

ALGERIA'S DEMOCRATIC AND POPULAR REPUBLIC  
MINISTRY OF HIGHER EDUCATION AND SCIENTIFIC RESEARCH  
UNIVERSITY OF ORAN, ES-SENIA  
FACULTY OF LETTERS, LANGUAGES AND ARTS  
DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON STUDIES  
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**Hyphenated Selves: Arab American Women Identity  
Negotiation in the Works of Contemporary Arab American  
Women Writers.**

A Doctorate Thesis in American Literature

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**2012-2013**

## **Dedication**

In memory of my father Mourad

## **Acknowledgments**

The writing of this thesis was very challenging and exciting at the same time. First and foremost, I thank initially and always Allah for his guidance and blessings all through my life. Then I would like to thank some of those who have their impact on my life and those who helped me or participated in any way to let my work see the light. First of all, I cannot say enough how much I am thankful to my supervisor and Dr. Zoulikha BOUHADIBA who has always believed that I can do it despite the obstacles I faced. Thanks to DrZoulikha BOUHADIBA because her fruitful information and great feedback were always the paved road in all the stages of my thesis. I must also extend my acknowledgement and thanks to Professor Donna ANDREOLLE. She was of great help to me and I could not list here all he has done for me. She read every page of this work in various stages; without her ideas and suggestions, this would have been a lesser work.

My thanks also extend to the members of my dissertation's committee, Dr. Zoubida SEBANE and Dr. Abdelkader BENSATTAB who accepted reading my work. I would like to thank both Professor Abbès BAHOUS and Doctor Nouredine GUERROUDJ, my teachers and members in my viva committee, for their significant contribution to my education.

My family has been my mainstay spiritually. They have always been there with confidence and support. Special thanks go to my dear mother Fatima for her unbelievable support and continual understanding.

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## Abstract

The present study focuses on identity formation in two contemporary Arab American women's novels. It examines the Arab American women protagonists' struggle to find a space for themselves within their families and their communities as well in order to construct bi-cultural identities. The thesis starts by giving a general overview on Arab American immigration and culture, and the acculturation process immigrants go through while adjusting to the host culture, it further discusses the social problems faced by the first and second generation Arab Americans in post-September 11 era and its reflection in contemporary Arab feminism and Arab-American women writing .However, any attempt to study the different aspects of literature produced by the first two generations of Arab Americans requires an examination of the roots of their literature. It is important, therefore, to study the historical background and the literary achievements of the first Arab Americans. Then it analyzes Mohja Kahf's novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*(2006) through which she demystifies some of the Arab/Islamic cultural symbols as the veil. She presents a strong female protagonist who struggle to define her self and to challenge Western perceptions about Arab women as passive and weak victims of their own society. While the last chapter focuses on Diana Abu-Jaber's novel *Crescent*(2003) who uses food as an important marker for the American born protagonist Sirine who oscillates between both sides of her identity through cooking Arab food and her romance with Han, the Iraqi University teacher.

## **General Introduction**

Arabs in the United States have a long history with negative characterizations but 9/11 placed a special burden on them. In fact, many things have clearly changed in the United States since the horrifying attacks of September 11 which hurt not only Americans, but also Arabs and Muslims in the U.S., the Middle East and around the world. However, the events had a significant impact on Arab Americans and have deeply affected them on a myriad of ways. Besides splitting the world into 'us' and 'them', the Arab Americans became at once visible, and in need to define and defend themselves. Most disturbing has been the perception of Arab Americans as collectively guilty for the actions of a small number of radical fundamentalists and the uncertainty about their allegiance to the nation.

For decades, Arab Americans have been viewed by the West as a monolithic population; yet, recent research has shown that the Arab American people are heterogeneous and diverse whose literature can be classified as ethnic literature or literature of immigration. In addition, Arab American literature can be described as a bridge not only between two Arab American generations but also between Arab Americans and American literary canon because the themes of Arab American literature go beyond issues of identity and culture loss. Arab American writers tend to transcend the narratives about their homeland and national heritage. They generally possess a solid knowledge of American identity with nostalgic connection with their homelands. Moreover, their literature investigates new issues about their long stay in the United States and recent political issues that disturb their homelands and everyday lives.

Because most of contemporary Arab American writers are strongly influenced by their ethnic identities and experiences, their texts focus on the immigrant experience in the U.S. and the conflicts between first and second generations of Arab Americans. They create new

histories for their nations through texts in which the ethnic protagonists struggle to change their position as marginal and subaltern. They are longing to be recognized as unique identities without having to sacrifice their background and their cultural identity. In this vein, Arab American writers, according to Amal Talaat Abdelrazek, write out their Arab identities, out of their American identity, and out of the identity produced when those two cultures come together (2). In other words, Arab American texts are part of Arab culture, part of American culture, and part of something still in the process of being created.

The present thesis aims at examining the literature written by Arab women living in the US relying on particular socio-political contexts. These Arab American women novelists, who use English as a means of expression, affiliate themselves to the feminist movement that does not target the Arab audience, but appeal to an international readership. On the one hand, the Arab American community obliges them to present a humane Arab picture to the United States through mainstream publication. On the other hand, Arab American writers must adjust to the larger publishing companies who distribute their works in order to acquire a worldwide readership. As Heather Hoyt claims in her paper entitled “Cover Girls and Catch Words: Packing Arab Women’s Novels in English,” the resulting package is often at odds with the authors’ intentions.<sup>1</sup> Although their depictions of the Arab world with its fanatic regimes sometimes seems to corroborate Western stereotypical images of the primitive Arab world, contemporary Arab American writers point out that it is not religion that places them in this situation. On the contrary, these authors tend to claim that Islam is the only religion that endowed women with rights that, if they have a better interpretation of the Quranic texts, they would have realized the pride and freedom granted by their religion. In other words, they

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Hoyt, “Cover Girls and Catch Words: Packing Arab Women’s Novels in English,” RAWI Conf. on “Writing While Arab: Politics, Hyphens, and Homelands,” *Arab American National Museum*, Dearborn, 18 May 2007.



emphasize that it is not religion that oppresses women but rather the patriarchal systems that limit women's agency.

Despite the difficulty of accurately representing their community, Arab Americans have been compelled to write otherwise, their image will be defined for them by those who assume that all Arabs and Muslims are terrorists or support terrorism. Without self-representation, the Arab Americans are stereotyped and misunderstood, as Muaddi Darraj points out in the introduction to her edited volume, *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing*, the choice is: "Write or be written."<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the Arab American writers have decided to show solidarity with the community of the Old country. This consciousness is further supported by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad who maintains that it is wars and crises that forge identity "[...] before that event, most of them were unaware or unconcerned about their Arab origins [...]"<sup>3</sup>

Consequently, the main purpose of the present thesis is to survey Arab American women writers' use of their pens to resist and embrace their past, present and future brought about by the marginal position from which they emerged. As many diaspora writers, they rewrite home and present new identities. Through a careful selection of two Arab American women writers, I intend to delineate differences and similarities between the two experiences while also pointing out internal differences among them.

The study is based on a corpus of two novels by two Arab American women writers of Arab ancestry published in English, namely Diana Abu-Jaber from Jordan and Mohja Kahf from Syria. Both are members of the third wave of Arab American writers and come from

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<sup>2</sup>Barbara Nimri Aziz, Foreward, *Scheherazade's Lagacy : Arab and Arab American Women on Writing*, ed. Susan Muaddi Darraj (Westport: Praeger, 2004) xii/

<sup>3</sup>Nabeel Abraham, "Anti-Arab Racism and Violence in the United States,"*The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994). See also Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "Maintaining the Faith of the Fathers: Dilemmas of Religious Identity in the Christian and Muslim Arab-American Communities,"*The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. McCarus, 61-84.

mixed Arab and American backgrounds. As Evelyn Shakir explains, members of the third wave of Arab American writers have expressed a distinct Arab American identity in their works. Arab American literature published since the 1980s, Shakir goes on, testifies to ‘a sea change’ in the way Arab Americans began to perceive their identities and see themselves.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the time span of the corpus covers a period of five years following the 9/11 attacks.

In this study, I argue that Arab American women writers tend to use different literary strategies to resist stereotypes and misconceptions about Arabs in general and Arab women in particular in American popular culture and literature. Women status in the Arab/Muslim world has been a critical issue in many recent debates especially in the West. Indeed, the image of the Arab/Muslim women has long been mixed with popular myths of Arab females prevailing in the Occidental world. In fact, there have been several misinterpretations and assumptions about women’s life in the Arab world and their treatment by family and society. These ideas seem to vacillate between dual paradigms, either between the image of a silent beast of burden or that of a capricious princess, the half-naked odalisque or the veiled woman (Mehdid, 1993: 25).<sup>5</sup>

Actually, Arab/Muslim women’s portrayal as silent, submissive, passive, and weak have been depicted by the West in general and Western feminism in particular who have, most of the time, investigated Arab women’s status far from its social, cultural, religious, and historical context. Therefore, Diana Abu-Jaber and Mohja Kahf tend to re-correct and to unsettle some of the Western mistaken perceptions and stereotypes about Arabs in general and

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<sup>4</sup>Shakir attributes this change in interests to the arrival of a new wave of immigrants from the Arab world who ‘rekindle[d] a sense of ethnicity in the established community and promoted a sense of kinship with the Arab world in general’ (p. 70).

<sup>5</sup> Mehdid, Malika, “A Western Invention of Arab Womanhood: The ‘Oriental’ female,” *Women in the Middle East: Perceptions, Realities, and Struggles for Liberation*. Ed. Haleh Afshar. London: Macmillan (1993: 18-58); as cited in Abdo, D. M. Narrating Little Fatima: A Picture is Worth 1001 Tales — “Multiple Critique” in Fatima Mernissi’s *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. *Image [&] Narrative* [e-journal], 19 (2007).

<http://www.imageandnarrative.be/autofiction/abdo.htm>

Arab/Muslim women in particular. They work to show why it is important for a Western audience to understand the facts and the real image of Arab/Muslim women's status in the Arab world and their experience and struggle in the New world.

Each writer attempts to negotiate the hyphen for her identity. The hyphen is currently a contested zone due to a revival of Orientalist and stereotypical racial discussions on Arabs. They live in a "median state, neither completely at one with the new setting nor fully disencumbered of the old, beset with half-involvements and half detachments" (Said, 1994: 34). Because of the "median state" as described by Said, they experience a kind of doubleness. This in-between state is intensified by the conflict between the traditional Arab values and the freedom and opportunities America seems to offer. In other words, they not only resist the East with its despotic regimes and the West which portray them as enslaved and unenlightened other, but also explore and express their feelings about their hybrid identities. Accordingly, these women struggle to find a place for themselves and claim an Arab identity without being marginalized by the American society.

The relevance of the present study is justified by the fact that the case of Arab feminism, and by extension Arab American feminism, is a crucial point of investigation because it has more often been seen as a rejection and betrayal of a woman's Arab background (Lisa Suheir Majaj, "New Directions" 73). As the present study will show through a literary investigation, there are many ways through which Arab American women may defend a feminist view while maintaining a kind of cultural attachment to the traditions of their homelands.

By investigating the heterogeneity of women characters in both novels, Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006), this thesis tries to contribute to the deconstruction of some stereotypes related to Arab American women

as being veiled and confined to the kitchen, privileging a deep and intensive literary analysis. Such writings make a significant shift in themes from their predecessors because earlier Arab American writers tended to assimilate easily within American culture, which often involved a breaking away from traditions and homelands. The Arab American women writers under study investigate the question of what it means to live as a “hybrid”. They call for co-existence and acculturation which differ greatly from assimilation. Moreover, the works of these women writers also show a great commitment to political and social issues facing Arabs in general, and Arab women in particular. They are aware of the equivocal Arab American relationship which aggravates to their struggle to claim an Arab American identity. The choice of the present thesis also lies on the fact that there are few works about the literary representations of Arab American feminism<sup>6</sup>, and, mainly, there are scarce analysis of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* and *Crescent*, which allows my research work to contribute to a field that has not been fully explored yet.

Therefore, the present thesis attempts to examine the novels of two Arab American women writers that deal with Arab American women and analyze how Arab/Muslim women can succeed in creating a distinct identity in U.S. society that moves beyond stereotypes and threatening conceptions of who they are. My project also explores Abu-Jaber’s and Kahf’s works with regard to contemporary discourses on feminism, ethnicity, immigration and settlement, Diaspora, as well as the current political events like 9/11 and the ensuing war on terrorism. I wish to contribute to a recent growing debate on works by Arab women writers in Diaspora. I believe that discussing these texts will contribute to a better understanding of the concepts of cultural identity and Diaspora, two concepts that I am interested in exploring in this thesis.

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<sup>6</sup>The most relevant works about Arab American feminism are the book *Food for Our Grandmothers. Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994), edited by Joanna Kadi, and an issue of *The MIT Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies* entitled “Arab and Arab-American Feminist Perspectives” (2005). See my works cited for the full reference.

Central to this project is the question of how do Arab American female protagonists negotiate a space for themselves within their families and their communities in order to forge bi-cultural identities? How do they mediate between their American and their Arab/Muslim identities? And more pointedly how do they interact with the Western portrayal of Arab/Muslim women in general and in particular after September 11? In this vein, the way women respond to the clash of their divergent identities, and the ways they resist and reformulate their identities inform the focus of this study.

In addressing Arab American women, one should be aware of the debate over the term “Arab American” since it puts forward a shaped unity that in fact bridges different geographical and social borders. The subtext to these questions is even more salient: under what conditions does a person qualify for the title of Arab American? And by extension, under which circumstances can or will a particular writer be recognized by the Arab American community? As summarized by Fadda-Conrey, some scholars such as Nadine Naber describe Arab American identity as a political choice. According to Naber’s, Arab Americans are likely to become the target of racism when they politically affiliate themselves with Arab interests. She writes, “What distinguishes this new racism (which is based upon politics) from traditional forms of racism (which are based upon biology or phenotype) is that Arab Americans who choose to be active in Palestinian or Arab issues or organizations may be subjected to political racism, whereas those who choose not to be politically active may not.”<sup>7</sup>

In order to understand Arab American literature, a critical framework is needed to explain its aesthetic, socio-political and cultural tendency. Moreover, this literature needs to

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<sup>7</sup> Nadine Naber, “Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23.1 (2000): 42, as quoted in Fadda-Conrey 10.

fit the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in the US that has resulted from different immigration waves and settlement.

These authors straddle two cultures. They skillfully merge their Arab cultural heritage in their writings. Both writers explicitly show their concern with Western perceptions of Arabs and Muslims. However, each writer draws on her personal experience as a woman of Arab descent. Through their different experiences, their cultural negotiations result in a form of double-consciousness as they turn one eye to the American context, while the other always turns toward the Middle East. With a contrapuntal vision, they try to bridge the gaps between cultures and voice their concerns. Their belief in the potential of open dialogue and its role in preserving harmony are prompted by their contrapuntal perspective shaped by their hyphenated identities.<sup>8</sup>

In employing the expression of contrapuntal, Said shows his appreciation for the counterpoint of Western classical music where ‘various themes play off one another, with only a provisional privilege being given to any particular one’. (Said, 1993: 59-60). Just as Said himself, these writers who live between two cultures often have contrapuntal perspectives that cannot make connections between quite conflicting experiences. These authors occupy, to use Homi Bhabha’s words ‘a third space [...] where the negotiations of incommensurable differences creates tensions peculiar to borderline existence’.<sup>9</sup> Hence, Abu-Jaber and Kahf write out of this dilemma as seen in their characters, Sirine in *Crescent* and Khadra in *The Girl*<sup>10</sup>. Both Arab Americans find themselves living in an undefined space which ‘may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the

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<sup>8</sup>Reading contrapuntally is Said’s strategy for unveiling how the crucial presence of the empire emerges in canonical texts as Austin’s *Mansfield Park*. In *Culture and Imperialism*, Said argues: as we look back at the cultural archive, we begin to reread it not univocally but *contrapuntally*, with a simultaneous awareness both of the metropolitan history that is narrated and of those other histories against which (and together with which) the dominating discourse acts (p.59, emphasis in original).

<sup>9</sup>HomiBhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994) p. 312.

<sup>10</sup>*The Girl of the Tangerine Scarf* will be referred to as *The Girl* for the rest of the work.

exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*'. (56, italics in original).

Recently, a number of books, anthologies and special issues of scholarly journals have focused on the works of Arab American writers. These inquisitive and analytical works have illustrated the connections between identity, religion, and gender among other issues. Evelyn Shakir's important contributions to Arab American women studies have focused on autobiography and history. *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American women in the United States* (1997) has often been referred to by many scholars in the field. In this book, she stresses the long neglected story of the Arab woman in the United States. By highlighting Arab women's depiction from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the present, she discusses each generation's negotiation between typical Arab values and the freedoms granted to women in the West. She proficiently challenges established stereotypes and creates a captivating image of a misjudged group; Anastasia Valassopoulos' *Contemporary Arab Women Writers: Cultural Expression in Context* (2007) tackles some of the well-established Arab women writers 'alongside authors whose work has attracted far less attention' (2). She studies the works written originally in English and also those translated into English.

Susan Darraj's *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (2004) binds together the voices of many Arab and Arab American women writers on and provides offers the best writings by their contributors. By exhibiting their own and personal experiences, the authors provide a better understanding of Arab women's condition and life across generations and cultures. Amal Talaat Abdelrazek's *Contemporary Arab American Women Writers: Hyphenated Identities and Border Crossing* (2008) discusses the works of Leila Ahmed, Diana Abu-Jaber, Mohja Kahf and Laila Halaby. Abdelrazek shows the contribution of the hyphenated identities of these writers in shaping their works. Through the

use of numerous approaches, such as feminist and post-colonialist, these publications have offered insightful and productive readings of texts by Arab writers.

Collections of essays include the co-edited collection *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third-World Women Writers* (2000) in which Lisa Suheir Majaj and Amel Amireh critically examine Arab women writers' reception of U.S. and relate their personal experiences to those women writers from other Third-World communities. Nathalie Handal also published critical and academic work which explores the relationship among women of Arab descent in their homelands as well as in the Diaspora. In her edited collection, *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology* (2001), Handal provides a comprehensive overview of modern Arab poetry, including the development of Arab American women writings. Paula W. Sunderman, and Therese Saliba; *Food For Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab- Canadian Feminists* (1994) edited by Joanna Kadi; Lisa Suheir Majaj, *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels* (2002).

Each of the above cited works makes a significant contribution to the field and reinforces our perception of the different cultural and contextual backgrounds in which the analyzed works are produced. These critics have skillfully demonstrated the heterogeneity and difference among Arab women by exposing the stereotypical and frozen images that portray them as helpless and passive victims of a fundamentalist Arab and Muslim patriarchy.

In the present study, I contend that Arab American women writers choose to emphasize the differences within the Arab American community and give importance to this investigation over other themes. In this context, Arab and white characters seem to be the main characters in the works of Arab American novelists. This may be due to the circumstances behind the immigration and settlement of Arabs in the United States. Through



a brief survey on the most important immigration waves of Arabs in the US, I would like to demonstrate that Arabs' position in discussions on ethnicity and multiculturalism in the US has, to differing degrees, influenced these writers' own sense of identity and has been manifested in their works.

The characters analyzed in both novels mirror the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial discourses in the US. Hence, a careful and thorough investigation of the contexts in which the novels were written seems to be the best means of exploring the themes. Here, I emphasize the immigration and settlement experiences of Arabs in the US because I find this contextualizing indispensable because the study of literature is strongly linked to the examination of its social context. In other words, we cannot effectively write about Diaspora without considering historical and current debates on the different integration policies in the host country. My aim here is to show the influence of the word 'Arab' on the literature produced by each writer. We should however remind ourselves that the concept of identity is as crucial to our discussion of the works of Arab women writers in Diaspora.

In order to proceed with the analysis of the corpus and the research outlined in the introduction, I find it necessary to delineate some of the key concepts that back my work. Since these women write about different diasporic experiences, it becomes crucial to discuss the meaning of the term Diaspora as a theoretical concept. The term "diaspora" is "etymologically derived from the Greek term diasperien, from dia- , "across" and - sperien, "to sow or scatter seeds"' (Brazier and Mannur: 1). Therefore, diaspora refers to groups of people who were "dislocated from their native homeland through the movements of migration, immigration, or exile" (Brazier and Mannur: 1). Diaspora, thus, is always related to dislocation from one place and to relocation in other places. The concept of a diaspora is not a new one; whenever peoples sharing the same values, cultural traditions, and racial/ethnic identity are scattered into inhospitable environments, there emerges simultaneously a culture

which retains many of the split traditions while attempting to cope with the alien-and most often dominant-society around them. The term “diaspora” was originally coined to reflect the dispersed colonies of exiled Jews outside of Palestine around the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC; it developed to mean the forced migration of other groups as well-most prominently, the dispersion of Africans throughout the Americas after the slave trade.<sup>11</sup>Nowadays, “diaspora [...] speaks to diverse groups of displaced persons and communities moving across the globe” (Brazier and Mannur 2), which are fictionally represented in a variety of contemporary literary works, such as the novel under analysis in this thesis.

Diasporic communities, then, are continuously conciliating their identities within the boundaries of their adopted home and beyond borders with their homeland as well. According to Robin Cohen, “Diasporas are positioned somewhere between nation-states and “traveling cultures” in that they involve dwelling in a nation-state physical sense, but traveling in an astral or spiritual sense that falls outside that nation-state’s space/time zone.”<sup>12</sup> Although all Diasporas negotiate their identities between their homeland and adopted home, differences still exist over their similitude.

According to Avtar Brah the concept of diaspora is ‘an ensemble of investigative technologies that historicize trajectories of different diasporas, and analyze their relationality across fields of social relations, subjectivity and identity’.<sup>13</sup>Perhaps Brah’s greatest contribution to the study of Diaspora is manifested by what she calls ‘diaspora space’, she insists that each diaspora ‘must be analyzed in its historical specificity’ if the concept of diaspora is to serve as a useful heuristic device (182-3). The identity of the diasporic community ‘is far from fixed or pre-given’ because it is constituted within the crucible of

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<sup>11</sup>Gay Wilentz, “Toward a Diaspora of Literature: Black Women Writers from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States,” *National Council of Teachers of English*, vol. 54, n°4 (1992), pp. 385-405.

<sup>12</sup>Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1997) 135.

<sup>13</sup>AvtarBrah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London &NewYork: Routledge, 1996)

every day experience; in the daily stories ‘we tell ourselves individually and collectively’.  
(183).

Diaspora space refers to a space of interaction between the immigrant and the native, or the person who inhabits the host country – and I will add that the immigrant is certainly influenced by those left in the place of origin. It is important to consider the relationship between these groups of individuals since the interactions between them take place in this diaspora, and it is within this space that the borders between them become puzzling, in the sense that negotiations need to take place all the time. Moreover, the extended concept of diaspora space is of great importance because it shows that individuals in diaspora are not the only ones to be affected, since those people who receive them in their host country are also extremely disturbed by their presence and by the daily interactions between them.

By using Brah’s work on space and border theory along with Gloria Anzaldúa, I will address the issue of border crossing in the selected novels by focusing on the displacement and dislocation of identities, especially in chapter three and four in which the characters, whether immigrants or American-born, feel exiled while negotiating both sides of their identities; the chapters further explore whether one can choose to become Arab or American if one has a hyphenated identity.

Another fundamental theorist when dealing with diaspora and cultural identity is Stuart Hall. In his essay “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Hall, although writing about cinema and the Caribbean context, sheds light on important issues that are common to multiple ethnic backgrounds and to multiple media of enunciation – not only cinema, but also literature – in which individuals place themselves. He argues that “identity” is a production that is always in process and is never stable, and he proposes two main theories about cultural identity. In the first theory, Hall defines cultural identity in terms of one shared culture, ‘a sort

of collective “one true self” (223). This means that any ethnic group shares many resemblances, such as their mutual diasporic experiences, and cultural traditions. As Hall states, this conception of cultural identity “provides us, as “one people”, with stable, unchanging and continuous frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions and vicissitudes of our actual history” (234). This idea is related to essentialist views which seek for a common core thus neglecting the differences that exist between individuals sharing the same cultural background.

By admitting the need of understanding the diasporic experience through deep analyses, Hall exposes the second concept of cultural identity. According to him, this position recognizes the presence of similarities shared by a distinct group while focusing on the changes that individuals endure, which “constitute what we really are”, or rather – since history has intervened – “what we have become” (225). Cultural identity, Hall stipulates, belongs to the future as much as to the past. For Hall, then, diasporic identities are not defined by essence or purity. On the contrary, they are defined by “the recognition of a necessary heterogeneity and diversity” (235).

The works of Brah and Hall shed light on the perplexity of diasporic identities. In this sense, the works of Arab American writers need to be drafted within racialized historical processes that have influenced their identities and their literary productions. By examining the socio-political contexts in which Arab American women writers produce their works, I hope to provide a helpful critical for and framework.

These two different concepts of cultural identity that Hall proposes are very useful for the understanding of how the women characters experience the diaspora in both Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* (2003) and Mohja Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006). The first concept cannot be applied to both novels, since the relationships that the protagonists have

with their Arab and hybrid condition are much more accentuated by their differences than by their similarities. The second concept, on the other hand, fits better to what happens in the novels: the experience of diaspora is identified by what the characters *become*, rather than by what the characters *are*. The construction of their experiences is marked by different positions, although it should be stated that, as Hall puts it, all these different positions are grounded on the past (236), which means that the construction of one's identity is influenced by the ways that each individual narrates and re-reads the past experiences. They clearly inhabit "the postmodern subject" since the postmodern conception of identity is neither biological, essential, nor permanent. Instead, it is defined historically, and shifts between contexts and audiences. Hall writes: "If we feel we have a unified identity from birth to death, it is only because we construct a comforting story or 'narrative of self' about ourselves.<sup>14</sup> The fully unified, completed, secure and coherent identity is a fantasy. Instead, we are confronted by a bewildering, fleeting multiplicity of possible identities, any of which we could identify with – at least temporarily" (598).

My adoption of the postmodern identity model deeply influences this analysis. I do not believe that an "authentic self" exists and reject the idea that cultural identities are certain and stable. I believe that identity, like culture, is constantly constructed and deconstructed along varying axes and shifting systems.

Throughout the chapters, the texts will illustrate how Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and Third Space are invoked. Though their works encompass a range of themes, both writers share a common concern with western perceptions of Arabs and Muslims. Each writer draws on her personal experience as a woman of Arab descent with affiliations to Arab, Muslim, and American communities. It is in this spirit that this thesis is written.

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<sup>14</sup> Hall, 1990, as cited in Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity," *Modernity and its Futures*, eds. Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity, 1992) 598.

Chapter One will examine Arab immigration in the US and their long uncertain ethnic classification. It will deal with Arab American identity negotiation and the narratives presented in the upcoming chapters. It is important first to establish a context for their experiences with a focus on immigration and notions of identity.

Chapter Two will focus on a survey on Arab American literature then will examine the status of Arab women in the literature field and will focus, in particular, on contemporary Arab Muslim women writers. Specifically, it will focus on the novels that are written by Contemporary Arab American women. The chapter will further examine the positioning of Arab American women within the Arab American community and larger American society. I will also hint at how Arab American feminists have negotiated their ethnic identities and how they challenge Western views vis-à-vis their status

Chapter Three will emphasize the work of Mohja Kahf who employs themes such as hyphenated identities and the position of Arab/Muslim women in the Arab-Western cultural encounter. Kahf, through *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*, demystifies some of the Arab-Islamic cultural symbols such as the veil, harem, and hijab that are commonly associated with a relentless Arab and Muslim patriarchy. Kahf's novel foregrounds the importance of Islam in shaping the experiences of her characters. The novel further presents the two strands of feminism in the Arab world: Secular and Islamic feminisms. Moreover, the novel articulates the hybrid positions of Arab/Muslim American women by constructing contexts in which the protagonist tries to negotiate the multiple aspects of her identity as well as her relationships with people among the various communities with which she is affiliated.

Chapter Four will concentrate on the novel of Diana Abu-Jaber *Crescent*. The image of Arab communities is central to the works produced by Arab American authors since Arabs and Americans of Arab descent have been the victims of a long history of stereotyping and

misrepresentations in US popular culture. The novel subverts stereotypes about Arabs and uses the metaphor of food as an important connector to their homelands. Writings on food as a mode of ethnic representation have provoked particular controversy with the Arab American writing community and readership. It is through cooking Arab food that Sirine discovers her neglected Arab part of identity; food seems to be the primary way that Arab Americans have related to mainstream America. Abu-Jaber employs her creative skills to engage with some of the problems that face Arab Americans and render Arab American communities marginalized. In other words, she concentrates on exploring the contradictions of their communities from within and explains them to the larger American community. In this way, the author's preoccupation with 'humanizing' her community thwarts her attempts to adequately explore trans-cultural and cross-ethnic dialogues and alliances.

# Chapter One

*A man finds his identity by identifying. A man's identity is not best thought of as the way in which he is separated from his fellows, but the way in which he is united with them.”*

Robert Terwilliger



## **Introduction**

Arab Americans constitute a sizeable and diverse minority population in the United States today. Despite the growth of this population within the United States, and the growing interest in Arabs on the international political scene, research and ethnic studies debate on Arab Americans remain remarkably scarce because of their heterogeneity of this group and the widespread misconceptions about this group.

Arab immigrants have been engaged in the process of becoming Americans for the last century (Haddad, 2000:109). The process has not been easy as researchers have found. Immigrants brought their distinctive identities, beliefs, ideologies and practices that have affected their own generation in their own countries as well as their new generation in the host country. Arabs' adaptation to the American culture has been affected by the national origin of the immigrants, by their ethnicities within each nation, language, political affiliation, place of residency, waves of immigration, culture, levels of acculturation/integration, and gender.

Arab Americans hold a unique set of cultural values, beliefs and attitudes. Like other immigrant groups, they have found that the conformity of their culture with the dominant culture of the United States has created a lot of problems. Despite more than a century of migration, Arab Americans have not fully adopted the culture, language, values, and American lifestyles. However, several things have changed in the U.S. since the attacks of September 11, 2001. The impact on the Arab community has been significant mainly the questioning of their loyalty to the nation and widespread conceptions that blame all Arab Americans for the actions of a small number of radical fanatics.

Women's adjustment to American culture has proved to be more problematic because of their portrayal in American popular culture as belly dancers, harem girls, or submissive women clad in black from head to toe. In fact, The Arab Woman has always been depicted as

a silent submissive creature, oppressed and in need of liberation. And yet Arab American women who were born and raised in the United States are strongly attached to life and culture in America, but their Arab part of identity is regarded by others as un-American.

The present chapter will attempt to highlight Arab Americans' struggle to adapt to their new environment and their Identity negotiation as Arabs and Americans. However, it is important first to establish a context for Arab American experiences with a focus on immigration and notions of identity. The chapter will further examine the positioning of Arab American women within the Arab American community and larger American society.

## **I.1. Arab immigration to the United States**

The Arab American community is made up of numerous people who originally hail from large and diverse geographical regions. They are most often defined by ancestry and national origin. The U.S. census identifies Arab Americans as Americans who can trace their ancestry to the North African countries of Algeria, Egypt, Libya, Tunisia, Morocco and the Western Asian countries of Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Palestine, Qatar, Oman, Saudi Arabia and United Emirates Arabs (U.S. Bureau of Census 1990).

The Arab American Institute estimates that approximately 3.5 million Arab Americans live in the U.S. today (Arab American Institute, 2000; retrieved June, 10, 2010). The institute has divided Arab immigration to the U.S. into two major waves; the first started around the 1870s and lasted nearly until the beginning of World War II; while the second included immigrants who arrived following World War II and continues to the present day (Shakir, 1997: 124). The two waves differ significantly in terms of cultural, political, socioeconomic, and religious background, and reasons for leaving. All of these factors affected their adaptation to the new country as well as the development of individual/collective identity. These two waves will be discussed in detail in order to provide a historical and contextual backdrop to the lives and experiences of Arab American women today.

### **1.1 The first wave: 1870-Second World War**

Many Arab scholars agree that documentation of Arab immigrants during the first wave is precarious (Mehdi, 1978; Naff, 1993; Suleiman, 1999). National borders and political leadership in the Arab world were different in that period from the present-day situation and the classification system used by immigrant officials, which was based mainly on race, could not adequately be applied on Arabs who are sometimes considered Black and sometimes White (Suleiman, 1999). Prior to the end of World War I, Turkey under the Ottoman Empire

controlled Syria, Palestine, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, much of the Arabian Peninsula, and much of North Africa (Hourani, 1991; Mehdi, 1978). Therefore, those Arabs who immigrated to the U.S. before the end of World War I were classified as Turks and not Arabs. By 1899, immigrant officials realized that some of these Ottoman subjects were Syrian and they added the classification of Syrian. At that time, Greater Syria included present-day Jordan, Palestine, and Lebanon (Naff, 1993: 29).

Although the number of Arab immigrants during this period is difficult to assess, there is enough documentation of the life experiences and the composition of this group. Naff (1993) and Suleiman (1999) reported that this first wave of immigrants consisted primarily of artisans or village farmers who were relatively poor, illiterate and uneducated. Furthermore, these earliest immigrants were mainly young, single, and adventurous Christian men who came from Mount Lebanon, then under the Ottoman occupation of Greater Syria,<sup>15</sup> and had no prior mastery of the English language. These immigrants were viewed as sojourners because their initial motivations were mainly economic; they hoped to earn as much money as possible within the shortest amount of time in order to return to their homes wealthier and prouder. They did not intend to live in America but considered it as transient home until the situation in the Middle East improved and they could return “home” safe.

Naff and Suleiman also reported that from 1861 to 1915, Mount Lebanon witnessed a time of increasing prosperity and cultural flourishing. They concluded that these early immigrants were not fleeing their home countries because of religious or economic persecution, but rather were attracted by America’s accelerating urbanization and industrialization.

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<sup>15</sup>Alix Naff, ‘The early Arab Immigrant Experience,’ *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. by Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994), pp. 23-35 (29). See also: Michael W. Suleiman, ‘Introduction: The Arab Immigrant Experience,’ *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, ed. by Michael W. Suleiman (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 1999) pp. 1-21

This earliest group was referred to as “the pack-peddlers” because they found in it a quick way of gaining money and returning to their homelands to purchase more land, marry and open up new businesses. In the U.S., peddlers settled around a supplier, usually from their village in Lebanon.<sup>16</sup> Equipped with two or three suitcases each, they peddled merchandise across towns and cities. These peddlers could be compared to mobile department stores selling clothing, linens, toweling, jewelry, laces, icons, frames, and rosaries (Naff, 1993: 96). Naff further remarks that peddling facilitated the assimilation of these early immigrants because it forced them to learn English and to see the country and experience its way of life. In fact, peddling networks provided opportunities for thousands of newcomers, but more significantly, it spared the early immigrants from a ‘ghetto mentality’ (29).

By 1910, peddling declined as an immigrant occupation (30). Workers started to look for jobs in factories and mills and many joined the assembly line but opened their own businesses managed by their wives and children.<sup>17</sup> They were attracted by industry’s payment of five dollars for an eight-hour day, which was initiated during WWI by Ford Motors Company (Naff, 31). As a consequence, a large number of Arabs settled near the Ford Factory in Dearborn. By World War I, official statistics show that there were around 100,000 Arabic-speaking immigrants (24). Arab immigrants established their own (Eastern) churches, an Arabic language-press, and voluntary associations that reflected traditional identity makers and perpetuated the traditional community fragmentation.<sup>18</sup> According to Naff, the most influential factors in shaping their identities were familial and religious affiliations and these prevailed in the Arabic language press and in the formation of clubs and societies (25).

Michael W. Suleiman argues that from 1870 to World War I, Arab immigrants thought of

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<sup>16</sup>Naff describes New York City as ‘the Syrian mother colony and the cultural and economic center’ (31)

<sup>17</sup>For a detailed description of how early Arab women immigrants contributed and shouldered family responsibilities, see Evelyn Shakir, *Bint Arab: Arab and Arab American Women in the United States* (Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997)

<sup>18</sup>Naff, p. 31. See also: Michael W. Suleiman, ‘Arab-Americans and the Political Process’, in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. by McCarus, pp. 37-60.

themselves ‘as in, but not part of, U.S.’ society and politics (Suleiman, ‘Arab-Americans and the Political Process’: 38).

Suleiman claims that Arabs were greatly affected by the outbreak of World War I (38). Many Arab community leaders encouraged young man in the US to join the American armed forces ‘to help their new country to liberate their old homeland’ (5). Community leaders further encouraged Arabs in the US to ‘buy American Liberty bonds to help with war effort’ (5).<sup>19</sup> Moreover, travel to and from the Middle East became more difficult and dangerous as the major war passages were the sites of naval battles. Greater Syria was divided into four countries after the Sykes-Picot Agreement of 1916<sup>20</sup> and in 1917, British Foreign Secretary, Arthur James Balfour, made his famous declaration in favor of a Jewish ‘national home’ in Palestine.

During this period, immigrants from all over the world were flooding in the United States by millions and this led to the rise of an anti-alien movement which was materialized in the Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 which restricted Syrian immigration under the quota system to 100 people annually.<sup>21</sup> Consequently, early Arab immigrants were cut off from their homelands, a fact that accelerated the Americanization process (Naff: 31).

Women were a part of the initial wave of immigration but their numbers were small. Prior to 1899, women accounted for just 27% of the Arabic-speaking immigrants to the U.S. (Naff, 1985: 115). Not surprisingly, the first women immigrants were predominantly Christian. As the community became better established, more women emigrated to the U.S. In

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<sup>19</sup>See Halliday’s ‘Millet of Manchester’ for details on the role Manchester Syrian Association (MSA) played in mobilizing Syrian communities in America to actively participate in the campaigns against the Ottomans.

<sup>20</sup> The Sykes-Picot Agreement of May 1916 was an unpublished agreement that was agreed by the British and French diplomats, Sir Mark Sykes and Georges Picot. They agreed to divide the Ottoman Empire after the end of the First World War. The compromise effectively aimed at to give France and Palestine control over Syria, Lebanon and Turkish Cicilia, while Jordan and areas around the Persian Gulf and Baghdad will be placed under the British government.

<sup>21</sup>Until then, the term Arab American did not exist as I will explain. ‘Syrian’ refers to Arabs from the Levant.

the period from 1919 to 1930, women made up approximately 47% of Arab immigration. Women came to join their husbands, to seek better economic opportunities, and to improve their prospects for marriage (Naff, 1985: 117). By 1925, women immigrants began to outnumber men (Orfalea, 1988: 315).

This first wave of Arab immigrants arrived in the U.S. during the government's efforts to assimilate newcomers and turn them into Americans. Such a measure was willingly embraced by many immigrants which resulted in the gradual disappearance of many of the community's most distinctive cultural values. This could be extremely painful but as Naff argues, Arab immigrants "could not easily avoid adopting the basics for getting along in America" (1985:10). Consequently, they attended citizenship classes, learned English, and adopted many of the manners that were critical to being accepted within their new society (Naff 1985). This atmosphere placed a great deal of pressure on new arrivals to relinquish their native cultures and identities and to conform, both socially and culturally, to greater American society. Furthermore, the kind of labor performed by these immigrants played a crucial role in their assimilation. Hence, the children of the first generation immigrants had little interest in, or knowledge of, their ethnic origins (Naff, 1993; Shakir, 1997). The Americanization process also had an impact on the role of women in the new country. Women gained more self-confidence and a sense of independence as they assumed responsibilities traditionally performed by the men of the household. Their increased participation in the economic welfare of the family as well as in more disciplinary and decision-making responsibilities led to the gradual eroding of traditional social restrictions on women – mainly in the Christian community (Naff, 1993: 34).

Adjustment for these early Arab Americans was further complicated by the nature of racism in America at that time. While immigration officials struggled with establishing a proper classification for Arab immigrants, the early Arab Americans fought to be classified as

White because of the negative connotations associated with being classified as Black (Suleiman, 1999). They argued that they were very much a part of the White race and, as Suleiman has contended, Americanization and the desire to be White came out of fear of being marginalized in the new home. Assimilation and Americanization for this wave of immigrants occurred so quickly, that Naff and others argue, if it were not for the arrival of new waves of Arab immigrants after the liberalization of US immigration laws in 1965, the 1967 war defeat, and the efforts to preserve and maintain their Arab heritage, the descendants of the first generation Arabs 'might have assimilated themselves out of existence' (35).

### **1.2 The second wave: 1945-Present**

The end of W.W.II marked the arrival of the second wave of Arab immigration in the U.S. (Shakir, 1997: 124). Unlike the first wave which was predominantly Christian from Mount Lebanon, the newer immigrants were a mixture of educated Muslim and Christian Arabs and were highly skilled (Suleiman, 1999: 21), and around 45% were women. They significantly differed from the first wave of Arab immigrants. Indeed, it substantially changes the composition of the present Arab American community. Many of them were Palestinian refugees and intellectuals seeking for the freedom of expression denied at home. Many of these immigrants were not only familiar with Western lifestyles having lived or studied abroad, but also spoke English fluently (Haddad, 1983: 65). This second wave of Arabic-speaking immigrants hoped, much as other immigrant groups arriving in the U.S., to find better opportunities for themselves and their families. According to Suleiman, these immigrants were profoundly influenced by the ideas of democracy to which they had been exposed through their interactions with the United States (1999:10).

The members of this new wave were also attracted to the U.S. because of its increasing industrialization, but these immigrants were often driven out of their homes because of



political instability. The regional conflicts included the Palestinian *Nakba* (catastrophe) and the creation of the state of Israel (1948), the Arab-Israeli wars (1967 and 1973), the civil wars in Yemen (1962) and Lebanon (1975), the Iran/Iraq war (1980), the Israeli invasion of Lebanon (1982), the first Palestinian *intifada* (1987), the Iraq/Kuwait conflict, and the Persian Gulf War (1991) (Hourani, 1991: 365). These conflicts, especially the unresolved Palestinian-Israeli conflict played a significant role in inhibiting the economic progress and the development of democracy in the Arab countries. Others immigrated because of major social and political changes in their homelands which made life difficult, especially for the wealthy and middle class in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, and other countries (Suleiman, 1999). Therefore, many of these immigrants were motivated by the desire to find a “democratic haven” (Suleiman, 1999: 9) where they would enjoy freedom without political or economic harassment. The 1967 war defeat resulted in the awakening of the third generation of early Arab immigrants who adopted an Arab identity instead of a Syrian one. Consequently, both the new arrivals and the third generation identify with their ethnic communities and work for the political and social improvement of their people in the Arab countries.

