thought that anything less than what they expected meant a "poor" teacher performance and a "poor" class. According to the graduates, eating or drinking in class could violate that sacredness. Interestingly, young undergraduates, during their interviews, never mention eating, drinking, or operating electronic devices as disturbing factors in classroom.

Furthermore, graduates and undergraduates articulate two different responses regarding study groups. First, the graduates, basing their judgments on what they witness and practice in their home educational schooling model as represented in the Mosque and the Arabic School, emphasize that a "good" learning environment is a teacher-centered environment. According to Yazan, who served as an Imam in the Mosque for several months, the teacher's input is more trustworthy: "I personally don't trust the student's info... Group study is a waste of time." Sami explains his frustration as,

I had this class where we had to make groups everyday and discuss poems or stories and write about them. I usually read the poem or the story at home, and underlined the theme, the speaker, the tone and the things that the teacher said. But when we made groups, people always talked about games, songs and movies... sometimes related to the work, and sometimes not. Every now and then, they changed the whole topic. Most of the time, I didn't understand anything they said... I used to ignore the group and work alone.

For most graduates, it is a question of power. With the teacher comes, allegedly, the power of his knowledge, the authority of his sources, his background knowledge of the text, and the accuracy of his interpretations. They associate lecture with the religious sermon, where focus and concentration are vital. Learning requires concentrating on what the Imām says, taking notes, memorizing, and studying in groups do not include any of these pedagogical techniques.

On the other hand, the undergraduates articulate a great sense of comfort in study groups. They do most of their homework in groups at the student union or the library, and they express immense interest in group projects and group presentations. Moh, a regular visitor of the student union, expresses his views about study groups as,

I took a class with... (the teacher's name). It was really fun...Like; he started every class talking about events in town, games, most recent movies, or something. He would encourage everyone to say what he thinks. Students were involved. When he taught, he asked us to do group works and presentations. He would play you tube songs, clips and movies and ask us to relate them to the work. Everybody in the class was active and talking; we became friends.

Some undergraduates insist that the teacher should have a deeper understanding of the subject. For example, Hussein, an undergraduate from Saudi Arabia, explains, "I always wait for the final concluding statement from the teacher." However, in general, they prefer working with other students. Hussein says, "It's always useful to see how other students think." Overall, undergraduates articulate more confidence in their communication skills, knowledge of the social and cultural events on campus, willingness for the friendship that comes with study groups.

### **Teachers and Texts**

In the traditional educational system as represented in the Mosque and the Arabic school, teachers are always equated with prophets, *sheikhs*, and holy figures. They are always expected to be powerful, formal, sacred and all-knowing people, a sacredness that frustrates and confuses students if the teacher in the new environment violates it with a poor dress style, a strong sexual comment, or a degrading social or cultural statement. The first verse revealed to Mohammed was a command to read, the Prophet Mohammed is always referred to as the greatest teacher, and teachers and scholars always hold the highest ranks in the religious discourse. Many of these students express unconscious fear (or respect as they refer to it) for the teacher. Reflecting on their learning experiences at their home countries, Yazan says, “the teacher could fail the student without any further notice, and he is always right”. Raheem mentions that he “was kicked out of class because [he] was chewing gum!” And Sami summarizes it all in his comment, “in Egypt the teacher is like a pharaoh; you don’t wanna mess with him”.

Similarly, both groups think of the text as mysterious, powerful and sacred. When they read their religious texts, especially the Holy Quran, or the Prophet’s sayings, they are obliged to seek interpretations from religiously educated scholars. Personal interpretations of these texts can be a risk. Moreover, the religious text is always right. Any questioning of the text means questioning God. In the Friday sermon, the Imam tries to support every argument he makes with a verse from the Holy Quran, or a similar act or sayings from the Prophet. Everyday behaviors and communications are built according to the instructions of these texts, primarily the Holy Quran. Eloquence is measured by how much the person memorizes of the Holy verses, stories, and sayings, and intelligence is expressed in the accuracy of repeating them. The Holy Quran, as a book, should not be

placed on the ground; it has to be set on a wooden stand or on a shelf. A Muslim cannot touch the Holy Quran unless he is pure/clean (meaning removing filth from the body or the dress by washing it, and having a full shower after a sexual act).

Therefore, students, like worshipers, should approach the text with reverence, and the only valid interpretation of the text is the teacher's. In the religious discourse, God sends prophets with religious texts (Quran with Mohammed, Torah with Moses, Injil with Jesus), so they could teach the people the meanings of those texts. After the prophets, the religious scholars study the teachings and actions of those prophets and illustrate the religious texts mostly through examples from the prophets' lives and actions. In the Mosque, as it is in many other mosques, the Imam should read, and teach, the Quranic verses according to their pronunciation and syntactic rules, originally made during the time of the Prophet Mohammed and his followers. More educated Imams have a legal certificate called *Ijāzah*, meaning that the Imam has been authorized by higher authority to read and teach the Quran. These higher authorities can be traced back to the Prophet Mohammed himself and to his first generation of followers.