Another important factor that increased the number of people coming to the United States from Arab countries was the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This act had a professional-preference clause that favored educated professionals (Naff, 1983). The resulting exodus of vast numbers of educated members of Arab society has since become known as the Arab “brain-drain” (Zahlan 1981) which reached its highest levels between 1968 and 1971.

Another significant difference between the first and second wave of Arab immigrants relates to how they viewed themselves and interacted within American society and politics (Suleiman, 1999:9). While the first wave considered themselves to be sojourners, avoiding any kind of political and social participation, this second wave of immigrants, for the first time in Arab American history, were proud to identify as Arabs. In fact, the new wave and

descendants of early Arab immigrants established a number of associations that defend the causes and concerns of Arabs. The Association of the Arab-American University Graduates (AAUG), the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee (ADC), and the National Association of Arab-Americans (NAAA) are among the most prominent establishments. Suleiman argues that for the politically active members of this segment the emphasis is not for their ethnicity 'but on their Americanism,' unlike the recent arrivals who felt themselves to be an ethnic community subjected to 'negative and hostile' propaganda and stereotyping (60).

Still according to Suleiman, the first wave often found themselves experiencing some form of identity crisis which mainly resulted in rootlessness and ambiguity. Later immigrants struggled with being denied by the host country and the privilege of being openly proud of their heritage (12-13). The development of a collective Arab American identity has, in general, been complicated by the tension between the simultaneous need to feel pride in Arab heritage and avoid discrimination and prejudice in the United States. He furthermore asserted the fact that "Arab American women have had more problems than their male counterparts in defining an acceptable or comfortable identity" (14). In other words, these women have been restricted from enjoying the freedom offered by the American society because of the narrow-mindedness of their husbands, fathers or brothers.

Women were unable to be active agents in the host culture because they did not have a strong command of the language, lack the necessary education, and were unfamiliar with American customs. They were not psychologically ready to accept the new customs; they found themselves much more isolated than they were in their homelands, where they often had a boring life.

First-generation Arab American women did not adjust adequately to American society because they still held on to the traditions and customs of the land of origin. Teenager Arab

girls living in the United States were likely to face more problems and challenges because of the clash between the traditional child-rearing practices and the freedom offered by America. These teenagers are antagonistic towards Arabs and Arab Americans. They also find consider American views of women's status in the Arab world to be inappropriate and disfigured. Nonetheless, they work hard to broaden Arab women's rights and to better their way of life. They condemn and repudiate any definition of their gender roles by Arab American men and how they should behave in the new land. They do not wish to be the conveyers or transmitters of tradition and culture – at least not as these are defined by men or as they prevail in the homeland (Suleiman, 1994:14).

The last and probably the most important thing that differentiates Arab American communities is religion as argued by Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad. She states that up to the 1950s, about 90 percent of the Arab immigrants to the US were Christians while the others were Sunni, Shia and Druze Muslims. However, by the middle of the century the composition of the group began to change and eventually some 90 percent of the Arab immigrants to the US were Muslims.<sup>22</sup> Amaney Jamal and Kristine J. Ajrouch point out that since immigrants to the US with ancestral links in Arabic-speaking countries are quite diverse with regard to immigrant status; national origin and religious affiliation, their attitude to a white racial identity differ, indicating divergent assimilation patterns in the Arab American community.<sup>23</sup> Ajrouch and Jamal's argument invites us to consider the significance of the historical process by which Arabs in America became classified by the US government as Caucasian/White after a series of legal challenges in the early twentieth century.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>22</sup>Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "Maintaining the Faith of the Fathers: Dilemmas of Religious Identity in the Christian and Muslim Arab American Communities," *Development*, ed. by McCarus (61-84) (63).

<sup>23</sup>K.J. Ajrouch and Amaney Jamal, "Assimilating to a White Identity: the Case of Arab Americans," *International Migration Review*, 41 (2007): 860-79 (876)

<sup>24</sup>In 1914, George Dow, a Syrian immigrant living in South Carolina, was denied American citizenship because he did not meet the racial requirement of the US law, which limited naturalization to 'aliens being free white persons'. The shocked Syrian community managed to resolve the problem by demonstrating that they were

## **I.2. The Racialization of Arab Americans in the United States**

Arabs in the United States are not easily defined and fit awkwardly into the racial scheme that identifies individuals and groups as either “Black” or “White.” Several studies on Arab American ethnicity and racial formation show that historically Arabs were first considered “not white,” then “not quite white,” and later legally “became white.”<sup>25</sup> In this sense, Joanna Kadi, editor of *Food for Our Grandmothers*, argues that Arabs’ position in the West is ambiguous, they moved from “Not Black. Not white. Never quite fitting in. Always on the edge” (xvi). As Nadine Naber explains, the ambiguous position Arabs occupy in racial and ethnic discourses in the US is due to a number of reasons. First, the diverse Arab American community is lumped together as generically Arab-Middle Eastern-Muslim. When the US is involved in a military action against any Arab country, anyone who may be identified as Arab, Muslim or Middle Easterner living in the US may be targeted as a terrorist-enemy because anti-Arab sentiment removes all traces of diversity in the Arab American community. Second, Naber argues that Arab Americans are radically white, but not quite. According to the US Census Bureau, Arab Americans are defined as Caucasian/White. Yet, they are perceived as non-whites in many social contexts. Third, Islam, Naber maintains, is used as a means of racializing Arab Americans. As Muslims are being portrayed as terrorists, it is primarily ‘the distorted use of Islam, rather than phenotype,’ that marks Arabs in the US as non-white others. A fourth factor that enhances the invisibility of Arabs in the US is the intersection of religion and race. For Arab immigrants, the organization of difference

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Arabs and therefore members of the Caucasian race. Dow was finally granted citizenship. The judge ruled that Syrians ‘were to be classed as white persons’, and were eligible for naturalization. As a result, Syrian immigrants mobilized around it to a degree that was unprecedented. However, the community sued several court cases challenging their racial status between 1909 and 1915 and again during the 1940s. The participation of Syrian commanders in George Dow’s case helped clarify the question of Syrian whiteness from a legal standpoint. For more details on this case and similar cases, see: Sarah Gualtieri, ‘Becoming “White”: Race, Religion and the Foundations of Syrian/Lebanese Ethnicity in the United States,’ *Journal of American Ethnic History*, 20 (2001), 29-58. See also: Randa A. Kayyali, *The Arab Americans* (Westport, CT, & London: Greenwood Press, 2006), especially pp. 45-54.

<sup>25</sup>Michelle Hartman, ‘“This sweet / sweet music”: Jazz, Sam Cooke, and reading Arab American literary identities’, *MELUS*, vol.31, N°4 (2006), 145-165, p. 145.

according to religious categories has conflicted with the US social structure that organizes difference according to race/ethnicity. (Naber, 2000: 37). On the one hand, government officials who have classified Arabs and their descendants according to different categories have, in part, structured the social and historical invisibility of Arab Americans. On the other hand, Arabs' heterogeneity and identification according to diverse, conflicting labels shape the internal difficulties associated with classifying this population. Race, as a site of struggle, is historically contingent since its significance and meanings shift according to the historical moment; it is no longer seen as a biological, natural, or immutable category. Race is rather viewed as an unstable concept that is a product of systems of representations, practices, and laws that have historically been subject to political contestation and transformation (Fuss 1989; Omi and Winant 1986). Race is therefore linked to relations of power and political struggles. I do not mean that race is only an illusion, I rather consider it as socially determined which affects individuals and collectivities.

The racialization of Arabs did not begin on 9/11 but underwent a shift from ambiguity to abjection. In other words, before 9/11, Arabs and Muslims were ambiguously racialized in the U.S. and after the events, the ambiguity was resolved. The positioning of Arabs and Muslims as antithetical to the American nation is not the result of the number of the terror provoked by the events of September 11, but made possible through a constructed set of meanings about Arabs and Muslims that was already in place.

In Omi and Winant's words, racialization is "a matter of both social structure and cultural representation." Cultural representations of Muslims and Arabs derive from an American media regime that has vilified this population for decades, and from a social structure that believes in, and resorts to, the rhetoric of moral superiority to justify

its intervention in the Middle East and its discrimination against Arab Americans.<sup>26</sup>

Racialization is not static but is produced, reproduced, and solidified in a variety of forums: family networks, religious institutions, government offices, and even schools (Coates, 2004).

The racialization of Arabs and Muslims has involved a process of separating the Other from dominant mainstream culture. This process did not begin with the attacks, though the events galvanized it. Indeed, a long history of misrepresentation and the propagation of endless stereotypes are illustrated in the US popular media; Arab and Muslim Americans were portrayed as terrorists long before 9-11.<sup>27</sup> Susan Akram claims that this process is part of the “deliberate mythmaking” tactics of film and media, in the problematic stereotyping strategies of “experts” of the Middle East, in the selling of foreign policy agendas, and in “a public susceptible to images identifying the unwelcome ‘other’ in its midst”<sup>28</sup>. She goes on denoting that Muslims and Arabs are constantly excluded from that desirable group of “ordinary people, families with social interactions, or outstanding members of communities such as scholars or writers or scientists.” (4) In fact, Arabs have been unofficially classified as terrorists by the US government since the 1960s, then perceived as dangerous threats to their national security (Hassan, 2003).

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<sup>26</sup>In the words of Rodney Coates, these depictions of “other” entire sub-groups is commonplace in American popular culture. “Evidence seems to support the vilification of racial nonelites. Blacks and Hispanics [for example] are more likely to be presented as criminals than as victims or more positively (Chiricos and Eschholz, 2002). These types of perceptual biases have dire consequences when racialized minorities confront the legal system (Berger, 2002).

<sup>27</sup>See Michael Suleiman. “Stereotypes, Public Opinion and Foreign Policy: The Impact on Arab-American Relations,” *Journal of Arab Affairs*. April, 2002; M. Nabil. “The Arabs Image,” *World Press Review*. June 1986; Daniel Mandel. “Muslims on the Silver Screen,” *Middle East Quarterly*. Spring 2001; Mark Tessler and Dan Corstange. “How Should Americans Understand Arab Political Attitudes: Combating Stereotypes with Public Opinion Data from the Middle East,” *Journal of Social Affairs*, Winter 2002; Jack Shaheen. “Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Villifies a People,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. July, 2003; Fawaz Gerges. “Islam and Muslims in the Mind of America,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. July, 2003; Sulaiman Arti. “The evolution of Hollywood’s representation of Arabs before 9/11: the relationship between political events and the notion of ‘Otherness,’” *Journal of the MeCCSA Postgraduate Network*, Vol 1, No 2 (2007)

<sup>28</sup>Susan Akram, “The Aftermath of September 11, 2001: The targeting of Arabs and Muslims in America,” *Arab Studies Quarterly*. Spring, 2002

The racialization of Arab and Muslim Americans captures the ways in which the dominant social structure of this country has positioned itself vis-à-vis this subpopulation. In fact, Americans have come to know and learn about Islam and Arabs through the prisms of terrorism and barbarism.

In order to understand post-9/11 Arab and Muslim-American racialization, it is important to situate the pre-9/11 racial status. Before the attacks, Arab Americans occupied an ambiguous racial status in the U.S. In other words, Arab Americans were simultaneously racialized as “white” and “non-white” (Naber,2000: 39). Arab immigrants’ encounter with the racialization process happened immediately after their arrival in the US whose were classified as Syrians in 1899. However, this designation did not protect the Arabic-speaking immigrants from being viewed as undesirable racialized groups and therefore illegible for citizenship.

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the U.S. witnessed a big flood of new immigrants which led to a growing uneasiness exemplified by racist stereotypes directed at immigrants and new restrictions on immigration. In 1910, the U.S. Census Bureau decreed that people from the eastern Mediterranean, including Turks, Palestinians, Syrians, and others were officially “Asiatics” (Naff,1985: 253). This meant that the racial status of Arabic-speaking immigrants was now truly ambiguous and this ambiguity deprived them of citizenship. Moreover, in 1911, the Bureau of Immigration and Naturalization implemented new directives that instructed civil employees around the country to deny the granting of citizenship for individuals who were neither white nor of African ancestry (253). As a result, the eligibility of certain groups of immigrants to become naturalized as citizens was no longer guaranteed. Not legally recognized as a minority group by the United States government, and unable to fit into the racial and ethnic categories used by the United States Census (black, white, Asian, Native, and Latino), Arabs have not been legally ‘racialized’ and were therefore considered white. However, at the same time, Arab Americans have been placed outside the

boundaries of whiteness, and paradoxically positioned as ‘not quite white’ (Samhan, 1999: 210; Bhabha, 1994: 86). Marked with stereotypes in the United States (villain, religious fanatics, backwards, and most remarkably terrorists), Arabs become regarded as the “Other,” living outside the ideological scope of belonging to the United States.

This paradox is constructed through a distinct process of racialization. Arab Americans are often classified as “others” on the basis of their religion and political affiliation while African Americans, Asians, and Native Americans are categorized according to their physical appearance. Such religious racialization tends to tie Arabs to Islam, and therefore considers all Arabs as Muslims; it represents Islam as a monolithic religion erasing diversity among Arabs and Muslims; and marks Islam as backwards, fanatical, and uncivilized (Naber, 2000: 52; Joseph, 260). Arab Americans, like Latinos,

challenge the U.S. system of racial classification because they do not fit neatly into the given categories. They are neither a race nor a racially homogeneous ethnic group. Rather, they are a diverse array of multiracial ethnic groups, bound together by language, cultural ancestry, and discrimination in the United States (Rodriguez, 2002:175).

Whereas in the past, racialized groups, including Arab Americans, struggle to be defined as whites to gain citizenship rights, “more recently, defining groups has been a way of including them and ensuring that particular groups are not discriminated against” (105). Arab Americans have historically claimed to be part of the Semitic branch of the Caucasian race in order to obtain citizenship. Those who were fair-skinned and Christian often succeeded in passing for white, while those with darker complexions or Muslims were not qualified. Since the Civil Rights Movement, racism directed at Arab Americans has often gone unrecognized because of their legal status as white.<sup>29</sup> Hence, being left with no other alternative, some Arab Americans choose to identify themselves as West Asian or North African on the Census,

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<sup>29</sup>See Therese Saliba’s essay, “Resisting Invisibility: Arab Americans in Academia and Activism,” *Arabs in American: Building a New Future* (Ed; Michael W. Suleiman, Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999: 304-319) for a discussion of several legal cases involving Arab American rights and citizenship, which points to the racial ambiguity of Arabs in the U.S.



while others have taken their ambiguous racial status and have avoided being racially marked (U.S. Census 1990). However despite the racial and religious diversity of the Arab American population, they are often seen by whites as non-white and by African Americans and other racialized groups as white, close to whiteness, or simply foreign (Kadi, 1994: 79).

The racial paradox and its subsequent consequences completely shifted on September 11, 2001 from invisibility to visibility. No longer ambiguously racialized, Arab and Muslim Americans face flagrant racialization on many levels, through government policies and practices of racial profiling, detention, deportation as well as through individual vigilante acts of discrimination, violence, and murder in the name of patriotism. In fact, in the immediate weeks and months after 9-11, new policies as the PATRIOT ACT (2001) singled out Arabs and Muslims and created a wave of fear and anxiety among visitors and immigrants from Muslim-majority countries. Thousands of people who feared arrest because of visa irregularities sought asylum in Canada (Murray, 2004). During the past several years, US government agents have made over 1,200 “special interest” arrests, such as those conducted under the power of the PATRIOT Acts and NSEERS<sup>30</sup> (The National Security Entry-Exit Registration System) program. Despite the antiterrorist rhetoric of this legislation, however, none of those 1,200 were ever directly linked to the September 2001 attacks.

This racialization process generally views Arabs as different than and inferior to whites, potentially violent and threatening their security, and therefore are targeted as a distinct group of people and criminalize them without evidence of criminal activity. The binary logic of “us”

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<sup>30</sup> The NSEERS program ordered for the registration of all young males from entering the US soil from 20 countries and asking for temporary visas. The program was implemented in the wake of 9/11 requiring from nonimmigrant visitors from the designated countries to be photographed, fingerprinted and interviewed at an immigration office upon arrival and departure from the U.S. However, NSEERS proved completely ineffective in countering terrorism. For more details, read Chris Rickerd, “Homeland Security Suspends Ineffective, Discriminatory Immigration Program,” in <http://www.aclu.org/blog/immigrants-rights-racial-justice/homeland-security-suspends-ineffective-discriminatory> (June, 2011)

verses “them,” based on a constructed myth of racial difference, invades U.S.society and provides the lenses through which group differences are organized, imagined,and understood.

### **I.3.Arab American Identity Negotiation in an Era of Global Conflicts**

As mentioned above, the Arab-American community is remarkably heterogeneous. It includes people from different countries and different religious denominations; those who speak no Arabic and those who speak no English; people who identify primarily with the “Arab” side of their heritage and those who identify primarily with their “American” side. This diversity further complicates the assessment of what constitutes “Arab-American” and Arab American identity as well.

In recent decades, identity has become a more problematic concept for social scientists. In fact, identity is a complex notion to pinpoint because it is so fluid under the effects of globalization. According to Philip M. Khayal: “identity formation then, is not a singular process with a definitive end point but an evolving social-psychological experience of self-discovery that changes with events, issues, and sociopolitical circumstances surrounding a person.”<sup>31</sup> Stuart Hall, among other scholars, argues that the identity of diasporic people is constantly being altered<sup>32</sup> because diasporic identity is fluid and constantly transforming itself. Hall continues that identity should be thought of as a “production” because the latter is never stable but develops according to the circumstances. Other scholars, like Homi Bhabha, have called this continuous changing diasporic identity “hybridity,” which means the fusion of elements from the homeland and adopted home to create a third culture

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<sup>31</sup>Kathleen Benson, and Philip M. Khayal, eds. *A Community of Many Worlds: Arab Americans in New York City* (New York: Museum of the City of New York/ Syracuse University Press: 2002)

<sup>32</sup> Stuart Hall, quoted in *Communication and Identity in the Diaspora: Turkish Migrants in Amsterdam and Their Use of Media*, Christine Ogan, (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2001),8. Quote originally appeared in “The Question of Cultural Identity” In *Modernity and its Futures*, eds Stuart Hall, David Held, and Tony McGrew (Cambridge: Polity Press in Association with the Open University, 1992).

and/or identity which reflects diasporans' "in-betweeness."<sup>33</sup> Arab Americans struggle with similar identity politics and issues of representation which other diasporas in the United States face. In the Arab American diaspora, much of the debate exists over which part of this category should be emphasized: Arab, American, or something in between; whether a hyphen should separate the two components of their ethnic, cultural, and national identities or if the hyphen should be replaced by a hybrid identity which blends the two entities rather than keeping them separate.

Since the present study aims at demonstrating Arab American women identity conflicts, it becomes important at this point to define ethnic identity and to explain the different strategies employed by this ethnic group to adequately adjust to the new home. Ethnic identity has been defined by sociologists as part of the individual's sense of belonging to a group. For groups with multicultural backgrounds, the development of ethnic identity has been conceptualized as an evolutionary stage process (Atkinson, Morten and Sue, 1979: 23). An ethnic group may be defined as a reference group whose members share a common history and culture, and who may be identifiable because they share similar physical features and values, and through the process of interacting with each other and establishing boundaries with others, they identify themselves as being members of that group. Therefore, ethnic identity, according to Smith (1989), is the sum total of group members' feelings about those values, symbols, and common histories that identify them as a distinct group. However, an individual does not belong to an ethnic group by choice; rather he / she must belong to such a group and becomes related to it through emotional and symbolic ties (Berton and Pinard, 1960).

As many of the ethnic groups who immigrate to the United States are escaping religious, political, and other oppressions, they are faced with a new challenge. The false

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<sup>33</sup>Ogan, 6.

promise of economic and social opportunity, the desire to keep their cultural customs and heritage, and the pressure to adapt and mix with the new culture, the American culture, causes them to see themselves as strangers in a new land and dealing with a different culture. In American society, ethnic identity development of the individual is tempered by one's minority or majority ethnic status. These two types of status lead the individual toward ethnic identity conflict (Smith, 1985: 25).

Ethnic identity or "acculturation" may be influenced by different factors such as age, level of education, length of stay in the United States, language, religion, social interactions, extent of experience of racism. Acculturation refers to "the changes in a cultural group or individual as a result of contact with another group" (Berry, et al., 2002:475). The process can broadly be conceptualized as occurring both within an ethnocultural group (i.e., Arab immigrants in the U.S.) and in the larger society (i.e., mainstream American society). Four distinct acculturation strategies have been identified as individuals or groups negotiate between the relationships sought among the groups or individuals and the maintenance of heritage, culture, and identity (Berry, 1970). A brief overview of these acculturation strategies for both ethnocultural groups and the larger society follows below.

Strategies of ethnocultural groups include assimilation, separation, integration and marginalization (Berry et al. 2002). Assimilation occurs when "individuals do not wish to maintain their cultural identity and seek daily interaction with other cultures" (354). Separation occurs when "individuals place a value on holding onto their original culture and at the same time wish to avoid interaction with others" (354). Integration occurs when "there is an interest in both maintaining one's original culture, while having daily interactions with other groups, here some degree of cultural integrity is maintained, while at the same time members of an ethnocultural group seek to participate as an integral part of the larger social network" (354). Finally, marginalization occurs when "there is little possibility or interest in

cultural maintenance (often for reasons of enforced cultural loss) and little interest in having relations with others (often for reasons of exclusion and discrimination)” (355).

The choice and use of the various acculturation strategies discussed above are, in part, the result of the nature of the interactions between the ethnocultural groups and the larger society. The larger society may respond to ethnocultural groups by adopting one of the four following approaches: the melting pot, separation, exclusion, or multiculturalism (Berry et al., 2002: 357). For example, when the larger society adopts the melting pot approach to interacting with ethnocultural groups, group members are essentially either encouraged or forced to assimilate. When the larger society demands that ethnocultural groups be segregated from the mainstream, then the groups employ the strategy of separation. When the larger society imposes ethnocultural exclusion, then marginalization most often is the outcome. Finally, “when cultural diversity is an objective of the society as a whole, it represents the strategy of mutual accommodation now widely called multiculturalism” (355-356).

Given what has been documented about the first and second waves of Arab immigrants to the U.S., this conceptual framework for understanding acculturation can be used to help guide a sociological and historical understanding of the types of strategies that Arab Americans have employed and the relationship between Arab Americans and the mainstream. The first wave of immigrants, the pack-peddlers, employed the strategy of separation since they were not engaged with the larger society while their children and grandchildren seemed to have employed the strategy of assimilation – namely, they did not wish to maintain their cultural identity and instead sought out daily interaction with the larger culture and society<sup>34</sup>. Such assimilation, however, was occurring during the time of an intense anti-alien movement in the U.S. (Naff, 1993: 25), supporting the assertion that the larger society was employing a melting pot approach to acculturation. The second wave of Arab

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<sup>34</sup> See Berry, Context of Acculturation in <http://fr.scribd.com/doc/85250152/Berry-Context-of-Acculturation>

immigrants is focused more on integration as they maintain deep attachments to their ethnic and cultural heritage and seek to participate in American society. The Arab American community, according to Suleiman, generally seeks to integrate more or less depending on the extent to which the larger society adopts a multicultural orientation. Integration has been identified as the acculturation strategy most associated with success and personal fulfillment during the process of adaptation (Berry, 2002: 354).

Another way to conceptualize acculturation strategies, which have focused on a more collective level, is to use a more psychological approach related to individual identity development and biculturalism. Berry (1990) drew a parallel between the forms of acculturation strategies and various forms of bicultural identities. At the individual psychological level, acculturative assimilation implies that the person identifies only with the mainstream community; acculturative separation implies that the person rejects mainstream culture and identifies only with their ethnic culture; acculturative marginalization implies that the person does not identify with either the mainstream or their own ethnic culture; and finally, acculturative integration implies that the person identifies with both the mainstream and their own ethnic community. Such psychological impacts of biculturalism on ethnic and cultural minorities have a dual nature. Research has demonstrated that biculturalism can create resilience and strength, but it can also create difficulties in identity development (Comas-Diaz & Minrath, 1985: 421) depending on the type of acculturation strategies employed (Benet-Martinez et al., 2002: 494) and /or allowed. When biculturalism manifests itself in its integrated form, individuals demonstrate successful competency in more than one culture and experience the least amount of psychological distress (497). According to Chin (1994), however, “it has not been uncommon for bicultural individuals to maintain separate and distinct selves syntonic with different cultures— behaviors and practice will differ depending on the context” (213-214). Such splitting, she maintains, allows the individual to

have cultural competency in two different domains, but also has the potential to cause a strain or stress upon the person who shifts cultural frames in different contexts.

In an in-depth qualitative exploration of the psychology of women's immigration, Espin (1999) sheds some light on the personal transformations and issues that arose among women immigrants to the U.S. Her research is important in the context of this present study because it was rooted in a sociological foundation of acculturation and at the same time gives voice to the manners in which the women negotiated the various conflicts that emerge. Most women who participated in the study revised their social and gender role expectations as a consequence of their migration. They worked hard at renegotiating gender roles with both the traditions of their home country and the expectations of the host culture; their experiences illustrated the simultaneous process of acculturation and identity formation (162). The research also points out that the younger ones (immigrants) were still questioning where they belong and who they would become [...] the older ones both reminisced and pondered what life would have been like under different circumstances (162-163). Furthermore, all of the women reported a liberating effect from the experience of being an outsider while discussing the losses inherent in the migration. Yet, young women reported that they struggled to "find a balance between the imposed hyper-sexualization of immigrant women as exotic and hyper-purity expected of them by their families and communities"(164), this made the adaptation to the new world difficult for the daughters of immigrant families as the development of their identity as young women became intertwined with the acculturation process and the emotional demands of migration" (9)

These findings emphasize both the struggles that occur within acculturating immigrant communities surrounding women's sexuality and gender roles and the manners in which oppression from the mainstream society further complicates the process. Despite the dual oppression experienced by women immigrants and the oftentimes taxing experience of

crafting a new identity, Espin (1999) asserted that most of the women who came out of the process did so feeling enriched. Among Arab immigrants, Evelyn Shakir has documented many of the same patterns that emerged in Espin's study. The findings from Espin's study can be understood on a political level as immigrant women's journey toward bicultural identities since their narratives often highlight the intertwined relationship between identity, acculturation, and oppression. In the words of Darder,

Biculturalism entails an ongoing process of identity recovery, construction, and reconstruction driven by collective efforts of subordinate cultural groups to build community solidarity, engage tensions surrounding nationality difference, revitalize the boundaries of subordinate cultures, and redefine the meaning of cultural identity within the current social context (1995: 3- 4).

From this perspective bicultural identity, gender roles, and acculturation have personal, collective, and political implications that are continually negotiated. Various social scientists have begun to acknowledge that Arab Americans, although a less visible minority, represent a unique population deserving special attention.<sup>35</sup> Shakir states that Arab Americans, as many other immigrant groups in the U.S., experience many of the pressures and complexities inherent in the acculturation process, while often being victims of ethnic discrimination or oppression (4). Social scientists have also concluded that Arab American invisibility, especially among women, is problematic in terms of workforce participation (Read, 2003) and in terms of the culturally particular identity development issues that arise from distinctly gendered and Arab American personalities. Currently, Read's *Culture, Class, and Work among Arab American Women* (2004) proves to be the only comprehensive source on Arab American women as a whole. This book includes statistics on religiosity, workforce

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<sup>35</sup> For more details, see: Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2002; Budman, Lipson, & Meleis, 1992; Dwairy, 1997, 2002.



participation, in-group and out-group marriage, in addition to discussions about the manners in which immigration and culture mediate Arab American women's experiences.

Read found that one third of working age Arab American women hold bachelor's degrees or higher, 52% are native born, 78% are U.S. citizens, and 91% are proficient in English. They tend to have about the same number of children as their White counterparts. When compared to other immigrant women, Arab American women have lower labor force participation rates than their native-born peers (45.9% and 72.1%). Throughout the book, Read recognizes the powerful influence of the Arab culture on Arab American women status and position in American society. In spite of the cultural diversity that can be found across the twenty-two Arab countries from which they immigrate, there is no common patrilineal family structure and the belief that the family is the basic building block of society. Thus, women's participation in the public sphere is discouraged as their primary duty is considered to be that of the family's keeper and cultural transmitter.

In the context of immigration, Arab American women are ultimately held accountable for maintaining and reproducing Arab ethnicity in the U.S. (Ajrouch, 1999: 129-139). The statistics demonstrate that immigrant generations tend to preserve traditional gender roles more than second and third generation Arab American women. Finally, Read explores the impact of religiosity on the lives of Arab American women and is able to dispel the misconception that Islam itself poses a barrier to Arab American women's achievement. She finds that strong religious identity—regardless of whether the person is Christian, Muslim or Jewish—has a restrictive impact on Arab American women's employment since more fundamentalist adherences to any of these faiths tend to be correlated with traditional gender roles. Last but not least, religiosity tends to be higher among lower socioeconomic classes of Arab Americans who also tend to be more recent immigrants. Thus, a correlation between religiosity, class, and traditional gender roles is established as all three are sustained,

reinforced, and reproduced within the various positions occupied by Arab Americans throughout American society.

In another study, Marshall and Read (2003) also found that approximately 77% of Arab American women married within the ethnic group, thus reinforcing Read's later assertion that endogamy contributes to the preservation of both Arab ethnicity and religiosity by keeping Arab American women in the home where they are responsible for transferring cultural values to the next generation. Despite Arab American women's high socioeconomic status, educational levels and English fluency – all variables that imply conditions conducive to high workforce participation – traditional gender roles persist, as these women continue to be primarily responsible for domestic duties. The constructive enactment and reproduction of gender as it is situated within the bounds of culture, ethnicity, and class seem to be among the strongest forces contributing to this paradox among Arab American women.

In sum, these findings highlight the importance of the distinct social, historical and cultural contexts structuring the lives of Arab American women. In some cases, the pressure to maintain traditional gender roles in order to preserve the old culture is a pattern seen among other immigrant groups, for instance Mexican women (Hondegneu-Stelo, 1994: 43). In this sense, Arab American women's experiences overlap with other immigrant groups. There are patterns in workforce participation, however, that demonstrate the manners in which Arab American women are distinct from other immigrant groups.

Shakir's *Bint Arab* (1997) is dedicated to putting forth "personal testimony of what it has meant and what it means today to be an Arab or Arab American woman in the U.S." (10). The author explains that a great silence descends upon Arab and Arab American women once they arrive in the United States and confirms the fact that little is known of this seemingly invisible group. In the narratives of various Arab and Arab American women, they repeatedly

speaking about the everlasting conflict between the Arab culture which tends to restrict women freedoms, and the American one which offers them new opportunities still hostile to the Arab world and expand their liberties as active agents in society. Despite the greater autonomy gained by young women of first, second, and third generations, many describe a “painful cultural lag that has sometimes intervened between the older and the new” (10).

It has been long established that minority status as a person of color and/or woman often leads to identity conflicts and that experiencing internal conflict may be a normal stage of development for people who are members of socially oppressed groups. These suppositions in conjunction with Shakir’s work imply that Arab American women, despite their invisibility and silence, indeed are experiencing culturally specific identity conflicts. Furthermore, that silence and invisibility may well be held in place by two forces: (1) collectivism, honor, and stigma in Arab culture and (2) anti-Arab racism, also referred to as Orientalism. As with many collectivistic cultures, the expression of conflict or negative feelings is not well accepted and rather is interpreted as a narcissistic preoccupation (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). Arab cultural notions of honor, manifested in the need to uphold a respectable family name and a good reputation along with culturally prescribed gender roles, also may influence women to silence some of the issues that they may be experiencing (Al-Krenawi & Graham, 2000). The expression of such conflict may elicit feelings of shame, selfishness, or a fear of stigma.

The second possible reason for Arab American women’s silence pertains to anti-Arab sentiments in America. Ahmed (1992) reports that Arab American women often do not share their experiences or publicly criticize the sexism within their group due to the racist beliefs that greater America holds about their ethnic group.

Many Arab American women paint a positive picture of in-group experiences so as to avoid confirming the negative stereotypes that mainstream Americans hold. Those stereotypes

often depict Arab women as being victims at the hands of their own men, and given that honor is such a deeply embedded cultural value, it may be that speaking against their own men is a blot on the in-group's honor. News coverage of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the Gulf War, and the invasion of Iraq portrays Arabs in a particularly negative light, namely as violent terrorists and fundamentalists, although many of the stereotypes that Americans have about Arabs pre-date these political conflicts. Hence, the main source of Arab stereotype dissemination is the media.<sup>36</sup> Prominent stereotypes in the media about Middle Eastern people have been “dangerously well-established in the psyche of mass audiences” (Deep, 2002: 1).

Deep reported that the current negative stereotypes in American films the depiction of the Arab as a wealthy or dangerous terrorist, uncivilized, people who are loud, crude and irrational; Arabs as people who always live in large groups; Arabs as heathen, backward, and evil; Arabs as religious fundamentalists. He further asserted that many of these stereotypes are rooted in the historical clash between the East and the West. In fact, Americans have consistently presented stereotypical images of the Arabs as Said contended:

In films and television, the Arab is associated either with lechery or bloodthirsty dishonesty. He appears as an oversexed degenerate capable of cleverly devious intrigues, but essentially sadistic, treacherous, low. Slave trader, camel driver, money changer, colorful scoundrel: these are some traditional Arab roles in the cinema. (Said, 1979: 286-287)

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<sup>36</sup>Representations of news events in TV dramas and policies drafted by the government, participate in racializing Arabs and Muslims. The media defined the notion of being in a continued danger because of Muslim extremists. Its implicit message was that Arabs and Muslims are backwards and in need of U.S. intervention to democratize and civilize them. Furthermore, the Arab has served as the quintessential *other* in Hollywood films throughout the history of cinema. Not only has the Arab world been consistently presented as inferior to the West in all aspects –morally, intellectually, and culturally – but also the Arabs themselves have been presented as antagonistic to Western values and a threat to the Western World. The depiction of Arabs in Hollywood was divided into different genres: documentary: *Streets of Cairo* (1896) and *Arabian Gun Twirler* (1899); fantasy: *1001 Arabian Nights* (1959), *Ali Baba and the forty thieves* (1943); political thrillers: *The Next Man*(1976), *The Rollover* (1981), *The Delta Force* (1986), *True Lies* (1994), *The Siege*(1998), etc. (From Salah Alaswad, *Hollywood Shoots the Arabs: The Construction of the Arab in American culture*, 2000). Those stereotypes heightened after 9/11 events as books and TV series which contributed in understanding the role of media in creating the “Arab-Muslim-Other”. It includes: Jack Shaheen’s *Reel Bad Arabs: How Hollywood Vilifies a People* (2001), TV series such as: *The Practice*, *Law and Order*, *NYPD Blue*, *7<sup>th</sup> Heaven*, *The Agency* (2001-2003), *Threat Matrix*(2003-2004) and the most important *24* .

These stereotypes conflate the group Muslims with Arabs and often characterize Muslim women as being oppressed, muted, veiled, or shrouded in misogynistic and violent religious cultures<sup>37</sup> (Hamdy, 2001). Furthermore, Arab American women report confronting stereotypes which characterize them as harem girls, domestic slaves, belly dancers, terribly oppressed and degraded, victims of genital mutilations, victims of forced marriages, passive, pathetic and “needing to be roused from their moral, intellectual, and political stupor” (Shakir, 1997:3).

Those stereotypes are significant not only in the lives of women who are struggling to find a personal and collective voice, identity, and empowerment, but also because mental health practitioners may be biased by the stereotypes they possess as they interact with Arab American women. Other stereotypes relate to the mystical contextual backdrop of the Arab world filled with tents, camels, and deserts. Others still relate to the views of missionaries who often portray Arabs as “characters in a sacred text, as “picturesque” or as “corrupt and fallen” (Shakir, 1997: 5-6).

Although immigration to America, as mentioned previously, opens up new possibilities for women to transform gender relations, very often patriarchal hierarchies are reproduced in the U.S. with even more pressure placed upon some immigrant women to maintain traditional gender roles in preservation of the ethnic culture (Espin, 1997). In the Arab world, women’s power is firmly rooted and established in the private context of family and not formally in the public sphere (Friedman & Pines, 1992). Ginat (1982) described Arab women’s power in the family as twofold: “(1) power which is the result of being an active member of both a nuclear and extended family and (2) power which results from being a ‘weak woman’ who can use her charm and wit to get what she wants from her husband.” (26).

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<sup>37</sup>This can be traced to the Iranian Revolution of the late 1970s and U.S. invasion of Afghanistan to liberate and save Afghan women from the Taliban oppression.

However, the frozen images about Arabs often lead the group to experience higher levels of stress. The marginal position of immigrants results in a higher rate of psychopathogenic symptoms (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996). Those groups who are most exposed to negativity and prejudices are most likely to internalize negative feelings about their ethnic identity. McGoldrick and Giordano (1996) agree with Portes and Rumbaut, and go on to state that if people receive distorted or negative images of their group, they may begin to feel inferior and experience self-hate.

Women immigrants frequently belong to many of these higher stress groups, especially if they are from countries with stricter concepts on the role of women. Many of these women do not know how to speak English and are traditionally unemployed, remaining in the home to have and take care of children. In the presence of social support, the experience of stress is reduced. For example, if new immigrants are entering the country to live with the same ethnic group, are returning to people who sponsored them, or are coming to live with family, their level of acculturative stress is lower than if none of these conditions existed (Portes and Rumbaut, 1996:105)

One of the problems for immigrants is that entrance into the United States does not automatically make them an American, but they find their loyalty torn between their country of origin and this new home that is supposed to bring them wealth and happiness. Loyalties to the home country can run deep through generations and be passed on for centuries; therefore, coming into a new country where none of these traditions and values is shared can prove to be stressful and problematic. Even those people who come from war-torn countries, whose leaders were hurtful, still have allegiance to their culture. The need to help their culture survive in their new home may be higher due to changes occurring in their country of origin, such as wars or new leaderships, attempting to wipe out old traditions and customs. Those people who attempt to assimilate into the majority culture at the price of losing the

connections to their culture of origin are the most likely to have more problems than those who maintain their heritage and connections (McGoldrick & Giordano: 1996, 25-27). The transitions that immigrants typically go through may result in loneliness due to the lack of contact with others who share their ethnicity and experience of migration. Immigrants also struggle with the amount of information and differences they encounter when they enter a new country.

#### **I.4. Arab American Women articulations of Ethnic Identities**

As I have demonstrated in the previous part, identity formation is a complex process especially if the ethnic group is experiencing high levels of discrimination. Numerous scholars have declared the racial category of “Arab Americans” ambiguous within U.S. society. Arab Americans are considered as being a heterogeneous group of people who come from a large geographic region and who display a wide array of physical characteristics. This diversity in physical features is a reflection of the geographic regions from which Arabic-speaking people hail.

Racial heterogeneity among the Arab American population works against any type of automatic racial category. Some members of the group can pass as white and some cannot. However, both historically and presently members of the group have been, and are marked as, racially and ethnically “other” in the dominant society in the U.S. Accompanying this categorization of otherness has been a simultaneous construction of Arab Americans as inferior, foreign, and dangerous. It is through the tropes of racial otherness and foreignness, perceived as an inherent threat, that Arab Americans, among many ethnic groups, are marginalized, excluded, and denied full acceptance within U.S. society.

The racialization of Arab/Muslim Americans has increased significantly since the events of September 11, 2001 and these groups are presently without doubt the most vilified

racialized ethnic group within U.S. society. This racialization creates a sense of group solidarity among Arab Americans and as other denigrated racial and ethnic groups have done before them, many Arab Americans seek to rearticulate their racial identity within state institutions by recasting the racial definition and meaning of Arab American. Hence, it is through this rearticulation and recasting that scholars hope to dislodge the dominant racial ideology and correct the misconceptions and stereotypes that fix them in their devalued position within the terrain of racialized ethnic groups.

As Omi and Winant point out, “without a racial identity, one is in danger of having no identity.” (1986: 62) The racial ambiguity of Arab Americans contributes to the idea that Arab Americans do not have a racial identity and thus it is acceptable to continue to ignore them within discussions about race in the United States. Racial ambiguity is most clearly reflected in the increasing dissonance between the official classification of this group as white by the federal government and the growing consciousness among many Arab Americans that they do not identify themselves as white. The recognition that they are not looked upon or treated as white within U.S. society only adds to their discomfort and their sense that being categorized as nonwhite is no longer useful. This combination of perceiving themselves as not white and the awareness of a racialization as nonwhite by the larger society have fostered a desire among some Arab Americans to reject the official classification of white. Although prior generations of Arab Americans identified themselves as white, individuals of the younger generation of Arab Americans, especially those who have come of age in the last twenty to thirty years, increasingly do not see themselves as white. Thus Arab Americans are contesting the racial identity by which they find themselves defined and constrained within the dominant society.

Omi and Winant further note that the value of individuals creating collective identities and collective subjectivities by offering group members an alternative view of themselves and



their world should not be underestimated in the struggle for group recognition. In fact, in their words, individual consciousness and practices shape “the universe of collective action” (Omi and Winant, 1986:68).

The overwhelming majority of Arab women in the U.S. identify themselves as nonwhite (Malek, 2005: 181). Most women express dissatisfaction with being forced to identify their race as white in government classifications. Additionally, they were frustrated by the complete erasure of their unique social location within the available racial options. This lack of recognition coupled with the absence of legitimacy of an alternative label or category makes it almost impossible to articulate an oppositional racial identity. Many women feel that they were forced to accept the appellation white, even though they were ambiguous about it or did not feel that it best represented their race.

This concept of the browning of America, made popular following an article in *Time* magazine (1990), has taken root in the public discourse where neo-conservatives bemoan the loss of whiteness in America and others embrace and celebrate the expanding of the canon beyond a rigid black and white focus.<sup>38</sup> The racial and ethnic composition of the population of the U.S. is changing. Brown just may be the most visible color of Americans. As Richard Rodriguez notes in his book, *Brown: The Last Discovery of America*,

Brown bleeds through the straight line, the unstaunchable – the line separating black from white, for example. Brown confuses. Brown forms at the border of contradiction (the ability of language to express two or more things at once, the ability of bodies to experience two or several things at once) (2002:xi)

The racial makeup of the U.S. is in flux and Arab Americans are located on the fault lines of this new racial formation. Women’s narratives provide examples of the transformation of racial definitions and formations in the U.S. Although there have been many

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<sup>38</sup>See Henry Williams “The Browning of America,” *Time*, Vol. 135, N° 5, April 9, 1990: 28-31.

domestic and international events that have negatively impacted Arab Americans, nothing compares in intensity to what Arab Americans experienced in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001. For the United States as well, the impact of that day far exceeds any other event that had happened in the past. Americans have been involved in different conflicts with other countries such as the First and Second World War, the Vietnam War among others but they have never been attacked on their soil since Pearl Harbor; however, the attack on America is the most heinous terrorist act on U.S. soil. As the world watched in horror the collapse of the Twin Towers on television screens repeatedly following this tragedy, retaliatory acts of bias and discrimination escalated against Middle Eastern and South Asian Americans. The tragic events of September 11 have unified most Americans against a new world of international terrorism; it instilled a great fear into the everyday world of Americans. Much has been written about the impact of September 11<sup>th</sup> on the American public and I will not repeat that discussion here. It has been sufficiently covered by numerous scholars and writers. The attack was catastrophic and its repercussions will linger for years to come in the minds of Americans. The impact of this event and the national fear that followed it had an extraordinary impact on the lives of Arab and Muslim citizens and immigrants.

For Arab Americans, the events of 9/11 were tragic for all of the same reasons as for other Americans. The senseless loss of life, the attacks in the cities, the devastation left in its wake for families, and the loss of the sense of safety were collective experiences shared by all Americans. But for Arab and Muslim Americans, the despair contained an added layer of grief and fear because after the attacks they found themselves the targets and victims of hate crimes and other acts of prejudice, discrimination, and marginalization at the hands of their fellow citizens. In addition to being the victims of violent acts, another consequence of this horrendous backlash was that Arab and Muslim Americans were not able to mourn September 11<sup>th</sup> in the same way as other Americans. Many Arab and Muslim Americans endured

numerous acts of hostility and violence. At its most extreme, several people were murdered in the weeks following the attacks. Others were physically assaulted and numerous businesses, places of worship, and homes were vandalized (Goodstein and Niebuhr 2001). There were many other acts of hate and intolerance that occurred at a lower level of violence, for example, instances of verbal threats and harassment. In addition, there was an increase in the number of job and housing discrimination complaints and a rise in racial profiling of Arab and Muslim Americans at airports. Many people did not report their experiences due to fear and a lack of faith in the protection of their local police forces and distrust in the government. In a survey commissioned by the Arab American Institute Foundation in May 2002, approximately thirty percent of the Arab Americans polled said that they had personally experienced discrimination in the past (Arab American Institute Foundation: 2002, 1). Twenty percent had experienced discrimination since 9/11 and forty percent said that they knew someone who had been discriminated against in that same time period. Seventy-eight percent of those questioned felt that there had been more profiling of Arab Americans since 9/11. About 66 percent were concerned about the long-term effects of discrimination against the community.

Nearly all of the women interviewed in this study after 9/11 were affected in some way by the increasing animosity and bias against Arab and Muslim Americans. The events included acts of violence, harassment, racial emails, and subtle changes in interactions with co-workers and strangers; several women expressed fear, others were angry and a few felt guilty and ashamed. Many expressed a desire to resist the demonization of Arab Americans racialized as violent, dangerous, and represented as potential traitors and terrorists.

Some Arab Americans feel they should seek official non-White status due to perceived racial/ethnic differences and cultural and religious discrimination and to differentiate their histories and cultures from European Americans (Naber, 2000). In recent years, some Arab

American women have chosen to categorize themselves as “Other” or Arab if given the option to list their own racial category on official documents and surveys. In everyday life, Arab Americans are oftentimes assumed to be Muslim and are therefore perceived as a non-White instead of Caucasian; however, women were almost twice as likely as men to be verbally and physically assaulted (Cainkar 2006).

Women tended to fluctuate between feeling offended and justifying their own positions on one side, and justifying the position of the people who offended them and finding excuses for them on the other. They felt in-between two cultures; they were offended because they were Arab and they tried to find excuses because they were American. They were unsure and uncertain of how to best express their hyphenated identities. There was a distinct identity that included both but was neither. Awareness of this in-between-ness is evident in Shireen’s words

“...as far as the people over there, they’re like: Oh she’s *Amrikiyyah*’ (American in Arabic), you know she’s this and, then from here, oh she’s an Arab’ so you’re kind of like in-between, two worlds, and, you have to, assimilate to fit, their group and their group and you can’t really, like I can’t be a total Arab” (12)

The expression of uncertain affiliations was a commonality among the women. Their affiliations with larger groups were themselves shaky and uncertain, and such were their words.

Arab Americans’ perpetual negotiation of their identities and the formation of the hyphenated “Arab-American” construct elucidate identity’s fluidity and dependency on context. In considering the identity of Arab Americans, we must first look to their countries of origin to understand the elements that contribute to their identity such as dialect, religion, history, and colonialist history. Then we must delve into the greater Arab identity and its influences on the populations of the individual Arab countries.

## **Conclusion:**

Arabs in America have long been negatively represented in the U.S. popular culture, but such characterizations heightened after the terrifying events on the Twin Towers. In addition to the anguish and concern for the country's safety that all Americans share, Arab Americans are constantly made to define and defend who they are or their image will be defined by the others; either by those who commit violence in their name or by those who assert that Arabs and Muslims are somehow monolithic or deserve collective blame for 9/11.

All Arab Americans, however, were not racialized during this period in the same ways. Many of the women agreed that Arab men, particularly Muslim men, had experienced the brunt of racism in the post-9/11 period. Arab and Muslim men were immediately deemed as suspicious by many of their fellow Americans. They were regarded as enemies within, bent on the destruction of the U.S. This racialization of Arab and Muslim Americans was constructed in part by the government through its overly sweeping punitive law enforcement measures that targeted Arab and Muslims within the U.S.

Women often find themselves straddling two or more cultures that do not completely mesh together, drawing on each but belonging to neither. Furthermore, Arab American women and especially Muslim American women have and are always struggling to assert their religious identity mainly by wearing the veil which becomes synonymous with cultural and religious differences that has been presented repeatedly as unbridgeable, alien and terrifying particularly in the aftermath of September 11. If ups and downs characterize relations of Arab women with the host society, it is important to stress that intergroup relations cannot be dissociated from the international context. Beyond any doubt, geographical problems have an impact on the internal relation in that the relationship between the mainstream society and Arab communities is shaken by events in the Arab world. The

whole life in diaspora has been punctuated by the news of the Middle East, news of wars, conflicts, killings and after the wars, the prejudice against minorities, mainly Arabs and Muslims, and the entire media portrayal of them tends to cloud race relations in general.

Women also must contend with the stereotype of being oppressed victims of the violent men in their lives. Unfortunately, despite a continued resistance to these stereotypes and tropes by Arab and Muslim Americans and their allies, it seems certain that they will remain salient in the foreseeable future unless an effort is made to engage with the Middle East, its peoples and governments, in new ways.

# Chapter Two

The moment the insider steps out from the inside, she is no longer a mere insider (and vice versa). She necessarily looks in from the outside while also looking out from the inside. Like the outsider, she steps back and records what never occurs to her the insider as being worth or in need of recording. But unlike the outsider, she also resorts to non-explicative, non-totalizing strategies that suspend meaning and resist closure [...] Not quite the Same, not quite the Other, she stands in the undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out.

Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*

## **Introduction:**

The US War on Terror resulted in the growing interest in Arab communities in the US. Ironically, Arab American literature did not gain attention or attain recognition until the terrorist attacks hit the US and led the world ask itself who those ‘Arab’ really were. The sudden shift from invisibility to widespread interest in Arabs and Arab culture places a heavy burden on Arab American writers who need to absorb these changes. Arab-American writers display solidarity with that community and with the Old country. They struggle to picture a positive image of Arabs and present a human picture about Arabs to the mainstream while negotiating an unstable identity.

Torn between two worlds, the characters in Arab-American literature find themselves in an uncertain space; trapped between two cultures and often speaking two or more languages, the writer conciliates a different literary scope. Their writings reflect the sense of double consciousness and in-betweenness that characterize the present age. Many writers are addressing issues, often in binary oppositions, pertaining to their experiences of hybridity or identity conflicts. They tend to highlight several aspects of their daily experiences, especially anti-Arab racism and bigotry.

However, the recent events place more focus on women who are placed at the heart of the global plans as wars are launched in the name of women’s liberation. In fact, women’s status in the Arab world has been a critical issue in many recent debates especially in the West. There have been many mistaken perceptions and assumptions about how women in the Arab Muslim world live and how they are treated by society, state, and family.

I am specifically interested in how Arab-American feminists have negotiated their ethnic identities and how they challenge Western views vis-à-vis their status in Arab countries through the revival of ‘Scheherazadian narrative’ techniques since Arab Americans and Arab



American women particularly have been rendered almost invisible<sup>39</sup> in most sociological discussions of race, ethnicity and gender.

In the present chapter, I will show the ways in which the ambiguous position occupied by Arabs in the ethnic and racial discourses in the United States have shaped the literature produced by Arab American writers. Moreover, I will draw connections between the Arab American women writers' backgrounds and their texts' subjects; the relationship among the authors, their texts and their readers is discussed in terms of postcolonial, multicultural and feminist theories. I will further investigate the ways in which these writers try to rewrite and interpose the Western canon. I will read some of these works as an attempt to correct some of the misconceptions about Arab women, Islam, and Arab culture in general.

The works of Edward Said, Homi Bhabha's concept of the "Third Space" and Chandra Mohanty Talpade's term of "ethnic coalitions" will serve as the literal framework for the discussion.

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<sup>39</sup> According to Nadine Naber, there are a number of paradoxes that shape and cause the invisibility of Arab in the US. First, the diverse Arab American community is lumped together as generically Arab-Middle Eastern Muslim. When the US is involved in a military action against any Arab country, anyone who may be identified as an Arab, Muslim, or Middle Easterner living in the US may be targeted as a terrorist-enemy because anti-Arab imaging removes all traces of diversity in the Arab American community. Second, Naber argues, Arab Americans are racially white, but not quite. According to the US Census Bureau, Arab Americans are defined as Caucasian/White. However, in many social contexts they are perceived and defined as non-whites. Third, Islam, Naber maintains, is used as a means of racializing Arab Americans. As Muslims are being portrayed as terrorists, it is primarily 'the distorted use of Islam, rather than phenotype,' that marks Arabs in the US as non-white others. From Nadine Naber, "Ambiguous Insiders: An Investigation of Arab American Invisibility" in *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 23.1 (2000): 37-61.

## **II.1: Overview of Arab American literature**

The “*Mahjar*” poets are the earliest groups of Arab American writers. The term is loosely translated into English the “immigrant” poets. However, the English translation does not adequately convey the meaning of the Arabic word, *Mahjar*, which refers not only to the immigrant, but to the immigrant’s destination, the new place where a person lives but maintains her difference. *Mahjar* represents the in-between space the immigrant negotiates with the new homeland. This sense of *Mahjar* echoes Homi Bhabha’s concept of the *Third Space*, a liminal space in which cultural boundaries overlap(p). In many ways, Arab American writers have engaged this third space where discursive identities of Arabs and Americans intertwine from the early twentieth century to the present. Their connection to the Arab homeland (“over there”) and their status in the new American home (“over here”) strongly affect their writing.

The “*Mahjar*” poets were among the first significant wave of Arab immigrants to the United States from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century.<sup>40</sup> Most of these immigrants came from the Levant(which included Lebanon, Palestine, Jordan, and Syria) of the Middle East; at the time, this area, also known as Greater Syria, was under the Ottoman Empire until 1918. The *Mahjar* writers have introduced new stylistic, thematic, and cultural influences from Western art and literature into Arab poetry. Their poems have influenced the *Nahdah*, or the Arab literary renaissance, which began in Lebanon and moved to Egypt in the latter part of the nineteenth century (Handal, *Poetry*3).<sup>41</sup> Moreover, they connected with “the Egyptian poets and many Arab intellectuals and writers who went to Egypt seeking freedom of expression [...] in this movement towards change” (Handal, *Poetry* 4). Most of the *Mahjar*

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<sup>40</sup> Some scholars, such as Alixa Naff refer to the presence of Arabs in the Americas before the United States was established. See Naff’s introduction to her historical work *Becoming American: The Early Arab American Experience*. Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1985.

<sup>41</sup> Handal discusses the emphasis on prose writing in Lebanon and poetry in Egypt.

poets continued to write and publish in their native Arabic, though some also began to write in, or supervise the translation of, their works in English. The best known of the *Mahjar* poets are Khalil Gibran and Ameen Rihani whose works have been popular in both the Arab world and the United States. As representatives of their homeland in the United States, they praised the past glories of the Arab world but condemned its current backwardness. They were often impressed by the New World with all its freedom and democracy as well as its scientific growth, yet were disappointed by its excessive materialism at the expense of spirituality. Both gave influential works to be remembered for in America and the Arab world alike. Nonetheless, Gibran is probably the most famous whose impressive portrait is often attributed to the fact that he was known from the West to the East. Gibran undeniably became one of the most acclaimed authors in the United States besides being one of the outstanding Arab writers in the whole world. However, in spite of all this celebrity, he still does not belong to the American literary canon. From all the numerous books he published in both Arabic and English, Gibran is famous for his book *The Prophet*, his well-known spiritual work. On the other hand, Rihani is often viewed as “the father of Arab American Literature,”<sup>42</sup> and has got the merit for introducing free verse to the Arab literary canon as early as 1905. He is the author of the first Arab-American poetry collection *Myrtle and Myrrh* (1905) and the first Arab-American play *Wajdah* (1909); however, *The Book of Khalid* (1911) is his famous novel based on the immigrant experience at the time. Those four texts are the first English-language literary works by an Arab writer anywhere. Rihani and Gibran were among the key figures in the Arab American literary organization, al-Rabitah-al-Qalamiyah, known in English as the *New York Pen League*, founded in the 1920s.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ameen Rihani in <http://www.ameenrihani.org/>

<sup>43</sup> The Pen League’s emphasis on universal themes is referred to in several sources that describe the development of Arab American literature, including the overviews by Abinader, Majaj, and Handal. Gibran in particular is noted for his focus on beauty, love, and the individual, especially in regard to spiritual growth. Handal refers to Gibran’s style as a kind of “Arab Romanticism”, which drew on Arab, British, and American literary models (Handal, *Poetry* 7)

Women were also important contributors to the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century Arab and Arab American literary movements. While a number of Arab women creative writers and journalists travelled to Egypt to participate in the renaissance, others immigrated to the United States where they became active in the *Mahjar* group. According to Handal, the first Arab women immigrant writer recorded to have written a book was Afifa Karam (1883-1925), a resident of Louisiana who was from Mount Lebanon; her works were also popular in her homeland (*Poetry* 42). Karam was the first woman journalist on the staff of the Arab American journal, *al Hoda*, published in New York, and is considered to be the best-known Arab woman journalist of her time (42).

The second generation of Arab American writers, like Vance Bourjaily, William Peter Blatty and Eugene Paul Nassar, produced very little literature. Shakir commends Bourjaily because he ‘wrote against the grain of stereotype’ but his perspective remained ‘resolutely’ masculine (69). She says that Blatty’s sense of humor is ‘a good marketing tool,’ but it is a betrayal because he has not engaged with more serious issues, like anti-Arab racism (69). Though she admires Nassar’s three-dimensional characters, Shakir argues that Nassar has avoided ‘the hostility of bigotry’ and other issues that arise from cultural encounter (70).

The Pen League had dissolved by the 1940s, and Arab American writers after this time “were not acknowledged as a group and did not write often of heritage or culture” (Abinader, 2000: 12). This lack of a strong Arab American literary identity may have resulted in part from the Pen League’s focus on themes more universal than Arab culture and also from efforts within the Arab American community to assimilate more within American culture.<sup>44</sup> Until the 1980s, there were few writers identifying themselves and their work as “Arab American.” However, several writers in the transitional period between the 1940s and 1980s

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<sup>44</sup> There are several resources on the history of Arab American communities, including works by Orfalea, Suleiman, Shakir, and Boosahda cited in the bibliography.

emerged and helped create a bridge between the first wave and the second wave of Arab American writers. Among these important figures are the women writers Etel Adnan and D.H. Melhem did not want to be read as writers of literature of immigration. Adnan first created her own publishing company The Post-Apollo Press; then published her English poetry collection, *Moonshots* in 1966; and is regarded as the first Arab American poet to write and publish in English (Handal, *Poetry* 42). Melhem, on the other hand, is a poet, novelist, and scholarly writer who has taught in Long Island University and in Social Research Department in New York. She is known for her scholarly work on African American literature as well as her creative writings about Arab and Arab American themes. Melhem was the recipient of the American Book Award in 1991 for her critical work *Heroism in the New Black Poetry* (1990). She has also given a lot Arab American literature, especially when she organized the first Arab American poetry reading at the Modern Language Association's annual conference in 1984 (Abinader, 2000: 13). Both Adnan and Melhem continue to encourage the progress and appreciation of Arab American literature in the United States and abroad through their writing and contributions to literary and academic organizations.

## **II.2. Living on the Hyphen: Contemporary Arab-American Women literature**

The second major wave of Arab immigration to the United States between 1940 and the Israeli-Arab war in 1967 has changed the composition of Arab Americans from being predominantly Christian to including Arab from all over the Middle East and North Africa, many of whom were Muslim.<sup>45</sup> Many of the contemporary Arab American writers were born in the United States or immigrated to it when they were children; these writers resist any reference to them as an ethnic minority group which reduces them to an inferior social position. Though not all Arab-American<sup>46</sup> writers are Muslim or speak Arabic, Arab-American writers and scholars argue that “shared sociopolitical, historical, and economic experiences form a collective memory that binds the past, present, and future across continents” (Handal, *Poetry* 42). In other words, it is the shared traditions, events, and situations that create strong bonds between Arab American writers and Arabs/Muslims in other parts of the world, especially in the Middle East. Hence, many Arab American women writers have focused on themes like family relationships, food, women’s roles, music, folktales to create bridges between their experiences and those of women in the Arab homelands. Miriam Cooke maintains that since late 1980s, Arab American women have begun “to take responsibility for the production of knowledge about women, gender and religion in the Arab world” (Cooke: xxviii). Evelyn Shakir, an Arab-American writer and critic, describes the time as “an exciting moment” with Arab-American literature showing “every sign of coming into its own,” and with “new writers [...] surfacing, new voices [...] sounding.”<sup>47</sup> Shakir attributes the change of interests to the arrival of a new wave of immigrants from the Arab world who ‘rekindle[d] a

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<sup>45</sup> The impact of the 1948 and 1967 Arab-Israeli wars on the Palestinian diaspora, especially as it relates to immigration to the United States, is examined in the historical overviews of Handal and Abinader, and discussed in more detail in Orfalea’s texts.

<sup>46</sup> The use of the hyphen in Arab-American suggests negotiated identities which imply a degree of balance or tension between the two halves of the term. Hyphenation defies “the melting pot” metaphor, suggesting instead identities that resist to ‘melting’ or dissolving in mainstream America.

<sup>47</sup> Evelyn Shakir, “1: Arab-American Literature,” in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to Our Multicultural Literary Heritage*, ed. Alpana Sharma Knippling (Westport CT & London: Greenwood, 1996): 3.

sense of ethnicity in the established community and promoted a sense of kinship with the Arab world in general.’(70) In addition to the concerns that permeate the works of ethnic literatures such as nostalgia, displacement and hybridity, literature produced by Arab Americans, Shakir maintains, is considerably defined by the Arab-Israeli conflict through its representation of the predicament of the Palestinians since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 (72). It is a renaissance as Elmaz Abinader puts it.<sup>48</sup>

Unlike the “*Mahjar*” writers, contemporary Arab American women writers are feminist activists who are strongly engaged in defending and redefining images and statues of women in Arab and American cultures, as well as the articulation of hybrid identities in the space between both cultures. They articulate and negotiate their hybrid identities by connecting with fellow Arab American writers. Amal Amireh argues that the reception of the works of Arab women in the West is closely connected to a long and complex history of the “West’s interest in Arab women as part of its interest and hostility towards Islam.”<sup>49</sup> Arab women writers, Amireh argues, cannot free themselves completely from the stereotypes assigned to them, “whose effects are too obvious to ignore;” their works are ‘manipulated’ to meet the expectations of Western readers.<sup>50</sup>

Arab American women have fostered the growth of Arab American literature by organizing many events, publications, and groups to support and encourage fellow writers. According to the editors of the special issue of *MIT’s Electronic Journal of Middle East Studies*, “Gender, Nation, and Belonging: Arab and Arab American Feminist Perspective” (Spring 2005), “diverse groups of Arab and Arab-American women have been leading

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<sup>48</sup> Elmaz Abinader, “Children of Al Mahjar: Arab American Literature Spans a Century,” *U.S. Society & Values* (February 2000), <http://usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0200/ijse/abinader.htm>

<sup>49</sup> Amal Amireh, ‘Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers’, *Al Jadid Magazine*, 2 (1996) <<http://www.aljadid.com/features/0210amireh.html>> [accessed September 2010], para. 10 of 22.

<sup>50</sup> Amireh, para. 12 of 22. See also: Andrea Shalal-Esa, ‘The Politics of Getting Published: The Continuing Struggle of Arab-American Writers’, *Al Jadid Magazine*, 15 (2009) <[http://www.aljadid.com/essays\\_and\\_features/ArabAmericanWriters.html](http://www.aljadid.com/essays_and_features/ArabAmericanWriters.html)> [accessed 28 November 2010].

community building efforts and organizing for social justice on multiple fronts” (Abinader, et.al. 18).<sup>51</sup> Among these “fronts” of activism are Arab American literature and criticism.

Joanna Kadi’s edited collection *Food for our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab American and Arab Canadian feminists* (1994) is a landmark text in Arab American women literature which brings attention to the role of women and memory in Arab and Arab American cultures. Since 1999, Kathryn Haddad, co-founder and executive director of *Mizna: Prose, Poetry, and Art Exploring Arab America*, has been promoting and supporting the works of new and established writers and artists. Furthermore, several recent scholarly publications and edited collections, such as Darraj’s *Scheherazade’s Legacy: Arab and Arab American Women on Writing* (2004), have highlighted the connections between Arab and Arab American writers. Perhaps the most important event for Arab American writers has been the founding of a contemporary Arab American literary organization. Indeed, in 1992, Barbara Nimri Aziz initiated the first meeting of Arab American writers at the American-Arab Anti-Discrimination Committee Convention (Majaj “Of Stories” 25). Over the next couple of years, the meetings grew in size and interest spread; the organization was officially named the *Radius of Arab American Writers* (RAWI) in 1994 and incorporated in 1996. Arab American writer Mohja Kahf developed the name, which reflects both an English and an Arabic meaning, the acronym RAWI also being the Arab word for “storyteller.” Indeed, Twentieth century literature has focused on the role of storytelling as “the oldest form of building historical consciousness in community,” especially among women of color (Trinh 148), and Arab Americans are no exception. Since its founding, RAWI’s membership has reached about 150 and the newsletter has as “a virtual living room” for conversation among its members (Majaj “Of Stories” 26). Lisa Suheir Majaj declared that “before RAWI, Arab American

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<sup>51</sup> Abdulhadi, et al. Mention several examples of organization and activism by Arab and Arab American women such as al-Hoda, an Arab immigrant women’s magazine founded in the early 1900s; the Syrian Ladies’ Aid Society of Boston (1917); the Feminist Arab-American Network (1983); and the Arab Movement of Women Arising for Justice (18)



writers were almost entirely invisible on the broader American literary scene, and they were just as invisible as to each other” (“Of Stories” 26). RAWI has provided a forum for Arab American writers as well as those interested in their work. “The network has also enabled authors to imagine at last a culturally informed readership. Pauline Kaldas calls it ‘an ideal audience’ – one comprised not just of Arab-Americans, but of everyone who understands multicultural issues” (19).<sup>52</sup> This ideal audience consists of readers who are aware of cultural differences not as oppositional factors, but as what McWilliams calls “viable locations of knowledge within the whole” of a discursive community (257).

Slowly, a number of literary magazines began to emerge, offering awards for the best writer or dedicating whole issues to selected features of Arab-American writing. *Al Jadid: A Review of Arab Culture and Art*, a quarterly magazine with an on-line version, edited by Elie Chalala, became a popular forum for emerging Arab-American writers. The magazine, as Judith Gabriel, one of its regular contributors, declares, offers a great chance for Arab voices to be heard, to “show them as very human members of a diverse culture, with a myriad of background scenarios and individual narratives.”<sup>53</sup> Chalala, the editor, viewed his magazine as a forum for writers to address not only the political themes dominating Arab-American discourse but also “culture and the arts,” which were unfortunately often given “a back seat” elsewhere.

Many believe that this growth of Arab-American writing was engendered by the rise of multicultural and ethnic awareness in the USA, starting in the 1970s<sup>54</sup>. The difference

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<sup>52</sup> Pauline Kaldas is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Creative Writing at Hollins University in Roanoke, Virginia. She is a published writer of poetry, fiction, and essays. Kaldas co-edited with Khaled Mattawa *Dinarzad’s Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction* (2004).

<sup>53</sup> Judith Gabriel, “Emergence of a Genre: Reviewing Arab American Writers,” *Al Jadid* 7.34 (2001). <http://www.aljadid.com/features/0734gabriel.html>

<sup>54</sup> The Arab world waged three wars with Israel, a civil war in Lebanon, the invasion of Kuwait and the Iraq debacle.

between early writers and contemporary ones is best explained by Salma Khadra Jayyusi who clearly points out

our duty is to stand as advocates to the truth of our cause and our culture. We are not heirs to [the Mahjar writers'] traditions, which spanned the two worlds, but must forge our own, based on the schism that has been introduced between the Arab world and our adopted country.<sup>55</sup>

Many writers translated their connectivity to their homelands into political activism<sup>56</sup> without neglecting their American identity. The growing political engagement that followed the 9/11 events added to the continuous humiliation of their people in the United States, has fostered a strong inclination to express resentment and offence. However, some maintain that what “spurred the growth of ArabAmerican literature” was partly “the search for voices outside the traditional canon of Anglo-American male literature, a search which led to the burgeoning interest in ethnic American writers.”<sup>57</sup> Arab-Americans found that they, too, could contribute to the rich mosaic of American society and literary culture, and struggle against a self-imposed invisibility; they even found ‘home’ and acceptance in ethnicity.

Indeed, Arab American women writers have been strongly influenced by writers from other American ethnic groups as African Americans, Asians, Chicano and Natives who name them as literary models who “depict multicultural complexities” (Majaj, “Of Stories” 29). Nathalie Handal argues that the connections Arab American women draw between themselves and women of other ethnic groups articulate a common bond in the struggle to negotiate their diverse and plural identities (“Shades” 159; *Poetry* 44). The process of building ethnic alliances across ethnic boundaries is referred to the “*common context of struggle*” against issues like sexism and racism as the fulcrum around which women from

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<sup>55</sup> <http://www.saudiaramworld.com/issue/200502/stories/Bi011.html>

<sup>56</sup> Suheir Hammad, a Palestinian-American poet stands as an outstanding feminist and political activist engaged in keeping alive the story of the lost homeland.

<sup>57</sup> Ludescher, “From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature,” in *Melus* (2006): 106.

different groups (ethnic, national and religious) construct their alliances (Chandra Mohanty Talpade, *Cartographies of Identities: 7* italics in the original). Mohanty calls for

an ‘imagined community’ of the third world oppositional struggle. “Imagined” not because it is not ‘real’ but because it suggests potential alliances and collaborations across divisive boundaries, and “community” because despite the internal hierarchies within third world contexts, it nevertheless suggests a significant, deep commitment of what Benedict Anderson call “horizontal comradeship.”<sup>58</sup>

This concept of “horizontal comradeship” turns to “political rather than biological or cultural bases for alliance”: rather than being based on ethnicity, race, sex, or class, or group identity and culture are grounded on the implications of such delineations—“the political links we choose to make among and between struggles.”<sup>59</sup> Such constant engagement with other movements is one of the main challenges that transnational feminist movements may encounter in various forms and at different levels.

Arab-American writers look to other ethnic American writers such as Toni Morrison, or Maxine Hong Kingston as models for expressing aspects of their respective groups that reflect lived experiences. Aziz refers to such internal aspects as the ‘intimacies’ of one’s culture (xii). Such multicultural models resonate especially with Arab-American women writers who are struggling to negotiate what Majaj refers to as “the dual burden of both cultural and gender ambassadorship,” this burden is a shared one among ethnic women writers who attempt to redefine and challenge the stereotypes projected on their group from outside and the negative practices within their own groups (“Of Stories” 30).

Arab-American feminist writer Nathalie Handal observes that “many of these Arab American women writers have found a cultural and psychological connection with other ethnic groups, since these groups share similar feelings of marginality and alienation” (*Poetry*

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<sup>58</sup> Chandra T. Mohanty, Introduction. In Chandra T. Mohanty, Ann Russo, & Lourdes Torres, eds, *Third World Women and The Politics of Feminism*. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press 1999) : 4.

<sup>59</sup> Mohanty, Russo and Torres, eds., *Third World Women*: 4.

56). Their solidarity with other people of color, namely the African-American experience, as Barbara Nimri Aziz maintains, could help Arab-American writers in their “struggle for empowerment and recognition.”<sup>60</sup> While Arab American women writers address a variety of subjects, negative western stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims continue to be a significant problem to which their writing responds. Through their art of writing, they try to humanize Arabs by dedicating their voices to subverting the calcified terms of signification which tied them to a string of insults.<sup>61</sup>

The feminist scholar Miriam Cooke notices that Arab women immigrants have been unable to criticize their community in the United States and the Arab homelands without being accused of cultural betrayal. She argues that Arab American women have different relationships with the Arab homelands of their families and their homes in the United States; they still face obstacles created by specific stereotypes projected from within and outside their communities (Cooke, 145). “Arab women’s experiences with sexism [within the Arab communities] are often exaggerated, sensationalized, and used against them” by Westerners (Abdulhadi, et al. 20). Amal Amireh and Lisa Suheir Majaj have discussed the cultural tension Arab women face when they speak from their own experiences. Those observations are based on their personal experiences as Arab feminist scholars in the United States. According to their research, Arab women’s criticism of Orientalist stereotypes of Arab women has also been viewed as defensiveness and raised questions about their self-defined position as feminists (Amireh and Majaj 1).

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<sup>60</sup> Susan Muaddi Darraj, *Scheherazade’s Legacy*, ed. Darraj:xi.

<sup>61</sup> Layla Al Maleh, ‘From Romantic Mystics to Hyphenated Ethnicities,’ in *Arab Voices in Diaspora* (424-448): 442.

### **II.3. Transnational feminist approaches on Arab/Muslim women:**

Feminism is not new to Arab Americans, but many refuse to engage in the feminist dialogue while their basic needs and rights for equality and freedom have not been met within the mainstream culture and “land of freedom.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, they are aware of feminism and advanced Western thought, but as Elia puts it, “many Arab women are delaying addressing critical gender issues, as they deal with the imprisonment, deportation, and ‘disappearing’ of their male kin,” a priority that supersedes any other at this time (155).

However, Arab women have long been represented in popular culture from a Western lens as silenced, docile, secluded, veiled, male dominated. Suha Sabbagh comments, in her introduction of *Arab Women between Defiance and Restraint*, that this stereotypical image of Arab women has very little to do with the lives of real Arab women (11). These fixed images about Arab women have undergone some changes through history. In fact, while Arab women in the past lived only for sensual pleasure, in contemporary stereotypes, their lives are described as being devoid of the simplest pleasure and achievement. They are cast as “quintessential victims of the beastliness and backwardness of Arab men” (Sabbagh: 12).

These Western misconceptions of Arab women are directly linked to the due to the misinterpretation Islam because religion evolves according to social, political and economic factors. As Lazreg argues, in order to understand the influence of religion on women’s lives, one must “address the ways in which religious symbols are manipulated by both men and women in everyday life as well as institutional settings.”<sup>63</sup> Hence gender relations can be analyzed in terms of religion when the latter is studied within its context. In the anthology *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*,

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<sup>62</sup> The rise of feminist consciousness coincided with the rise of Nationalism in the Arab world in early 19<sup>th</sup> Century. See, for example, Margot Badran & Miriam Cooke (eds), *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing* (London: Virago 1990).

<sup>63</sup> Marina Lazreg, ‘Feminism and Difference: The Perils of Writing as a Woman on Women in Algeria,’ *Feminist Studies*, 14 (1), 1988:95.

Susan Muaddi Darraj argues that Arab-American feminism still have many challenges to face. The main problem, according to Darraj, is that “despite recent interest in the Middle East, following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the West has not made significant progress in its understanding of either Arab culture or the role of women in Arab society and within the Arab community in America” (159).

However, Arab and Muslim women are caught between two “evils”. They have not only been victimized by the oppressive images of them in U.S. popular culture and the media, but have also been marginalized by many Western feminists who see Arab/Muslim women as the ‘poor’ who need to be liberated from their men. Mohja Kahf claims that Western colonization of Arab countries led to the emergence of narratives that portray Muslim and Arab women as victims (7). Hence, Western women’s representations of Third World<sup>64</sup> women, which Arab/Muslim women are part from, do not reflect the real status of Arab women in their societies.

Because of the Western feminists’ assumption that all women are the same, transnational feminism emerged to counter the West’s narratives about Arab women. Transnational feminists challenge the universal claim of Western feminists to speak on behalf and for all women. They rather emphasize the necessity of difference in race, class, religion, and culture of women. Gayatri Spivak, in particular, denies the Western feminists’ assumption of universalism because neither a universal nor a representation of all women can be achieved since the Western feminists’ interests are in great conflict with the Third World women’s needs (Lemmerich:9). In her essay “*Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism,*” she asks for stopping the universalizing of “Sisterhood.” (Spivak, 2003:386). For Spivak,

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<sup>64</sup> Third World is used here to define Arab women feminism. The term was first coined by the French demographer and Economist Alfred Sawy in 1952 to refer to Middle Easter, Asian, African, Central and Southern American countries that were not member of the NATO or the Communist Soviet Bloc. This term is often used by Third World feminist scholars themselves as Chandra Mohanty Talpade

many Western feminists ignore women's specific cultural, social, and political conditions and that is why western feminists' universalism is a failure.

Another transnational feminist, Chandra Mohanty Talpade, shares similar views with Spivak when dealing with the feminists' assumption of women's universalism. Mohanty contends that Western feminists assume that all women are a coherent group sharing the same interests and desires without taking into consideration their class, ethnicity, racial formation, or different circumstances (Mohanty, 1984: 337).

Thus, the experiences of Third World women are diverse especially in the Arab Muslim countries due to the Arabic culture and Islamic religion. Gloria Anzaldùà recounts Third World women experiences asserting:

Because white eyes do not want to know us, they do not bother to learn our language, the language which reflects us, our culture, our spirit. The schools we attended or didn't attend did not give us the skill for writing nor the confidence that we were correct in using our class and our ethnic language (Keating: 26-7)

In other words, Anzaldùà, as many other transnational feminists, challenges Western feminists' claim of leading the world's feminism and speaking on behalf of Third World women instead of speaking to them and understand their problems and difference. Hence, Western feminist's depiction of Third World women has proven inadequate. According to Spivak, Western feminists should learn to stop feeling and acting privileged feminists so as to understand the situation of women in the other side of the globe (Lemmerich: 9-10). In the same way, Marina Lazreg asserts that Western feminists' hegemony is based on their assumption that they belong to "perfectible societies" whereas other women belong to traditional or patriarchal societies and these are imperious to change from within (2000: 205). Spivak defends Third World women claiming that they are not victims of their patriarchal

system and are not oppressed by their husbands but rather accuses the First World for minimizing their values and silencing them.

Arab-American feminism is widely influenced by transnational feminism since these feminists have aligned the experience of Arab-American women with the struggles of other minorities. This kind of feminism stems from “[a] self-conscious definition of [Arab American women] as members of an ethnic minority (Hatem, 1998: 382). However, we must remember that Arab Americans has been classified as white for a long time by American political institutions<sup>65</sup>. Then, Arab women’s identification with other women of color results from the fact that they are perceived as an oppressed group because of their gender and ethnicity. By aligning themselves with people of color, there try to explore the connection between their different cultures. Michelle Sharif demonstrates, in her essay “*Global Sisterhood: Where Do We Fit In?*”, that it becomes necessary for Arab American feminists need to join other women of color by indicating that:

Arab-Americans belong to both cultures and therefore they occupy a unique position. We can and we must help this dialogue develop. Our struggle, like all women of color, includes overcoming racism as well as sexism. By joining women’s groups in the United States, we can put issues such as anti-Arab racism and agenda. Our time for recognition and respect in western feminist movements has come (1994:159).

Arab-American feminists often struggle with divided loyalties. On the one hand, they feel the need to defend their cultures, nations of origin, and religion from hostile media and political attacks in the United States. On the other hand, they are committed to feminist criticism of the Arab American culture, working to integrate Arab American feminist struggle within the larger US and global women’s movements. However, the fear of being accused of cultural betrayal has silenced some Arab American feminist theoristsbecause they are

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<sup>65</sup> Arabs waited till the year 2000 to be recognized by the US Census.



incapable of criticizing their culture of origin especially in times of crises. Whereas others consider their cause to be a matter of life or death for their people. Despite the issues and sites of contestation, Arab American feminists are playing crucial roles in the struggles within Arab American communities. Margot Badran and Miriam Cooke, in their book *Opening the Gates: A Century of Arab Feminist Writing*, prove that Arab women have been debating issues of gender equality and the roles of women in society for at least a century. However, the movement has been divided into, to use Leila Ahmed's words, "two divergent strains of feminism" in the Arab world: namely Secular feminism and Islamic feminism.<sup>66</sup> Ahmed argues that one branch has been the dominant voice of feminism in Egypt and in the Middle East for most of the twentieth century, and the second has remained an alternative, marginal voice until the last decades of the century (174). She explains that secular feminism in the Middle East has been generally affiliated with the westernizing, secularizing tendencies of society and predominantly the tendencies of the upper, upper-middle, and middle-middle classes. Islamic feminism, on the other hand, has articulated its agendas within native, vernacular, Islamic discourse – typically in terms of general social, cultural, and religious renovation (174-5).

As an Arab-American writer and engaged feminist, Mohja Kahf draws on her Arab-Islamic heritage and her experience in the United States as a hyphenated ethnic demonstrate the importance of trans-cultural dialogues and cross-ethnic alliances. She recognizes different forms of feminist activism as fields for alliance building. Despite the constant clash between the two forms, I contend that each of secular feminism and Islamic feminism in the Middle East have unconsciously influenced each other as many researchers point out. Badran, for instance, insists that secular feminism and Islamic feminism in the Middle East 'flo[w] in and

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<sup>66</sup>Islamic feminism appears for the first time during the 1990s in different parts of the world, mainly in the works of Iranian Muslim scholars such as Ziba Mir-Hosseini published in the women's journal *Zanan* (Badran, 2002 as quoted in Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam*, 2001: xii); see also Leila Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven & London: Yale UP, 1992): 174.

out of each other.<sup>67</sup> In short, Badran contends that ‘secular feminism is Islamic and Islamic feminism is secular’.<sup>68</sup>

Amongst secular feminists, Nawal El Saadawi and Fatima Mernissi appear as the most acknowledged ones whose interests match the Western culture. Nawal El Saadawi is viewed by Westerners as a prominent figure in the Arab feminist movement that has seriously defended the rights of Arab women. However, Arab Islamic feminists view her as an activist who could have fought more aggressively for the Arab woman’s cause, but has been somewhat influenced by Western discourse which weakened her voice of resistance. Amal Amireh, an Arab feminist scholar, argues that “although she makes some efforts to resist the West’s misrepresentation of her, El Saadawi [...] also invites it in some ways, allowing her works to be used to confirm prevailing prejudices about Arab and Muslim culture” (228). El Saadawi rejects the utility of veiling, she argues that a woman who veils is likely to draw more attention to her body as the woman who walks on the streets uncovered. She spread the idea of “removing the veil from the mind”<sup>69</sup> by using the Qu’ran and the Prophet’s tradition to support her claim that the veil is un-Islamic (Cooke, 2001: 134). However, it is worth mentioning El Saadawi’s role in advocating social justice and equal rights with men.

Fatima Mernissi, on the other hand, assumes that feminism and Islam are very incompatible and have extremely different ideologies that cannot communicate with one another. In her book, *The Veil and the Male Elite: A Feminist Interpretation of Women’s Rights in Islam* (1987), Mernissi provides Westernized and Eurocentric interpretations of the status of women in Islam to illustrate their subordination within the supposedly “oppressive” religion. On several occasions, she decontextualizes incidents from the history of Islam and

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<sup>67</sup> Margot Badran, ‘Between Secular and Islamic Feminism/s: Reflections on the Middle East and Beyond,’ *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 1 (2005): 6-28 (p.12).

<sup>68</sup> Badran, 12. She likens the interconnectedness of secular and Islamic feminism to the description of Islam ‘as *din wa dunya*’ which means that Islam joins “religion and everyday life.”

<sup>69</sup> The slogan has been introduced during the Arab Women’s Solidarity Association founded in 1982 by Nawal El-Saadawi.

Quranic verses that enable certain meanings to be twisted in order to fit the feminist agenda she supports. Such misinterpretations portray Islam as oppressive whose women are in need for liberation. In doing so, Mernissi contributes in deepening the Western misconceptions of Islam as limiting women's agency.