The sacredness of teachers and texts is clearly manifested in the behaviors and assignments of both groups in classroom. For example, most of these students expect a strong presence of the teacher in the classroom. Yazan summarized his opinion:

A good classroom is the one in which the teacher has a full knowledge about the subject, understands the students' differences and tries to work with every student... tries to see what is successful in class, and relates what is in class to the outside world. [Yazan likes the] formal class where students respect the teacher and the class.

Raheem emphasizes that a good class had always to do with a good teacher who "should be a tough professor, no late, no noise, no distraction... [Raheem] blame[d] the professor

for everything goes wrong in class.” In their paper assignments, they tend to repeat the teacher’s explanations, thinking that a good grade comes from repeating those words accurately, a problem they often face in their evaluations in the new learning environment. Similarly, their critique assignments (reading a text and responding critically to it) are more or less summaries of the original texts, or a repetition of class discussion of the topic.

However, in terms of personal relationships with teachers, the graduates, who are deeply founded in the religious discourse, articulate more uneasiness in dealing with teachers. They express strong resistance to call teachers by their first names, comment or question the teacher’s behaviors. Yazan explains that he always feels “awkward” when he calls teachers by their first names. He says, “I always feel I need to apologize.” On the other hand, some undergraduates express more comfort and less formality in their relationship with teachers, calling this relation “very friendly”. They have no problem calling teachers by their first names, exchanging jokes, or commenting on their dress and behavior. Raheem explains this friendly relation further:

Students in Spring International (language school) always speak favorably of Mr. X who teaches grammar. They see him always in the fitting center. He plays soccer with them. They invite him to their parties. One day, as Ali (Raheem’s brother) said, “He smoked hookah!” Ali said that Mr. X is a nice and funny teacher. He always reminds them of their grammatical mistakes even in the soccer field. And in class, he talks about sports, or games they had together, and jokes about some players. They like him.

In general, Arab students feel “safer” in the new system, where they choose their classes, times and teachers, and they seem to have almost as much power as their teachers’. They

always express their appreciation as their teachers show some kindness, helpfulness and interest in the students' social life.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Arab students are generally very active and hardworking students. Their respect and appreciation for class meetings, the teacher, and the text make them very careful and attentive to teachers' lectures and class discussions. The emphasis they put on learning, and the way they equate learning with worshiping, prioritize the importance of learning and school from other life activities during their stay in the United States. They come to school with some already well-established learning skills and strategies which can be utilized in the new learning environment. For example, they are careful listeners, active participants, and eloquent speakers. They can do well in skills that require understanding and memorization, presentations, and class projects. They are careful in following school rules and regulations, obedient in terms of syllabi and assignments' due dates, and above all aware of the importance, even the sacredness, of the educational institutions and activities in general.

However, there are other areas they need to develop, beginning with some training in collaboration and study groups. I believe teachers of Arab students, and in this case of native students as well, should demystify the value of collaborative learning and study groups early in the learning process, perhaps by assigning one or two articles about the significance of collaborative learning. Similarly, I believe more teacher-student conferences and class workshops would enhance their critical thinking and test their logic, which mostly comes from some cultural or social dogmas that can be easily challenged. In my composition classes, I bring some samples of different readings of the



same text (some are students' readings from different classes) and challenge these students to respond to them, developing their skills in critical thinking.

In addition, Arab students need to understand the difference between their home community discourse and that of western academia. A good approach towards such understanding can begin with a discussion of the matches and mismatches between these discourses. For example, texts are sacred in the religious discourse; however, in academia, every text is open for interpretations and questioning.

Finally, in academia, we tend to believe that it is always useful to challenge college student' worldviews, especially those coming from one worldview backgrounds. However, teachers should be extra careful with students coming from different background and beliefs. Many Arab students expressed high resistance and fear to discuss topics that relate to their religion or personal matters. In an environment where their religious and cultural identities are already targeted, questioned and misunderstood, they can easily lose their interest in the class, and/or the teacher, by a funny joke, a sexual comment or a stereotypical suggestion.

## CHAPTER VI: ARABS AND THE WEST

### Arabs and Western Social Life

In this chapter, I discuss how the different cultural models of Arab community, as I argued in the previous chapter, respond to the surrounding dominant western culture, and how their social and cultural identities are questioned and compromised. First, I believe that Arabs in general see the West in a very complicated and controversial way. The nearest way to describe it is a relationship of love and hate. Most Arabs admire the technologically and medically advanced West, praise the western educational and professional institutions and hope to pursue their education and future careers in the West. They deeply respect western values such as democracy, freedom, responsibility, and equality. However, the common belief that many Arabs share is that the West is morally corrupt. Descriptions of western living styles as represented in popular western media and Hollywood films fuel these assumptions. There is a sense of resentment of western foreign politics and political and military involvement in Arabs' issues and conflicts. This section examines these views about the west among the Arab community in Northwest Arkansas, especially Arab students attending the University of Arkansas.