At this stage, it becomes important to examine Arab Islamic feminism and the feminists' contributions in challenging the negative assumptions of the West on Arab/Muslim women. Arab/Islamic feminists act as spokeswomen of Arabs, Muslims and women around the world to resist oppression caused by local or foreign governments. Nahib Toubia, an Arab woman, defines Islamic feminism as

A state when women no longer suppress their feelings of anger and love, of rage and ecstasy, of revenge and beauty. It is when women feel free to use their immense emotional energy to explore and redefine their position in the world. It is then they use their intellect and wit, education and skills, and their rich heritage of knowledge and wisdom to redesign their roles in the past, present and future of humanity. Feminism is the fire that melts, but also does not destroy (1998: xii).

In other words, Islamic feminism constitutes a resistance of the earlier assigned roles on women toward a focus on gender equality and social justice. Islamic feminism seems to represent a revolution in men's eyes because it is working to redefine the position of women within and outside the domestic sphere. In fact, the Arab patriarchs, on the one hand, endeavor to have absolute control over women's bodies since the Arab/Muslim woman has is considered as the cultural bearer of society and that she needs to behave in a certain assigned way by the Umma. On the other hand, the Arab woman is exposed to the neo-orientalists who picture her as the 'poor' who need to be saved from their man. Hence, to achieve social justice, Arab American feminists try to form solidarity with other women around the world to make their voices heard worldwide. They work towards raising consciousness about issues that concern all women. Suheir Hammad's poetry focuses more on social and political issues

as race and discrimination, displacement, and injustices in the world, whereas Kahf's poems deal with issues of gender and equality. In her poem *Thawrah des Odalisques at the Matisse Retrospective*, Kahf portrays the decision of the painted women to free themselves from their patriarchal bondage:

Statements were issued on our behalf  
By Arab nationalists, Iranian dissidents, Western feminists  
After some of us put on hijab,  
And wouldn't let us speak at the rally,  
But wanted us up on their dais as tokens of diversity  
Then someone spread conspiracy rumors about us among the Arabs  
Like, why had we hung around so long? In the capitals  
Of the Western world so long? With our legs so open?  
You can see les implications dangereuses  
It did no good to tell them we didn't choose the poses  
We were painted in. or that, anyway, our sexuality,  
When we do choose to put it into play,  
Is our own business. Narrow-minded Arab bastards,  
I'll say it even though they are my brothers,  
A hundred years since we entered those paintings  
And they're still stuck in a Neanderthal cave  
On that whole man-woman thing.

One of the first things the odalisques do is to “sue the pants off the Matisse estate and the museums: Cruel/and unusual contortions, unhealthy and unfair/ working conditions at nonexistent wages.” But they also reclaim a female identity of their own and the right to control their own bodies. In other words, women are creating new gender roles. What is important for Kahf is not which men, Arab or non-Arab are more narrow-minded. Rather, what really matters for her is recognizing women's value and freedom. Kahf's feminist stance

encourages women to value themselves away from male admiration, and create change which is demonstrated in her poem “The Woman Dear to Herself”:

The woman dear to herself loves  
For another what she loves for herself...  
The woman dear to herself  
Gives herself breast exams and running shoes  
And eats well and washes her face in the river  
And cherishes the beauty in other women as in her her self (55).

In this poem, Kahf engages in what Mohanty calls “ethnic coalitions” where she links women around world. She shows women that their role is not confined to housekeeping but tries to educate women how to develop self-love, to have more interest in themselves and in other women sharing the same situation.

Though Hammad is a political activist, she has also contributed to the Arab-American and Islamic feminist movements by addressing certain issues that concern women in her poetry. In her poem “*Of Women Torn,*” Hammad reviews men’s definition of “loose” woman and control over women’s bodies. The speaker in the poem asks:

Where is he now  
Where was he when they found  
The swelling of your belly  
Proof of your humanity  
When they stuck fists up  
Inside you to prove you loose  
When they beat you blue  
Ripped the hair out your head (75-6)

She considers the man equally responsible for the woman's pregnancy and naming her "loose," for he escapes punishment while she is beaten and tortured. This is the type of gender discrimination that feminists try to resist and struggle to change. These Arab-American feminists have engaged in feminist dialogues and the creation of narratives of resistance. They have contributed to the formation of a new space in which they give voice to the silenced woman.

Arab American feminism has played a crucial in giving Arab American women the right to speak about their matters in order to prove Western stereotypes to be wrong. Influenced by feminists' ideas, Arab-American women discuss these distorted images in their writings by picturing the real face of an Arab woman. However, Arab American women choose to identify with their Arab culture to challenge the misconceptions and reductive images of Arabs and Muslims. In fact, Arab-American women writers have responded to a wide range of factors affecting their community by reconstructing and broadcasting the negative images of Arabs, Muslims and Americans while navigating the space between their Arab and American identities.

These authors are engaged, to use Homi Bhabha's words, in 'a third space [...] where the negotiation of incommensurable differences creates tension peculiar to borderline existence.'<sup>70</sup> Bhabha invites us to consider how this space 'may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not only on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture's *hybridity*.'<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge: 1994) p. 312.

<sup>71</sup>Bhabha, p. 56, italics in original. Speaking from the perspective of an Arab American writer, Laila Halaby reflects on how her hyphenated identity is a site of conflict between creativity, ethnicity and market and publishing interests. In an interview, Halaby states: "In terms of writing, a hyphenated title immediately *relegates* you, as a writer, to a lesser category, a by-product of American culture rather than a part of it, though in terms of marketing, I think it is *helpful* for my publisher to say that I am an Arab American author and therefore a credible voice." (p. 2)

For the complete interview, see: Steven Salaita, 'Interview with Laila Halaby, <[http://www.rawi.org/interviews/interviews%20\\_halaby\\_.pdf](http://www.rawi.org/interviews/interviews%20_halaby_.pdf)> [accessed 22 June 2009].

They oscillate between cultures and, in that space between cultural boundaries, articulate hybrid identities that belong wholly neither to one culture nor the other (xiii). For Arab Americans, this means articulating both sides of their heritage, Arab and American. In this sense, Arab American feminists are searching for their identities and selves; they have examined their multiple identities in a number of critical and autobiographical essays. For instance, Lisa Suheir Majaj has described this fusion of culture in her own identity:

I am tired of being afraid to speak who I am: American and Palestinian – not merely half of one thing and half of another, but both at once – and in that inexplicable melding that occurs when two cultures come together, not quite either, so that neither American nor Arab find themselves fully reflected in me, nor I in them (“Boundaries” 67-8).

Majaj’s description also refers to a tension between different identities that paves the way to a new identity, which embraces aspects of each affiliation. Frustrated with questions of identity and definitions imposed by other people, the Arab American woman struggle to define herself in spite of the dissatisfaction of others who cannot accept her multicultural identity (Handal “*Shades*”: 159). Khaled Mattawa argues that “the most urgent task is to take stock of, and assert a claim to, the American context by enriching the dialogue among Arab-Americans’ diverse influences” (Majaj “Of Stories” 30).

According to Darraj, Mattawa’s appeal has inspired Arab American women who are challenged to define a home for themselves in the “middle space” between their two or more cultures (*Scheherazade’s* 3). Furthermore, transnational feminist ideas have helped contemporary Arab-American women writers connect their works and their state of in-betweenness with those of women in the Arab world and other women of color in the United States.

However, identifying with both sides of their heritage, Arab and American, becomes difficult when “Arabness” carries such negative connotations as [harem girls, religious fanatics, terrorists,] in mainstream American discourse, especially after the horrific events of September 11, 2001. A number of Arab American women writers have expressed an ambivalent relationship with their Arab and American backgrounds; an example is Darraj’s description of how she has been perceived by people from both cultures: “While Americans thought I was a ‘foreigner.’ Arabs regarded me as ‘Americanized’” (*Scheherazade’s* 1). Evelyn Asultany, who is of Iraqi, Cuban, and American descent, shares the same feeling of Darraj, she argues that multiethnic people like herself often feel dislocated because their identities are not “acknowledged as complex and whole” (“Los Intersticios” 18). In addition to these hindrances of recognition and self-identification, the difficulty in assimilating into mainstream American culture because of their “Arabness” has led to a tension between these two aspects of their identities. Du Bois’s concept of a “double-consciousness” explains this tension:

This sense of always looking at oneself through the eyes of others, [...] one ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warning ideals in one dark body. (*Souls* 9)

Although Du Bois speaks about the African American’s position, this concept can be applied to other minority groups in the United States, including Arab Americans. This ambivalent space enables the ethnic person, in this case the Arab Americans to negotiate a path between their own identity construction and the stereotypes – such as “all Arabs are Muslims, and all Muslims are terrorists” projected upon them by the host culture. Yet, they cannot escape the cultural loss brought about the process of negotiation. Several critical works



in Arab American literature, as Handal's, also invoke this double-consciousness.<sup>72</sup> Arab American women have found it difficult and impossible to free themselves "from the largest context of a hegemonic United States discourse that interprets all things Arabs as oppressive or backwards" (Abdulhadi, et al. 20). According to several Arab feminist writers, the colonization of Arabs in the Middle East or North Africa has been transformed to some extent onto Arab Americans; whether "over there" or "over here," people of Arab descent face similar stereotyping.

The sense of cultural loss is passed on to the immigrant's children as a willed or unwilled legacy. An example is Kahf's description of the cultural intersection in the new world and her comparison between her country of origin and the host one; she says that in the Syrian life she might have had, "other purples waited, a plum tree had our name on it;" the vineyard watchman "chased away/children whose names he knew...our parallel-universe Syrian selves among them." But in Indiana, "My brother and I crossed through a field./ Its golden music wasn't ours." (60). Kahf finds her self in this dual and difficult coexistence of both worlds. At the poem's conclusion, she says:

My brother knows this song:  
How he have been running  
To leap the gulch between two worlds, each  
With its claim. Impossible for us  
To choose one over the other,  
And the passing there  
Makes all the difference. (59-64)

For Kahf, as for other Arab-Americans, the utmost question is not which world to choose, Arab or American. Rather, she shows that Arab-American identity exists at the crossroads: the interconnection of both cultures, the wide gap between both worlds. Kahf's

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<sup>72</sup> Handal engages the term "double-consciousness" in her introduction to *The Poetry of Arab Women* and in her essays, such as "Shades of a Bridge's Breath" (in Anzaldúa and Keating)

narrator and her brother navigate the middle ground between the two roads. Like the “gulch” in Kahf’s poem, the tension between cultural affiliations is challenging to navigate. “Leaping the gulch” implies that they do not inhabit, or perhaps fear falling into, the undefined Third Space where cultures come into contact. While “the passing there” heightens the children’s awareness of each path and the connections between them. The search of a cultural balance is a common point between Arab-American writers whether immigrants or American-born. Diana Abu-Jaber who is American-born to a Jordanian father and an American mother, says in an interview: “Like many first generation writers, I’m trying to find a cultural balance between ancestry and America [...] I was trying to construct myself. My relationship with the Middle East is one of return. When I was younger, I had a very fragmented sense of self. I couldn’t find a role model for a first-generation anything.”<sup>73</sup>

This ‘looking backward’ to the homeland is not restricted to first-generation immigrants who are feeling displaced. But this feeling of displacement is passed on to their children. In fact, children of immigrants are often torn between the present home and the past home much as their parents were. The fact that they often cannot escape being “*marked* as different by virtue of their skin color, their family background, and other ethnic unassimilated traits,” America never quite feels like home to them.<sup>74</sup> These children often do not believe in the search for success that inspired their parents to become American; this success is reserved for those who ‘look’ American. So, instead of placing great importance on the American aspect of their identity, children of immigrant parents may feel a “strong sense of being exclusively” Other.<sup>75</sup>

Nonetheless, immigrants and their American-born children often configure the homeland and the new home differently because they have different relationships to both

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<sup>73</sup> Interview with Char Simons: [www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/199402/balancing-on-the-hyphen.html](http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/199402/balancing-on-the-hyphen.html). Accessed Feb. 12, 2012.

<sup>74</sup> Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations*, 206.

<sup>75</sup> Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations*, 206.

places. In either case, the two places undergo a process of interpretation: the places exist intact in the abstract, but in order to represent the place to themselves and to others, diasporic individuals must create or interpret an image of the place for themselves. Radhakrishnan writes that home, to the diasporic individual, “becomes a mode of interpretive in-betweenness, a form of accountability to more than one location.”<sup>76</sup> This accountability becomes closely linked to representation – the hyphenated individual tries to find a balance between representing the homeland of her past and representing the homeland of her present. Thus, most of the Arab-American women writers deal with the characters’ representation and memories of the land they left behind; they further highlight how, as Sarup wonders, are these places “imagined and represented” by people with split identities? How do these places “affect people’s identities? How do the worlds of imagination and representation come together?”<sup>77</sup>

The past is not entirely reiterated in the present, but part of a new articulation that engages both past and present. Literary works that invoke the past do so to renew it, “refiguring it as a contingent ‘in-between’ space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present” (Bhabha 10). The connection between cultural difference and performativity develops in the Third Space; this space becomes the time and place of a process in which “statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability, and capacity” (Bhabha 50). To enter into this “split-space of enunciation” that Bhabha describes is the first step towards conceptualizing an “international” culture that embraces differences and articulates cultural hybridity: “we should remember that it is the ‘inter’- the cutting edge of translation and negotiation, the *in-between space* – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture” (56 original italics). Bhabha’s “Third Space” is used by several Arab American writers in their discussions of cultural hybridity. Hence, critical contributions of Arab American studies have

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<sup>76</sup> *Diasporic Mediations*, xiii-iv.

<sup>77</sup> Madan Sarup, “Home and Identity,” *Travelers’ Tales*, ed. Robertson: 98.

focused on the construction of hybrid Arab and American identities with emphasis on the ways in which these constructions challenge western stereotypes of Arabs and Muslims.

Arab American women literature shows this ambivalence towards presenting an Arab identity in an entirely non-white context. In other words, although Arab-American writers attempt to create links between Arab-American characters and non-white characters in their works, these attempts are not always successful, conveying an ambivalence and indeterminacy toward non-whiteness. In fact, Arab American literature is mainly populated with characters who perceive themselves as members of a larger white American community. This ambivalence can be best explained within a racialized context of immigration and settlement in the US. Similarly, Lisa Suhair Majaj commends Arab American writers such as Diana Abu-Jaber, Elmaz Abinader, and Joseph Geha (whom Shakir calls the third wave of Arab American writers) because their employment of memory is not monolithic but ‘facilitate[s] assimilation, ground[s] feminist critique, and make[s] possible transformative relations to ethnicity.’<sup>78</sup> In other words, Majaj praises these writers for their ability to turn to memory to negotiate a ‘heterogeneous’ ethnic identity that is ‘engaged across cultural borders.’ (267) In this context, Majaj believes that Arab American identity is best understood as a pan ethnic identity predicated, on the one hand, on common interests such as anti-Arab discrimination, stereotypes of Arabs in popular culture and the events in the Middle East and their repercussions in the US, and, on the other hand, a common identity based on an Arab cultural heritage relevant to contemporary Arab Americans. (267) Elsewhere, Majaj calls on Arab American writers to reflect their ethnic identities in their works and construct an Arab American ethnic identity in conjunction with other groups because the precarious position

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<sup>78</sup> Lisa Suhair Majaj, ‘Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory’, in *Memory and Cultural Politics*, ed. by Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerrettjr, and Robert E. Hogan (Boston: Northeastern UP, 1996), 266-90 (p. 266)

Arabs occupy in US discourses on race and ethnicity ‘means that Arab Americans may be unable to elicit responses to their concerns without affiliating with other minority groups.’<sup>79</sup>

Thérèse Saliba agrees with Majaj’s argument and asserts that classifying Arabs as Caucasian/White covers over discriminatory and racist practices that define Arabs as ‘Other’ and serve to disempower them in their political struggles.<sup>80</sup> Saliba argues that the push for including Arab Americans within ethnic politics, ethnic studies, and feminist scholarship is ‘a critical strategy for resisting invisibility.’ (316) Literary and cultural productions by Arab Americans are sites for manifesting/contesting an Arab American identity and delineating its features. This position is reflected in the daily experiences of members of the community who engage with whiteness in heterogeneous ways. As I will show in Chapters three and four, Diana Abu-Jaber and Mohja Kahf’s works attempt to subvert some of the stereotypes commonly associated with Arabs in American popular culture. Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* marks a striking depiction of exilic experience and identity conflicts related to the lost home and points to the importance of food in defining one’s identity, while Kahf’s *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* questions Western perceptions of the veil as an oppressive tool to keep the Arab/Muslim woman captured.

The ambiguous position that Arabs occupy in US ethnic and racial discourses influences the way Arabs in America define their identities and divides members of the community on their relationship with whiteness as I have explained in the previous chapter. Arab American literary and cultural productions become sites where the definition of an Arab American identity is contested. A closer look at these productions will enhance our

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<sup>79</sup> Lisa Suhair Majaj, ‘Arab-American Ethnicity: Locations, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations’, in *Arabs in America*, ed. by Suleiman, 320-36 (325-26).

<sup>80</sup> Thérèse Saliba, ‘Resisting Invisibility: Arab Americans in Academia and Activism’, in *Arabs in America*, ed. by Suleiman, 304-19 (309)

understanding of the dynamics that influence an Arab American identity especially in its engagement with (non)whiteness.

With the rise of Islamophobia and racial profiling of Arabs and Muslims since 9/11, the Arab-American presence and voice has gained more importance since their invisibility has denied them a space from which they can speak and articulate their own concerns. Absence and invisibility have characterized many Arab-American and Muslim women in the West before and after 9/11. Thérèse Saliba discusses the Western representation of Arab women as “captive or absent” subjects in her article “Military Presences and Absences: Arab Women and the Persian Gulf War.” She asserts that by the “absent” Arab woman she means two major forms of absence:

The first, a literal absence, when the Arab woman is not present or is entirely missing from the scene; the second, a symbolic absence, when she is present but only for the purpose of representing her invisibility or silence in order to serve as a subordinate to the Western subject of the scene. She is also granted moments of presence when her actions and speech are manipulated and exploited to serve the interests of her Western interpreters. In all these instances, the absent Arab woman is objectified and contrasted to the ‘liberated’ Western woman, who often serves as a representative for Arab woman. The white woman is granted agency to speak for Arab women, usually on behalf of their liberation (126).

This continuous state of absence and invisibility within the dominant culture and women’s movements, and the constant attack on Arabs and Muslims after 9/11 has generated the need to locate and create a space through which Arab-American feminists can speak. In resistance to invisibility and silence, many Arab-Americans and Arab/Islamic feminists constantly yearn for new narratives about themselves, narratives they write and are not written about them by others. By doing so, they have forged their own space from which they have become their own definers and transmitted their own personal experiences. The space they now belong to is an in-between space outside both the dominant American culture and the

traditional Arab culture. They have created this space in which they live on the borders of the Western and Muslim culture.

Critics of contemporary Arab American women writers have examined how their texts address and resist some of the dominant claims underlying negative Western stereotypes of Arabs. Three of the widely held Orientalist stereotypes of Arab women that Arab American women's works challenge are: Arab women are oppressed by Islam, especially by wearing the veil; Arab women are exotic and erotic 'others' who are seductive objects; Arabs and Muslims are terrorists or support terrorism, which reflects their "backwardness" and "fanaticism." In either case, the reader is exposed to the manifest hostility between of the old world and the new. Arab American women narratives that focus on religion tend to consider women as responsible for preserving both religious and cultural traditions of the old country because women are often "assigned the role of bearers of cultural values, carriers of traditions, and symbols of the community" (Moghadam, 1994: 4), which means that women are compelled to ease the evolution of the group. But when Islam comes to be associated with cultural practices, thus considered as oppressive, the female heroines need to accommodate both religion and culture to be fully accepted by the American society. However, literature by veiled Arab Muslim women cannot break away from pointed at as others and they, therefore, cannot be considered as full members of the mainstream society. In such texts, women who wear the veil can never build a narrative which discusses comfortable assimilation.

Throughout the chapters, the scholarly and creative works of Nathalie Handal, Gloria Anzaldúa's theory on Borderlands and Homi Bhabha's Third Space will be engaged to highlight the connections between Arab American women's writing and issues affecting Arab women in the diaspora and Arab countries. Arab and Arab American feminists have drawn attention to the way Western views of Islam have equated it with the oppression of Muslim and Arab women, especially by using the images of the veiled woman. Ramla Khalidi and

Judith Tucker point out that this image of the oppressed Muslim woman recurs in several media from popular culture to academic discourse. (9)The texts of Diana Abu-Jaber and Mohja Kahf engage this “in-between” space. In their respective styles, both Arab American women writers (re)shape images of Arabs, Muslims, and Americans through narratives that tend to humanize Arabs. Their texts also address assumptions of what it means to be “American.” Readings of each writer’s text will illustrate how Bhabha’s concepts of hybridity and Third Space are invoked. Though their works encompass a wide range of themes, the three writers share a common concern with negative western perceptions of Arabs and Muslims. Each writer draws on her personal experience as a woman of Arab descent with affiliation to Arab, Muslims, and American communities. Each has a different style and is concerned with specific stereotypes that affect intercultural relations among these communities in local and global contexts.



#### **II.4. The Revival of Scheherazadian Narratives**

Arab American feminists have been particularly drawn to life stories and narratives as compelling and relatively unobtrusive ways of studying other women. Many Arab feminists have employed storytelling as an effective means to understand women's worlds and lives with as little intervention as possible. They contend that allowing women to express their concerns in their own words is a valuable approach to research.<sup>81</sup>

Arab-American women writers like Kahf and Abu-Jaber resist being defined naming their own experiences. In fact, Arab-American women writers are starting to open up with an outpouring of their own voices, telling their own stories. Through the revival of "Scheherazadian" narrative of survival, they contest and resist America's biased perceptions about Arab women and Arabs in general. Women's transformation of the oral narrator of *The Arabian Nights* from victim to literate survivor challenges neo-orientalist projections of Arab women's passivity and silence<sup>82</sup>. These women's narratives provide subjective accounts of individuals as they reconstruct their experiences, recall instances of racialization, and articulate their ethnic identities.

Ricoeur (1994) asserts that narratives are one of the most cognitive schemes human beings have. He contends that it is through the creation of stories that plots are constructed which link separate events into a meaningful narrative. These plots help to order the multiple realities encountered in everyday life and are intimately connected to the construction of identities. As Taylor writes,

My identity is defined by my commitments and identifications which provide the frame or horizon within which I can try to determine from case to case what is good, what is valuable, or what ought to be done, or what I endorse or oppose (Taylor, 1989: 27)

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<sup>81</sup> Such approach was used by many Arab American femininists as Patai, Abu Lughod, and Behar.

<sup>82</sup> Reviving Scheherazad's Legacy, 140

Thus, narratives prove to be a valuable strategy that enable individuals determine where they stand on important issues. The use of storytelling seems to be the best way to grasp one's identity. In fact, to make sense of her or his life, an individual must construct a narrative, a sense of personal trajectory, which is often told in a story. An alternative way to understand it is to realize that:

We repeatedly rehistoricize ourselves by telling a story; we relocate ourselves in the present historical moment by reconfiguring our identities relationally, understanding identity is always a relational category and that there is no such thing as a subject who pre-exists the encounters that construct the subject. Identity is an effect of those encounters—identity is that set of efforts which develop from the collision of histories. It is not an abstraction. It's an extraordinary complex kind of sedimentation, and we rehistoricize our identities all of the time through elaborate story-telling practices [...] and those story-telling practices themselves are ways of trying to interrogate , get at , the kinds of encounters , historical movements , the kinds of key moments of transition for us—both individually and collectively. (Bhavnani and Haraway, 1994: 21)

In the telling of narratives, people feel more comfortable to claim their lives and identities. In addition, this allows women to resist any attempts to fix their identity via the revival of the narrative techniques of the storyteller of *The Nights* to depict a process whereby the individual is constantly going through new experiences of representations in the new land.

Scheherazade's storytelling is revived in the twentieth-century literature by Arab-American women writers. Her words and ideas shape the resistance Arab-American women writers adopt to challenge prevailing Western representations of women. The first lines of Mohja Kahf's poem "Email from Scheherazad" explain the importance of employing storytelling in Arab-American women writings:

Hi Babe. It's me. It's Scheherazad. I'm back  
For the millennium and living in Hackensack,  
New Jersey. I tell stories for a living

You ask if there is a living in that.

You must remember: where I come from,

Words are to die for.

In this depiction, Kahf refers to Scheherazade as a witty feminist who knows how to tell a story. Through reviving ‘Scheherazadian’ narrative, Arab-American women writers seek to negotiate their identities and affiliations; they try to save their lives as well as the lives of Arab women from negative connotations imposed on them as did Scheherazade who saved her life and other women’s lives from murder by Shahrayar. Such cultural narratives are important because they become the means through which identities are framed.

Hence, it is these narratives which eventually give women power in a hostile environment. K. Appiah’s discussion of the prominence of narrative as a transnational and cultural device is pertinent to the significance of narrative in diasporic writing of women. Appiah argues that a cultural translation can be made possible as “a different human capacity that grounds our shaping; namely, the grasp of narrative logic that allows us to construct the world to which our imagination responds [...] the basic human capacity to grasp stories, even strange stories, is also what links us, powerfully to others, even strange others” (Appiah, 2005: 257). I argue that the importance of this ‘human capacity to grasp stories’ urges the exploration of “Scheherazadian” narrative as diasporic narrative, outlining Arab-American women’s worlds. As a diasporic narrative, it explores these difficulties of negotiating these women’s daily experiences. In this sense, narrative in Arab-American women’s cultural production occupies a conceptual space that is best described by political, social and economic conditions.

Indeed, these narratives take on new shapes and purposes. First and foremost, it becomes a narrative of resistance to persistent Orientalist representations which shape these

women as silent, oppressed, or sexual subjects of desire. This resistance is also cultural since it questions representations of their culture as temporarily static and unchangeable. Furthermore, the narratives gain prominence in diasporic writing as a result of these writers' awareness of their American audiences and how mainstream culture race Arab men and women in representation.

In doing so, these Arab-American writers assume the role of cultural translators and place upon themselves the responsibility of telling their own tale again and again. Shahrayar in their tale is a plethora of Orientalist processes and racialization which shapes and races portrayal of Arabs within mainstream American culture.

These women use narratives as a space of cultural production and negotiation. In it, the material objects of their everyday experiences, exemplified in their relation to food and veil, are shapes to express their cultural negotiations in the diaspora. Diana Abu-Jaber is a first-generation Arab-American born to an immigrant Jordanian father, whereas Mohja Kahf is an Arab-American immigrant born in Damascus to Syrian Muslim parents. Despite their diasporic positions, they are united in their resistance to the reductive racialized, gendered and cultural stereotypes ascribed to Arabs and Muslims. Each of them, through Scheherazadian narrative<sup>83</sup>, reappropriate Scheherazade's empowered status in Arabic culture, questioning mainstream stereotypical representations of themselves and their Arab and Muslim culture.

Moreover, their novels represent a negation of the interpretation of *The Nights* as an ethnographical document through which representations of the East and Eastern women can be drawn out unquestioningly. Food becomes a site of cultural negotiations through which Abu-Jaber explores the mixtures of identity mediations. Whereas Kahf as many Muslim

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<sup>83</sup> Well-known writers from the Arab world have gone back to Scheherazad, as a source of inspiration, reviving her narrative techniques in their writings: Nawal Al-Saadawi's *The Fall of the Imam* (1988), Assia Djebar's *A Sister to Sheherazade* (1993), and Fatima Mernissi's *Dreams of Trespass* (1994). These works have become classics and representative texts in women studies and Middle Eastern studies courses especially in the West. In them, 'Scheherazadian narrative' is one narrative that resists patriarchal traditions and colonial dominance.

women writers wearing the veil/headscarf resist becoming the epitome of their culture's backwardness. She dedicates her efforts to unsettling the typical Western and patriarchal structures of the veil.

## **II.5. The veil and Arab American women's Identity: Its contested meanings**

Veiling of women, men, and sacred places has existed among people of different cultures and religions. Nevertheless, it is widely misunderstood since it represents a locus of struggle between Islam and the West, between modern and traditional interpretations of Islam, a battleground for power and political agendas.<sup>84</sup> In this sense, Arab-American feminists and activists tend to use Islam to empower themselves by highlighting the historical and cultural variations of the veil in their attempt to subvert its image and challenge Western and patriarchal interpretations of it. They strive to dismantle patriarchal systems of oppression and to subvert the image of the Muslim veil which has been and is still misinterpreted by Westerners and equated with oppression and subjugation of women in Arab and Muslim worlds. These feminists provide different readings of the veil and create new interpretations that reflect its various contemporary functions and meanings in modern Arab and Islamic societies.

The issue of the veil and the hijab stand at the core of Islamic traditions and religious beliefs. It is almost impossible to tackle issues about Islam and feminism without debating the veil or the hijab. Hence it has become the subject of many scholarly debates as literature, history, and in many Western and Arabic societies. Both words, veil and hijab, are defined as head-cover and are meant to promote privacy for females and to forbid the intermingling of sexes. The veil has been used as a symbol of both oppression and resistance in popular press; while in cultural studies veiling has been linked to identity. Yet, despite its continuing resonance in the western imagination, 'the veil' remains a confusing and controversial topic,

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<sup>84</sup> The veil dates back to pre-Babylonian times in Sumeria, Persia and in Hellenic and Byzantine cultures. Leila Ahmed describes how in Athens prior to Christianity (550–323 BCE) 'women were expected to confine themselves to their quarters and to manage their household [...] Their clothing concealed them from the eyes of strange men' (1992: 28). However, the Western preoccupation with the issue of veiling in Muslim cultures emerged in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century because of colonization. See Homa Hoodfar, "The Veil in Their Minds and on Our Heads: The Persistence of Colonial Images of Muslim Women," in *RFD/DRF*, 22 (3-4): 5-18.

one which is frequently ‘attacked, ignored, dismissed, transcended, trivialized or defended’ (El Guindi, 1999: xi). While social scientists discuss its cultural significance and argue over the meaning of its expansion into western cultures, and the media spreads fear about the Islamic threat, western feminists locate the veil as emblematic of an oppressed minority within patriarchal structures (Grace, 2004: 1). Although the veil and hijab have been used synonymously, the veil means to cover the face, while the hijab is to cover the body of a Muslim woman when in presence of adult men who are not close relatives. However, both the veil and hijab are supposed to ensure modesty, decency, chastity and above all, respect and worship. The veil means to conceal the truth in English; whereas its Arabic meaning is to protect purity. Thus, the veil becomes a symbol of purity that intends to send a message to the outsider about the veiled women. Wearing the veil assures everyone that these women will not be harassed in the streets and in the workplace, but also that they have become honorable women.<sup>85</sup> Evelyn Shakir stresses this feeling of purity when she presented a Muslim woman, Khadija (a pseudonym) who comments on the veil, stating that “when you dress sexy, you feel sexy, and you go out and anything can happen to you. But when you’re all covered up [...] you’re so pure and protected in your mind and in other people’s minds” (*Bint Arab*, 1997: 117). This idea of purity and security echoes the original use of the veil in Islam to distinguish the status and identity of the Prophet’s wives, daughters and the wives of the believers, “so that they may be recognized and not molested” (Surat 33: 59). However, when a woman decides to unveil she is, indirectly, rejecting masculine authority over women’s bodies because she thinks that it is men who link the hijab to a woman’s purity. Some Western feminists share similar views on the veil and its negative connotations which make them incapable of seeing the women behind the veil or understand their reasons for wearing it.

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<sup>85</sup> Macleod 1991, cited in Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (Routledge New York: 2001): 131.

Consequently, Arab-American feminists have engaged in contextualizing the veil and reclaiming its meaning in their resistance to Western and patriarchal dominance. They deconstruct the veil and rewrite its meaning to liberate it, and themselves, from Western handling of its meanings and interpretations. In the discussion of the veil and its connection to the Islamic faith, Leila Ahmed observes that “veiling to Western eyes [...] became the symbol of both the oppression of women and the backwardness of Islam” (1992: 152). Ahmed’s belief that in the modern era, the west has worked to misrepresent the Islamic practices is reiterated by Hirshmann who remarks that the West has perceived Islam as “a form of barbarism—fueled in contemporary times by popular antipathy toward terrorist bombing and hostage-taking” which is considered the main source of Muslim women’s inequality; and the veil is now read as “the ultimate symbol, if not tool, of this inequality” (464). However, she realizes that Muslim women wear the veil by choice and try to defend it by representing it as “a mark of resistance, agency, and cultural membership” (464). The writings of many Arab feminists and their manifest resistance to the West and its misconceived ideas show a growing awareness of misunderstanding of the practice of veiling and its place within its own cultural and religious context. In her study, Hirschmann concludes that it is women who view the veil as an important element in their identity formation. Hence, despite the West’s efforts to portray the veil as an act of oppression by the patriarchal system, women are strongly engaged in defending it and have taken on the veil willingly in Muslim and secular nations alike. Many Muslim women are surrounded by many unveiled women, especially in Western societies, and yet still hold on to veiling as an important marker of their religious identity and a significant part of their commitment to the Muslim faith.

Many Muslim women have adopted veiling as an act of resistance to social and economic stratification. In other words, veiled women do not feel the social pressure to keep up with fashion because the veil relieves them from that constant burden of worrying about



their clothing or appearance. Women who choose to take on the veil experience a sense of freedom from being judged by their physical beauty and feel a sense of accomplishment since they are evaluated through their professional achievement or lack of it. Muslim women who participated in Katherine Bullock's study believe that "true equality will be had only when women don't need to display themselves to get attention and women need to defend their decision to keep their bodies for themselves" (Bullock, 2002: 184).

Nonetheless, Arab American feminists and writers who address the issue of the veil in their challenge to Western stereotypes have been compelled to emphasize it because the veil has become the most controversial and debated issue in the West through which Arab/Muslim worlds and more specifically its women are attacked and denigrated. In fact, the veil and its various interpretations within Western discourse have become highly politicized and decontextualized after they have stripped it of its original significances and reduced to a piece of cloth widely manipulated by the West. It is used as an excuse to promote Islamophobia and justify the War on Terror launched by President George W. Bush after the attacks on the Twin Towers; the Western discourses have assigned a new image to the veil in order to enforce their domination and preserve the gap between East and West, between "us" and "them." The focus on this divide proves to be crucial in ensuring the perpetual call for the liberation of Muslim women from their patriarchal societies and their mission in civilizing these countries by spreading democracy.

Hence, Arab and Islamic feminists dedicate their efforts to analyze the use of the veil and its meanings from an Islamic and cultural perspective and relocating it within its original context. These feminists have acknowledged the multiple functions of the veil, and interpreted the ways in which it has been used socially, religiously and politically. In fact, the veil was worn by women years before the rise of Islam. At the time, a woman wearing the veil meant that she was the king's harem. The veil was also common among wealthy upper-class women

in ancient Greece, as well as in the Byzantine Empire, Persia, and India. Moreover, many women put on a scarf when they attend the church or the synagogue. However, the veil became accepted as the norm around the tenth century and has moved in and out of fashion since.<sup>86</sup> With the coming of Muhammed (PBUH) women used to wear traditional Arab dress. After applying the Quranic teaching to almost all aspects of life, women began to cover their heads as a sign of respect for the Prophet and his teachings. Since then, veiling became linked to religious obedience. Nowadays most devout Muslim women consider the veil obligatory. They wear it with honor and regard it as a reflection of their faith, purity, and adherence to Islam. With few exceptions, some women in Muslim countries are assigned to a certain code of Islamic dress. While in the West, Muslim women usually have the decision to wear the veil or not. But to Western women, the scarf symbolizes repression and discrimination whereas to most Muslim women, it symbolizes devotion (Hawkins, 2004: 30).

Read & Bartkowi's (2000) "To Veil or not to Veil: A Case Study of Identity Negotiation among Muslim Women in Austin, Texas" examined the impact of veiling on twenty-four Muslim women: twelve of them veiled and twelve did not. The interviews with the participants "highlight how their gender identities reproduce and reformulate existing Muslim gender discourses [...] with attention to the subjective disparities and points of congruence between both groups of respondents" (395). Most participants stated that "veiling is a commandment in the Quran [...] it represents a submission to God [...] and is a symbol of worship" (403). Many women choose to take on the veil in American society to show their "connectedness with a broader religious community of other veiled Muslim women" (403). Thus, as an act of pride to belong to a minority culture, these women choose to identify with their heritage, even if it can endanger their lives and expose them to bias and discrimination. The participants explain that they feel proud when they are neglected and misunderstood by a

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<sup>86</sup> See Mary C. Ali, "The Question of Hijab: Suppression or Liberation?" Islamic School of Greater Kansas City, <http://www.isgkc.com>

foreign culture. Most of them points out that the veil rescues them from being exposed to sexual harassment and prejudice in their workplaces or social situations. After decided to put on the veil, one North American young woman proudly explains that:

No one knows whether my hair looks as if I just stepped out of a salon, whether or not I can pinch an inch, or even if I have unsightly stretch marks. Feeling that one has to meet the impossible male standards of beauty is tiring and often humiliating [...] The idea is that modest dress and head covering allow women to appear as individuals, rather than as purely physical objects.<sup>87</sup>

The image of the veiled woman is an ambivalent and a shifting signifier which leads many to debate the significance and the presence of the veil in modernizing societies. It “gives access to an ‘identity’ which is predicated as much on mastery and pleasure as it is on anxiety and defense, for it is a form of multiple and contradictory belief in its recognition of difference and disavowal of it” (*Location*, 1994: 75). Scholars question mainly whether the visible upsurge of veiling arises from the fear of loss of identity in a changing society, a protest against Western values or simply that women are now veiling because they have something ‘immoral’ to hide. They cite various cultural reasons for holding on to the veil. While for Westerners veiled women still remain ‘mysterious,’ the conflict in understanding is not only a problem of history and colonialism but is also conceptual and cultural, encompassing religious bias and preconception (Lazreg, 1994). As Nancy Lindisfarne-Tapper and Bruce Ingham conclude, veiling (and head covering) must be understood in terms of how images of veils are used, ‘to persuade which audiences of what political advantages, and why?’ (1997: 16).

The contemporary fixation on the veil as the quintessential sign of Muslim resistance and cultural authenticity and the treatment of women epitomized Islamic inferiority (Ahmed,

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<sup>87</sup> Monica Flores, “Hijab: the Muslim Woman’s Head Covering,” <http://www.worldtrek.org/odyssey/africa/101399/101399mondjib.html>

1992: 14). Some believe that the hijab or veil is a tool of subordination invented by men to prevent women from public admiration and sexual availability. For instance, Nawal al-Saadawi spread the idea of “removing the veil from the mind”<sup>88</sup> by using the Qu’ran and the Prophet’s tradition to bolster her claim that the veil is un-Islamic.<sup>89</sup>

As I have stated before, to many Muslim women, the veil is an identity; to others, it is a symbol of oppression symbolizing “the relegation of women to a secluded world” (Hawkins, 2004: 33). Fatima Mernissi in *Beyond the Veil* portrays the present-day Muslim world and demonstrates the importance of identity to individuals and to society as well by stating that

individuals die of physical sickness, but societies die of loss of identity [...] a disturbance in the guiding system of representations of oneself as fitting into a universe that is specifically ordered so as to make life meaningful. Why do we need our lives to make sense? Because that is where power is (ix).

In her book, Mernissi demonstrates why fundamentalists in Islam call for the return of the veil as a statement that “has to be looked at in the light of the painful but necessary and prodigious reshuffling of identity that Muslims are going through in their often confusing but always fascinating times” (ix). On several occasions, she cites incidents from the history of Islam and Quranic statements out of context that enable certain meanings and interpretations to be twisted in order to fit the feminist agenda she supports.

Majid (2002) affirms that “whether veiled or not, women’s conditions are determined not by the clothes they wear but by the degree to which they manage to forge an identity for themselves outside the discourses of modernity or religious authenticity” (115). Islamic

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<sup>88</sup> El-Saadawi has used this slogan during the foundation of “A Women’s Solidarity Association” in 1982.

<sup>89</sup> Nawal El-Saadawi, cited in Miriam Cooke, *Women Claim Islam: Creating Islamic Feminism through Literature* (Routledge: New York, 2001): 134.

women have that power of using the veil and hijab as symbols of identity and of social and cultural reality.

Ahmed (1992) demonstrates that “the notion of returning to or holding on to an ‘original’ Islam and an ‘authentic’ indigenous culture is itself, a response to the discourses of colonialism and the colonial attempt to undermine Islam and Arab culture and replace them with Western practices and beliefs” (234). The veil becomes a symbol of rejecting Western bourgeois capitalism that spread over the globe as a result of Western colonization of Arab/Muslim countries. Ahmed declares that “the reemerging veil attests, by virtue of its very power as a symbol of resistance, to the uncontested hegemonic diffusion of the discourses of the West in our age” (235). Through this concept, Islam questions modernity and what it stands for.

Kamarck (2002) described the veiled women in Afghanistan, like many women from the colonized world, seeking an Islamic path that could lead them to modernity since all other avenues were not successful: “for nearly one hundred years, periods of ‘liberation’ have been imposed on Afghan women by various ‘modernizers’ -- some home grown, some, like the Soviets, imported. Without exception, the ‘modernizers’ failed and the backlash increased repression of women” (2). Over hundreds of years of colonization, wars and increasing hatred of the West, emancipating women became a symbol of westernization and a threat to Islam and its integrity.

Whether veiling stands as an Islamic resistance to modernism that seems as a threat to Islam or as a response to imperialism and nationalism, it has served to keep Muslim women’s visibility covered. However, Minces (1980) stated that “modernization is not necessarily viewed in a positive light, particularly when understood as ‘westernization.’ Many [Muslim] women find the over-exposed style of western sexuality repulsive and they fear the breakdown

in the extended family unit with thesecurities offered by such a social structure. Many women sincerely desire a more‘moral’ economic, political and social life as prescribed by Islam.” (8). At least for the present, the veilseems a permanent fixture of American Islam–though it is still not adopted byeven a majority of Muslim women–and an important tool in helping Muslims notonly survive but respond creatively to the tensions of post-9/11 society in theUnited States. One of the feminists who discusses such an issue is Alison Donnell who states in her article “Visibility, Violence and Voice? Attitudes to Veiling Post-11 September” that:

The differences in social conditions and political status enjoyed by different communities of veiled women and the many cultural variables and specificities that attend the wearing of veils are seldom the interest of those who represent the veiled woman to and for the West. Even the word ‘veil’ implies the fixing and homogenizing of a range of dress practices and garments which are worn in accordance with hijab (132).