Then, I emphasize the nature of the colonial situation that surrounds minorities. The unbalanced power relations that define minorities within a dominant culture usually result in a situation of ambivalence, resistance and hostility. Colonized minorities acknowledge the superiority of the majority's dominant linguistic system, legal system, and cultural and social "norms" channeled through the majority's systems of education, media and social life. On the other hand, minorities maintain their differences and strive to keep their traditional cultures and values. They undergo a continuous subversive

identification process where they question, change and reconcile some of their identities, the longer they live in the dominant culture. This continuous subjectification of minorities reshapes their views about many of their daily activities including their educational practices, work, and community involvement.

In this colonial situation, the colonized loves and hates the dominant colonizer. Friere (1970) explains that the oppressed takes the oppressor as his model of “manhood,” always striving to be like him:

The oppressed, having internalized the image of the oppressor and adopted his guidelines, are fearful of freedom. Freedom would require them to reject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility. (p. 28)

Similarly, Fanon (1965) argues that the colonized envies the town of the colonizer, being the better town, the cleaner, the brighter and more attracting, while the town of the colonized is the dirtier, more crowded, and messier. The colonized always envies the colonizer and wishes to replace him, “there is no native who does not dream at least once a day of setting himself in the settler’s place” (p. 39).

Nevertheless, the dominant colonizer establishes his power and superiority over the colonized, usually by creating a system of difference, mostly through a stereotypical discourse. The colonizer projects minorities as degraded and less civilized. Bhabha (1994) explains the process in this way:

[T]he objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction....some of its practices recognize the difference of race, culture and history as elaborated by stereotypical knowledge, racial theories, administrative colonial experience, and on that basis institutionalize a range of political and cultural ideologies that are prejudicial,

discriminatory, vestigial, archaic, mythical, and crucially are recognized as being so”(83).

This stereotypical discourse, aiming at degrading minorities, prevails in the American popular media, where social groups such as Arabs, Asians, African Americans, and Hispanics are highly misrepresented. Gramsci names this subjectification process, “subalternity” and defines it as “the feelings of mental inferiority and habits of subservience and obedience which necessarily and structurally develop in situations of domination-most dramatically in the experience of colonized people” (qtd. in Jameson 76).

In addition, the degree of resistance and ambivalence in a colonial situation varies among the colonized minorities. Some other social factors, such as religion, gender, and sexuality, weaken or intensify the hostility. Arab Muslims might feel more oppressed in a western culture than Arab Jews or Arab Christians, since the former have both their ethnic and religious identities questioned. Gender differences among Arab communities complicate the resistance and hostility of the colonial situation. Besides, as I have emphasized in previous chapters, the Arab community in Northwest Arkansas is widely diverse and heterogeneous; their views of the American society surrounding them is widely varied. For example, traditionalists, though they admire many western values and aspects, think that the West represents a cultural invasion to their religion, cultural values, and social life. In most of their gatherings and conversations, they always emphasize the importance of solidarity and the necessity of protecting their traditional values, activities and lifestyles. Gay (1994) explains these feelings:

The relative physical isolation of ethnic groups in the United States means that individuals in these groups are much more likely to engage in

qualitative interactions with people who are like themselves than with people from different ethnic groups. Interactions with people who are different are transitory and perfunctory. (p. 3)

Many families in the Fayetteville Arab community live in the same area (the Wedington Road area) where they can socialize on a daily basis, visit each other, and practice their school and religious activities together. They subscribe to Arabic newspapers or have Arabic TV channels networks. They usually gather at nights, men in one apartment and women and children in another, and have their dinners and conversations, discussing issues regarding their home countries, the mosque, the school, and other issues affecting their stay in the United States. They tend to rent independent houses to maintain more privacy and to avoid the hassle and intrusion of administrators and neighbors in small apartment complexes (One of their main concerns is gender; for example, they fear a maintenance man getting into an apartment when the “man of the house” is not available.)

This group tries to avoid any contact with the outside culture and rarely participates in cultural events in town or at school. Their relationships with westerners are edgy and short, developing and enhancing many stereotypes about Americans among this community. Gay (1994) emphasizes that “the absence of close and significant interactions across ethnic, social, and cultural lines may reinforce stereotypes and cause individuals to be suspicious and distrustful, even fearful, of those who are different” (p. 3). Many students of this community have developed their own views of how Americans live, drink, party, and socialize. Sami tells his story when he first comes to Arkansas, explaining why he does not choose to live with an American roommate:

I was interested to have American roommate, but I had to think about it. Most Americans like to party and have fun which might affect my studies...People here drink and do other crazy things...I like their friendship but more in a formal way. For example, I like to go to their formal parties.

Many Arab students express their preference to socialize with other international students in the United States, who share many experiences with Arab students, among which the most important was being an “outsider”, a stranger, and a minority. Besides, their meetings and interactions with Americans were mostly brief and anxious. Sami expresses his sense of annoyance: “In their parties, I do not feel hundred percent comfortable. They have different ways of talking, drinking, gathering. I never felt that I belong. I usually stick to my international friends.” Raheem claims that this distance is his own problem: “most of the time I think I don’t belong, but it’s because of me, not of them. Like after the exam, they go to the Dickson Street [downtown] to drink. I don’t drink. They want to go have fun, but that’s not how I have fun.”

Besides the stereotypical notion of the American society as morally corrupt, an image certainly exaggerated through many issues such as sex, drinking, and drugs, there is a sense of fear of other social groups such as African American and Mexicans, as these two groups are highly misrepresented in the American popular media. Some members of this community, especially those who have no real experience with these social groups, and know only some stereotypes picked up from a movie or two, express a deep concern when they choose neighborhood in which they live, their friends, and their entertainment places, avoiding neighborhoods that have high populations of these social groups. Sami

cautiously states that “sometimes, African Americans look scary but some of them are really nice.” Yazan thinks that African- Americans are more sensitive because of “the discrimination they experienced; they might misunderstand [him]”. He then explains why he is always “careful” (trying to maintain a formal relation) in dealing with them.

In terms of gender, the western woman with her independence, dress and behavior adds to the traditionalist’s gender anxiety. Husein explains his view saying that “our culture made it sensitive to deal with women.” Yazan, has no problem dealing with women but according to him,

I prefer to have a male professor. They are easier to deal with. When I first came here, I asked them not to include any females in my PhD committee, I still think men will be easier to understand me, and I always think of female teachers as more demanding.

This sensitivity in dealing with gender issues is minimized in other groups, such as the ambivalents and the westernizers. It was obvious that these groups are more comfortable in their relations with the other gender, though many issues regarding dress and behavior surface their relations. Sami emphasizes that he has always been “cautious” in dealing with women, while Raheem stresses the codes of “proper dress” that he “did not see” in his female classmates.

Lastly, with traditionalists, the most terrifying and culturally different aspect of the new environment was sexuality. Any non-hetero-sexual practice was a “taboo” in many of their countries. Although many non-hetero-sexual orientations exist in many countries in the Arab world, Arab societies are extremely intolerant and hostile to any non-heterosexual relationship; consequently, Arab non-heterosexuals tend to live their

own private lives away from the public eye. The Arab community sees an entirely different society here in the United States where people express their sexual orientation, almost freely, and have those identities acknowledged in their societies (at least in some liberal societies in the United States, and in some college activities and meetings). Many members in this community are astonished by the freedom the new system allows, though many have learned to adapt to the new environment and to conceal their rejection.

Raheem guardedly says, “I feel it is very *normal* to deal with gays like anybody else, to go to their homes, to have them come to your place.” Some students still cannot ignore it completely. Sami explains that he once “had a gay teacher who was one of the best teachers” he ever had, but “could not take the gay image of [his] mind.” Similarly, Husein explains his first “awkward” meeting with a gay person: “I tried to be nice, but I failed; apparently I sounded super-nice to the degree that he felt something is wrong. As he expressed his homosexuality, I said something like, ‘wow that’s great; that’s really fine, I like that’.” This sense of uneasiness still dominates the community, shaping their ways of communication and their views of the new environment.

On the other hand, many members of this community, especially westernizers, have reconciled and compromised their identities to accept many social and cultural values of the surrounding American society. Many have found their dream life style, especially with the freedom, independence and adventure that the new environment affords. Moh expresses his love for the new environment with its easiness of communication and freedom of speech, in comparison to his home country where, “everything is complicated and taboo.” He likes to dress fashionably and have pictures



and logos on his shirts, or tattoos on himself. Aziz has a girlfriend and enjoys having parties with his American and international friends. Nabeel says,

The first thing I saw as I arrived at the airport is a couple kissing each other passionately. I liked that. I don't think you can see that in my country. Everything is *so* forbidden, even kissing your wife.

The community includes other members who like drinking, smoking, dating and gambling (many of these activities are considered religiously forbidden or morally wrong in the traditional discourse), and these members continuously express their fear of returning to their home countries. Ali says, "If I did not get a chance to live in the USA after I graduate, I will go to Mexico and have a farm." Aziz believes that one day he will win the lottery and permanently live in the United States.

Westernizers see in the new environment a good place to work and live. They purchase houses and businesses around the city, challenging many of the views and philosophies of traditionalists. According to traditionalists, many businesses and transactions in the new environment are religiously forbidden or morally wrong, including loan interests, selling alcohol, cigarettes, and pork products. However, businessmen in the community have prospered. Azen has one of the biggest clothes stores in the area, Nabeel has a hookah bar, and Bari is a well-accomplished contractor who builds many projects, houses and gas stations using bank loans.