Certain facts have hardly found their way into Western discussions about Arabs and Muslims, like the fact that veiling practices and Islam itself varies from one culture to another and that many Muslim women do not veil at all. Furthermore, the fact that Arab societies are made of a mixture of Muslims, Christians, Jews and secular individuals who have been able to coexist for centuries does not concern Western Orientalists in the Arab world who received a Western education.

## **Conclusion:**

Contemporary Arab-American women writers focus more on the anti-assimilation tendency than early Arab-American writers who tended usually to emphasize differences and heterogeneity in relation to others. Their social relations are more confined to members of their ethnic group. This restricted contact with the in-group reveals that Arab women operate within established ethnic boundaries, where indigenous cultural norms and values shape their contacts and relations (Read, 2004: 24-32). However, migration may be a driving force behind women's compulsion for integration given that the new cultural environment may modify their perceptions. This may give birth to the reconceptualization of their convictions and habits. Renegotiation of religious and cultural identity discloses a process of adaptation and reformulation of cultural values. For Arab women, reconciliation of cultural differences and establishment of contacts with mainstream society is far from being a harmonious and painless process. Opposing and sometimes clashing attitudes lead to ambivalent feelings which mark issues of cultural identity and race relations. Moreover, attitudes of Arab women are torn between a tendency of conservatism that sets as limits frequenting the in-group, an inclination for a mosaic identity with developed bonds with other cultural groups, whereas a break in the relations with the co-ethnics and the adoption of cultural norms of the host societies dominate the life of a category of Arab women.

Arab American feminists often struggle with divided loyalties. Many feel the need to defend their cultures, nations of origin, and religions from hostile media and political affronts in the United States. Yet they are committed to feminist criticism of the Arab American culture, working to integrate Arab American feminist struggles within the larger U.S. and global women's movements. The pressures of cultural loyalty have silenced some Arab

American feminist theorists. However, other Arab American feminists consider their cause to be a matter of life and death for their people. Regardless of the issues or sites of contestation, Arab Americans are increasingly bringing gender issues into their battles and Arab American feminists are emerging as central players in the struggles within Arab American communities. This, with no doubt, helps to set the misconception that feminist thinking is recently introduced to the Arab world and it is the West's gift to the oppressed marginalized women in this region. Currently, works of those Arab-American women writers are becoming very critical especially as the negative image of Muslim women is enforced more in the Western mind especially after the horrific terrorist events of September 11.

In its defense, recent feminist theory has been known to link the struggles of women with the struggles of disadvantaged groups or nations, as well as to urge a global sisterhood of women. There are of course a number of problems with both these assertions. The latter is mainly a question of concrete inequality: racial ethnic, geographical and class factors which render certain women more powerless than others (Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 1980: 50-78).



# Chapter Three

**I.** To find the salve

for this wound you carry

without knowing its name,

you must return to the house

where you were born in the old country. Go

get Damascus.

**II.** To find the grave of your lost brother

whose blood you carry,

you must stay in the new world

no matter what happens

you must go into the vein and heart of America. Go

into Indianapolis

**III.** Which do you want, choose

You only get one journey

Mohja Kahf, excerpts from *The Fork in the Road* (96-7)

## Introduction

Since the attacks of 9/11, the West has deployed all efforts to spread negative representations of Arab/Muslims and create misunderstandings of this group's culture. This system has applied this strategy to its depiction of the veil and the Middle East at large. As a reaction to such common portrayal of Arabs and Arab women in particular in Western popular culture, I argue that the current wave of Arab-American women literature challenges the East/West binaries of placing Islam within and as a part of American culture through the strategy of resistance. Among these contemporary writers, Mohja Kahf tries to contextualize the Arab-American experience and culture, and situates the Muslim woman's choice of veiling within its cultural, social, religious, and geopolitical contexts in order to resist and counter Western discourses and perverted narratives of Arab-Americans and the Middle East.

Following the example of Scheherazade, Kahf uses her art to correct Americans' biased view of Arab women. Depicted as a feminist, she not only seeks to alter the fixed American misconceptions of the Arab woman as the exotic sex object or the oppressed victim, but she also criticizes the view that a woman's expressions of desire and the pursuit of her interests contradict the interests of man and challenges man's supremacy over women.

The present chapter seeks to examine Arab-American women's voices in resistance to Western images through a deep and thorough analysis of Kahf's *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. I look at Kahf's novel as a good example of such a strategic form as a way of rethinking the meanings around Muslim womanhood in America. It further studies Kahf's narrative and her depiction of the veil as a sign of freedom, resistance, and an autonomous identity. Great emphasis is placed on the formation of Arab/Muslim American woman's

identity and finding a space for her individual voice among the many conflicting voices of the East and the West, Muslim and Secular, feminist and anti-feminist in America. The main character, Khadra Shamy, faces the challenges that an Arab/Muslim woman confronts in the host country, her hyphenated identity, the discrimination she encounters in her adopted homeland and her attempt to build a new future. Among the most important issues with which the protagonist grapples as an immigrant living between two worlds, the clash of Arab and American culture, the definition of who she is, her sense of identity as an Arab, Muslim, Arab American in a hostile environment. The chapter will further analyze the strategies used by Khadra in order to achieve a certain balance within this unavoidable displacement inherent to diasporic subjects. Here, I rely mainly on Stuart Hall's considerations about hybridism and Gloria Anzaldua's *The New Mestiza*. With her narrative, she resists the East with its fundamental regimes and the West with its view of Arab women as domesticated, subjugated, and unenlightened Other. Instead, she calls for embracing difference and hybridity.

### **III.1. The use of Narrative as an act of Resistance**

The situation engendered by immigration exacts what Steven Salaita and Edmund Ghareeb call “split vision”<sup>90</sup>, mediating between events of the past and the present. Instead of feeling rooted in one specific place, the immigrant constantly moves between old and new homes, inhabiting a third space, one in-between two homes (5).

Always in search for the self, the immigrant’s adaptation to the new world represents neither nostalgia for nor a rejection of the old world. Yet, he/she does not have a comprehensive acceptance of all aspects of life in the new, adopted home. Rather, the transition to the new world requires a continual process of defining and redefining one’s national and cultural identity (Said: 56). The exclamation, “liar,” is the first word of the novel, spoken by the protagonist Khadra who is reluctantly driving back to her childhood home (1). This emotional outburst comes as a response to a road sign that proclaims, “The people of Indiana welcome you” (1). Khadra’s first reaction then, is one of rejection of the American myth of inclusiveness. She is suddenly flooded with memories of when her family first moved into the new house. The local neighborhood bullies immediately marked them as “foreigners. Dark and wrong” (6). She also recalls how she and her brother were constantly tormented in school and often referred to as “rag-heads”. Of her experience with cultural marginality and painful alienation, the Arab American critic Lisa Suheir Majaj says in *Food for Our Grandmothers*:

My childhood desire, often desperate, was not so much to be a particular nationality, to be American or Arab, but to be wholly one thing or another ... although I spent years struggling to define my personal politics of location, I remained situated somewhere between Arab and American cultures – never quite rooted in either, always constrained by both. My sense of liminality grew as I became more

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<sup>90</sup> Steven Salaita and Edmund Ghareeb, *Split Vision: The Portrayal of Arabs in the American Media*. Washington, DC: American-Arab Affairs Council, 1983.

aware of the rigid nature of definitions: Arab culture simultaneously claimed and excluded me, while the American identity I longed for retreated from my grasp (70).

Like Majaj, Khadra and her brother Eyad straddle Arab and American cultures, feeling firmly rooted in neither and constrained by both. Khadra draws a dim picture of the immigrant experience, one loaded with the reality of feeling torn apart from one's home and monstrously "dropped" ("The Roc," 8) into a new world. The first lines demonstrate a grim picture of the newly adopted home – a cold and unwelcoming world rather than a splendid image of a host country filled with freedom and golden opportunities. Upon her arrival in America, Khadra realizes that the external gaze is limiting her definition of who she is.

The most important thing in *The Girl*<sup>91</sup> is the author's resistance to the Western perceptions and narratives of immigration and identity because she tries to create her own genre of the Arab/ Muslim-American woman in which she hopes to provide her with new possibilities not offered by the West. In the current anti-Islam/ anti-Muslim and political climate in the United States following the attacks of the Twin Towers and the launching of the "War on Terror", Kahf and other Arab American writers are faced with the complicated choice between expressing Muslim otherness and assimilating. As a Muslim Arab-American writer, who does not want to be further marginalized due to the false reputation Islam and Muslims have gained over the years, her narrative is expected to reiterate the mainstream's fears of Muslims which has become synonymous with "terrorists."

With the rise of Islamophobia, the use of binaries has been intensified through deepening the divide between "us" and "them", which depicts the West as superior and the East as fanatic and uncivilized. Within this process of stereotyping, the continuous attack on Arabs and Muslims, and the Muslim woman's veil becomes crucial since it widens the gap

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<sup>91</sup> I will use *The girl* as reference to *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* for the rest of the chapter.

between “us” and “them” to dominate the Arab and Muslim worlds, justify the war and attacks on the Middle East. The veil has been meticulously chosen as an appropriate cultural sign to mean oppression, among other meanings. Because of those definitions, the old and long existing phenomenon of Muslim veiling that was never a concern to anyone suddenly becomes significant in the contemporary world of the West.

The widespread image of Arab women as a veiled creature, persecuted by their male counterparts and a severe religion on the one hand, or that of belly dancers or the exotic reflections of women in the harem on the other hand are still having a great effect in American popular culture. Indeed, for more than a hundred years, Arab/Muslim women have been depicted as mute and devoid of identities. Such misconception encourages Kahf to challenge these stereotypes and present a positive picture of the Arab/Muslim community.

Throughout *The Girl*, Khadra Shamy, an Arab Muslim veiled woman, tries to replace the Orientalist notion of the Arab Muslim woman as passive, with the notion of Arab woman as active agents in the third space. In this space, the hybridized individuals erase any claims for inherent cultural purity and inhabit the state of an in-between reality marked by shifting psychic and cultural boundaries. This is a time-space of the “lives of those who dare to mix while offering ... [in] the realm in-between, where predetermined rules cannot fully apply” (Minha, *When the Moon*, 157). This hyphenated time-space is the “realm of subjects-in-the-making” (Minha, “Women, Native, Other,” 102), a space where these hyphenated identities remain active and self-confident. Thus, from these third-time spaces, hybrid Arab American women develop a mode of resistance, rejecting Arab and Western suppression.

Throughout the narrative, Kahf attempts to resist being subdued and overpowered by Western negative stereotypes. Kahf recognizes how Western narratives keep people ignorant of important issues and busy with transient ones. They use the veil as an excuse to divert

people's attention from real oppressions taking place by the West. In resistance to the dominant narratives of the Muslim world, Kahf gives us a glimpse of people's suffering in the world that are just glanced over indifferently by the media and Western governments. In fact Arabs are also portrayed as terrorists or extremists but never as victims of Western conspiracies. Kahf contextualizes the historical and political circumstances in which Arabs and Muslims have been oppressed and misrepresented by Western mainstream. The narrator in *The Girl* describes the situation and how powerfully people feel about it:

Where was the soul at peace? ... There was fighting in Western Sahara. Afghans filled refugee camps in Iran and Pakistan. Patani Muslims were being persecuted in their Buddhist-dominated country. Life in Lebanon was a hell of shelling and death. None of this was an important part of the news in America. Whereas the minute details of the lives of the American men held hostage, and the tears and hopes of their mothers, fathers, grandparents ... in Kissamee made news every day (122).

These lines show the indifference of the world towards other people's suffering because their plight is not even acknowledged or given a minute for reflection. The narrator's feelings of pain and bitterness are reflected in the passage "Only they were human, had faces, had mothers. People wore yellow ribbons for these fifty-two privileged white men who now were, if the American news was to be believed, the most wretchedly oppressed of the earth" (123). This is an instance of negative stereotypes being clearly manifested in action. The animosity between "them" and "us" is deepened through the diminishment of the importance of "other" nations' losses with the simultaneous glorification of their heroism and dominance.

Over the years, The West has proclaimed itself as the dominator of the world which gives it the right to determine the common enemy that should be defeated but in the case of Arab-American women, the common enemy they are being asked to fight are their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons. According to Susan Muaddi Darraj, the editor of *Food For Our Grandmothers*, the main problem is that

despite the recent interest in the Middle East, following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the West has not made significant progress in its understanding of either Arab culture or the role of women in the Arab community in America [...] Arab and Muslim women continue to be used as a means of justifying the “spreading of liberty” doctrine across the Middle East. At a time when the East and the West are allegedly at odds, Arabs in America – and especially Arab women – have become key players and, too frequently pawns. In fact, the image of the oppressed, silenced women is frequently used by some as a proof of the barbarity of Arab culture and to justify the West’s foreign policy toward the East (159).

This image of the oppressed woman is obviously related to the image of the aggressive Arab men, and it becomes crucial to consider and have a closer look at these stereotypes, since as Darraj states, are used in the service of Western perspective (139). As a Muslim feminist in the U.S., Kahf works to unsettle these rigid stereotypes that imprison Muslim women behind walls of misperception. As for the veiled Khaleda, “the female with Uncle Shukri,” is reduced to a piece of cloth that makes her voice unheard and her education irrelevant. The speaker in “Descent in JFK” states:

If they saw Uncle Shukri  
In his checkered headscarf,  
Like when he left her ride  
Behind him on his motorbike  
They’d think he was a terrorist,  
They’d never known Khaleda  
Has a Ph.D.  
Because she wears a veil they’ll  
Never see beyond (37).

The speaker knows quite clearly that she is regarded as the “other” by mainstream culture, and she becomes aware that she has fallen into the trap of – stereotyping: stereotypes as Bhabha declares are, “fixed and static construction[s] of other as the subject of colonial



discourse” (Bhabha, *Location*: 70). As stated earlier, the veil in the minds of many stands for ignorance, backwardness and oppression. These minds cannot see a woman wearing a veil without thinking of it as a sign of oppression. They cannot consider the possibility that this person may be very educated and with a Ph.D. degree. The speaker, however, asserts that to “see beyond” the rigid barriers between us and them, constructed by racial and religious prejudices, both people coming from different cultures need open-mindedness toward one another. As a woman of Arab descent, the speaker realizes that others now see her as an oppressed victim just as they see all Arab males as patriarchal terrorists.

The combination of being an educated Muslim and American simultaneously is incomprehensible to many. The public’s perception of its contradictoriness is one of the major problems that Arab Muslim American women encounter. For them, being Muslim threatens their Americanness because the two identities are incompatible. Nevertheless, if they are non-practicing Muslims, and shedding off the veil, their Americanness is more likely accepted and not questioned.

In this way, Kahf’s narrative raises questions about the possibility of retaining difference in this anti-Muslim climate. In *The Girl*, the protagonist oscillates between retaining her cultural difference and assimilating to the American culture especially when her Islamic devotion is questioned. Instead of merely asserting one pure identity, Khadra suggests a hybrid one because she feels that she is not “Arab enough” to be considered as Arab, nor “American enough” to be American, and is shunned by both. Her hybrid state opposes dualistic Western thinking with “divergent thinking, characterized by moving away from a set of patterns and goals toward ... perspective... that includes rather than excludes (Anzaldua: 379). Thus, in order to establish a coherent identity, Khadra needs to negotiate the difference between the ‘old’ world and the ‘new’ one” (Abdurraqib: 55). She asserts that, in general, authors have had to choose between depictions of acculturation, assimilation or cultural

hybridity and this negotiation has always been influenced by cultural climate. Abdurraqib emphasizes that:

Narratives that espouse retaining difference and cultural exchange do not work well when the cultural climate requires that the audience be unified against a common enemy. In these situations, narratives that present a trajectory of assimilation are more acceptable because assimilation, in these situations, is related to allegiance (55).

Kahf explores the Arab-American woman's experience and life in America. She depicts the limitations by which a Muslim Arab American woman is restrained due to culture, religion, and gender differences. She subverts the stereotypical representation of Arab women in U.S. popular culture which, to borrow Jack Shaheen's words, "narrow [...] vision and blur reality."<sup>92</sup> Like Scheherazade, Kahf is actively engaged in the act of saving her life and the lives of Arab women through words by creating a new space from which the Arab-American woman can speak. Suzanne Gauch points out that women writers use Scheherazade's voice and Scheherazade-like storytelling to "struggle against co-option Imperialist and anti-Islamic critics" (xii). Kahf weaves into her narrative recurrent debates between Western feminists, Secular and Islamic feminists and the various views they hold. She engages in the Arab/Islamic efforts to challenge the Western discourse through the creation of a narrative of survival and resistance.

Throughout the novel, Khadra takes advantage from her situation of being inside and outside both cultures at the same time. She necessarily looks out from the inside. Not quite the same, not quite the other, she stands at that undetermined threshold place where she constantly drifts in and out.<sup>93</sup> She is, in other words, this inappropriate "other" or "same" who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming "I am like you" while

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<sup>92</sup> Jack Shaheen, "Hollywood's Muslim Arabs," *The Muslim World*, 90 (1-2), March 2000: 22-42 (p. 26).

<sup>93</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *When the Moon Waxes Red*

persisting in her difference and that of reminding “I am different” while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at. (Minha, “Not You/Like You”: 418). Khadra is not able to define her self until she comes to the conclusion that she is Arab and American as well. Once she accepts herself, she will be able to take control over her life and be free to be herself.

It is clear that identity issues raised in Arab-American writings are usually problematic but the issue of the veil results in great controversy. Being Muslim per se is perceived as un-American let alone wearing the veil. It is generally thought that veiled Muslim women cannot be fully incorporated into American society because “their bodies cannot escape being marked as other” (Abdurraqib: 56). She further emphasizes that:

In these texts, women who wear hijab [veil], by virtue of their adherence to a practice that is clearly not American, can never construct a narrative in which comfortable assimilation is the denouement. As a result, immigrant Muslim women who veil must create a new genre that defies the demands American culture places on conformity (56).

Kahf resists that false notion that a Muslim woman wearing the veil cannot be part of the American society and lead a fully American life style. Instead, she portrays Muslim and Arab American women as part of the contemporary landscape living American lives in the heart of the U.S. Nevertheless, Kahf’s novel and poetry reveal that although this veiled woman tells her own stories, her narrative can never be about easy assimilation. Therefore, the Muslim woman is compelled to construct a strong narrative of resistance and survival in a hostile environment.

In order to survive, these women need to picture a positive image of the veil which is manipulated by the Western discourse and is used as a powerful tool to build solid barriers and misunderstandings between “us” and “them” in order to ensure the continuity of fear and alienation of the “Other,” and feelings of hostility and threat between the two parties. The veil

that indicates Muslims' difference from others questions their allegiances regardless of their Americanness especially after the terrible events of 9/11. Abdurraqib notes that visual identifiers can be reinterpreted "when context is erased or misunderstood" (57). Kahf provides an instance of a veiled woman whose Americanness is questioned in her poem "Hijab Scene # 7." She presents the reader with a litany of stereotypes that so often define interactions between non-Muslims and Muslims. In this poem, the female speaker resists Western perceptions of her and refused to be silenced, she says:

No, I'm not bald under the scarf  
No, I'm not from that country  
Where women can't drive cars  
No, I would not like to defect  
I'm already American  
But thank you for offering  
What else do you need to know  
Relevant to my buying insurance  
Opening a bank account  
Reserving a seat on the flights  
Yes I speak English  
Yes I carry explosives  
They are called words  
And if you don't get up  
Off your assumptions  
They're going to blow you away(39).

In this poem and many others<sup>94</sup>, Kahf's anger and frustration here are manifest. Yet, she uses gentle humor as a powerful strategy of subversion. It resists the simplistic assumptions and deeply-held American conceptions about who and what Arabs and Muslims

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<sup>94</sup> For more details, see *Emails From Scheherazad* (Contemporary Poetry Series), University Press of Florida, 2003

are. Through the female speaker, Kahf challenges the image of Arab and Muslim women as silenced, humorless and subservient individuals. She presents an alternative image that of an empowered Muslim woman who does not need to defect or to be saved. Whether she covers her hair or not is her own business. And most importantly, she is “already American” which means she is not foreigner.

The Arab/Islamic feminist EisaUlen points out that many feminists, Muslim and non-Muslim, Western or Eastern, focus on the veil, “urging complete unveiling as the key to unleashing an authentic liberation. For them scarves strangle any movement toward Muslim women’s emancipation” (46). Many Arab/Islamic feminists have dealt extensively with such misconceptions and struggle to create counter-narratives that highlight the real meanings of the veil within their cultural and religious context.

In Kahf’s narrative of the Muslim veil, she contrasts the image of Muslim identity with the image of American identity in her poem “Hijab Scene # 2”:

You people have such restrictive dress for women,  
She said, hobbling away in three-inch heels and panty hose  
to finish out another pink-collar temp pool day (42).

Kahf demonstrates absolute command of both the language and the assumptions of her speaker. In these few lines, the modern American woman views the Muslim woman’s dress as very “restrictive” and fails to see that she herself is being restricted by her high heels and outfit. By comparing the two cultural expressions, “Kahf illustrates how it is culture, rather than veiling, that keeps veiled Muslim women in liminal positions. Kahf illustrates that veiling is not incongruous with being American and with other American practices” (Abdurraqib: 68). This means that being Muslim does not make any American less American and vice versa, being American does not make a Muslim any less Muslim. This is a

realization that Khadra took so long to come to for she initially was trapped in her miscomprehension of this dual identity of Americanness and Muslimness.

Just like Kahf, Ulen challenges Western interpretations of the veil. She compares the image of the Muslim veiled woman with that of an American woman and subverts the meaning of the veil. In “Tapping our Strength” Ulen raises important questions about the veil and the meaning it hold in the Western eye. She asks:

Are women who insist on wearing hijab unselfconsciously oppressed, or are they performing daily acts of resistance by covering their hair? In the West, where long blond tresses signify a certain power through sexuality and set the standard for beauty, are veiled women the most daring revolutionaries? ... Is liberation possible within the veil? (43).

She clearly opposes the Western discourse that assumes that the millions of veiled Muslim women around the world are “unselfconsciously oppressed.” She shows her readers that these women may be covering their hair as an act of resistance. She calls people to view them from a different perspective, and believes that they should be viewed as revolutionaries rather than oppressed victims to have taken on veiling and resisting all those personal, political and social attacks caused by it. Ulen challenges the Western assumption that the act of shedding off the veil is the only way to veiled woman’s liberation. She asks her readers to think about whether liberation is actually possible within the veil. Through the question she raises, she is indirectly calling for new interpretations of the veil which consider the practice of veiling as liberating and an act of resistance.

Indeed, veiling can be liberating if it is interpreted within its own cultural and religious context. The veil is not only synonymous to an important Muslim practice but is associated with piety and freedom from materialism. When the women decide to put on the veil, they are no longer slaves to appearances nor victims to fashion. The Islamic dress code and veil free

the women from consumerism and the fashion's control over their bodies and their representation in society.

The frozen image of Arab and Muslim women as oppressed and silent veiled women is contested in Kahf's narratives who is outraged by the chains through which patriarchy, Eastern or Western, restricts Muslim women and their choices in life. She rejects the ideas that reduce the Muslim woman to a piece of cloth which has become the epitome of discussions in the West and the East as well. In both worlds the Muslim woman as a human being and her suffering is trivialized but her hair and veil are given great importance by patriarchal and Western discourses. In most of her poems, Kahf presents empowered Muslim women who assert their identity and break their silence to be heard by the Western discourse. Kahf states in her poem "My Body is Not Your Battleground" that:

My body is not your battleground  
My hair is neither sacred nor cheap,  
Neither the cause of your disarray  
Nor the path to your liberation  
My hair will not bring progress and clean water  
If it flies unbraided in the breeze  
It will not save us from our attackers  
If it is wrapped and shielded from the sun  
.....  
Untangle your hands from my hair  
So I can comb and delight in it  
So I can spill it over the chest of my sweet love  
.....  
My body is not your battleground  
My private garden is not your tillage  
My thighs are not highways to your golden city (58-9).

In this poem, she presents a powerful and independent woman who refuses to listen to those oppressive voices that externalize the Muslim woman's body. The speaker asserts out loud that her body is her own business, that she has absolute control over it. Kahf believes that a woman's story cannot be heard unless she acknowledges herself as an integrated identity whose body solely belongs to her.<sup>95</sup> In other words, she claims the right over her own body rejecting any oppressive voices that Arab women's bodies – whether Western feminism or Arab patriarch. Kahf contradicts those who believe liberation can be brought by shedding the veil and those who think wearing it will save them from their attackers. The speaker finds both parties irrational and neither one leading to true freedom or progress.

Kahf's narrative deals mainly with these conflicts and the Arab Muslim woman's struggle to fit in while preserving her culture at the same time. Khadra is also forced to make a decision about whether she should hold on to the veil or remove it to gain acceptance within American society. Due to the multiple pressures by parents, Wajdy and Entehaj, culture and society, Kahf builds her narrative to focus on these issues and the development of her protagonist's identity. Khadra is strongly influenced by others and is unable to find her own identity. Her parents try to simplify everything for her by dividing things into two main categories: halal and haram. Such ideas lead Khadra to become more confused and perpetuate the process of constructing her identity. The continual tension to preserve the original culture and certain beliefs are illustrated by her mother's and aunt's confessions during and after her visit to Syria. Khadra's mother reveals to her daughter that "Our biggest fear was always losing you [...] Losing our children to America. Having you not keep Islam one hundred percent" (383-4). After that, Aunt Ayesha restates the same concern declaring that:

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<sup>95</sup>AmalAbdelrazek, 'Scheherazad's Legacy: Arab-American Women Writers and the Resisting, Healing, and Connecting power of their Storytelling,' in *MIT Journal*, 2005: 147



We put a lot of weight on your shoulders [...]Not just you- all our children [...] But especially you girls. You had a lot to measure up to [...] We were so young when we came, you must know that [...] Young in strange land, your mother was, like me [...] Afraid [...] of being swallowed up by this land, reduced to nothing [...] ‘And we were so idealistic [...] But we put it all on you [...] Wanting you to carry our vision for us , our identity—our entire identity, on *your* heads, imagine! (404-5).

Khadra has been taught since her childhood that Americans are the “Other” because her parents consider the “Other” as apostates. In Khadra’s journey in search of a coherent identity, Kahf exposes her to a wide range of choices, different lifestyles and distinctive individuals that help her in her search of who she is and the development of her own identity. Khadra meets both religious and non-practicing Muslims, emancipated and oppressed Muslim women to help her in her quest of identity and her understanding of the true meaning of Islam. Khadra’s encounters delineate the diversity of the Muslim community that is often misrepresented by media and the Western discourse. In *The Girl*, Kahf recreates the image of the Arab/ Muslim woman in her resistance of the West that portrays her as oppressed, silenced and obedient. She subverts the stereotypes and misconceptions about Arabs and Muslims and puts them into question by providing a wide range of non-monolithic images of Arabs and Muslims through the characters of her narrative. As an active Arab/Islamic feminist whose main concern is to highlight women’s value and freedom, Kahf places the women at the forefront of her narrative. She presents her readers with various representations and images of women as active and independent agents in society that reflect the Muslim and Arab-American community and the role of its women more precisely.

Through these representations she creates new readings of the lives of Muslim and Arab-American women contradicting in this way the prejudiced and standardized image of the Arab and Muslim American women in particular as backward, uneducated, and sexually oppressed. She introduces several heterogeneous images of the Muslim/Arab-American

woman in *The Girl*. The first educated and ambitious woman to which Khadra is presented is her own mother Ebtahaj. She avows to her daughter that she dreamt of becoming a doctor by attending a medical school “[She] has a college degree [...] But after [she] graduated, [she] chose to stay at home for the children” (21). Khadra’s mother echoes the traditional of a woman as a wife and mother who sacrifices her dreams in furthering her education to take care of the children. She states “I used to dream I would be a doctor one day, and open a free clinic for poor people” (25-26). Then Kahf imagined Teta, Khadra’s grandmother, who is an independent and a qualified woman who comes from Syria. She worked as a telephone operator and was among “the very first wave of working women; it was one of the new jobs that had opened up for women in the old days, and I was one of them!”(271). Her grandmother was very proud of herself and did not obey a society that collectively considered that “a telephone girl’s job was a bad thing, a thing for floozies” (271). She struggled and resisted those confining roles assigned to women by Arab patriarchy and society and decided to carry on her job with her girl friends. Teta asserts: “We wanted to be the New Woman” (271). She tells Khadra about her girlfriends and the freedom they enjoyed while working outside. She adds proudly “We were [...] women who cherish themselves, women who are cherished” (272). Like Scheherazade who teaches Shahrayar “to heal his violent streak through stories,” killing “the beast of doubt” inside him, Tata uses her art of storytelling as a powerful means of resistance, helping her granddaughter define herself and relieve her from her anxiety; she tells Khadra many stories about her marriage and life because she feels her granddaughter’s psychological anxiety and loss of peace with herself and identity.

Another character who greatly influences Khadra is the practicing woman Zuhura. Khadra encounters the first and the strongest Muslim woman who considers herself as an integral part of the American culture, and is somewhat a role model for Khadra in her quest. While most of the members of the Dawah Center picture a negative image of Americans and

present an idealistic picture of Islam and Muslims, Zuhura is brave enough to contradict the members' beliefs. She feels estranged by the other inhabitants of Indiana, but expressed her views out loud, as the narrator explains "Zuhura didn't fit in the landscape. She didn't fit what the local thought they knew about someone who looked like her as they saw her approaching" (44).

Zuhura's rape and murder is a turning-point in Khadra's life. After esteeming and respecting Zuhura for her bravery, Khadra hears the people of her community putting the blame on her parents for giving her too much freedom and allowing her to travel to a different town to carry out her studies "She has been asking for trouble [...]. Her family should have given her more guidance" (96). Zuhura's crime results in the Muslim community feeling more isolated from the mainstream as neither the police nor media pay much attention to Zuhura's death. Instead of looking for and prosecuting the criminals, her crime has been classified as an honor crime. This incident is very confusing for Khadra, and pushed her to hold fast to her religion. She thinks that she can avoid the same fate by keeping her religion closer than ever before since Zuhura was murdered for her nonconformity.

After this sad event, Khadra begins to exclude her friends who did not match her expectations and standards. Khadra decides to stop meeting Livvy, a conservative Christian, and Hanifa, a Muslim teenager who becomes pregnant before getting married, because they were suspicious and do not conform to her idea of the "Islamic lifestyle." She thinks that ending these friendships will make her a good and practicing Muslim, but it proves the opposite because she was seen as different by others at this stage of her life. Her friend Hakim tells her "you don't even remember what a bigmouth you were? How nosy you were? How you interfered with me, Hanifa, and everybody? Tried to root out every nonconformist blip on your little halal-haram radar? Felt entitled to mess with everybody's life?" (395)

Khadra feels more lost than ever before and decides to leave Indiana in the hope of finding what she is looking for. Kahf presents another alternative image of a practicing woman for Khadra to consider and learn from. Her friend Maryam is an independent and successful assistant public defender. She does not always pray in the mosque but practices religion according to her views. Khadra's stupefaction about Maryam's way of life and way of thinking is highlighted by the narrator who states that:

This friend mapped Muslim space in a way new to Khadra. Maryam's thing was service. Service to the poor is service to God ... 'I don't have to be working only with Muslims or on Muslim issues or Muslim this or Muslim that. By representing impoverished defendants, I'm manifesting Muslim values in my life. We don't need a ghetto mentality' (367).

Maryam's words help Khadra consider other views of Islam than the ones inculcated by her parents and the members of the Dawah Center. She becomes aware of the different choices she can have. The image of Maryam is very important to the counter-narrative Kahf is creating. Maryam represents a positive image of the practicing Muslim American woman who is capable of reconciling her American life with her Muslim heritage. She represents that successful woman who succeeds in adjusting her personal and professional life as well. She concentrates on the core values of true Islam that encourages a Muslim to display his/ her faith in their daily life and conduct towards others.

Later on, Kahf provides Khadra with a different image of a Muslim woman who decided to forge a new identity for herself and relinquish her culture and religion in order to be accepted as a full member of mainstream America. Through this model, Kahf highlights the conflict between the secular and the practicing Muslim and their view of each other. For many Americans, Muslims are frequently reduced to the image of blind followers of the religion of Islam or terrorists who try to convert people by force. Through the various images and models presented by Kahf in the novel, Khadra is no longer trapped by a single image of

Islam and Muslims but has a variety of models to choose from in order to have a clear image of the kind of life she wants to lead. Bitsy Hudnut is Khadra's Iranian roommate, a secular Muslim who participates in intensifying the stereotypes of Muslims. She does not want to be identified as a Muslim Iranian. She changes her Muslim name Fatima-Zahra to Bitsy after she moves to the United States and gets her citizenship. Khadra is puzzled when Bitsy refuses to tell her real name, and then asks her why she did not keep her name to which Bitsy replied that she did so to "[...] order pizza without the guy on the phone getting all confused [...]" And job applications and such, [...] Makes things just a whole easier" (369). Bitsy does want to be conceived as Muslim and since she is not veiled, she can easily pass for an American and have a simple life without being discriminated against because of her religious affiliation.

The representation of Bitsy and her hostile relationship with Khadra is just a simplified exemplification of the serious conflict and political divide between practicing Muslim women and secular Muslim women. The conflict between the two parties is based on the lack of trust between the two. Many practicing Muslim women are suspicious of the motives of secular Muslim feminists as being "purveyors of Western ideological discourses alien to indigenous feminists theorizing and praxis" (Zine: 173). Secular Muslim women, in turn, frequently label their practicing sisters as victims of "false consciousness" who lack the political maturity to understand their own oppression" (173). Such negative attitudes towards each other hinder any kind of solidarity and understanding which is clearly shown in the relationship between Khadra and Bitsy. While one group perceives the other as slaves to the West and its ideologies, the other does not think of its counterpart as equal but as inferiors lacking maturity, and thus, unable to engage in political and intellectual dialogues about the oppression of women.

### **III.4.Negotiating Boundaries: Khadra's Dilemma of Dual Identity**

In Khadra's quest for identity, Kahf exposes the protagonist to different experiences and people to help her find her lost self. Kahf uses Khadra as an example of an Arab woman who is torn between her upbringing in a strict Muslim family and the American lifestyle and customs. In Kahf's resistance to the dominant's culture's views and beliefs about Arab women's status in society, she creates a new genre of the veiled woman and a new space for the Muslim American woman. She delves into the details of Khadra's and other Muslim women lives to free them from cultural domination.

Through her narrative she exhibits the diversity within the Muslim and Arab-American community. Kahf concentrates on Khadra's identity formation, her female relations in order to depict the distinct Arab women's roles and outlooks. Furthermore, she represents the various obstacles that limit these women's lives whether racial, religious, or patriarchal. Khadra is presented as an empowered Arab Muslim female, but her freedom has been somewhat restricted by their parents as a child and later by her traditional husband and his patriarchal outlook on life. Juma's main concern in getting married to Khadra is to marry a proper Muslim girl focusing on how people would perceive her as an Arab woman but he discovers that Khadra's behaviors were no so "Arab". For instance, when Khadra goes to ride her bicycle, he tries to forbid her believing that bicycle riding is an un-Islamic behavior; his ideas shocked Khadra because bicycle riding has been part of her whole life and never contradicted with her practice of the Muslim faith. Juma does not expect her to do embarrassing things to him and finally tells her "I forbid you [...] As your husband, I forbid you," (230). Khadra could not believe he would say something like that for "Her father never said things like that to her mother. It was alien to everything she felt and knew." After her daily fighting with Juma, she finally surrenders and gives in and puts her bike away and with

time the gears rusted and tires lost air; Khadra feels that “Something inside her rusted a little, too” (230).

Khadra is different from her mother, she does not want to sacrifice her freedom and give up her dreams to accommodate her husband. Instead, she is an activist on campus leading demonstrations, holding meetings, and circulating petitions among other things. However, Khadra’s own husband wants her to behave like a “modest” Arab woman and tries to control her life and limit her liberties. But Khadra is not satisfied with her marriage to Juma who embodies the Arab man who wants to control his wife and limit her agency, he complains “Every time she went out in a campus demonstration.” He keeps saying “Does it have to be you? Let somebody else demonstrate. There’s no shortage of people. Does it have to be my wife?” (241). When Khadra shouts and claims that she was free in her actions, he shouted back “it’s always my business what anyone wants from you. What the hell do you mean none of my business? You’re my wife” (242). But Khadra is determined to play an active role on campus and in the Muslim community but her husband expects her to follow the norm and give up on her activities for him. He does not appreciate her independence, and believes as a wife she should be willing to make all these compromises to satisfy her husband and to fit the profile of the perfect obedient wife. Juma is bothered for his reputation in front of other Arabs and how he is perceived and “his wife,” while Khadra does not accept to be regarded only as “his wife”.

Khadra refuses to play the conventional role of housewife expected by her husband. Through Kahf’s representation of Khadra’s character, she challenges that image of the subservient and silenced Muslim wife who satisfies the needs of her oppressive husband at the expense of her own needs. Juma once asks her “What’s for dinner?” to which she responds “I don’t know. Why are you asking me? Like I’m the one who’s supposed to know?” Juma looks around and says “let’s see: who’s the wife in this picture?” (241). His reaction upsets her

because she never viewed herself as a housewife whose life is confined to the limited space of the home. Her husband, on the other hand, reflects the image of the traditional patriarchal figure that controls his wife, believing it is his natural right, due to his privilege of maleness.

I'm not a woman- I don't know HOW to cook! Juma shouted. 'Well it didn't come with my BOOBS!' Khadra shouted back. 'You can LEARN it! Here, I'll show you!' [...] 'Put chicken in pan. Put pan in oven. It's that simple. Okay? Now LEAVE me ALONE! (241).

In this dialogue Khadra is portrayed as a strong and independent Muslim woman who resists male domination and the patriarchal roles assigned to women. Khadra was beginning to lose herself and the dreams she has for her future in her relationship with Juma. During this period, she was unable to find a clear definition of her identity as a Muslim American. When Khadra gets pregnant and realizes that it was impossible for her to continue her life with Juma who does not accept her the way she is, and decides to have an abortion against everyone's wishes because she knows that her marriage is failing. She thinks having a baby with him will lock her up in a type of life she does not want for herself. She feels suffocated by the idea of having to change herself and her whole life for Juma. The narrator shares with the reader what goes on in her subconscious and her internal dialogue:

Where was it, this will of hers, this misshapen self? She needed to know it. *Hello, self. Can we meet at least?* It was not vain glorious to have a self. It was not the same as selfish individualism, no. you have to have a self to even start on a journey to God [...] She had not taken even a baby step in that direction (248).

This internal dialogue is of paramount importance at this level of Khadra's life, it reflects Gloria Anzaldúa's description of the *New Mestiza* whose internal strife results in a kind of insecurity and indecisiveness. Having a mestiza consciousness means that Khadra is prepared to engage, and get rid of earlier previous feelings of persecution, and become active



and free. Khadra reaches a stage where she cannot give up any more of herself to others or to certain beliefs, and needs to reconcile with herself. The narrator notes:

Her self was a meager thing, scuttling behind a toilet, what she hadn't given over of it to Mama, to Juma. Too much, she has given away too much. she will not give the last inches of her body, will not let them fill her up with a life she does not want (248).

She lived as someone devaluated and stigmatized by her parents, her husband, and the dominant culture and no longer accepts to play that role. She instead decides to use her voice to define herself, to speak for herself and to open new spaces for herself. The mestiza consciousness is now her new identity and she enacts it and performs it on a daily basis. The attributions of this new identity Anzaldúa describes in *Borderlands*:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be a Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode nothing is trusted out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only she sustains contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else (Anzaldúa, 1987: 79).

Going through the *Borderlands* helps Khadra to redefine her position not only in her own eyes, but also in the society. Now, she is no longer the voiceless, tamed woman that would not dare to challenge others. Yet having a better notion of our own identity is not enough, since the transformation one has suffered does not come without compromises (Anzaldúa, 1987: 3). In the same way, Khadra's personality is plagued by psychic restlessness (*Borderlands*: 100). As a result, she realizes that she is experiencing an inner and psychological struggle. She finally understands she has lost herself and has been blindly following everything dictated by others without questioning things. She seems to have led her early life in blind obedience. She makes a mistake when she believes that her individual self is not as important as the community and that serving the community is what makes her

significant. She does not realize that in order to help others and make change, she needs to start with herself first, come to terms with her beliefs and who she is and finds peace within. At her young age, she misunderstands the Islamic faith and does not learn about how Islam simultaneously embraces both individualism and the community. Her narrow understanding of the Muslim practices leads to her loss of self because she has the wrong belief that Islam does not cherish the self but cherishes the common good.

In order to reconcile her self, she decides to get a divorce from Juma. Khadra tells her brother “I don’t know if I can stay married to him [...] I feel like I can’t go on in this marriage without killing off the ‘me’ that I am” to which he replies saying “Do you really want to be a twenty-one-year old divorcée?” (242). A thought like that scared her especially that it would be looked at as one of the biggest failures by society. Nevertheless, she explains “I don’t think I can stay with Juma without changing who I am. Who I essentially deep-down am” (243). Khadra’s spiritual awareness is represented as a turning point in her empowerment which led to a complete metamorphosis.

Khadra has the impression that she had spent her life giving away pieces of herself to every dear person and religious belief while neglecting her own desires and dreams. In her journey of self-searching, she decides to start a new life where she can take her own decisions thus exercising the power of autonomy. Anzaldù’s celebration of the “mestiza consciousness” that blooms at the borderlands is tightly linked to the idea of survival. The “mestiza’s” survival depends on her capacity for self-transformation and adaptation. In order to survive at the borderlands, she must learn to live between differences and often conflicting cultural codes, ways of being and even identities. Because to the consequences of her social location, the “mestiza” needs to learn how to transcend borders and become instead a crossroads, a place of transit and constant flux. As Anzaldùain expresses in “To live in the Borderlands means you,” becoming a crossroads is a dangerous enterprise for

people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,  
 you're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat,  
 forerunner of a new race,  
 half and half—both woman and man, neither—  
 a new gender;  
 In the Borderlands  
 you are a battleground  
 you are at home, a stranger,  
 To survive the Borderlands  
 you must live *sin fronteras*  
 be a crossroads. (216-7)

Anzaldùà thus describes the difficulty of being forced to choose to live at the margin and become a crossroads. At the border, “la mestiza” is alone, vulnerable and left to her own devices. To survive the borderlands, she needs to acquire how to defend herself. Khadra is determined not to concede her will any more for her parents or a husband or a boss. From now on, she decides to make her own decisions and lead the life she always wanted and practices the faith as she understands it.

Khadra’s loss of the self intensified after her divorce from Juma, she became very conflicted about her beliefs, identity and commitment to the veil. She becomes aware that she has never really questioned who she is, and realizes that she needs to begin to question in order to find answers she is looking for. “It was all part of some previous life lived by some other Khadra who accepted things she didn’t really want, who didn’t really know what she wanted and took whatever was foisted on her without examining it” (263). Then Khadra asks herself what she really wants, “And then what? Where do you go when the first part of your life is coming to an end, and you don’t know what is yet unborn inside you? Where do you go when you’re in a free fall, unmoored, safety net gone, and nothing to anchor you?” (265). The

divorce has a big impact on Khadra's life, she felt completely lost and bewildered, until she finally comprehends that she must go "back where she came from: Syria" (266) to help her find answers to her questioning. Her decision to visit Syria, her homeland, gives her hope to find her cultural origins and would serve as a journey into herself without any external pressure telling her who to be and what to do.

Khadra's loss of her sense of belonging to America and her community pushes her to 'look backward' to the homeland as many children of immigrants. Khadra is torn between the present home and the past home<sup>96</sup> and does not feel American. So instead of exploring the American aspect of her identity, she feels a "strong sense of being exclusively" Other (Radhakristnan: 206). She feels that her bonds to America and the Arab community in the new land are weakened. She imagines a community in which she can feel perfectly in place, a community that would accept her, her beliefs and her customs.

Khadra's visit to Syria helps her to come to terms with her identity. Through the weekly baths of her grandmother, Khadra knows many untold stories about her family as the one of Ebtehaj's suffering from her stepmother after the death of her mother. Apparently, Ebtehaj's stepmother was secular and discriminated against her and mocked her for wearing the veil because during those time, according to Teta, "The city was against it, the tide was against it" (275). Teta carries "she tried everything- she's yank it right off her head. I heard she put it in the pot and shat on it" and she was embarrassed to be seen in public with her veiled stepdaughter, she even made Ebtehaj walk on the other side of the street (275). Furthermore, her stepmother forbid her from assisting any Quran circle and tried to marry her with a man "who drank and whored, just to make her misery lifelong" (276). She also tells her the story of her mother's rape by her professor during her stay in France and how this incident impacted and changed her life from a rebellious woman to a pious one. All these stories about

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<sup>96</sup>Radhakristnan, *Diasporic Mediation: Between Home and Location* (Minneapolis : U of Minnesota), 1996: 206

her mother's past made Khadra establish strong bonds with her grandmother and understand why her mother was so overprotective. She becomes aware of her mother's determination to hold on to the veil despite the agony she experienced and realizes that her mother was strong enough to follow her Islamic beliefs which strongly contradicted the tendency of the time.

Kahf has chosen to follow Scheherazade and retell the story in order to change the dominant configuration of her identity. Such a strategy is significant in resisting the dominant discourses that consistently refuse to include Arab women's stories, their choice to veiling and its treatment throughout history. The importance of retelling history in resistance to the West can be best understood through Gramsci's powerful claim that "...in a given state, history is the history of the ruling classes, so, on a world scale, history is the history of the hegemonic states. The history of the subaltern states is explained by the history of hegemonic states" (222-3). Clearly, in Kahf's resistance to Western supremacy, she challenges the history constructed by the ruling classes through retelling the history of the long train of abuses and discrimination inflicted by Western and patriarchal forces upon Arab/Muslim women.

The narrative resists the stereotypes placed on the Arab nation that is demonized and represented as fanatically Muslim. Kahf realizes that the particularities of veiling have been and continue to be overlooked within Western discourses and thus brings issues surrounding the veil and veiled Muslim women to the forefront. She provides many examples of persecution of veiled women in the United States to stress the type of oppression and discrimination Arab/Muslim women experience worldwide. In doing so she tries to demonstrate the real image of the practicing Muslim woman who has been viewed as a victim and subjugated by the veil to show that the latter has been controlled by the Western discourses in order to be used as a means to silence and depreciate her through the negative meanings attached to it. In other words, it is not the veil itself that is oppressive, but the way it

is portrayed and enforced in people's imaginary. Minha, using the example of the veil as a reality and metaphor, explains that:

If the fact of unveiling has a liberating potential, so does the act of veiling. It all depends on the context in which such an act is carried out or, more precisely, on how and where women see dominance. Difference should be defined neither by the dominant sex nor by the dominant culture. So when women decide to lift the veil, one can say that they do so in defiance of their men's oppressive rights to their bodies. But when they decide to keep to put on the veil they once took off, they might do so to reappropriate their space or claim a new difference in defiance of genderless, hegemonic, centered standardization (416).

Rather than considering the fact that women have the right to veil themselves, Orientalists view veiling as a source of women's subjugation. Indeed, they see the veil as a symbol of dominance and restriction of women's liberty. Readers continue the journey with Khadra back and forth to America. Khadra recalls one of her childhood experiences in America when she was intimidated at school and ridiculed because of the veil. He remembers when one of the children at school took from her Malcolm X book and then told her that he would return it to her if she takes off her "towel". So she ended up pulling her scarf off her head and the children commented "Look, raghead's got hair under that piece a shit" (124). Khadra tried to resist, but the children kept her from moving until they tear her scarf. She shouted to them "I hate you" and one of them shouted back at her telling her "It's just *hair*, you psycho!" (124).

Throughout the novel, Kahf provides a historical background of the oppression the veiled woman had experienced in this supposedly "Muslim" nation. Kahf uses Syria as an example to illustrate the persecution of veiled Muslim women. Khadra's aunt tells her about what had happened in Syria in 1982. During that period,

the Islamic front rebelled against the Syrian government that was repressive, corrupt and dictatorial [...] They seized control of parts of the city of Hama and the government in response launched “a deadly campaign” against the city and its civilians. At least 10,000 people were killed by the armed forces and a warning was issued by the government to potential dissidents that the regime would “use all the force at its disposal to remain in power” (362).

Following this incident, the government had become anti-religious because its supremacy was threatened by the Islamic party. Khadra’s aunt goes on and says that the governments blocked the city and a thousand of paratroopers harassed any woman who was wearing the veil. Her aunt asserts that “You could strip off your hijab [veil] ..., or get a gun to your head” (281). She continues by saying that her daughter, Reem was stopped by the paratroopers on her way home so she slipped off the scarf right away. Her aunt observes “Why endanger your life for it?” then continues with the story (281). The paratrooper asked her to remove her clothes because she was wearing a long garb, but did not wait for Reem to take off her dress so she ripped it off her and “held it up in the air and set it on fire with a blowtorch” (281). According to her uncle Mazen, such reaction from the government happened because of the rebels like Khadra’s mother and father who had politicized the veil and upset the government. This incident shocked Khadra and made her realize the importance of her parents’ decision to leave and flee their homeland to the United States and why her mother views the veil as an important Islamic practice.

Khadra also meets Teta’s Jewish friend. It is a bit confusing for Khadra at first as she was always taught “these people over there, not the same of course [...] still not part of Us. never” (305). These incidents help Khadra to have a clear idea of how things work; she understands that she should not take things as black and white but should opt for and try the grey. She “came to realize that photography was her thing” (297). As choosing photography

as a carrier, Khadra succeeds in living appreciating life as it is for the first time in her life. She uses her camera as the means which will help her find her true self and the people she excluded from her life.

Starting up this new job enables her to meet a new friend known as the poet. However, the latter is portrayed in different ways by Kahf so that the reader is unable to accurately know whether the poet is a real or fictitious person, representing Khadra's conscience. He recites poems with obscure meanings which are grasped by Khadra alone. The poet utters "But baby, I am here to tell you. The baklava is you." She burst out laughing. "The baklava is me?" "Pay attention" (299). Whether he is real or imaginary, the poet always examines her actions and guides her to see and practice religion according to her convictions without being influenced by others' views; he helps her to become more indulgent towards herself and others.

After all this questioning, Khadra is no longer the product of her parents or anyone else but a product of her own self. "And then this whole other life opened up in her mind. It sent her whirling in mad agony. This incidental skin, this name she wore like a badge—glance down, check it—what was it again? Had it changed? Was it always changing? Who was she? What was she, what cells of matter, sewn up into this Khadra shape, this instar? Imagine!" (306). Khadra starts to see things on a new angle. She begins to have a clear definition of who she really is; this awareness helps her enjoy life as it is. She develops a dual personality and "operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else" (*Borderlands*: 101). The fluidity of her new sense of self is based on a "mestiza consciousness" or a "consciousness of borderlands," which enables her to evolve from being the sacrificial victim into "the officiating priestess at the crossroads" (102).



After her self-awakening, Khadra seems to have reflected on those options available to her as a Muslim woman in America. Her journey with the veil ends in Syria when she decides to remove her scarf and practice Islam as she understands it. She sits outside and lounges under the sun and enjoys the penetration of the rays into her body making her feel warm, powerful and relieved. The narrator thoroughly describes the deepest feeling of Khadra when she decides to slip the scarf off:

Her scarf, a kelly-green chiffon, was slipping off the crown of her head. She reached to pull it back up. Then she stopped, noticing the wine-red juices running between her fingers, and not wishing to stain the lovely scarf... The scarf was slipping off... she knew deep in the place of yaqin that this was all right, a blessing on her shoulders... The sun on her head was a gift from God. Gratitude filled her... Her self, developing (309).

She tries to find peace with herself and have a better understanding of her religion. The passage demonstrates that Khadra is no longer influenced by others' beliefs and opinion of her, and decides to find her connection with God and religion on her own.

It was all part of some previous life lived by some other Khadra. Khadra who accepted things she didn't really want, who didn't really know what she wanted and took whatever foisted on her without examining it [...] She loathed that girl, that Khadra. Despised her. Blamed her for it all [...] Wanted her dead. Wanted to be dead and gone. (263-4)

She is no longer in that huge gulf between the two worlds that are in conflict with each other, the strict Muslim world and the secular world. She wants to escape from these labels (halal/haram) which seem radical and limiting to her, and the way of doing it is supposedly putting her freedom of choice into practice, without worrying about external regulations. This newly adopted attitude makes her believe she is going through a unique path that does not restrict her neither within the Arab culture nor within the American one. She remains in that in-between space where moderate Islam exists and where she is more at peace with herself.

After her return from Syria, Khadra is able to cope with the different and often contradictory facets of life. She decides to carry on her devotion to photography and moves to Philadelphia to fulfill her dream. The narrator describes her new experience:

The covered and the uncovered, each mode of being had its moment. She embraced both. Going out without hijab meant she would have to manifest the quality of modesty in her behavior, she realized one day, with a jolt. It's in how I act, how I move, what I choose, every minute. She had to do it on her own, now, without the jump-start that a jilbab [long garb] offered. This was a rigorous challenge. Some days she just wanted her old friend hijab standing sentry by her side (312).

Khadra can no more stick to veil and bear the consequences of wearing it in the U.S. because it has caused her a lot of trouble and misunderstandings. She cannot take further marginalization due to the veil. She would rather shed it and be more accepted by the mainstream society. Perhaps if the dominant culture had not put the veil under a microscopic lens and placed too much pressure on it and veiled women as well, it would not have been an important issue and Khadra may have continued to wear it. If the West had not manipulated it and made it synonymous to "oppression," the Muslim woman would not have to prove she is not subjugated and would have been accepted as a 'woman'.

Through her decision not to veil, Khadra is taking some relief of being constantly judged by a piece of cloth. By shedding the veil, she is more likely to be seen as more American and less Muslim in her own eyes and in the eyes of others. Although the veil constituted an important element of her identity, the meanings it took did not reflect her real person. Khadra's dilemma with the veil is best understood through Abdurraqib's statement about women's narratives that focus on religion, that:

Islam becomes the religion of the 'other' and the culture from which women need to be liberated. In these narratives, women are held accountable for both religious and cultural traditions of the old country [...]But when

Islam is conflated with cultural practices and is seen as oppressive, the female protagonists must consider compromising both religion and culture to incorporate themselves into American society (56).

Under such pressure, they are forced to take a stance with regards to the kind of identity they wish to display and more importantly bear the consequences of their decision. Khadra also tries “Islamic dating” with Chrif, her new Arab-American friend, who considers her as being backward because of her unwillingness to have a sexual relationship with him out of wedlock. She retains her attitude toward sex. She enjoys sexual intercourse and claims that only marriage would allow her to satisfy her sexual desires “honorably”. Instead of following her desires, she challenges him and puts an end to their relationship. Despite her great confusion toward her own religion, she knows where the limits stand. Khadra proudly tells Chrif, “I certainly don’t want to sleep alone forever. I would like to get married one day and have sex again. Good sex. Great sex” (360). Kahf uses Chrif as an example of the many people’s perception of the Muslim woman who think that making her body available to others outside a marriage relationship will free her from religious restrictions because chastity is not necessarily a virtue in the eyes of many. In this context, Chrif tells her:

Alls I know [...] is that you want to pretend you’re some kind of liberated woman on one level, but on another level you’re just your typical backward Muslim girl with the old country still in her head [...] You’d rather sleep alone in a cold bed forever than take a lover? Just because some old men back in history made up a rule that you have to be married to have sex? (359).

In this discussion, Kahf clearly describes to her readers and Khadra how Western forces and voices can come from within the Muslim/ Arab-American community itself and not necessarily from the outside. Chrif’s words echoes the negative connotations frequently attached to Muslim women by the Western discourse where the Muslim woman is read as backward, sexually suppressed, and victimized. As discussed in the previous chapter, many transnational feminists have criticized Western feminists’ discourse that tend to include all

women of the Third World into a homogeneous group that share same interests regardless of class, religious, or cultural differences. Chandra Mohanty Talpade believes that the image of an “average Third World woman” is the product of this process of homogenization of these women’s oppression. She asserts that this average Third World woman is read as “sexually constrained, and her being ‘Third World’ is read as “ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, domestic, family-oriented, victimized [...] this is [...]. In contrast to the implicit self-representation of Western women as educated, as modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the freedom to make their own decisions” (22). Khaf is resisting this reductive image of the Arab Muslim woman through her representation of empowered and emancipated Muslim or Arab-American women, like Khadra, who voice their concerns, decide the kind of life they want to lead and cannot be forced into submission. Khadra shares these feminist ideas when she is depicted in the novel holding the book of Gayatri Spivak’s *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (351). Khadra develops her own character, decides not to surrender to anyone any more, and chooses to become a cultural activist who understands the connection between power, oppression, and the production of knowledge.

Khadra refuses to conform to the popular stereotypes imposed on Arabs and Muslims by the West and does not accept to contribute to the worldwide misrepresentations on them. She chooses instead to renegotiate her identity as an active and independent Muslim American professional. While Khadra works for a magazine, *Alternative Americas*, she is assigned to feature Indianapolis Muslims as part of the magazine’s coverage of minority religious communities in Middle America. Her boss is very pleased to learn that Khadra has actually grown up in this community and that she has strong connections to each member. He tells her “Behind the veil! Wow! A keyhole view of the hidden, inside world of Muslims” (48). Khadra is uncomfortable with this assignment of putting her own community in the spotlight. The narrator shares with the readers the mixed feelings of Khadra about such a task:

She doesn't think she herself can take one more of those shots of masses of Muslim butts up in the air during prayer or the clichéd Muslim woman looking inscrutable and oppressed in a voluminous veil (48).

This is one of the important issues Khadra fights for because she does not want to engage in that continuous process of reproduction of the negative images of Muslims. After long reflection, she decides to accept the difficult task of covering a panel on "Zionist Agendas and the Islamic Movement in Palestine" and media influence(406). She focuses her camera on the speaker but hesitates about whether she should display these pictures of angry Muslim men. She thinks "Everyone already knows this face of Muslims. That's all they know" and when she talks about it with her editor, Ernesto, he tells her she should have a record of this because "it is part of the picture" (407). She is deeply disturbed by this in-between space where she has been put against her will and is forced to pick a side and make a decision; she remembers when her friend Seemi once told her that she cannot be both religious and an innovative person. Seemi tells her when they argued on Salman Rushdie's book "You either come out and support him or you're one of them. There's no room for any other position" (333). There she comes in the crossroads and needs to choose one side so she decides to defend her community by claiming that "So many religious Muslims are not like this but full of genuine humility and gentleness," and after careful thought, decides she will not include the photo of the shouting angry Muslim. The narrator states "Enough already. Space is limited and there are things to be said" (407). Khadra, as a cultural activist, realizes the importance of her role in the magazine and the responsibility toward her community. She believes her job is not to help in the spread of further misrepresentations and perpetuation of oppressive and distorted images of Muslims but to try to present a different and a positive picture, one that truly speaks for them and clarifies their situation.

Khadra faces many challenges in her work and is determined not to be forced in doing what she does not believe in. on another occasion, she argues with her editor about presenting

an exposé on how many Muslims practice polygamy in America and refuses to do it. She tells him “It’s what the mainstream media always does: Pick the most sensational thing and highlight the negative ... See, the wives thing is just not the core story here. Don’t trip on it” (435). It may seem at the first glance like she is being subjective and is unwilling to report the truth without censoring it when it comes to her Muslim community. On the one hand, she defends her community and argues with her editor about what she should and shouldn’t include about them, on the other hand, she argues with her Muslim fellows and gives them different perspectives about how Islam is a lot more sophisticated than the little details they dwell on. For instance, Khadra tells Eyad that she will include a certain item about Muslims in her article against his wish because she believes it is an important part of the story. She asserts that “Because it takes both sides to make a whole picture- the dark and the bright” (435). In her negotiations, she renegotiates her own identity as Muslim and American simultaneously, and her position on many issues and in the third space. She tries to find a place in that in-between space where she struggles to bridge the gap between the supposedly polarized binaries within herself as a hybrid Muslim Arab American. HomiBhabha’s notion of hybridized subjectivity in the third space helps to explain how individuals negotiate the contradictory demands of their lives. He asserts that hybridized individuals are caught in the third space of translation and negotiations, which erase any claims for inherent cultural purity; they inhabit the rim of an “in-between reality” marked by shifting psychic, cultural, and territorial boundaries (*Location of Culture*: 38). Equipped with what Edward Said called “contrapuntal” vision, the protagonist looks at the issue from different and multiple perspectives, as an American, an Arab, a Muslim, a woman, and a hyphenated identity that lives in a border zone, in the space “in-between” – a space that refuses closures<sup>97</sup>. Khadra is depicted as “standing between the door and the mirror,” a door that opens to both cultures and

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<sup>97</sup> Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993): 59-60.

a mirror that reflects her own fragmented yet hybrid self<sup>98</sup>. She explains to Eyad who insists that she censors the article she is writing on Muslims in America where she stands on the issue of representation of Islam and Muslims, she argues:

Despite all that [...] Yeah, even in spite of the Islamophobes and the ignorance out there. I'm counting on the intelligence of the readers [...] I am well aware of that. You don't have to tell me how harsh scrutiny is that the Muslim community is under. I know all that. We still need to face our darkness too. Negatives and positives. No, for our own sake, not to pander on *them*. For the sake of '*studying what our own souls put forth*' (436).

Not only does Khadra renegotiate her identity as a professional and cultural activist, but she also negotiates her hybrid identity. Khadra's hybridity constitutes a mixture of an Islamness, an Arabness, and an Americanness that reflect multiple allegiances to nations and cultures that are in conflict with one another as she tries to reconcile between the multiple selves within herself. Kahf offers a notion of Arab Muslim women's differences not as static and definitive, but, rather, as an opportunity for dialogue and conversation. Khadra, instead of merely asserting one identity, suggests a hybrid one that opposes dualistic Western thinking with "divergent thinking, characterized by moving away from set patterns and goals toward [...] perspective [...] that includes rather than excludes" (Anzaldua: 1990, 379).<sup>99</sup> Khadra, as a hybrid, enjoys the privilege of being inside and outside both cultures at the same time. She is, for the first time, aware of her person, instead of just being an Arab, an American or a Muslim. She confesses to Hakim when he tells her that he had always thought she had two

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<sup>98</sup> Mohja Kahf, "My Grandmother Washes Her Feet in The Sink of the Bathroom at Sears" in *E-mails from Scheherazad*, 2003: 26-28

<sup>99</sup> In the late 1980s, Gloria Anzaldua articulates "La Consciencia de la Mestiza." The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance of contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, operates in a pluralistic mode – nothing is thrust out, the good, the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned.

sides: “I guess what I’ve been doing is trying to get to a place where I could reconcile the two, and be a whole person.” (395)

In this sense, Kahf unfolds the politics of hybrid identities and makes clear that the Arab-American identity is not static but is in a constant development and negotiation. She confirms Stuart Hall’s views on diasporic identities as a production that is always in process and is never stable (223). Khadra has long struggled with her distorted identity; she has tried so hard to find peace between her conflicting selves. At the beginning of the journey, she thought that becoming an American citizen would be read as a betrayal to her Arab identity and would force her to become someone she is not. Eventually, the granting of the American citizenship enabled her to deal with her new identity. The narrator reveals the conflicted emotions Khadra feels toward getting citizenship:

To her, taking citizenship felt like giving up, giving in. after all she’d been through at school, defending her identity against the jeering kinds who vaunted America’s superiority as the clincher put-down to everything she said, everything she was. Wasn’t she supposed to be an Islamic warrior woman, a Nusayba, a Sumaya, an Um Salamah in exile, by the waters dark, of Babylon? (141).

Kahf exposes her to multiple images of empowerment and oppression of Muslim women in America to help her consider her options and define her commitments and the identity she wishes to display. These images of empowered Muslim women occupy Khadra’s mind; she looks up to these female figures and “warriors” and thinks if she becomes American, she can no longer follow in their steps. At this stage of her life, she is not mature enough to choose her role in society or explore her options to make an informed decision about the type of identity she wishes to take on and defend. Khadra initially equates Islam with foreignness; she strives to harmonize her American part of identity with her Arab identity. The narrative attempts to build a bridge of peace between Islam and Americanness, challenging perceptions of their incompatibility and contradictoriness.



Khadra has gone through different struggles and sufferings from the beginning of the narrative in order to understand what it means to be an Arab, an American, a Muslim and a woman simultaneously. Furthermore, she has tried hard to find connections between these multiple identities and their handling of the Muslim veil. After she has been exposed to diverse Muslim communities in the Middle East and in America, and short stays in Saudi Arabia and Syria in search of an autonomous identity, she learns that she can have different options to define herself and the many paths to take as a Muslim American. In Syria, Khadra stands at the crossroad between religion and culture where she decides that she is not obliged to compromise neither her religion nor her culture. When she takes off the scarf, she relinquishes the old, intolerant, black-and-white Khadra. By putting on a tangerine scarf, she is holding on her new, progressive, indulgent self. She also chooses the same bright, grabbling colors of her grandmother's scarves, showing she is proud enough to be fully identified as a Muslim Arab-American and strong enough to challenge the West's misconceived ideas about veiled women.

As soon as she returns to the U.S., she finally realizes and admits she is American and exclaims for the first time "Homeland America" (313). This assertion shows that Khadra has walked away from her roots to such an extent that people look at her as if she were a stranger and she herself feels as a foreigner in her own homeland. This sense of not belonging to the homeland is common to diasporic subjects who realize that the land they imagine can never be accurate and that it does not quite resemble the homeland they have imagined<sup>100</sup>. This feeling derives from the fact that even though she knows how she is supposed to behave, the years living in contact with another culture made her a different person who is unable to pretend to be someone she is not.

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<sup>100</sup> Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homeland," in Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism* (London: Granta/Penguin, 1991): 10

In the same way, Hall talks about the difficulty “many returnees find reconnecting with the societies of their birth” (“Thinking the Diaspora”: 3) For him, these returnees have different reasons not to feel comfortable in their homelands:

Many miss the cosmopolitan rhythms of life to which they have become acclimatized. Many feel that ‘home’ have changed beyond all recognition. In turn, they are seen as having had the natural and spontaneous chains of connection disturbed by their diasporic experiences. They are happy to be home. But history has somehow irrevocably intervened (3)

The narrator describes such a feeling about being home and Khadra’s harmony with her new American identity:

And here she is. Eighteen years distant from that ten-year-old girl terrorized by neighborhood boys shouting ‘Foreigners go home!’ and the girl bewildered by her mother’s sobs of ‘We are not American!’ as she scrubbed her clean of American dirt, eleven years away from the girl who cried into her pillow at the defeat the day the U.S. citizenship papers came, caught between homesick parents and a land that didn’t want her. Not just didn’t want her, but actively hated her, spit her out, made her defiant in her difference, yet at the same time made her unfit to live anywhere else. Going overseas was what enabled her to see that she was irrevocably American, in some way she couldn’t pin down (390-1).

Khadra’s journey ends with a momentary reconciliation of her diverse identities, as an Arab, an American and a Muslim. She has not covered ground on her journey yet but she is close to accomplish her goal. Her ambivalence towards the veil does not seem to come to a total end. Khadra’s travels and many experiences revolving around the veil and the practice of search for a different Islam end in her redefinition of her relationship with religion and the Muslim veil, and the decision to take off the veil. She continues to practice Islam and show modesty through her conduct rather than the practice of veiling. Leila Ahmed explains that:

The veil came to symbolize in the resistance narrative, not the inferiority of the culture and the need to cast aside its customs in favor of those of the West, but, on the contrary,

the dignity and validity of all native customs, and in particular those customs coming under fiercest colonial attack – the customs relating to women – and the need to tenaciously affirm them as a means of resistance to Western domination (164).

In Kahf's resistance narrative, Khadra's decision to shed off the veil does not mean that she feels ashamed of it nor does she remove it to be a Western fashion addict but decides to put it on from time to time. She does not believe that the veil is a sign of the backwardness of her native culture, on the contrary, she wears it to show pride in her culture and its customs and her strong connection to this rich heritage and Islamic civilization. The misinterpretation of the veil and different stereotypes imposed on Arabs and Muslims by the Western discourse strengthens her ties with the veil and her cultural origins. In resistance to the West's attacks on the veiled Muslim woman, Khadra refuses to completely remove it and decides to put it on to show her pride to her Muslim and Arab identity. In the following passage, the narrator describes the newly transformed Khadra and her way of dealing with the veil stating that:

People stare. She is still in hijab. She pulls the tangerine silk tighter around her head. The stares only make her want to pull it on tighter, not take it off the way Seemi keeps suggesting she do after every Middle Eastern crisis dredges up more American hate [...] It's my connector, Khadra had tried to explain to Seemi once about wearing the scarf through hard times. 'It makes me feel connected to the people in my family, my mosque, where I come from. My heritage [...] Don't be ridiculous, Seemi had said. Take the damn thing off; it's not worth risking your life for' (424).

Sometimes Khadra seems to have the desire to fit in but still wishes to assert her Muslim and Arab identity, and make it visible to the mainstream because she is not ashamed of her heritage or her cultural origins. But she may have chosen not to commit herself to the veil so as to avoid being labeled and misjudged by the dominant culture. Kahf seems to have exposed her protagonist to the experience of a fragmented life and a split identity in her call to immigrants, Arabs and Muslims in particular, to deal with this current situation that every

Arab or Muslim has encountered in America. Perhaps Khadra's decision to embrace this new identity regarding her affiliation with the Islamic religion and the practice of veiling in America can be interpreted in the light of Abdulhadi's words addressed to Arabs in America post 9/11. She sarcastically addresses Arabs telling them:

Avoid as much as you can Being You! Pass if you can!  
Melt in this melting pot! Do not cry multiculturalism and  
diversity! This is not the time [...] better save your life!  
Better yet: 'Go home,' foreigner! What if you have no  
home to go back to? What if this your home? Dual  
loyalty? Split personality? Divided? Not a real American?  
But who is? How many 'real' Americans are still left  
around? (73).

It took Khadra a long time to accept her hybrid identity and understand the complexity of her situation as an Arab and Muslim in America. She is, in other words, this inappropriate "other" or "same" who moves about with always at least two gestures: that of affirming "I am like you" while persisting in her difference and that of reminding "I am different" while unsettling every definition of otherness arrived at. (Minha, "Not you/ Like You," 418). I believe her choice at the end of the narrative is to pass as much as possible, and yet identify herself with her culture of origin and openly claim her strong connection to her Arab/Muslim origin whenever her original country was attacked.

Kahf expands the possibilities for Khadra's character. Her growth throughout the novel moves from being a Muslim child in America, just "surviving the minefield of each day" (126), to putting her camera into focus at the end of the novel and deciding that "there will be no postponing her task, and no crouching and stopping and restricting her movements for someone else's hung-ups" (440).

One of these "hung-ups," and I would argue, the major problematic that Kahf explores in *The Girl*, is the tension between those who see Islam as "rigid and homogeneous" and those who embrace its multiplicity. Throughout her childhood, Khadra learns that there are many

different kinds of people who can be Muslim. She meets black radicals, Cambodians, Kenyans, Kuwaitis, “pale white” men from Nebraska, Shi’a, Sunnis, members of the Nation of Islam, and many others (24-29). Her experience contradicts the beliefs of her parents, who “wanted Islam to be monolith” (344), and who did not believe that most of these groups were “real Muslim” (24). Part of Khadra’s development and eventual sense of empowerment comes from finally seeing that the “belief system of her parents and their entire circle ... was just one point on a whole spectrum of Islamic faith. It wasn’t identical to Islam itself, just one little corner of it” (232).

Khadra seems to have come to the recognition that she cannot always cry for diversity in the American mainstream and that sometimes it is just easier to “melt in this melting pot,” in other words through shedding the veil and “melting” she can pick her battles. This way she prevents misinformed individuals from victimizing her through her sweeping generalizations, stereotypes and discrimination. Having shed the veil, she now has control over which identity she wishes to display and the kind of dialogues she engages in with the mainstream. She can finally be herself without society’s constricted and narrow views that imprison the Arab/Muslim-American woman. Taking photos provides her with a kind of unparalleled peace, she is enjoying life, God, and that feel she is living on the margin anymore. “She knows she is where she belongs, doing what she must do, with intent, with abandon. And it is glorious, it is divine, and Khadra’s own work takes her there: into the state of pure surrender” (441).

However, it is important to emphasize that Khadra does not achieve a perfect balance between these two sides, since it is impossible for a diasporic subject whose condition is related to displacement and anguish to come to terms with his/her identity. Regarding the conflicts which are part of the process of hybridism, Hall states: “it is about a process of cultural translation, agonistic since it is never completed, but which remains in its indecisiveness” (Hall, “Da Diaspora”: 71). Therefore, when I mention the certain balance that

Khadra achieves, I do not refer to an absence of conflicts, but rather to the ability she has to deal with her sense of displacement so that it will not hinder her experiences neither in her homeland nor in the adopted country.

Khadra embraces a sense of “advanced hybridization” since she really embraces strong aspects of both the American and the Arab culture. Hall admits the existence of this “advanced hybridization” and highlights the fact that it seldom has a character of assimilation (“Conclusion: The Multi-Cultural”: 227), which can be understood as “one kind of ethnic change in which people become similar, and contrasted with differentiation in which groups stress their distinctiveness”(44). Therefore, as it happens to Khadra, experiencing an “advanced hybridization” does not mean that one is privileging one culture over another, but rather, it means that one is making negotiations between the two cultures.

Neil Macfarquhar notes that *The Girl* “turned Ms. Kahf into something of an idol among Muslim American women, especially young ones, struggling to reconcile their faith with a country often hostile toward it.” (New York Times, May 12, 2007: P.3) Macfarquhar continues, “Her audiences say Ms. Kahf embodies what they strive for, in that she is someone who both respects her own faith and yet uses the advantages offered by being an American, like free speech, to explore its every corner.”<sup>101</sup>

Kahf is not someone who focuses much on persecution, alienation, and the silences imposed by patriarchy. In both her creative writing and her scholarly work, Kahf has examined the limited number of available narratives and identified only “three main conventions through which an Arab woman is typically constructed: as a ‘victim of gender oppression [...] as an escape for her intrinsically oppressive culture ... [and] as the pawn of Arab male power’” (Kahf, qtd. in Amireh and Majaj 17). *The Girl* revises the construction of

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<sup>101</sup>MacFarquhar, Neil. “She Carries Weapons; They are Called Words,”*New York Times*. 12 May 2007, B9-B15.

Arab women's identity in American literature by refusing to operate within a system that strips them of any power. In the spirit of Gloria Anzaldúa's call to move from "victimhood" to "a more extensive level of agency", Kahf expands the possibilities for Khadra's character (2). In *The Girl*, the migratory subject enjoys the benefit of seeing the limitations of at least two disparate communities, but also bears the responsibility of fostering discourse and change in both places.

This kind of project is increasingly gaining foothold in diaspora studies and transnational feminist literature. As Sarah Husain, editor of the anthology, *Voices of Resistance* notes, "the struggle we face today is not just limited to those against colonial legacies and its inherited regimes of control... but also... the struggles we face within our own 'Muslim' communities, our families, our homes – indeed, the struggles within ourselves" (3). I would argue that all of Kahf's writing, whether creative or scholarly, operates within this critical framework.

## **Conclusion**

Following Scheherazade's tradition of storytelling, Khadra aspires not only to find herself, define herself, and name her own experiences, but also to reach out to others, building bridges between the American and Arab worlds. Like Scheherazade, who corrected the king's clouded judgment of all women; Khadra tells her stories seeking to subvert the dominant paradigm that sees Arab women as oppressed. Storytelling plays a key role in revolving the racial and religious conflicts by engaging both the self and the other. Khadra seeks to open doors to an understanding of her Muslim Arab women's differences and resists any distorted images of the Islamic veil.

For many Arab American women, the veil is the least of their worries. They not only have to resist the negative Western stereotypes but also have to fight Arab males who see religion through patriarchal eyes. Kahf's protagonist asserts her American identity while she persists in her Arab roots, and affirms her rights as a Muslim feminist who has to fight two fronts: Arab and American. She believes that Islam can be liberated from interpretations that keep women in an inferior position, arguing that religion actually teaches social equality that God has given all human beings. She rebels against imposing practices that view women as bodies – covered or uncovered and develops her own kind of Islamic feminism that advocates women's individual autonomy and the right to choose.

She further insists that the words "Arab," or "Muslim" and "feminist" are not incongruent. Indeed, although Muslim women may be oppressed, Western feminists and patriarchal societies call for their liberation from subjugation without having a deep and accurate understanding of Muslim societies and their culture. In a political environment of increasing hostility toward Islam, Kahf demonstrates that the face of Islam is not essential or monolithic, nor are Muslim women (veiled or not) mere passive victims of their religion and



culture. Kahf suggests that patriarchal values within nationalist and religious ideologies limit women's agency and oppresses women, not Islam per se.

In this brief examination, Mohja Kahf explores how exclusionary definitions of belonging in both the host and original community negatively impact diasporic consciousness. But Kahf also insists that the search for identity and community need not be limited to conventional approaches and boundaries.

# Chapter Four

Food is a key element to the construction of selfhood and is central to our sense of identity.

(Claude Fischler)

## **Introduction:**

Unlike the “*Mahjar*” writers, contemporary Arab American women writers attempt to celebrate their culture of origin and, at the same time, try to negate the mistaken homogeneity that is found in the way Arabs are perceived by Americans. One of the most praised authors of this new generation of Arab-American writers is Diana Abu-Jaber. Her novels represent the Arab-American experience from the point of view of someone who is deeply engaged in it and who fluctuates between both sides of the “cultural hyphen”. She presents themes that consciously reflect issues immigrant conditions and the struggle over one’s definition of the self. In her second novel entitled *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber raises serious questions about hyphenated identities, exile, longing for home, self-discovery, and cultural transmission. The narrative structure is based on the strong connection between food and nostalgia for the lost homeland. Besides that, food – the Middle Eastern food – appears as an important aspect of the Arab American identity.

In this sense, food constitutes a key element to the construction of Arab-American identity. Moreover, the representation of food in literature provides an interesting arena for examining identity, ethnicity, and cultural belonging. By using food as a literary device, Diana Abu-Jaber creates a favorable space to question identity issues and to explore the complexities of power relationships and the order of a given society.

The present chapter aims at exploring the representation of food in Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent* as being of great importance for the individual’s sense of self and identity; she further explores the important link between food and identity in which the preparation of Arab dishes provides the protagonist, Sirine, with the basic ingredients for the negotiation of her mixed race Arab-American identity.

#### **IV.1. Contemporary Arab American Food literature**

The landscape of Arab American literature in the past and present continues to flourish with food metaphors, colorful descriptions of old world dishes and even cooking tips. Several anthologies and edited volumes have included food in their titles<sup>102</sup> using it as a powerful metaphor in discussing issues related to the old homesuch as displacement, alienation and identity conflicts.

Contemporary food literature is primarily composed of fiction and poetry. The narratives are therefore constructed rather than revived.<sup>103</sup> In general, contemporary food literature tends to delve into the critical moment of encounter between Arab and American, and the fragmentation and re-assertion of cultural identities. In this sense, food literature aims to represent the self; through their creative expressions, these authors seek to tell a true story of Arab American experience and identity. They, too break silence into a space that is crowded with negative and frozen images of Arabs.

In this act of self-representation, food stands for Arab American identity itself and mark characters as Arab in both public and private spaces; furthermore, it represents an Arab American resistance to majority American culture. In this, the authors resist a static American identity, and a fast-food individualistic lifestyle. Seemingly, food stands out in much of Arab American literature as a symbol of Arab identity. However, the foods employed as identity symbols are often Middle Eastern foods, even when the authors intend to indicate an inclusive cultural, rather than national heritage.

The authors relying on food in their writings celebrate difference, proudly displaying Arab identity as strong, rich and deeply rooted in history. However, in the midst of praise,

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<sup>102</sup>Diana Abu-Jaber's food memoir, entitled *The Language of Baklava* (2005) and Pauline Kaldas's *Letter from Cairo* (2007) are two examples of recent works that weave together narratives and recipes.

<sup>103</sup>Although Abu-Jaber's cookbook-memoir is the only specifically autobiographical work, several poems may be grounded in personal experiences and circumstances.

sadness plays still affects the characters and the narratives. This sadness reflects the tragedies of Arab history – consequences of a long history of colonial occupation – as well as those of Arabs in America. Through the use of food metaphor, the poems and short stories with this theme aim to define what it means to be an “Arab” to the American public and reject stereotypical representations; however, the very need to identify one’s self as an Arab only exists outside of the Arab world, in a place where people do not really know what Arabs look like. They use food to claim their identity and belonging.<sup>104</sup>

In his seminal essay, “Food, Self and Identity: You are what you eat,” Claude Fischler irrevocably contends that food constitutes the self.<sup>105</sup> He claims that food is a key element to the construction of the self and “is central to our sense of identity” (275). He states that

[t]he way any given human group eats helps it assert its diversity, hierarchy and organization, and at the same time, both its oneness and otherness of whoever eats differently. Food is also central to individual identity, in that any given human individual is constructed, biologically, psychologically and socially by the food he/she chooses to incorporate. (275)<sup>106</sup>

In addition to marking Arab and Arab American identities, food literature explores the shape of Arab American lives. Despite the problems faced by Arabs in the United States as discrimination, Arab Americans struggle to resist such injustice and opt for living their lives as full American citizens. Food arises once more in the narratives resisting a dominant monolithic white North American culture.<sup>107</sup> Hence, in many Arab American works, food provides a way of accepting change, cultural clash, and the stress of difference. As the

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<sup>104</sup>See SuheirHammad’s “Bag of Zaatar,” *Zaatar Diva* (2005), Lisa SuhairMajaj’s poem “Claim,” *Food for our Grandmothers* and Mohja Kahf’s “The Spiced Chicken Queen of Mickaweaquah, Iowa,” *Dinarzad’s Children*.

<sup>105</sup>Fred L. Gardaphé&WenyngXu, “Introduction: Food in Multiethnic Literature”, in *MELUS*. 32.4 (2007). 5-10. P: 7.

<sup>106</sup>Claude Fischler, “Food, Self and Identity,” in *Social Science Information*. 27.2 (1988): 275-292.

<sup>107</sup>These writings resist a culture of diets and fast food, anonymous neighbours and casual Zionism. For more details see: Diana Abu-Jaber’s *The Language of Baklava* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2005), SuheirHammad’s “mama sweet baklava,” *Food for our Grandmothers*, and Naomi Shihab Nye’s “Red Brocade,” *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (New York: Greenwillow–Harper Tempest, 2005)

immigrant characters of these narratives face a kind of cultural shock, foods from the old home provide them with familiarity and continuity. In fact, this phenomenon mirrors the real food behaviors of many immigrant groups, who form separate “eating enclaves.”<sup>108</sup> Donna Gabaccia describes this pattern : “New Americans faced many changes over which they had relatively little control—where they would live , what kind of work they would do, which language they would be required to learn to speak. At least they could exercise control over their meals.”<sup>109</sup> Thus, in both actual and imagined families, food is a source of comfort in a different and foreign land. Accordingly, food becomes a means of retaining part of the Arab heritage in America.

In writing about the reconstruction of the old home in the new one, Diana Abu-Jaber is often adept at using kitchens as a place to reinforce, shape, or change identities. Both of her parents cook to remember when they are away from their native-born lands. In Jordan, her mother makes pancakes with a yearning heart. Abu-Jaber watches her mother struggle with the ingredients and utensils at her disposition; the desire to taste home grips her. She writes: “I feel at this moment we all want pancakes more passionately than we’ve ever wanted anything.”<sup>110</sup>

Food bridges the gap between the different identities and adds structure to the narrative. Diana Abu-Jaber states that:

“eating is one of the things that crystallizes your experiences and the metaphor of food is a way to translate the cultural experiences. Thus the treatment of food in *Crescent* becomes a ‘safe’ way for white American readers to listen to dangerous topics like war, Iraq, the Middle East” (PSU Talk, 21 October 2006).