### **Arabs and Western Politics**

Regardless of how the members of the Arab community in Northwest Arkansas disagree on many social and cultural issues in the new environment, and how they react differently to some of them, they all share some common views and criticism of the

West; for example, many criticize American foreign politics and involvement in Arabs' issues and conflicts in the Middle East. They reject the American invasion of Iraq, the indifferent and "prejudiced" American stand on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and finally the United States' passive reactions to recent Arab revolutions and uprisings. They express their disappointment with the United States' hesitation and indifference to the bloodshed and massacre that happens every day in Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and other Arab countries during Arabs' revolutions of 2011. For example, the United States monitored the situation in Egypt and Tunisia for many weeks before they committed themselves on the people's side. Nabeel thinks that the "United States declared their support for people's revolutions only after the people have already won the conflict. It is just a way to save their face and maintain their future profits with the new governments." Similarly, the indifference of the United States' foreign politics is exposed as they avoid any direct political or military involvement in the Libyan revolution, entering its fifth week (as I am writing this dissertation) while thousands of people have been killed. Hussein believes that the United States "do not want to get involved directly in the resignation of the Libyan president to avoid the anger of other Arab dictators," especially after the United States has angered other presidents and monarchs in the area when they requested the Egyptian president, Mubarak, to resign. Many Arab presidents expressed their anger with the United States; some claimed that the United States pushed Mubarak over the cliff.

These feelings against the American foreign politics are confirmed in recent studies of Arab nations. For example, the Center for Strategic Studies at the University of Jordan conducted a survey of Arabs' feeling towards the West in five Arab countries, namely Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Egypt and Palestine. The study included respondent

samples from university students, businessmen and media associates. The study concludes,

When "the West" was broken down into the U.S., U.K. and France, the survey broadly found that majorities of Arabs surveyed were critical of American and British foreign policies, but viewed French foreign policy positively. Culturally, however, Arabs in the Mashreq<sup>3</sup> region tended to look positively on Western cultural values, to define these in positive terms - liberty, hard work, pursuit of knowledge, and wealth creation - and to see these as cutting across all Western countries... The citizens of the Mashreq region want to be treated better by the West and by their own Arab governments. This is one of the conclusions we draw from the strong support for democracy in Arab societies, which is often higher than in many Western countries. The average Arab citizen feels he or she has been mistreated by their own government, by their own government under Western pressure, and by Western powers directly. That's why respondents express a very strong drive for being treated with respect and dignity. They are almost desperate to enjoy a system that gives them voice to express themselves, and that recognizes their humanity, their existence, and their concerns." This relates to recent Arab revolutions. (Khouri, 2005, p. 1)

The second view that members of this community share is the hostility and misrepresentation that American popular media projects about Muslims. In many TV shows, films, and political discourses Muslims are always attacked, misrepresented and questioned. Issues about the Muslim Sharia'a (Islamic Law), mosque-building, dress and cultural activities are highly politicized in the popular dominant discourse. Many American politicians manipulate the discourse of Islam to propagate their political agenda. Attacks on mosques and the Quran are common, and Islamic issues and legislations become a target for many late night and comedy shows. Recently, Arabs' revolutions and uprisings in the Middle East are compromised in the dominant western

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<sup>3 3</sup> Mashreq, literally means the East. In this context, the author refers to the Arab countries included in the study.

political discourse by how much Islamic fundamentalism they support, and whether those uprisings advance or threaten The United States and Israel's regional profits. Before the West supports any revolution, western politicians examine the revolution's relations to any fundamental religious discourse in the region, the new faces that the revolution brings, and their ideology towards the United States and Israel. There are many misrepresentations of the savageness, luxury, and irrationality of Arabs, a widespread extreme portrayal of women and eastern sexuality (such as the *Harem* and female slaves), and extremely disturbing pictures of the Middle East as a violent potential threat to the West. Almaney (1982) believes that the anger that Arabs shows against the West is a direct result of how the West projects Arabs in their popular media. According to Almaney,

The Arab's perception of the West is, to a considerable degree, a reaction to the West's perception of him. The Arab who travels to the West for the first time becomes dismayed at the perverted images Westerners have of the Arabs. In the face of what he regards as gross misrepresentations of his people and culture, the Arab reacts angrily, and his anger often translates into bitterness and hostility towards the West. (p. 13)

This misrepresentation of Arabs, mostly through highly exaggerated political and stereotypical discourses, is mainly created to project Arabs as the degenerated "other," an Arab that should remain dependent, controlled, and exploited. This dominating ideology is not different from previous arbitrary western philosophies that legalized colonization and exploitation, cannibalized blackness, and enslaved women for centuries. Dominique Mannoni (1964) argues for the superiority of the white male western and designs his famous Dependency complex of the Malagasy, the "other." According to Mannoni, the Malagasy "knows or feels that he is inferior... in infancy" (p. 61), so the Malagasy does

not try to solve this complex in the same way the European does; rather, he tries to develop some relation of dependence on the European. And according to Mannoni, once he develops this relationship with the European, his inferiority complex does not bother him anymore:

[T]he need for something to depend on is, then, the first element in the structure of the Malagasy's personality as he emerges from the security of tribal life...A Malagasy receives from a European some favour which he badly needs, but would never have dreamed of asking for. Afterwards he comes of his own accord and asks for favours he could very well do without; he appears to feel he has some sort of claim upon the European who did him a kindness. (p. 42)

Therefore, one should ask if the "other" is really inferior or is deliberately degenerated to clear the conscience of the dominant colonizer. Bahbha (1994) argues the latter: "[T]he other must be seen as the necessary negation of a primordial identity- cultural or psychic- that introduces the system of differentiation which enables the cultural to be signified as linguistic, symbolic, historic reality"(p. 52). So, in a colonial situation, there must exist a stereotypical discourse of difference, inferiority and discrimination.

Consequently, the colonized sees himself always in a comparison with the colonizer. According to Fanon (1976), the black man is obsessed with the challenge of proving to the white man that he is equal. "The Negro is a comparison...he is constantly preoccupied with self-evaluation" (p. 211). This continuous comparison results in a constant questioning of the self, of existing identities, and of one's own culture and values:

[T]he Antillean as therefore to choose between his family and European society; in other words, the individual who climbs up into society-white

and civilized- tends to reject his family-black and savage-on the plane of imagination. (Fanon, 1976, p. 145)

These comparisons can be easily noticed among the members of this community, ranging from those who strive to look like the dominant western, mainly in the way they dress, talk and behave, and to those who emphasize their differences and values, mostly adhering to their traditional codes of dress and behavior.

### **Arabs and Stereotypes**

Finally, many members in the community express their annoyance and frustration at the repeated stereotypical questioning from their American peers and friends in the new environment. According to Arab students, most of the questions indirectly emphasize the superiority of American and western cultures or confirm the hostile stereotypes about the savageness and primitiveness of Arabs. Husein, an undergraduate from Saudi Arabia, tells a story when his American friend “asked him if [they have] camels in Saudi.” He believes the question means “do you have cars in Saudi?” Yazan, in describing his feeling inside the classroom, says, “I do not like teachers to refer to me in class, even if it’s in a good way. I do not like to be noticed, that’s why I like big classes. Even if the teacher thinks something good about me, I just don’t like him to refer to me in class.” Some students mention that they always get questioned if they have pizza, cafes, bars, and internet in their home countries.

A few members in the community have their own interesting stories, especially in situations where their identities have been questioned or compromised. For example, Ali (pseudo-named), a 17 year old male Arab Muslim student taking Popular Culture class at

the University of Arkansas, narrates his experience as his teacher comments on one Islamic practice in class and his reaction:

We were reading that day something about American adults and music, night clubs, drinking, and violence. It was a very interesting topic. You know I wanted to learn everything about this culture. Anyway, like always, we went off topic, discussing the down town dancing clubs, the bands coming that time to Fayetteville, their favorite songs, bands, and other stories. Then, the teacher, who was a funny guy, told a joke. . I knew the joke ...it was the old joke about the two people in a restroom having an argument whether or not they should wash their hands after using the toilet. Many people laughed. Then, the teacher paused for a second and sarcastically said: “do you know that Muslims use only their left hands to wash their private parts!” He then raised his eyebrows. I still remember. The whole class was laughing at this time. It wasn’t funny. I felt embarrassed. I really wanted to defend myself and my religion. I wanted to tell them all the things that my parents taught me about using my hands. They can’t be wrong. I don’t know if it’s scientific or not, but it makes sense to me, and I feel comfortable this way. I can’t imagine I would eat and touch my private parts using the same hand, even after cleaning.... (The story goes on, and the student’s impression of a good class evaporated)

Similarly, Ahmed, a 15 year old Arab Muslim student attending Fayetteville High School, was trying to settle down in Fayetteville after few months of his arrival. He came to the United States to finish his high school study, as a part of cultural exchange program sponsored by the American Department of State. He enrolled in one of the family- sponsoring programs through which, American families invite international students for a dinner and have a friendly conversation about American culture, the students’ home countries, and other cultural topics. Many international students love these cultural programs and usually create long friendships with their American families. Ahmed’s American family happens to be a single law professor at the University of Arkansas. The following is a short encounter between Ahmed and his hosting professor:

I met this guy first at school, along with my scholarship supervisor, who introduced both of us. The guy was nice, talking to me, asking me all questions about how I was living in Fayetteville, about the city, the food, the weather, and the people. He told me some stories of his travels to many countries and other stories about some international students he hosted. The guy was really nice, and he knew a lot about international stuff. We became good friends quickly. He invited me to his place many times and introduced me to many of his friends. He really gave me the impression that I was a son to him. One day, as we were cooking together, actually I was showing him how to do one of my favorite dishes; I took an empty glass from his dishwasher, cleaned it, and filled with water. After I drank the water, I put the glass back in the cupboard. Then he, smiling at me, starts explaining to me the importance of cleaning the cup before putting it back in the cupboard. He went in length discussing the viruses and bacteria that could be transmitted from one person (assumably me) to another, if they both use the same cup without cleaning it. My friend did not even give me a chance to explain to him that I know his entire 'bullshit' lecture on cleanliness. I interrupted his lecture and explained to him that it's just a cultural difference. I reminded him that I cleaned the cup before using it. I told him that it was my belief that the guy who uses it after me would clean it before using it. Then, I realized the whole problem. It was not cleaning the cup immediately after or before using it; it was how we thought of each other, more importantly how he thought of me. I was sure that I was not cultured enough for him..... (The story goes on, and the respect that the student had for his friend professor was shaken).

These two scenarios reflect how Arab students think of their home cultures as their personal territory, highly sensitive, and extremely innegotiable. Given the intensity of their self-consciousness in a surrounding dominant culture, any interference into their social and cultural background, if not professionally and carefully crafted, is a threat to their identities. As for these two situations, the two professors tried to participate in a cultural dialogue that involved a minority student obviously as one of them is a professor of culture, and the other is a sincere participant in a cultural-exchange program; however, neither asks himself where he stands on their cultural dialogue, what are his biases, and how much hegemony is impeded in his social and cultural practices. As Ong et al (2002)



put it, the challenge becomes not only teaching “cultural appreciation (or tolerance for the matter), the more difficult task is preparing ourselves and our students to engage and critique such intersections that involve complex, well-established, and structurally redundant formulations of social and cultural hegemony” (p. 125). Consequently, in both situations, the two professors have unconsciously excluded the “other” as inferior based on their own codes of properness and aesthetics that is mostly shaped by their dominant culture. This exclusion of the “other” feeds into the students’ already-existed fears and self-questioning, resulting in a less sense of security and authenticity. Therefore, the new culture to them becomes a scary scenario where they have to fight for their cultural behaviors, perspectives, and identities.

Given this cultural conflict with minority students, along with the unconscious exclusion of the “other” by the dominant culture, the selection of cultural conversations becomes highly challenging. The question becomes how to make

[s]tudents range beyond a fixed understanding of culture as a singular practice that is passively inherited by one’s ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and/or nation to a more dynamic and complex understanding of cultural practice as a politics in their daily lives. (Ong et al, 2002, p. 131)

This understanding of “cultural practice as a politics” can only begin when majorities and minorities question their “passively inherited” cultural biases and stereotypes about the “other,” and re-think of their own social and cultural practices which they take for granted as normal and “correct”.

## Conclusion

Although some might agree that a sense of oppression and transition exists in being a minority, one should ask how much of these processes are imposed by the majority, and how minorities themselves advance or resist these processes. Arab students, as this dissertation explains, express that some of the transitions they experience are direct results of their desires and ambitions, regardless of the dominance of the majority. On the other hand, some students remain faithful to their cultural models and express little to no compromise. In some cases, these cultural and religious conservatives impose their home identities and cultural legacies on the dominant culture and demand some sort of acknowledgement. Many times high officials, academics and citizens of the city are invited to the Mosque. They come and listen to Islamic lectures and abide by the religious and cultural codes of dress and behaviors at these locations. Arabic restaurants and Hookah cafes fill the city and lately receive a large population of admirers. Some Arabic dishes, such as *Hummus* and *Falafil*, have made their way into typical American restaurants.

Unlike many previous studies about this social group, this dissertation argues that Arab students represent a complicated and heterogeneous group who respond to the new environment in so different ways. Some students come to the United States with pre-conceived ideas about the West, either as a pleasurable adventure or a necessary evil, and develop their identities accordingly. The social external pressures become just reinforcement to perspectives that the students already developed. In addition, their identities are in a continuous performative changing process. In this process of identification, most of these students lose their sense of familism and communal

cohesions. They associate more with people who share their personality traits. A religious conservative Arab might spend more time with a conservative religious Indian, or Bangladeshi, than with a younger less religious Arab. In the same way, the young liberal Arab spends more time with internationals or Americans who share his interests.

Like many other similar studies of minorities in the United States, this dissertation attempts to generate more culturally informed teachers who would better perform in classrooms of culturally diverse population. This research aims at clearing up some misunderstandings about Arab students, their differing cultural experience and their varied perspectives about learning. As explained above, this population includes many subdivisions of more or less powerful, more or less educated, upper and lower classes, religiously conservatives and liberals. There is the more religiously conservative, monolingual, married, upper class student, and there is the liberal, bilingual, single middle class other. There are many others in between, and some completely different. So, for a more productive teaching-learning environment, teachers of such groups have to understand these backgrounds, build on them in terms of teaching strategies, and avoid any clash between the dominant culture and the student's background. Smith (1998) observes that such studies can help teachers be "respectfully sensitive to the cultures of their students" (p. 20). Gay (1994) confirms that "learning is more effective when new ideas are related to prior knowledge and initially are taught in ways familiar to students" (p. 5).