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<sup>108</sup> Donna R. Gabaccia, *We are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 35.

<sup>109</sup> Gabaccia 48.

<sup>110</sup> Abu-Jaber 36.

Hence, it seems clear that Abu-Jaber aims to humanize Arabs for U.S. readers especially after the traumatic events on the Twin Towers; she wants ‘to put a human face on people who are culturally erased.’<sup>111</sup> The novel draws the reader’s attention to the fact that Arabs and Arab Americans have been unfairly demonized and stereotyped. Stereotyping has long been manipulated by mainstream cultures to maintain authority over other minority groups. According to Bhabha, “the stereotype constructs the group or the individual as the Other [...] the stereotype is an ideological operation that aims to maintain authority and superiority over the oppressed groups and individuals” (*Location*: 66). In this way, *Crescent* seeks to reintegrate Arab American communities with mainstream US community. Throughout the novel, Diana Abu-Jaber focuses on two main elements of cultural difference – namely Arabic food and language. Although the relationship between Sirine and Arab culture is ambivalent, both Levantine food and Arabic language play an important role in introducing Arabs as human beings as a way of challenging the stereotyping image that label Arabs.

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<sup>111</sup>Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom, ‘Counter Narratives: Cooking up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Shihab Nye’s Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*’, *MELUS*, 32 (2007), 33-46. P.39.

#### **IV.2. Memory and Identity Construction in *Crescent*:**

In *Crescent*, Abu-Jaber beautifully represents a relationship between two distinct worlds, the Arab world and the American world. The fusion of both worlds is depicted through relationships between Sirine and Arabs in the café. Although this relation is irregular, it clearly indicates that Sirine attempts to build a bridge between her origin or her Arab identity, and her American life and experience.

Sirine's memories of her childhood have a strong influence over her life since they arise mostly when she is working in the café, especially in the back kitchen, cooking Arab dishes, and also through her contact with Hanif. The latter carries the pain of the exile and the loss of his home as well as of his identity, culture, and religion. As Edward Said has noted "Crippling sorrow, anguish, suffering, and muteness" are some of the terms associated with the exilic condition (*Reflections* 173). He even goes on to state that it is "like death but without death's ultimate mercy" (174). In fact, he tries hard to forget his past when he was compelled to run away from Iraq during the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and suffers because of the impossibility of ever returning to his homeland. For Han, home appears as something lost; it becomes, using Avtar Brah's words, a "mythic place and a place of no return" (192).

In an interview with Andrea Shalal-Esa, when asked about the character Han, Abu-Jaber explained that Han's character is part of one of her "literary obsessions," which questions the painful experience of being in an immigrant condition. The painful experience she mentions is related to the very moment that a person leaves his or her country and is unsure about the future; Abu-Jaber concludes that it appears as an "incredible experience and journey [. . .] and for a lot of people it can be a real process of loss" (5).



Han is often secretive and resists remembering his traumatic past experiences. His images of Iraq are randomly scattered in the past as he is haunted by the experience of having been forced to leave his country as an exile. As many exiles, Han's experience is a personal one presented through the medium of fiction. Gradually, the professor reveals to Sirine his past, as the following passage demonstrates:

I was thinking of myself when I was ten years old [...] My mother's side of the family are in Nasra – in southern Iraq. My father's sister Dalal lives in the north. I have some other relatives who're scattered around the Middle East and Central America since the Gulf war [ . . . ] I escaped to England not long after Saddam Hussein came to power [ . . . ] Basically I had a scholarship and no easy way to get to England. (132-133)

After sharing his painful situation with Sirine, Han confesses that there is absolutely no possibility of returning to Iraq because "Saddam's idea of mercy was of allowing them to apologize for escaping before having them executed" (120). Han's experience corresponds to what Paul Connerton said in his book *Social Memory* "our experience of present very largely depends upon our knowledge of the past" (2). His memories and the feeling of loss, as the quotation points out, determine the way he acts, allowing his past to shape his present in order to be able to survive in a strange environment. In a certain way, his memories are strongly connected to the political events in Iraq; he tries to forget about his escape from Iraq, in 1980, when Saddam Hussein had declared war on Iran. This fact took place in an unstable political situation because the new party – the Ba'athist Party – was trying to control all aspects of their lives – from media to the arts to the schools – and Han's father was afraid of what could happen to him.

His experience as a refugee shaped his new way of living from the first moment he enrolled at a private school in Cairo, where he learned the history of the West – American

and British. He describes this process of assimilation he went through as something he could not avoid:

“My school was filled with children from wealthy families. I never felt I had a choice in the matter,” [...] it started everything for me. It wasn’t so much like or not like. It was more a sort of force of nature. Big and inevitable. The school had British and American faculty, classes were conducted in English, and history classes were the history of the west, literature was the literature of America and Britain. I didn’t question any of it” (259).

For Han, the past seems clearer now that it is examined from a distant point in the present. His flashbacks as well as his contact with Sirine take him twenty years back and this lapse in time allows him to understand his past, although it is put together by little fragments.

In this context of personal instability, *Crescent* goes beyond a love story to show how different experiences of Arabs in the West are affected by a similar nostalgia for the lost homeland and the difficulty in belonging to the new environment, as illustrated in Han’s condition. In fact, Han’s displacement and loss of home arises Sirine’s sense of home that seems very difficult and painful for her to remember or to define her own identity as the following passage demonstrates when Han asked her what home means to her, she replies: “Work. Work is home.” “How American of you,” he says, smiling. And is work family as well? She looks at him a second. “It might be” (132). Sirine believes that work is home because her work as a cook in Nadia’s café is the sole link she has to her cultural heritage which is conflicting and uncertain for her yet. Sirine, like Han, feels exile but for a different reason. Every time she listens to his stories of lost home and family, “that somehow corresponds to a sensitive and silent element inside herself. She has a moment like a flash of recognition that flares in her” (188). Thus, everything that Han has gone through his loss of sense of home relates to a memory of loss buried inside Sirine that was too painful to remember.

Another character who helps Sirine in uncovering her lost part is Nathan, an American photographer. Nathan's memories are anchored back in Iraq where he meets Han's sister and falls in love with her. Despite being American, Nathan is more committed to the East than the West. Because of this, he is fully aware of the political unrest of that region; he knows the geographies of the places he has been to, besides knowing the names of the Arab poets and their poetry by heart. Through the character of Nathan, Abu-Jaber challenges the negative and stereotypical image of Arabs and presents a more positive and humane picture of them. All what Nathan saw in Iraq were ordinary people who were very generous to him. He tells Sirine that he decided to go to the Middle East to find terrorist spies but he carries on saying "I ended up taking pictures of a really beautiful world. A very, very lovely and complete place [...] I never found my terrorist, though, unless" – he hitches one eyebrow, lowers his voice ominously – "it was me" (284). Abu-Jaber challenges the neo-orientalist<sup>112</sup> discourse that dominates the representational space of Arab Americans after the attacks of 9/11. Besides, the photographer loves photographing people – mainly Sirine and Han – in their intimate moments.

Nathan divulges his past in the back kitchen of Nadia's café while watching Sirine stuffing some grape leaves. The food and the privacy in the kitchen awaken his memories and make him remember the one he loved and lost. He confesses that he "had always thought love made you feel light, but this was exactly the opposite. It was the heaviest thing" (87). He felt so complete as if he had found the reason for his existence, his "true north", and his identity.

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<sup>112</sup>As a discourse, Neo-Orientalism is a redressing of the orientalist practices Said described in his critique, *Orientalism*, within current frameworks and agendas. Although in an updated form, neo-orientalism continues to "otherize" the "East" as the necessary antithesis of the "West," thus robbing it of independent identity and voice. As with orientalism, through rigid binaries, the "other" is locked into a dependent definitional category such that if the West is masculine, modern and secular, then the East must be feminine, primitive and religious. Neo-Orientalism, however, adds a democracy theory into as a justification for wars in Arab and Muslim countries. For more details see, see Elmaz Abinader, "Children of Al-Mahjar: Arab American Literature Spans a Century," *U.S. Society and Values* 5.1 (2000), 1 November 2007 <<http://www.usinfo.state.gov/journals/itsv/0200/ijse/toc.htm>>; Evelyn Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States*, ed. Alpana Sharma Knippling (Westport: Greenwood Books, 1996).

He says that in that region he learned about family relationships, something he missed because his parents divorced when he was a child:

I went into the Middle East without any idea of who I was –there was no needle on my compass, you know? But the people in Iraq – this sounds dumb and romantic – but the thing is, they really seemed to know who they were. They dressed the way their grandparents dressed, they ate the way they've eaten for hundreds of years. And they were so alive – I mean, lots of them didn't have TV or telephones, but everyone talked about politics, art, religion, you name it. They were living under dictatorship but their inner selves stayed *alive* – do you see? (87, author's emphasis)

The photographer continues telling Sirine about Leila, and, according to him, she “was like *a true north*” (88, author's emphasis). But, suddenly he resorts to the complicated political situation involving Iraq and the U.S.:

Nathan lowers his face and replaces his glasses, hooking them around his ears. ‘Oh. Well. There're always complications, aren't there? An Arab girl, a Muslim, an Iraqi. And an American, failed-Episcopalian boy.’

[Sirine] begins trimming another grape leaf. ‘That doesn't have to mean anything.’

[Nathan replies]: ‘maybe it doesn't. I don't know. But for us [. . .]it made everything so difficult – to be altogether.’ (88)

His experiences in that country somehow shaped his life back in the U.S. as he witnessed a close relationship among those people who, even living under a dictatorial regime, seemed to have hope for a better life. His revelations lead Sirine to realize the painfulness of the photographer's memories, and she “wishes she knew how to say something wise or consoling to him, something that wouldn't sound frightened or awkward” (88). In a certain way, Nathan's memories have a strong impact over Sirine's life as she makes associations with her own experience of the loss of her parents, a situation when there was no wise or consoling thing to say, just let time heal.

Her presence in the kitchen even stimulates other students to confess their solitude and turmoil of being “invisible” in the American culture as once one of them revealed to her:

How painful it is to be an immigrant – even if it was what he’d wanted all his life – sometimes especially if it was what he’d wanted all his life. Americans, he would tell her, don’t have the time or the space in their lives for the sort of friendship – days of coffee-drinking and talking – that the Arab students craved. For many of them the café was a little flavor of home. (22)

The food served at the café enables them to question their inner selves and momentarily lessens the painful experience of missing one’s homeland. In this context, Sirine’s presence in the kitchen and her food help the customers to reveal their past. Through her character, Abu-Jaber contradicts the Eurocentric image of the Arab silent woman whose place is restricted to the kitchen, who can only cook and listens silently to Arab men while discussing Middle Eastern politics. Rather, food works as a contact language – an effective medium to translate experience and create a meaningful world. It helps individuals around her connect and communicate.

Each of these characters deals differently with their memories. Throughout the story, Nadia’s Café appears as a meaningful space since it is filled with the smell of the food cooked by Sirine, which is able to “cheer the Arab students up” (17); in addition, her act of preparing the food – especially baklava – is also a strong connector to the “old world” since it reminds Han of his family and his life back in Iraq, and Sirine of her parents. Besides that, her food works as a bridge drawing closer the regular customers while they enjoy the afternoon conversations in the café.

In this way, the counter, the back kitchen and the other rooms in the café take on the role of a place of recalling past experiences. As memory is a reconstruction of the past based on experiences of the present and is borne by living societies founded in its name, it remains

in permanent evolution, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived.<sup>113</sup> Curiously, food serves at the café feeds the characters involved in the story and “feeds” and revives past memories as well. Consequently, it also becomes a fragment of the old home. I agree with Halbwachs’s understanding of memory as being socially constructed through people’s membership in the various groups-families, religious, or other communities (Halbwachs, 1950). Thus, it is the “collective memories,” as proposed by Halbwachs, that create and reinforce identity. Han’s and Nathan’s memories about Iraq arise in Sirine a strong desire of knowing more about her heritage, her home country and revive her buried memories about her parents.

Described as “Aladdin’s Hidden Treasure”, Nadia’s café is “a little flavor of home” (22). It is a special place, mainly for the Arab immigrants who go to the U.S. searching for opportunities – be it professional or personal. As described,

The café is like other places – crowded at meals and quiet in between – but somehow there is also usually a lingering conversation, currents of Arabic that ebb about Sirine, fill her head with mellifluous voices. Always there are the same groups of students from the big university up the street, always so lonely, the sadness like blue hollows in their throats, blue notes for their wives and children back home, or for the American women they haven’t met [...] There is a group of regulars who each have their favorite shows and dishes and who sit at the same tables as consistently as if they were assigned [. . .] There are students who come religiously, appearing at the counter with their newspapers almost every day for years, until the day they graduate and disappear, never to be seen again. And then there are students who never graduate. (19-22)

In *Crescent*, the café becomes a gathering place, as Fadda-Conrey points, Arab students, teachers, exiles, and immigrants gather at the café, which becomes for them the symbol of a recreated home in the midst of a foreign and alienating culture. In fact, the café also becomes

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<sup>113</sup> Dan Ben-Amos & Liliana Weissberg, *Cultural Memory and Construction of Identity*, (Wayne State University Press: 1999): 100.

the core of *Crescent's* ethnic borderland, serving as the central locus of interethnic and intercultural interactions between Arabs, Arab Americans, Latinos, and white Americans, among others (194). For the Arab students, Nadia's Café works as the representation of home, and, consequently, of memory. It is the place where the collective forms and also fosters bonds among the regular customers through the very act of eating and participating in that ritual. Thus, the food cooked by Sirine seems to have the effect of reminding the café's regular customers of their homelands.

Abu-Jaber also observes that the cafés have the power of creating "their own cultural environment, their own micro cultures" (Shalal-Esa 5). As Um-Nadia states "I look and then I look again. I see Arab men come here from away all the time. They all come to me because we make something like a home in this country. It helps. And most of them stay" (94). Indeed, the café is attended by male customers, and, interestingly, they are the ones who seem to have a strong desire for forming bonds as a way of appeasing the feeling of alienation they have toward the American society. In this sense, it reinforces the idea presented in Wathington's study, which clearly remarks that, Arab American writers who use food as an ethnic connector, "food is a means and expression of staying Arab in America" since it works as "the reconstruction of the old home in the new world" (72).

Abu-Jaber clearly portrays this idea and deals with the café as a strong metaphor of connection to the lost past; the space of the café awakens flashbacks from their homelands and comforts the characters. Thus, food and the act of remembering a lost country in the café work as a sort of relief in a strange and foreign language; and it is in this sphere of culture that Sirine quests her identity.

It is in the café that Arab immigrants "spend their time arguing and being lonely, drinking tea and trying to talk to Um-Nadia, Mireille, and Sirine" (17). Um-Nadia, the

café owner and the “all-around boss,” points out that the loneliness of the Arab is a terrible thing, it is all consuming. It is already present like a little shadow under the heart when he lays his head on his mother’s lap; it threatens to swallow him whole when he leaves his own country, even though he marries and travels and talks to friends twenty-four hours a day. [And] that is the way Sirine suspects that Arabs feel everything –larger than life, feelings walking in the sky (Abu-Jaber 19). Such a feeling of loneliness and displacement is best described by Sirine’s uncle when he says: “[...]And immigrants are always a bit sad right away from the start anyways. Nobody warns you when you leave your town what’s about to happen to your brains” (142). This sense of loss is echoed by Edward Said’s description of exile as being akin to an open wound, an “unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home; its essential sadness can never be surmounted (Said, *Reflections*, 173). As a consequence, for the Arabs, the café becomes the re-creation of the Middle East in the West; besides that, the “Real True Arab Food,” cooked by Sirine, is the connection that takes them back to their old memories.

However, in *Crescent*, not only the Arab and Latino immigrants, but also others such as the Italian waiter Eustavio from the Italian café, La Dolce Vita, share the same feeling of loneliness for being away from home. As the waiter declares, when “[w]e [immigrants], leave our home, we fall in love with our sadness” (143). In fact, as the novel demonstrates, there is no escape from the past, since one’s memories inhabit the very self and can be triggered at anytime. The café becomes a nostalgic place for Abu-Jaber’s characters as it makes the regulars remember their past experiences and lives. It revives memories through reading newspapers, watching the TV set broadcasting the news from the East, besides the presence of Sirine’s food. As mentioned previously, it also works as a re-created home for the Arabs in the United States. As a result, the café appears as the best place which “nurtures” the characters’ recollections.



Sirine's presence in the kitchen eases the loneliness the regulars feel due to her kindness and her gentle voice. Besides that, "her food is so good that [they] cannot help themselves" as "they sit at tables, leaning toward her" (17). It is worth mentioning the reference to other ethnic workers: the Central American custodian, Cristóbal; the Mexican busboy, Victor Hernandez, and Um-Nadia's daughter Mireille. Interestingly, as Fadda-Conrey states, all the characters, including the minor ones, are carefully described and "their individual national differences negates simplistic representations of the Arab identity" (195). The representation of the café as a re-created homeland can be seen through the interesting analysis of the names of the characters from Egypt and Kuwait, when the critic comments that

[t]he names of the Arab students from Egypt and Kuwait--Schmaal, Jenob, Shark, and Gharb, which in Arabic mean North, South, East, and West, respectively--signify distinct geographical entities that can be interpreted as individualized characteristics challenging the reductive attributes the term Arab often generates. (195)

Abu-Jaber places her protagonist into a multicultural society to enable her to acquire different experiences and gain a rich knowledge about her culture. She further challenges the West's depiction of Arabs as a homogenous group. Yet, the author chooses to write their names in Arabic in order to focus on the singularity of their own cultural identity. Despite living in the United States, they still identify themselves as Arabs. Although they come from different Arab countries but they still carry the same cultural identity. Thus, using the different experiences of Arabs by telling them apart from each other is a strong tool for portraying the community's struggle to refute stereotypes defined by Bhabha as "complex, ambivalent contradictory mode of representation, as anxious as it is assertive" (10). I believe that the presence of such different characters belonging to different backgrounds creates a domestic contact zone which is situated in cafés, kitchens, and homes. It becomes a place where characters, despite having different origins, find in the language of food an effective means for transmitting and expressing their feelings. A view supported by Fadda-Conrey who argues the

importance of food as a metaphor for “the interconnections within the ethnic borderland between different ethnic characters” (201).

In “Home and Away,” Sara Ahmed argues that the immigrant’s feeling of displacement comes mainly from the fragmented past memories. As she remarks, the act of leaving a home and becoming an outsider in a strange culture leads to the creation of “a new community of strangers, a common bond with those others who have shared the experiences of living overseas” (84). Furthermore, she argues that “the forming of a new community provides a sense of fixity through the language of heritage – a sense of inheriting a collective past by sharing the lack of a home rather than sharing a home” (84-85). In the same line of thought, Avtar Brah describes identity in the diasporic community as being “far from fixed or pre-given. It is constituted within the crucible of the materiality of everyday life; in the everyday stories we tell ourselves individually and collectively” (183).

I would like also to point out that, besides the counter, where the café regulars enjoy Sirine’s food, the back kitchen also plays a central role in the story. The back kitchen is a private space where intimate actions take place. The back kitchen, “full of shelves, cupboards, a giant refrigerator, a linoleum topped table with wobbly pipe-metal legs and five vinyl-cracked chairs” (65), is the place where Sirine reveals her doubts about Han to Um-Nadia. Closely linked with Sirine’s memories of her childhood, “the back kitchen is Sirine’s retreat, her favorite place to sit at a table chopping carrots and thinking her thoughts. She can look out the window at the back courtyard and feel like she’s a child again, working at her mother’s table” (65). Working in the back kitchen takes Sirine back to her childhood, helping her mother to prepare baklava.

Thus, cooking also revives Sirine’s memories about her childhood. The chef remembers her parents preparing the traditional dessert – an intimate ritual – where complicity

and love are intimately linked. In this way, watching her parents in the kitchen indicates how much they loved each other, as their “concerted movements” to prepare the dish was like ‘a dance’ where “they swam together through the round arcs of her mother’s arms and her father’s tender strokes” (66). The act of preparing *baklava* together, as described in the novel, strongly resembles an intimate relationship. As Sirine’s parents spent little time with her because of their job, she was happy to share and contribute in the preparation of the dish of love. Once again, this particular element functions as an important human connector, to put it in Abu-Jaber’s terms, this time not between her and Han or her and the café regulars, but between Sirine and her parents.

*Crescent* highlights Sirine’s process of remembering the food cooked by her parents during her childhood:

Sirine learned how to cook professionally working as a line cook and then a sous chef in the kitchens of French, Italian, and “Californian” restaurants. But when she moved to Nadia’s café, she went through her parents’ old recipes and began cooking the favorite – but almost forgotten – dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents’ tiny kitchen and her earliest memories (22).

The back kitchen works as a stimulating space for the protagonist. It is the place where Sirine thinks about her family. The kitchen allows her repressed feelings to surface when she starts remembering how her mother teaches her the importance of certain ‘memory foods’ as her defense against cultural clash as the following passage shows:

Sirine learned about food from her parents. Even though her mother was American, her father always said his wife thought about food like and Arab. Sirine’s mother strained the salt yoghurt through cheesecloth to make creamy labneh, stirred the onion and lentils together in a heavy iron pan to make mjeddrah, and studded joints of lamb with fat cloves of garlic to make roasted kharuf (56).

Sirine's mother learned these recipes from her mixed marriage in which she finds in food the best means for cultural dialogue. By adding the preparation of Arabic food to her own identity as an American woman, the mother unsettles the fixed notions of Americanness and provides a paradigm of contestation for her daughter's future engagements with American culture in adulthood (Mehta: 212). Hence, maintaining the food ways of the old world is a kind of cultural compromise. As the novel demonstrates, holding on to a cultural food heritage is a means of holding on to identity.

It is in the back kitchen of Nadia's café that Sirine and Han prepare their first baklava together – echoing her memories of her parents in the kitchen. She makes that act a moment of bonding with the professor and reinforcing their love. During this ritual of food preparation Han is emerged by a strong feeling of homesickness. The loneliness of being away from his family for so long seems expose his instability. He declares to Sirine how he even misses his mother's coffee and bread. He also ends up asserting that he misses everything: "Absolutely everything" (68). The atmosphere of intimacy surrounding the kitchen and the baklava make Han unveil his past and confess his fears towards returning to Iraq. He maintains: "I have to keep reminding myself. It's so hard to imagine. So I just tell myself: not yet" (70).

Indeed, the back kitchen is a place of intimacy and complicity; it is the appropriate zone for revelations, confessions, and love. In that place Han decides to give Sirine his phone number and his address not only as a way of consolidating their relationship, but also as a way to allow her penetrate and discover the mysteries of his life.

After all the customers have gone, Sirine decides to stay to prepare in advance part of the dishes for the next day. Working only under the moonlight and the streetlights, the chef is "spreading small brined grape leaves, flat on the cutting board, slicing out the tiny stems, wrapping the star-spoked leaves, around rice and meal" (85). This is also the first occasion

when she contemplates the ingredients and thinks about her first date with the professor. Stuffed grape leaves and baklava are the mother's 'memory food', cooked grape leaves provides the very soul of Middle Eastern food. The Arab-American scholar Therese Saliba indicates that grape leaf picking was an important ritual for the women of her family, mainly her grandmother, who introduced her granddaughter to a female cultural heritage that provided the core of Arab/Middle Eastern cuisine. She compares the plant to "a tenacious survivor, tangling and weaving its way wherever it finds an opening [...] since our identities are not clear – cut or easily defined. They are complex and layered, tangled and contradictory."<sup>114</sup>

Another means that helped arising memories about the lost home is the scarf offered by Han to Sirine. The scarf was sent to Han by his aunt as a souvenir of his sister when he was still living in England. After telling Sirine about the object and some prayer beads, the professor insists that she accept the scarf saying that it belonged to his mother:

He slides the shirt off her shoulders, then opens the veil and slowly drapes it across her recycling body; the silk floats over her skin. It is about four feet by four feet, black with faint shifting tones of gray and rose, embroidered along the borders with a precise, intricate design that makes her think of her redberries. "This is the traditional pattern of my mother's village in the south. All the villages have their own design. If you study them, you can figure out where a certain embroidery stitch has come from." He hands it to her. "She used to wear it over her hair." (160)

Sirine hesitates accepting the object not feeling comfortable enough to accept such a meaningful gift. Deep inside "she wants the scarf but there is also something about it, a vague sense warning her away. 'It's your only memento,' she protests" (161). Han tries to convince her to take the scarf, explaining the connection between the object and the day his parents fell

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<sup>114</sup>Therese Saliba, "Grapeleaves," *Food For Our Grandmothers: Writing by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Boston MA: South End, 1994): 189.

in love: “look at you, just look. It was made for you. It’s necessary that you keep it.’ He ties two corners together. ‘My mother was wearing this when my father fell in love with her’” (161).

Han offered the scarf to Sirine to prove his love; however, the scarf not only carries Han’s memories of his family, but it is also an object that provokes his thinking about his life in Iraq and his feelings towards being away for such a long time without having contact with them. Han ponders a little, but ends up revealing to Sirine his hopes for knowing his family safe living under Hussein’s regime. He confesses he misses them:

He studies her, his expression quiet and contemplative. “I do and I don’t. It’s hard to get information from Iraq, so few letters get through, and the ones that do are usually so heavily censored that they don’t make much sense. I suppose my brother is still in prison and I hope that he and my mother are still alive. But I have no way of telling for sure. And there’s no way for me to know if I’ll ever see them again.” He pauses. “I always think about them.” (161-62)

When Sirine asks about Leila, Han changes the subject quickly; avoiding the sadness related to those memories. Sirine and Han exchange confessions about their pasts:

She tells him about her parents’ job as relief workers. How they were often away from home, always in the worst places, the most dangerous war-torn, ruined. She tells about her father’s belief that most of the world’s greatest contemporary problems could be traced to the American obsession with commerce, and her mother’s certainty that Americans were just devoted to nature, religion, friends, and family as the Arabs were. (162)

Sirine’s memories are also painful and she even compares her experience with crossing the desert as Han did when escaping to Egypt. In fact, she is also annoyed for having been raised by her uncle without the presence of her parents. She confesses how the images of her parents were disappearing little by little from her memories. She carries on saying:

I even stopped feeling excited when my parents came home. I tried not to show it, but I can remember when I started not waiting to go to my parent's house when they came back. They'd be gone, sometimes a month, sometimes more – which is forever to a kid. After a while I felt like I barely knew who they were. They were these adults who seemed to think I was supposed to love them. (145)

Sirine felt this way toward her parents until one day they left home and never came back. The waiting process became everlasting, as Sirine felt “mortally wounded, ancient and silent. And all the tears left her body, almost forever” (310). After her parents' death, Sirine became alienated from her home, from the world and most importantly from herself.

The scarf leads the characters to uncover their past. The importance of the object is also displayed in the novel during the Thanksgiving dinner, when Sirine plans “to wear it for dramatic effect while bringing in Victor's pumpkin pies” (223). While she is in the kitchen of her apartment Nathan arrives and is surprised when he sees the scarf on her. He is bothered as the object arouses his memories of Iraq: “He stops suddenly, moves closer, his head slightly canted to one side. ‘What's that?’ ‘This?’ Sirine opens her hands so a swath of material bells out, reveals the delicate berry-colored stitches. ‘My scarf.’” (223)

Sirine explains to him the origin of the scarf but Nathan knows its whole story. He knows it belonged to his beloved Leila, and this fact troubles and torments him to an extent he cannot control:

‘Oh,’ Nathan says in a voice that is barely audible. Sirine says, ‘It's very old. It belonged to Han's mother.’ Nathan's face darkens. He doesn't speak for a moment but just stares at her and the scarf. And then, he says, unsteadily, ‘Hetold you that?’ he doesn't say anything more but simply stands there for another moment. Sirine slips the scarf from her shoulders. She opens her mouth, but Nathan says, ‘I – can't – I – forgive me. I'm sorry,’ and quickly leaves the room. (223)

After the dinner Sirine realizes she lost the scarf. She is unable to remember where she last put it and this makes her really disturbed apprehending Han's reaction when he finds out she lost it. The next day, Nathan comes to the café but "he looks hangover and somehow wrung out, his eyes hollow with fatigue, and he doesn't have his camera with him". He apologizes for leaving dinner so suddenly but says he was "suffering from a terrible headache" (232). Um-Nadia even asks him about the scarf and he pretends having no idea about it.

Han does not realize that Sirine loses the scarf only during Nathan's second exhibition where he is disturbed by the photos of his relatives back in Iraq and his rage is intensified when Sirine tries to calm him down and he all of a sudden explodes with her. He regrets trusting her with such an important and meaningful object; besides that, he calls himself a fool for giving her the only souvenir he has of his sister.

Watching the photos at the gallery and losing his sister's scarf makes Han's exilic condition unbearable. As the professor explains to Sirine, exile is "bigger than everything else in my life. Leaving my country was like – I don't know – like part of my body was torn away. I have phantom pains from the loss of that part – I'm haunted by myself. It's as if I'm trying to describe something I'm not, that's no longer here" (182). Besides that, he tries to explain it to Sirine:

'Exile is like a dim, gray room, full of sounds and shadows, but there's nothing real or actual inside of it. You're constantly thinking that you see old friends on the street – or old enemies that make you shout out in your dreams. You go up to people, certain that they're members of your family, and when you get closer their faces melt away into local strangers. Or sometimes you just forget this is America, not Iraq. Everything that you were – every sight, sound, taste, memory, all of that has been wiped away. You forget everything you thought you knew.' (182)

Han's comments echo Edward Said's *Reflections on Exile* as a condition of loss. Said claims that "the pathos of exile is in the loss of contact with the solidarity and the



satisfaction of earth: homecoming is out of question” (179). Nonetheless, Han contradicts Said’s comments about the impossibility of going back home for an exile. Eventually, the emotional burden of abandoning his family becomes too much for Han to bear, and he finally decides to risk going back to Iraq, where he could be accused of being an American spy, and imprisoned or even killed. In fact, the professor has to definitely reconcile with his tormented past experiences. He needs to see his family again in order to feel comfortable with himself again.

However, just after Han goes back to Iraq, Sirine finds the scarf again in Nathan’s apartment. She distinguishes the object among some photos recognizes the object because of Han’s scent still impregnated in it. After such surprise, Nathan tries to apologize saying he wanted to return it to her, but he did not know how. Sirine asks him why he took the scarf and, in that moment, the photographer unveils the truth behind the object and its importance to him. He tells Sirine that it belonged to Leila and he reveals the whole story about their love affair and the way he was treated in Iraq at Han’s house.

The scarf again triggers Nathan’s past memories to the present. He tells her about his life back in the Arab country and ends up confessing that Leila was arrested and killed afterwards because she was suspected of helping spies. The photographer states:

‘It’s been so painful to live with these secrets,’ he says. ‘You have to understand. I never realized that Han held himself responsible for Leila’s death. I should have guessed it, I suppose. They say that for some people, the guilt of surviving the people they love is worse than death itself. At this time, I kept quiet about what really happened – I thought of that as my own punishment. To live like this – shut away from everything, and to never, never tell anyone what happened. I couldn’t stand the shame of it. I couldn’t stand myself. I thought of killing myself but living seemed a better punishment. I’m responsible for Leila’s death. My carelessness drew the police to her.’ (378)

Just like Han, Nathan is haunted by memories of Iraq, especially those related to the political instability of the country. As self-punishment, he decides to live with the guilt of being responsible for the death of his beloved one.

In *Crescent*, memory is used as a cultural phenomenon, since the characters can only recall what constitutes part of their experience in a communal context. It is ordinary; therefore, that an immigrant community is the perfect collective 'environment' for the development of memory which seems so personal, but at the same time, it is shaped by collective experiences. In this perspective, Sirine's food has the power to become a bridge that connects them to their lost homelands. Memory – the memory of their homelands – plays an important role in easing the feeling of displacement and uncertainty about their future in a host country.

### **IV.3. The Role of Food in shaping Sirine's hyphenated self**

The issue of representation occupies Arab American writers' main preoccupation in portraying the Arab community in the United States because representing their own community help them create, consolidate, and reify their identities. Self-representation is therefore the highest value of the identity discourse, as Arab American writers reject the West's imposed and negative images of Arabs. In the case of Diana Abu-Jaber, self-representation by itself does not guarantee the "right" kind of identity portraiture.<sup>115</sup> In this act of self-representation, food stands for Arab American identity and development. It serves as an effective means in surviving and staying Arab in a hostile environment.

However, the importance of food to identity formation is certainly not unique to the immigrant experience. Whether a part of "invisible" majority culture or "deviant" minority culture, food environments influence our constructions of credos and categories. (Fischler: 276). Generally speaking, eating preferences and behaviors are part of familial and societal legacies. We may prepare the signature dishes of deceased relatives to mark holidays or guard the secret ingredients of a family recipe. In other words, particular spices may evoke strong emotions or memories in us. Even in distorted eating behaviors, we tend to reflect social values and constraints.<sup>116</sup>

Diana Abu-Jaber often uses food as a literary device and a significant theme in her writings. The presence of food and the act of eating in her books – especially in the novel *Crescent* and in the memoir *The Language of Baklava* – are used as important and meaningful symbols since they often function as connectors to the old land in the United States, establishing a bridge between the place of origin and the new setting as the Arab

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<sup>115</sup>Naaman, RAWI Conference, 18 May 2007; also see Fadda-Conrey and Field in *Melus* 31. 4 (2006): 187-206; 207-225.

<sup>116</sup>Susan Bordo, "Hunger as Ideology," *Eating Culture*, eds. Ron Scapp and Brian Seitz (New York: State University of New York, 1998) 28.

characters present in her novels deal with different kinds of displacement, mainly the geographical one. Abu-Jaber herself defined the “metaphor” of food as “such a great human connector,” and something “intimate” (5). She keeps on arguing that it is “the most powerful way of creating the metaphor of the heart and gathering place, a place where the collective forms” (5). In fact, food is a stimulus to self-understanding as she herself tries to find her place in a world made up of pancakes and kefta as a child growing up in a mixed family.

In the article “Counter narratives: Cooking Up Stories of Love and Loss in Naomi Nye’s Poetry and Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*,” Lorraine Mercer and Linda Strom observe that food, in both Nye’s poetry and Abu-Jaber’s novel, structures the narratives and “functions as a complex language for communicating love, memory, and exile” (33-34). They insist that food has a sacred meaning insofar as it works as a “natural repository for memory and tradition and reveals the possibility for imagining blended identities and traditions;” moreover, as the authors observe, Nye and Abu-Jaber “use food to construct spaces wherein they imagine the possibilities of peace, love and community” (33-34).

I argue that food in *Crescent* works as an ethnic bonding agent, bringing different ethnic characters together. I believe that Sirine, the main character of the novel, and the food she cooks function as a kind of bridge that is able to draw different ethnicities together and also to connect present and past as long as its flavor remain in the mouth. In fact, her food helps them keep their memories about home alive. Besides that, food acquires different connotations throughout the novel, as it seems to stimulate immigrant characters to question and make revelations of their fears and dreams towards their lives in the U.S. In this sense, food works as a connective medium that “transcends the limitations that the difference [of complex identities of the Café regulars] might engender” (202). Moreover, as she states, it is through food that “Sirine can enact her role as a bridge across the different ethnic communities” (199).

The food cooked by Sirine takes the status of a cultural, as well as a political bridge since it is able to draw together peoples that may be enemies in the region they come from, creating bonds among them that are strengthened when the feeling of loneliness that results from being inserted in an unfamiliar culture arises. Different cultures and backgrounds find themselves inside the same space and united by the same purpose of enjoying cultural emblems that may lessen and soften the painful feeling of being away from home. Cooking becomes the essential link between the old land and its diasporic configuration in the US. as Claudia Roden states, “there is a lot more to food than eating and cooking. Behind every dish lies a world, a culture, a history. Dishes have social meanings. They have emotional and symbolic significance. Food is about power – it is an expression of identity and ideology”.<sup>117</sup> By cooking the food of their Middle Eastern homes, Sirine draws those Arab exiles and immigrants together, duplicating some of the nuances and rhythms of home:

Especially Sirine. They [the Arab exiles and immigrants at Nadia’s café] love her food – the flavors that remind them of their homes – but they also love to watch Sirine with her skin so pale it has the bluish cast of skim milk, her wild blond head of hair, her sea-green eyes... she is so kind and gentle-voiced and her food is so good that the students cannot help themselves – they sit at the tables, leaning toward her. (17)

In *Crescent*, Arab immigrants identify with the atmosphere of Nadia’s Café which plays an important role in the plot since it functions as a unifying metaphor, ironically, of Arabs’ many – and therefore heterogeneous – homelands.

The smells and flavors of Sirine’s food seem to soften the feeling of loss of their homelands. As Fadda-Conrey claims, in Abu-Jaber’s novel:

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<sup>117</sup>Claudia Roden, “Foreward,” to *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Culture of the Middle East*, ed. Sami Zubaida & Richard Tapper (London: Touris Park:2000): vii.

The most important bridges are Sirine herself and the Middle Eastern food she cooks. From her pivotal position in the kitchen, which opens out to the rest of the café, Sirine serves as an integral connecting link, joining together the different communities and individuals of *Crescent's* ethnic borderlands (196).

Fadda-Conrey ponders that “Sirine’s cooking and the act of participating in its consumption, while drawing various characters together, simultaneously, underscores their varied ethnic, national and cultural identities” (199). She not only reminds them of their homes, but also, with her American looks and the way she cooks, putting “the cinnamon in with the chocolate and pepper in the sweet cakes, so things fall apart... make it bigger,” Sirine, as the Arab poet Aziz says, “reveals America to us non-Americans. And vice-versa” (197). Accordingly, Sirine’s hyphenated identity as an Arab American becomes a privilege rather than a disadvantage. It makes her part of the Arab community at the café while also remaining different from it. An outsider from within, Sirine links these Arab people simultaneously to their old and newly adopted homes. With her American looks and her cooking, she reminds them of the America they want to live in with the opportunities they may enjoy in their new homes. Moreover, since food is strongly connected to one’s origins, Sirine’s cooking of Arab foods, especially the Middle Eastern foods reveals aspects of what it means to be Arab and especially an Arab woman in a foreign land because food practices are mainly used to denote racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds.

Through her cooking and her art of silence, Sirine stands as the queen at Nadia’s café. Not only Sirine’s role as a good cook of Arab food, however, but also her role as an effective listener makes “Arab men come here from far away all the time” (83). Sirine uses her silence to listen to men’s stories; a means which cures these exiles from their traumatic exilic experiences. Sirine’s art of silence is reflected while talking to Nathan, the only American exile at the café, tells her his story of exile. At this moment Sirine

wishes she knows how to say something wise or consoling to him, something that wouldn't sound frightened or awkward. But she remembers the time after her parents' death, when people would approach her and try to explain her loss to them: they said things that were supposed to cure her of her sadness, but had no effect at all. And she knew then, even when she was nine years old, that there was no wise or consoling thing to say. There were certain helpful kinds of silences, and some were better than others. (100)

Sirine knows that nothing she could say would relieve the pain he feels but with her affectionate silence and careful listening, Sirine helped him tell his story for the first time since he has exiled himself (186). When asked about the character Sirine, Abu-Jaber claimed that she wanted to “draw on that kind of internal conflict: what part of me is Iraqi? What part of me is American?” She goes on to question if “it is something that I've inherited, something in the blood or something that people tell me I am? I think that her condition mirrors that of a lot of young Americans that they feel connections or longing for a place that they may or may not be born in it and they want to reclaim it when they can but it is not immediately accessible” (Fresh Air, 2003).

Sirine represents those Arab-Americans who hunger for an unknown place but feel a strange connection to it. In fact, Sirine's struggle to define herself and reconcile with her Arab part of identity starts from the café where she cooks Middle Eastern food and is surrounded by Arab and other immigrant students. Spending much of her time in the café's kitchen makes her feel as if she were in her mother's kitchen again. In fact, it is “in the absence of her parents, Sirine attempts to use food and cooking to establish her own narrative of origin” (42). Her parents worked as emergency care personnel for the American Red Cross who were killed in a tribal clash in Africa. As the narrator remarks, “on the day she learned of their deaths, Sirine went into the kitchen and made an entire tray of stuffed grape leaves all by herself” (50). Cooking the Arab food appears to be the most effective means through which she re-creates

her intuitive memories of her parents as well as to negotiate her Iraqi identity and think about her life. However, the revival of this part of her dual heritage coincides with Han's presence.

Sirine witnesses the regulars' satisfaction as they close their eyes while savoring her food. Eating her baklava makes not only the Arab students taste home, cooking this special dish also serves to locate herself during the day. As the narrator comments, "Sirine feels unsettled when she begins breakfast without preparing *baklava* first; she can't find her place in things" (66). Moreover, tasting this special food encourages those characters to discuss serious issues like their diasporic dislocation.

Food becomes a special language of communication between Han and Sirine by compelling them to correct their stereotypical misconceptions of each other. On the one hand, Sirine is interested in learning about her father's culture and religion but her sense of identity is ambivalent as she was not raised in her father's culture and does not understand her connection with the professor and Iraq. She belongs to the American society but cannot identify herself as American but rather refers to herself as half-Arab when asked about her origin. At the same time, as her work is crowded by Arab persons who sometimes speak Arabic or tell stories about their Arab countries, she knows that she belongs to this culture but she cannot identify herself as Arab neither. "She doesn't follow the news and now she feels ashamed that she's taken so little interest in her father's home country" (62). She does not understand Arabic; the Arabic food she cooks stand as the main connector to Arab culture. Han helps her to discover and understand this forgotten and unexplored part of her identity. Han, on the other hand, needs directions to situate himself in the U.S. He clearly declares to Sirine: "I really don't get the geography of this town." He continues by saying that, "It seems like things keep swimming around me. [When] I think I know where something is, then it's gone" (75). He feels alienated and finds in Sirine and in her way of cooking his real north.



Several passages from the novel sustain my idea that food helps characters find their way home as it is always present when they tackle issues of belonging and search of home. For instance, while Sirine was in the back kitchen and notices Han entering the café for the first time, she feels something different and “thinkshe does look different from the rest of the customers” (42). At that exact moment, she is making knaffea when Um-Nadia wisely says: “Ah, you’ve made knaffea today,” she continues by asking Sirine, “who are [you] in love with, I wonder?” (42). This passage shows an interesting connection between cooking and being in love as Sirine’s first symbolic contact with Han occurs when she serves him “a plate of knaffea herself” (43). Hence, besides working as a bonding agent to the lost homeland, food is also used as an expression of love and care.