This research is entirely based on the observations of the Arab (Muslim) students at the University of Arkansas and may not apply to other Arab student populations in the United States. Still, this dissertation can be useful in understanding some common

background behaviors of this ethnic group, and for other future research. It is obvious that this dissertation does not cover the female students of this community, mainly because of the highly sex-segregated nature of this group. I could not have any access to observe or interview some of the female students in this community. I believe that a male research speaking for female students may misrepresent their experience, or further marginalize them. I propose that a female student could have a much better access to this community's female students and a much better understanding.

**APPENDIX I****FIRST INTERVIEW TOPICS**

1. Current age
2. Country of citizenship
3. Native language
4. Family members living with the interviewee in the USA
5. Years of residence in the USA
6. Language preference at home (here at The USA)
7. Language in which they read for pleasure
8. Language in which they write for pleasure
9. language in which they write their personal stuff (phone numbers, calendars, notes, diaries)
10. Language mostly used in their audio-visual devices (TVs, MP3s, Phones, Internet,.. etc )
11. Times in which they speak their native only
12. Times in which they speak English only
13. Times in which they speak Arabic and English
14. Activities they do in English regularly
15. Activities they do in Arabic regularly

**APPENDIX II****SECOND INTERVIEW TOPICS**

1. Self-assessment in reading ability in English, reading preferences
2. Self assessment in speaking ability in English
3. Self-assessment in writing ability in English
4. Self-assessment in understanding a speech given in English
5. Expectation of good classroom and good teacher
6. Relationship to other students
7. Favorite class activities, projects, teaching styles
8. Favorite things to do on campus, or in the city
9. Favorite places to visit on campus and in the city
10. Things and statements normally expressed in Arabic that does not exist (or not normally said) in English
11. Things and statements normally expressed in English that does not exist (or not normally said) in Arabic
12. Amounts of times spent regularly at The University of Arkansas, homes, library
13. Things they liked in the “new” (here in the USA) learning environment
14. Things they miss in the “new” learning environment
15. Any remarkable living experience in the USA
16. Any advice for a new Arab student coming to the USA

## APPENDIX III

### INFORMED CONSENT

Title: Multiple Literacies, Fragmented Identities: a study of Arab Students at the University of Arkansas

Researcher:

Gamil Al-Amrani, Graduate Student  
David Jolliffe Ph. D., Faculty Advisor  
University of Arkansas  
Fulbright College of Arts and Science  
Department of English  
718 Kimpel Hall  
Fayetteville, AR 72701  
479-575-4301

Administrator:

Rosemary Ruff, Director  
Research & Sponsored Programs  
Research Compliance  
University of Arkansas  
120 Ozark Hall  
Fayetteville, AR 72701  
479-575-3845  
rruff@uark.edu

Description: The present study analyzes the process of identity formation of Arab students at the University of Arkansas. The researcher observes Arab students at the University of Arkansas. The researcher's role is a participant-observer. The data will be collected in three main procedures. First, the researcher will observe some of these students in classrooms (ENGL 1113 and 1123, WLIT 1113 and 1123) taking notes of the different literacy activities that take place and the students' roles in them. Second, the researcher will observe some of these students outside classroom, in places such as the library, the student union, the Islamic center of northwest Arkansas, and in some student events on campus. Then, four students will be asked to participate in two separate interviews. The interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. In the first interview, students will be asked to provide some background information that will cover age, sex, education, second language experience, language preference, the language mostly spoken at home, and activities they do in both L1 and L2. In the second interview, they will provide a more specified description and assessment of their language skills (speaking, reading and writing) in both L1 and L2, their experience as students at the University of Arkansas, some of their stories, some of their expectations and preferences regarding learning, and some of their hopes and fears in general.

Risks and Benefits: There are no anticipated risks to participating in the study. The study attempts to create a culturally sensitive environment at school, solving some of the social and cultural problems that hinder the learning of this ethnic group.

Voluntary Participation: Your participation in the research is completely voluntary. You will not be penalized in any way for choosing not to participate.

Confidentiality: Only the researcher will know your name from your writings and papers. The authors of all the writings used in the study, including all participants' interviews, will be given aliases in order to protect their identity.

Right to Withdraw: You are free to refuse to participate in the research and to withdraw from this study at any time. Your decision to withdraw will bring no negative consequences – no penalty to you.

Informed Consent: I, \_\_\_\_\_, have read the description, including the purpose of the study, the procedures to be used, the potential risks and side effects, the confidentiality, as well as the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Each of these items has been explained to me by the investigator. The investigator has answered all of my questions regarding the study, and I believe I understand what is involved. My signature below indicates that I freely agree to participate in this experimental study and that I have received a copy of this agreement from the investigator.

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(Signature)

(Date)



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