The description of the scene describes the impact of that contact not only for the two of them, but also for those sitting at the counter as they seem to be bewildered by its passion, as demonstrated in the following passage:

Mirelle and Victor stop talking and Um-Nadia and the customers look up to see this break in precedent, even the two [American] policemen sitting by the TV, eating fried lentils and onions, and watching reports in Arabic about terrorists from Saudi Arabia (43).

During that specific moment the chef serves Han, the narrator describes her desire to give him the food. In fact, as it is mentioned, Sirine “has an impulse to sit and feed him by hand” (43). She has a maternal instinct as if she knew his fluctuation and his unstable situation in the United States. The *knaffea*, as described by Um-Nadia, is a dish of love; by offering Han that dish, Sirine is implicitly offering her love to him.

According to Um-Nadia, the *knaffea* “is said to be so delicious that it brings even the wild animals home” (44). Mirelle, Um-Nadia’s daughter, asks about it as if not quite understanding the implicit meaning which her mother employs to the expression. Han, in his

turn, says: “[a]ll those stories about the animals – the *jemeland asfoori* and the *ghazal*,” then he asks the name of the last one in English. Nathan answers him by saying that the name is Oryx. Han continues by saying that “[w]ell, the *ghazal* is always wandering, looking for his lost love, and they say he has to go away before he can find his way home again” (44). Even the wild animals look for love. As the passage demonstrates, Han resembles the *ghazal*. He is also looking for love and stability; however, when he really finds them in Sirine and her food, he leaves them and decides to return to Iraq. In short, Han’s conception of his new home in America as “a distraction” delays his return to “real life” in Iraq where he is under threat; he lacks a nurturing space in either place (359). It is worth discussing that Um-Nadia’s statement seems to be enlightening the reader to understand the end of the novel, the moment when Han goes back home despite running the risk of being killed by Saddam Hussein’s men.

Besides the Arab food Sirine cooks, her love relationship with Han is quite significant as it allows her to question her life and define her identity as an Arab-American woman. For Sirine, the act of cooking becomes a way of expressing and questioning her fears regarding Han and her connection to Iraq. In this way, Crescent explores the problem of homelessness in the diaspora. But this problem does not occur only because of political exile. As Rom Charles states, “Abu-Jaber broadens her exploration of exile to include all various ways we’re left bereft of home – by the death of parents, the separation from lovers, the hunger for lost childhood” (19). In other words, Abu-Jaber highlights how the experience of diaspora forms orphans out of immigrants or exile. While exchanging their memories about the past, Sirine always “has the feeling of missing something and not quite understanding what she is missing (70). Hence, the excitement he causes in her makes her feel uncomfortable, but, at the same time, she feels something mysterious about him. As a result, their relationship is inevitably colored by an “essential sadness” (Said, *Reflections*: 173). She knows that she cannot fill that void, she feels that “Han seems to have some sort of *internal light* that makes him intriguing

and, at the same time, a little bit hard for her to look directly, he's so charming and educated and worldly" (53). As I have mentioned above, since Sirine is born in the U.S. and has never visited Iraq or even spoken Arabic, her only connection to her Arab part of identity is food, but when she meets Han she shows a lot of interest in it and wants to explore that buried part of her identity. "I'd love to be able to speak Arabic" (131) she tells Han, because she considers Arabic as a ghost language which resembles the Arab part of her identity. Furthermore, Han wants to teach Sirine about Iraq and the part of the Arab culture she does not know, whereas Sirine teaches him about the U.S. and the complexities of being American.

In order to enable Sirine learn quickly the Arabic language since the latter is the most effective means of communication and transmission of culture, Abu-Jaber chooses to enforce this learning process by using Arabic words through her narrative to stress the uniqueness of the cultural identity of her characters. Han tells Sirine some Arabic words that make her realize that she belongs to the Arab culture and must learn more about it:

*"Yaelbi, yahayati,"* he murmurs

"What is that?"

*"Elbi* means 'my heart,' *hayati* means 'my life.' *Yaeyeni*, 'my eyes.' "The words shimmer over her. "Say more," she says.

*"Yawardi*, 'my flower,' *yathahabi* 'my treasure...'... "It's like a poem," she says, strumming his chest with her hand. (157).

Undoubtedly, she unconsciously misses her other ethnic half – the one in which she has never been interested in until her intercourse with Han. So, the professor seems to have "the light" Sirine needs to grasp her father's Iraqi past. The love story between Han and Sirine is described, to borrow Nouri Gana's words, as a "refreshing journey of self-discovery and cultural reinvention" (238). He states that,

In the McCarthyistic atmosphere of post-9/11 and the heightened politicization of Arab identity, it is only fair, Abu-Jaber seems to contend, that the likes of Sirine should first become aware of portions of her identity that might need to be accounted for, even prior to understanding how such portions have a concrete bearing on her otherwise tranquil American identity. (238)

In other words, Sirine's identity struggle comes from her strong desire to give meaning to this kind of hybrid life, or in-betweenness, the life of an Arab American woman. Sirine has always led the life of an independent American woman, and yet she cannot transcend the bond she feels toward her Iraqi heritage. As she is an orphan, Sirine can only turn to her uncle's stories, memories, and photographs to learn about her cultural roots. She has always been satisfied with her existence yet had a sense of longing for somewhere else.

As Sirine carries the secret of the Arab recipes, she makes Han comfortable when he is with her and makes him think about his family back in Iraq. Even her deepest feelings towards the professor are described through the metaphor of food, especially when she is in the Victory Market trying out new flavors. The scent of the spices "make her think of Han – somehow, everything seems redolent, brimming with suggestions of Han. . . [t]he intimate proximity of Han's body comes back to her now, the scent of his skin echoed in the rich powder of spices" (124). Moreover, when they first make love, her sentiments are also connected to food because food provides her with relief and protection: "He's amber and caramel and earth-colored. His skin excites her; she inhales deeply, as if she could take in his essence; he tastes of almond, of sweetness" (126). Making love to him, as described in the passage, translates into a new feeling to her, the one she had never felt when cooking; after that she inhales the scent of his arms that, for her, "smell like bread" (127).

Sirine grieves because she sees as an outsider by Arabs and Americans as well. She was born in the US to an American mother, but she grows up in her Iraqi uncle's house after the death of her parents. She looks so American yet belongs to Arabs. Han sees her as a pure

American when he first meets her, so when he invites her to his apartment he prepares American food because he ignores the Arab part of Sirine's identity. He treats her like an American and forgets that she too belongs to the Arab culture. Han plans an American night for Sirine saying: "I was going to play some American music for you but I guess I don't actually own any. I meant for tonight to be all-American for you" (76) but was surprised when Sirine tells him that she is not really all-American because she is treated as a foreigner or an ethnic individual by Americans. The professor attempts to understand Sirine's hybridity through the means of cooking since it is a means of communication between the two lovers. His inability to converse with her in his native tongue arouses a strong desire to learn how to cook American food from the famous and popular cookbook *The Joy of Cooking*. The following passage demonstrates his efforts to grasp this language:

Han just seems excited – his skin slightly damp and pink from the kitchen heat – and intrigued by the new kind of cooking, a shift of ingredients like a move from native tongue into a foreign language: butter instead of olive oil; potatoes instead of rice; beef instead of lamb. (77)

Han is trying to become temporarily "American" by replacing the ingredients of the cooked dishes. Finding himself in a new environment gives him new possibilities to forge an identity – different from the stereotyped Iraqi one. The language of food brings Han closer to Sirine. As the professor is looking for safety and emotional stability, he finds in the act of cooking the means of being on the safe side of the American cultural hyphen. His attempts show his willingness to communicate with a woman he perceives to be authentically American.

The dinner intensely fascinates Sirine to the point that she congratulates Han and the food. As a food expert, Sirine approves the dishes and starts naming each ingredient apart: "Mm, the rich texture of this meat loaf—the egg and breadcrumbs—and these bits of onion are

so good, and there's little chili powder and dry mustard, isn't there? It's lovely. And there's something in the sauce...something..." (77)

The chef is so familiar with the ingredients, she tastes them meticulously, when Han wisely observes "The way you taste things..." He gestures over the food, picks up a bite of meat loaf in his fingers as if it were an olive. 'You know what everything here is – I mean exactly'" (77). The quotation also emphasizes Han's desire to be accepted by mainstream society; hence, Sirine does not accept such a comment, claiming that "it's so basic, anyone can do that. It's like you just taste the starting places – where it all came from" (77). The chef thinks that good food should be directly linked to its origin. In other words, food becomes an essential fragment of the old home. She ponders: "You know, so the best butter tastes a little like pastures and flowers, that sort of stuff. Things show their origins" (78). Within this context of intimacy, Sirine seizes the opportunity to ask Han about his life in Iraq to picture what it looks like to live in it. He gives her hints about the cultural aspects of his homeland such as the History of Andalousya, "a place where the Muslims and Jews lived together and devised miraculous works of philosophy and architecture," (79) and religious rituals.

He describes what the interior of a mosque looks like, its clean open prayer hall, and – after much coaxing – he recites the *athan*, the call to prayers, to Sirine outside on the floor of his balcony. It sounds like singing to Sirine, but he says no – this is praying, which is pure. He *hesitates a moment, as if he can't quite remember*, then demonstrates the postures and genuflections for praying – bowing from waist to knees to head. (80, emphasis added)

The quotation shows how Sirine barely knows her father's religion just as it shows Han's lack of practice of his religious faith. He confesses to her: "haven't prayed in some time, I'm out of practice" (80). Besides that, he tells the chef about personal details of his life such as studying in England, his few girlfriends, and the unstable political situation in Iraq. He

“talks about trying to sleep when he could hear gunfire and soldiers in the street, never feeling entirely safe, always wanting to run away” (82).

Neither completely in the Arab world nor fully integrated in the American world, Sirine lives in the border zone between Arab and American identity. Sirine becomes an incarnation of what Anzaldúa calls the “nepantlera” in her preface to *This Bridge We Call Home*, existing at the frontier, bridging the gulf between realities, perspectives, ethnic communities and racial categorizations (10). Anzaldúa articulates the importance of such a force stating, “I associate nepantlera with states of mind that question old ideas and beliefs, acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another” (“*(Un)natural Bridge*” 1)<sup>118</sup>. Her hyphenated third space, however, does “limit itself to a duality between two cultural heritages. It leads [...] to the consciousness of root values” (Lavie and Swedenburg, 17), values that she learns through Han’s stories of exile.

Sirine is attracted to Hanif who, unlike most Arab men at the café, seems to have some sort of internal light that makes him intriguing and, at the same time, a little bit hard for her to look at directly: he’s so charming and educated and worldly. But it’s more than that. Most Arab men have always been eminently polite to her, filled with and Old world propriety, so formal, they seem almost not to see her but to see an outline captioned: Woman. Han, she’s noticed, looks at her. Even though they barely know each other, she already has the clear, uncanny sense that when he looks, he sees her. (47)

Indeed, Sirine embodies more than just a beautiful American woman to Han who also scents the Arab side in her identity. He sees beneath the appearance of this successful and extraordinary cook; he sees and identifies with her homelessness and her fragmented identity that longs for a strong sense of home and integrated identity. Han is the first one to remind Sirine of her “root values” and to point out to her what it means to have and lose one’s roots,

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<sup>118</sup> Carol Fadda-Conrey, “Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu-Jaber’s *Crescent*,” *MELUS*, 31.4 (2006: 187-205): 198.

family, and home. Han explains to Sirine the geography of Iraq by drawing a map with his fingers on her body, sensually connecting the body to its roots. He tells her of Iraq's history, its everyday life during the war, and how this war has disturbed his sense of living safely and peacefully. Instead, the unsafe and warlike conditions leave him "never feeling entirely safe, always wanting to run away" from his own home" (82). Han above all transmits and defines to Sirine what it feels to be Iraqi living in Iraq: "Iraq is endless. As a child, I thought it held the whole world." He describes to her the beauty of the buildings, but then goes on to say that "it's more than buildings – there's a special quality to the air in Iraq. A feeling" (73). Han's narratives and nostalgia penetrates into Sirine's heart, causing her a deep sense of guilt for ever forgetting or neglecting her Arab heritage:

What Han says reminds her of a sense that she's had – about knowing and not knowing something. She often has the feeling of missing something and not quite understanding what it is that she's missing. At the same time, she is not sure what Han means about the dangers and why it was so difficult to leave – but she also feels embarrassed to ask him and reveal her ignorance and now she feels ashamed she's taken so little interest in her father's home country (62).

Han succeeds with his depictions to connect Sirine to Iraq in a perplexing way, but also he disturbs her satisfied existence and introduces to her the notion of simultaneously having a home and being homeless. The more he speaks about his deep attachment to his home and his family and of his agony of living as a refugee, the more she realizes that she too has always missed having a home. She tells him, "I guess I'm always looking for my home, a little bit. I mean, even though I live here, I have this feeling that my real home is somewhere else somehow" (118). As she is fascinated by Han's stories of his home/homeland, she feels attached to this forgotten Iraqi part of herself, a feeling that immediately translates into the physical interaction of Sirine's and Han's bodies: "she leans forward into her listening and he



leans forward into his telling and once again their knees are touching. She would very much like to take his hand” (73).

The physical intimacy that develops after Han and Sirine confess to each other their feelings of loneliness and loss reflect how they hunger for the other: “The elements inside Han and herself had called to each other, like the way ingredients in a dish speak to each other” (318). However, they both look for more than a romance. As their relationship deepens, they come to realize how starved they are for the sustenance of a sense of home, which they find in their relationship.

As she discerns Han’s history, Sirine’s memories and feelings of a tormented childhood, missing home, lost parents, and fragmented sense of self begin to develop inside her. Every time she listens to his stories of lost home and family, “that somehow corresponds to a sensitive and silent element inside herself. She has a moment, like a flash of recognition that flares in her” (188). These moments represent what Bhabha terms “the outsideness of the inside that is too painful to remember” (“*The World and The Text*,” 455). Everything that Han has gone through in his exile experience relates to a memory of loss buried inside Sirine that she has found too painful to remember. The more he tells her of his attachment to his family and to his homeland, of his terrible and agonizing loss, and of the torment of knowing that he can never return and can never reclaim his home, the more Sirine realizes how much she has missed this sense of home and the ability to belong. Sirine becomes obsessed with Han’s stories of the lost family, home, and Iraqi history. She “feels the thought of Han as if circulated within her own body as if he were the fundamental element that Aziz spoke of – as purely necessary as air and bread” (154-155). Han’s stories of his home invade her everyday life, fostering her quest for her roots, her history, and her own identity as an Arab American when he describes to her what it feels like to be an exile, she realizes that she too has lived this experience of exile while always trying to forget it. Sirine’s parents were never home for

her; “There was a particular grade of loneliness to those isolated nights, her parents as gone as if they’d never really existed at all” (209). Even when they were actually there, she often felt that part of them stayed in the places they had just left. She has missed any emotional contact with them; looking at them she often saw the emptiness of their eyes “not quite focusing on Serine” (209). Sirine’s home never had the quietness, comfort, and warmth a home should have. Sirine’s nights were often invaded by her mother’s loud screams, her nightmares reflecting horrible experiences of war, starving children, ruins, and earthquakes. Sirine’s longing for a safety of enclosure and warmth wears her out until she decides to stop waiting for her parents to come home or to be present for her when they did come home.

After she has grasped Han’s tragic history, she turns to look into Islam, and tries hard to engage herself in the political information focusing on her country of origin, Iraq. Thus, in trying to find out her Arab roots, Sirine meets Rana, Han’s student, who takes her to the meeting the group “Women in Islam” after Han told her that Sirine seems to have a bit of interest in Islam. According to Rana, the importance of having Sirine attend the meeting lies in the fact that “it’s so important to have women like her attend” that she is “such a model to the younger women” (187). She further emphasizes the Arab side of Sirine “you look so [...] almost Arab in it. You’re Iraqi, aren’t you?” when she sees her wearing the scarf Han offered her. The gathering is made up of a few women “fully cloaked in veils and floor-length black dress; the rest are dressed in pants and cardigans, jeans and blouses” (188). This description well portrays Sirine’s situation since the latter women are the ones emerged in the American culture, but, at the same time, unlike the chef, they are aware of their female and Muslim condition.

For Sirine, being in the meeting is an opportunity to discover part of her Iraqi identity as she would be closer to her father’s roots. Adding to that, the chef wishes to learn more about Han and “the pieces of things he didn’t seem able to tell her about” (188). When she is

asked to identify herself to the other women in the meeting, she says “I cook” (189) because the Arabic food represents the only connection to her cultural heritage. For her it is a contact language, a medium to translate her experience of life and love, and to create a meaningful world. She strongly identifies herself and emotions via cooking to be able to explore her repressed cultural roots. However, the meeting goes beyond just a women’s conversation, and ends up assuming a political aspect as some of them, especially Rana, question the negative stereotypes of Arabs in Hollywood films. It is also an occasion to discuss the American occupation in Iraq and it is the time when Han’s student, ironically, seems to be the only woman aware of the unstable situation in the homeland; she also claims that terrorists just come from the passivity of the other women who “just want to be Americans like everyone else” (191) and do not fight rooted stereotypes of violent Arabs. Here, this passage offers an interesting insight on the meaning of safety for immigrants. Some see the idea of Americanness as a synonym of “safety”, while others just consider it a form of “alienation,” as Rana points out.

Sirine is impressed by Rana’s experience and knowledge of the history and politics of the Arab world, “in her presence, Sirine feels as if her mind is small, dimly lit place” (192). At other times, she feels jealous of Rana because she represents what Sirine cannot be – a typical Arab American woman. Sirine even admits that, because she is American, she does not have as much claim on Han as Iraqi or Middle Eastern girls like Rana. Sirine becomes hunted by the idea that Rana is Han’s secret love “who would summon him back to the old country, to his true identity” (230). Sirine tries to bridge the gap between herself, her American self, and the Arab side of Rana’s identity, by trying to understand Rana’s beliefs and traditions.

Sirine realizes the crisis of her identity. She always identifies herself as half-Arab. Abu-Jaber reveals Sirine’s crisis when

She stares at the portrait of herself in the metal-framed mirror. All she can see is white. She is so white. Her eyes wide, almond-shape, and sea-green, her nose and lips tidy and compact. Entirely her mother. That's all anyone can see: when people ask her nationality they react with astonishment when she says she's half-Arab. I never would have thought *that*, they say laughing. You sure don't look it. When people say this she feels like her skin is being peeled away. She thinks that she may have somehow inherited her mother on the outside and her father on the inside. If she could compare her own and her father's internal organs – the blood and bones and the shape of her mind and emotions – she thinks she would find her truer and deeper nature. (231)

Sirine always feels lost between her American part and Arab part. She performs a kind of self-criticism while looking at herself in the mirror; such an act is evocated by DuBois' concept of "double-consciousness," by which she assesses her identity through racial perceptions handed to her by mainstream white culture. Abu-Jaber believes that the problem of Arab-Americans can be solved through hybridity. She attempts to explore the Arab-American identity as something new, as an identity that exists related to but ultimately separate from the Arab and American identities from which is originally created. Hybridity, according to Bhabha, is the third space where two cultures, races, and ideas come to occupy one space ("Third Space" 211).

Sirine wishes to be Arab and American at the same time. She believes that both Arab and American culture identify who she is. Indeed, cultural identity must be considered in the context of cultural relationships. Han helps her to realize this truth. When she meets him she realizes that she belongs to the Arabic culture as well. She decides to make an Arab Thanksgiving for her family and friends to see the fusion of both parts of her identity. "At work, Sirine announces that this year will be an Arabic Thanksgiving with rice and pine nuts and ground lamb in the turkey instead of cornbread, and yogurt sauce instead of cranberries." (206)

Cooking Arab foods in a traditional American celebration ensures the cultural survival of Arab-Americans in the United States. Brinda Mehta suggests that the novel establishes the important link between Sirine's cuisine and identity in which "the preparation of food provides the protagonist with the basic ingredients for the healthy negotiation of her mixed-race Arab-American identity." (204)

Another important celebration is Ramadan where cooking for Ramadan becomes Sirine's first introduction to the Islamic side of her Arab-American heritage. Han tries to explain to Sirine the sacredness of Ramadan to Arabs and Muslims; he says "the idea behind the fast of Ramadan is to remind everyone of the poor and less fortunate, a time of charity, compassion, abstinence, and forgiveness." (244). Sirine decides to look up some of the more unusual dishes in honor of the month. She cooks different Ramadan meals and ends with the *Eid* celebration that shows the end of a month of spirituality. This meal includes the preparation of "whole stuffed lamb, baklava, and knaffea pastry with sweet cheese" (265).

Cooking gives Sirine the power of rehabilitating her self from the tension of hyphenation: "only when she cooks, in those moments of stirring and tasting , does she feel fully restored to herself" (340). The protagonist succeeds in her existential quest when she realizes that she does not have to choose between the two sides of her identity.

She can rightfully claim her subjectivity by being Arab and American simultaneously through cooking. In fact, the language of Arab cuisine provides Sirine with the necessary instruments with which to negotiate the complex American landscape where she finally achieves a sense of place “at home”.

## Conclusion

Food is undoubtedly a key element for the analysis of Abu-Jaber's *Crescent*. It is an artifact that brings together different ethnicities in the space of the café; it also functions as a spin board for both Sirine and Han to begin to negotiate their past memories; and serves as a trigger to her uncle's meaningful storytelling. And, as a result, the representation of food ends up being the ground for discussing political issues concerning the situation of Arab immigrants and their descendants in the United States.

In *Crescent*, food is indeed a form of participation through which the immigrant characters long for home and for acceptance in the new environment. Eating traditional food from their homelands seems to compensate for their adverse situations. Seen from this perspective, I concluded that food acquires the role of a site of memory, for it enables the characters – Arab immigrants and non-Arabs – to make associations to places or lived experiences.

In the context of *Crescent*, culinary memory is strongly connected to the kitchens, in this case, not only the kitchens of Nadia's Café, but also the ones in Sirine's and Hanif's homes. Because of that, analyzing the role of kitchens in the novel became highly important for my research, as they offered the ground on which characters make revelations. The vivid tastes of childhood dishes that permeate these spaces seemed to encourage the characters to unveil their past. Indeed, they contribute to the richness of Abu-Jaber's novel as food is not only a simple marker of ethnicity, but it is a strong metaphor of love, and a common language between the different ethnicities. Hence, the kitchens in the novel surpass ordinary assumptions to acquire the status of a site of memory, not only foregrounding revelations, but also becoming the stage on which the character Sirine enacts her Iraqi identity while maintaining the tradition of cooking the Arab dishes, inherited from her father.

The warmth and comfort of the café's kitchen transport her back to her childhood memories trying to partake in the moments when her parents cooked together in their kitchen.

Though the story has a somewhat awkward "happy end", Abu-Jaber weaves the novel with an innovative narrative framework. She offers different side-stories and mythical tales, all of which shift back and forth in time in order to express the sense of confusion that comes from having no stable sense of home.



## General Conclusion

The present research began with an attempt to trace the different waves of Arab immigration to the United States and understand the motives behind each flood and the impact of such an experience on the Arab community in general and Arab women in particular. The study showed that unlike the first generation who assimilated easily to mainstream culture, the second generation decided to claim their Arab part of identity while integrating to the American culture. After the instability of Arab American racial identification, Arabs are given an honorary white category by the US Census, being classified as Caucasian/White, a status can be and often is withdrawn at given moments. Indeed, despite Arabs' classification as racially white, the US government has unofficially grouped them as a distinct group by blaming Arabs for terrorist threats to the national security. Therefore, the new discrimination on Arabs is strongly associated to the current US foreign policy in the Middle East and its impact on the domestic context.<sup>119</sup>As a consequence, Arab literary productions in the US are deeply influenced by the precarious position Arabs occupy in ethnic and racial hierarchies. In this way, a discussion of the ways in which the post-9/11 events are represented enhances our understanding of the position Arabs occupy in discourses on race and ethnicity.

Nadine Naber maintains that the terrifying events of 9/11 are 'a turning point' rather than 'the starting point' of anti-Arab racism in the US.<sup>120</sup> Naber argues that since 9/11, Arab and Muslim Americans have been classified into a new segregated category that overshadows the important differences that exist within these populations. Newspapers, films and TV shows have been and are still powerful tools for propagating the false misconceptions on Arab

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<sup>119</sup> Michelle Hartman, "This Sweet/Sweet Music: Jazz, Sam Cooke, and Reading Arab American Literary Identities," *MELUS*, 2006: 145-165(p. 147).

<sup>120</sup>Nadine Naber, "Introduction: Arab Americans and U.S. Racial Formations," *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber: 1-45 (p.4).

and Muslim Americans and forming public opinion.<sup>121</sup> Naber further argues that in the current war on terror, ‘subjects perceived to be “Arab/Middle Eastern/Muslim” [are not only seen] as a moral, cultural, and civilizational threat to the “American” nation, but also as a security threat.’<sup>122</sup>

While Louise Cainkar agrees with Naber that racialization is a social process, she argues that the racialization process experienced by Arabs in the U.S. differs in both historical timing and pretext from that of other minority groups in the U.S. because the exclusion of Arab Americans from social and political privileges ‘postdates’ the historic exclusion of other marginalized groups.<sup>123</sup> Hence, it seems quite clear that the social exclusion of Arabs in the U.S. has been a racial project because Arab inferiority has been manufactured and used to influence the American public opinion using ‘essentialist constructions of human difference’ (48). Cainkar further states that the ways in which Arabs, Muslims, and people perceived to be Arabs and Muslims were held collectively responsible after the 9/11 attacks ‘should alone provide convincing evidence that their racial denouement had been sufficiently sealed before the attacks occurred’ (51).

Arab Americans after 9/11 have not only experienced an increase in discrimination but also have seen the legal system turn against them. Not only is the denial of their Americanness more pervasive than ever, but the assumption of their guilt by ethnic association has never been more conspicuous. Arabs and Muslims are perceived as threats and are seen as enemies from within.

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<sup>121</sup>For an examination of how Arab and Muslim Americans are represented as racialized subjects in newspapers in the aftermath of 9/11, see :Suad Joseph, Benjamin D’Harligue and alvin KaHin Wong, ‘Arab Americans and Muslim Americans in *The New York Times* before and after 9/11,’ in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 229-75. And for a detailed discussion of how films and TV shows in post-9/11 have demonized Arabs and rendered them enemies of the nation, see: Jack Shaheen, *Guilty: Hollywood’s Verdict on Arabs before and after 9/11* (Northampton, MA: Olive Branch Press, 2008).

<sup>122</sup>Nadine Naber, “Look, Mohamed the Terrorist is coming !” Cultural Racism, Nation-based Racism, and the Intersectionality of Oppressions after 9/11,’ in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp.276-304 (p. 280).

<sup>123</sup>Louise Cainkar, ‘Thinking Outside the Box : Arabs and Race in the United States,’ in *Race and Arab Americans before and after 9/11*, ed. by Jamal and Naber, pp. 46-80 (p.47).

In this way, Arab literary productions in the U.S. engage with questions of cultural identity, ethnic and racial relations and the diasporic experience. The ambiguous position Arabs occupy in the American ethnic and racial discourses influences Arab American literary productions in many ways. While Arabs in the U.S. are officially classified as White, they are popularly perceived as non-whites and occupy a contested and unclear space in studies on race and ethnicity; this position has differently intersected with Arab literary representations, socio-economic, political and historical issues.

In exploring this U.S. minority, a special emphasis has been put on their women and feminist issues. In my analysis of the two Arab American literary works, *Crescent* by Diana Abu-Jaber and *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by Mohja Kahf, I focus on the hybridization of the female protagonists, Sirine and Khadra respectively, and the cultural images through which Arab/Muslim American women are oppressed and misinterpreted by Western discourses. In my discussion of the two female writers' works, I show the importance of the veil and food in the definition of one's identity, and provide a critique of the Arab/Islamic feminist movement and the major issues that concerns them.

In discussing the feminist resistance to patriarchal and Western discourses, I have presented the voices of several Arab American/Islamic feminists who have tried to resist silencing and subordination, and undermine patriarchal fabrics of oppression whether local or western. Following the Scheherazadian storytelling strategy, these feminists not only reject suppression, but rewrite their stories rejecting reductive hegemonic narratives. They succeed in carving autonomous spaces that allow the Arab American woman to speak up, excel, and produce artistic work that challenges and subverts the various types of patriarchal and western dominance. In fact, Arab feminists and Middle Eastern scholars continue to negotiate the

contested terrains of women's relationship to national and Islamic movements and of the hybrid identities of Arab and Muslim women in the diaspora.<sup>124</sup>

Throughout the study, I have found that much more research needs to be done on the areas of Arab American/Islamic feminisms that need to be further addressed as part of the body of American literature because they have been ghettoized by the U.S. academy and feminist conferences, and read as "un-American" and insignificant to Western feminist movements or discussions. I believe this exclusion and silencing of Arab-American voices has led to a great lack of information about these women's concerns and struggles within U.S. intellectual discussions and feminist circles. This lack of information and communication hinders the establishment of coalitions among the various feminisms, mainstream and non-dominant. The gap between American and Arab-American women is best exemplified through by SuheirHammad's poem "*First Writing Since*" in which she feels the suffering of others and wishes she can unite in solidarity with other women in their common struggle against oppression and injustice around the world since everyone has been victimized in one form or another. However, she realizes that others in the dominant culture may not share the same sentiments but have rather embraced the West's perceptions of the other and the imperialist rhetoric of "us" vs. "them".

The present work also shows that Arab-American women are tremendously tired of being misunderstood and perceived as "the nameless veiled women" even in the developed feminist groups. They go on to note that the images of the "submissive woman" who is either crying or passively accepting her oppression within mainstream media mark Arab and Muslim women as having no control over their own lives which are being defined by men and thus they are unable to assert their identities or power as agents of social change. Thus the demonization of Arab women does not only obstruct the ways in which they are perceived,

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<sup>124</sup>Therese Saliba, "Arab Feminism at the Millennium," *Signs*. 25.4 (2000), 1087-1092, p. 1087

but it hinders Arab American women's activism by forcing them to continually challenging and breaking stereotypes. Perhaps if feminists and Western intellectuals approached the issue of the Muslim veil objectively within its own religious context, and not from a Eurocentric perspective, they would be able to respect such a practice and people's freedom of religious belief and finally be able to move beyond it to more critical issues affecting the lives of Arab American women.

The first contrast between Diana Abu-Jaber and Mohja Kahf lies on the fact that each author approaches feminism differently. While Kahf explicitly shows her activism and commitment to the Arab American feminist movement through her poems and works to demystify all the negative constructions attributed to Arab women namely the veil, she presents strong and independent women who fight for equal rights to the same opportunities which reflect the core of feminism. She also rejects the misinterpretations of the Qu'ranic text by the patriarchy which ignores the basic social principles of justice and equality. Abu-Jaber cannot be considered feminist per se because she shows no direct adherence to the Arab American feminist movement; however, the conception of her character focuses much on women's claim for freedom and liberty from social constraints and male-dominance which are best reflected in Rana, the typical Arab, veiled, dark featured who has escaped from the dominance of her husband in order to enjoy the freedom of living on her own.

The two novels discussed in this work show a preoccupation of Arab American writers to object the fixed images assigned to Arabs and Americans of Arab descent in the U.S. popular representations. In different ways, Diana Abu-Jaber's *Crescent* and Mohja Kahf's *The Girl* attempt to employ literary productions as resistance stratagems to humanize Arabs and Arab Americans as well. Both novelists have concentrated on exploring from within the contradictions of Arab American communities and tried to improve the image of Arab populations especially women who have been subjected to a long term process of stereotyping

in American literary and popular productions. In this sense, both novels tend to focus on finding ways to improve the image of Arab American communities especially after 9/11 and the subsequent war on terror. In exploring women's issues and their resistance to patriarchy and western discourses in the Arab-American community represented in Kahf and Abu-Jaber, the two protagonists, Khadra and Sirine, have renegotiated a space of their own for their hybrid identities and the multiple selves they house. They both struggle to find a third space to occupy outside their original culture and the dominant American culture where they do not feel a sense of belonging. In these two limited spaces, they are trapped between the "them" and "us" when in reality it is exactly this binary that constitutes their hybrid identity, for within them lies the conflicted "them" and "us" simultaneously.

As both novels highlight the daily experiences of their heroines and present their relationships to American and non-American characters as well, the reader is given a chance to examine the different socio-economic and political contexts in which these characters live. In fact, the two works tell the story of the female protagonists' struggle to find a way of coping with their hybrid state by settling boundaries and adjusting to the established borders by American society. Both novels are based on food, religion, and language which are important markers of the identity construction of the protagonists, Khadra and Sirine respectively. Although both stories discuss the Arab journey in the United States, each story differs from the other and tells the unparalleled experience of its protagonist highlighting the heterogeneity of the Arab American population which is made of Christians and Muslims, immigrants and people born and grown in America.

Furthermore, the two novels differ on the protagonists' background. While *The Girl* deals with the story of the Arab/Muslim American Khadra who immigrated to the United States with her Syrian parents at the age of 6 and went through a perplexing journey of self-discovery. *Crescent* brings the story of the American-born Sirine who discovered her

forgotten Arab (Iraqi) part of identity through food and her love affair with the Iraqi exile Han.

As the study goes on, it has been observed that the processes of identity formation are extremely influenced by age and generation. This is evident in the relationship between Khadra and her parents. While the older generation is strongly attached to the traditional customs, the younger one is more Americanized in its mastery of the English language and its adoption of the host country's ideas of the changing gender roles. Furthermore, the younger generation is more comfortable with its hyphenated identity; they try to take advantage from both worlds while struggling to find a place in the Third Space.

Consequently, a better examination of ethnic markers examined in every work, mainly the veil and Levantine food, shows the significance of these attributes in the protagonists' identity formation. On the one hand, with regard to the significance of religion in the identity construction of the heroines, we can say that unlike Sirine whose religion represents just an element of her Arab-American identity, Khadra is highly influenced by her Muslim identity, especially the veil. Her Muslimness is a noticeable characteristic of her identity. Throughout the novel, Khadra struggles to deconstruct some of the stereotypes related to Arab/Muslim American woman wearing the veil. She resists the Western and Oriental discourse that subordinates them and portray them as silenced women in need of liberation. She also resist patriarchal dominance over them that tries to keep them confined, limit their freedoms, and stand in the way of their autonomy and intellectual growth when she decided to divorce from Jumaa. While throughout the novel, Khadra's intention was to search a clear space, she comes to the conclusion that it is not necessary to have only one feature; she can manage all the different aspects of her identity. She realizes that she is what her experiences make her (Hammad: *Drops of This Story*, 1996: 85).

On the other hand, food is pervading in the analyzed works especially in *Crescent*. Anita Mannur states that “food [...] becomes a potent symbol for signifying the ethnic integrity of Arab Americans, serving both as a placeholder for marking cultural distinctiveness and a palliative for dislocation.”<sup>125</sup> In other words, the Arab American food works as a clear boundary between the Arab community and the host country and helps in remembering the lost homeland. Sirine is Iraqi by blood and has an American nationality. This combination hinders Sirine in establishing an autonomous identity for herself. She cooks Arab food which turns to become a significant element in her identity formation. She is only half Arab as she always states in the novel; in other words, she is not influenced by the Arab culture. By cooking Arab food, especially Middle Eastern food, Sirine is unconsciously embracing her difference and affirming her Arabness.

Hence, Diana Abu-Jaber has used food as the medium language to remember, maintain, and assert both home and identity. Through the focus on food she claims a common identity and proves her membership in it. Furthermore, food proves to be the best means of becoming a true Arab American while adjusting to the new home. It represents not only the process of Arab American identity construction in both first and later generations of immigrants, but also pictures and incites resistance to American cultural dominion. Abu-Jaber beautifully uses food to connect the new world and the new Arab Americans to the lost homeland. In doing, it suggests that food will continue to comfort Arab Americans today as they face the double-edged sword of racism and invisibility. Food furthermore relieves Sirine’s anxiety vis-à-vis both the old and new worlds, facilitating the tension between both cultural loss and marginalization.

In spite of the obvious success of food imagery, contemporary Arab American literature is incessantly questioning the boundary between Arab and American. Thus, the

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<sup>125</sup>Anita Mannur, “Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora.” *MELUS*, 32.4 (2007): 13.



food-identity discourse only partially helps in maintaining an Arab American identity. I contend that the food metaphor—as dealt with by the authors examined here—fails to genuinely involve all Arab Americans because the foods mentioned are overwhelmingly Levantine. For instance, foods like grape leaves and mjaddarah have no significance for Arab American of Maghrebi descent unlike Middle Eastern Americans on which it has a big effect. In this way, the discussion disassociates some Arab Americans by committing itself to regionalism. Consequently, it seems difficult to consider the resilience of this identity-food discourse.

In conclusion, I maintain that there are no explicit references to 9/11 in both novels. However, the reason for writing these stories might be the increased bigotry towards Arab Americans that resulted from the events of 9/11. It seems that with publishing the two novels, Mohja Kahf and Diana Abu-Jaber want to highlight the significance of tolerance by demonstrating that the U.S. is made up of diverse races, ethnicities, and identities. Yet it is noteworthy to mention that Leila Halaby's *Once in a Promised Land* (2007) can be considered as the first attempt by an Arab American novelist to explicitly represent the impacts of 9/11 on Arab Americans such as the manifest anti-Arab racism and the intensive FBI investigation of Jassim, Halaby's protagonist.

I hope that my critical analysis of the works of Mohja Kahf and Diana Abu-Jaber will open up new doors about U.S. Third World women issues both in the Arab world and the U.S. I further hope that my project paves the way to build bridges between U.S. feminists and Arab American feminists as they have been repudiated and excluded from many U.S. feminist discussions.

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## **Biography Mohja Kahf**

Mohja Kahf was born in Damascus, Syria in 1967. She is a Syrian-American poet and novelist. She grew up in the Midwest after the immigration of her family to the United States in 1971. She has a PhD in comparative literature from Rutgers University



and is a professor of English at the University of Arkansas. She is the author of the poetry collection *Emails from Scheherazad* (2003) and the novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006).

Kahf's perceptions of the differences and similitude between her homeland and the host country stem from her growing up in the United States. Her poetry is a mixture of both Syrian and American predominance; Kahf sometimes criticizes the many assigned stereotypes about Muslim women by tackling hairstyles, sex, and clothing. In *Emails from Scheherazad*, she settles Scheherazad in 21st-century Hackensack, New Jersey and construct empowered women who are not afraid of standing out and claiming their difference. Kahf has also tackled the burden of immigration in *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* by depicting a Muslim girl's identity formation in Indiana.

Kahf co-writes a column on sexuality for the website Muslim Wake Up. Her nonfiction work includes *Western Representation of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999).

### **Synopsis of *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf***

*The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* is written in a form of a bildungsroman set in the American heartland. Khadra Shamys, a young Syrian-born girl and the heroine of the novel, lives with her family in Indianapolis, where her parents aspire to spread the word of the prophet and to help fellow Muslims perfect their practice of Islam. Chosen for its geographical location, “international airport, low crime rates, and affordable land,” Indianapolis becomes the destination of choice for Khadra's sincere, devout parents. Intent on inculcating the “Islamic Lifestyle” to other Muslims, Khadra's parents have no reluctance about dictating the religious behavior of their friends. Khadra is nurtured by a tight-knit, cosmopolitan community of Muslim aunties and uncles, comprising African Americans, Arabs, South Asians, and Cambodians. However, the community is marked by sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Shias, the racial prejudices of Arab members against their African and African American cohorts, and differences in economic status. As the novel progresses, Khadra sheds her simplistic understanding of each of these identities and gains a more complex one. During her sojourn in Syria following her divorce, she learns more multiculturalism on the same trip and becomes more indulgent through her interactions with Syrian Jews and her recognition of their claims to an authentic Syrian identity. After returning to the United States, Khadra similarly articulates a multicultural American identity, delighting in the ethnic and religious diversity of Philadelphia, where she has moved to escape Indiana and to pursue a degree in photography. Her conception of Islam expands to incorporate a wide range of practices.

## Biography Diana Abu-Jaber

Diana Abu-Jaber is an Arab American author and a teacher at Portland State University. She was born in 1960 in Syracuse, New York. Her father is Jordanian and her mother is American, from Irish and German descent. She moved to Jordan with her family



when she was seven years old and spent there two years. She spends her life between Miami and Portland. She is the author of the novels *Arabian Jazz* and *Crescent*. The latter was awarded the 2004 PEN Center USA Award for Literary Fiction and the Before Columbus Foundation's American Book Award and was selected as one of the twenty best novels of 2003 by The Christian Science Monitor. On the other hand, *Arabian Jazz* won the 1994 Oregon Book Award and was nominated for the PEN/Faulkner Award. She is also the author of a memoir, *The Language of Baklava*, and *Origin* (2007) the first in a new mystery series starring Lena, a highly gifted, intuitive fingerprint expert.

## **Synopsis of Crescent**

*Crescent* is a novel about a thirty-nine-year-old woman, Sirine, who is Iraqi-American and works as a chef at Nadia's Café, a Lebanese restaurant, in Los Angeles. Sirine is single and falls in love with an Iraqi exile named Hanif Al Eyad, a professor of Arabic literature at the University. Despite being a hyphenated person, Sirine does not speak Arabic, the language of her father.

The legacy of her parents – especially from her father – are the old recipes of Arab dishes. When Sirine started working at the café, she began cooking “the favorite – but almost forgotten – dishes of her childhood. She felt as if she were returning to her parents' tiny kitchen and her earliest memories” (Abu-Jaber 19). It is through the medium of food that Sirine negotiates her Arab self.

Hanif or Han, as he is called throughout the novel, carries the pain of being an exile. In a certain way, he tries to place himself inside the new environment of the U.S. and, little by little, he reveals details of his life. The novel is interwoven with Hanif's flashbacks of his life in Iraq and his escape from the country during Saddam Hussein's dictatorship.