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Arab Voices in Diaspora

Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature

Edited by

Layla Al Maleh

Arab Voices in Diaspora

Cross Cultures

Readings in the Post / Colonial Literatures in English

115

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Leila Kubba, *Distance* (2007; acrylic and collage on canvas, 100 x 100 cm). Courtesy of the artist.

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LAYLA AL MALEH
JUNE 2009

Preface

Arab Voices in Diaspora: Critical Perspectives on Anglophone Arab Literature sheds light on an increasingly important body of creative writing in English by Arab authors, or by authors of Arab descent. It deals with a previously neglected corpus of literary work that is now receiving increasing attention not only from university departments with Middle Eastern concerns but also from intellectuals everywhere who are interested in postcolonial studies, the New Literatures, and indeed the larger domain of World Literature in English.

Although scores of books have looked at anglophone literature around the globe, they tend to make scant reference to the contribution of Arab writers. The literature of the Caribbean, the West Africans, the Indians, for example, has been introduced to the world, investigated, and analyzed. Names such as those of Chinua Achebe, Derek Walcott, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Bharati Mukherjee, and Anita Desai, among others, now form what we might call a 'parallel canon' indispensable to academic departments everywhere. However, anthologies and critical scholarship approaching anglophone Arab writing remained scanty, except for a doctoral dissertation here and an M.A. thesis there. Edward Said, the Arab-American godfather of postcolonial theory, wrote a brief article on Ahdaf Soueif's novel *In the Eye of the Sun*, but even Said overlooked Arab literature of English expression.

The fact of the matter is that Arabs have been using English as a medium of literary expression since the beginning of the past century. A significant anglophone Arab literary revival has taken place in the last few decades. Now, quite logically, it is awaiting full recognition. Hyphenated Arab-American, Arab-British, and Arab-Australian authors have been making their voices heard with originality and confidence. They aim to carve a niche for themselves within other emerging literatures which use

the lingua franca of English. While their voices could easily be accommodated under labels such as 'emigrant', 'ethnic', and 'postcolonial', the term 'anglophone', coined after the model of 'francophone', has been found to be convenient enough to lodge them within the larger multicultural family.

The description implied by this adjective 'anglophone' does not simply provide a linguistic 'shelter' for the Arab writer in English. What the label also achieves is a much wider umbrella under which certain themes and concerns can be shared. Born away from the homeland, Anglo-Arab literature is haunted by the same 'hybrid', 'exilic', and 'diasporic' questions that have dogged fellow postcolonialists.

The tension between the centre and the periphery, the 'homeland' and the 'host land' raises, time and again, familiar issues of belonging, allegiance, and affinity. Concerns pertinent to cultural and relational identification lie at the heart of these works, and the tension between assimilation and preservation is equally persistent. Some commentators find migration and hybridity enriching and invigorating agents. Others seek to conceptualize a 'third space', as Homi Bhabha called it, or an in-betweenness, which challenges ideas of essentialism and root-oriented identity politics. In this vein, some essays in the present volume propose an exploration of the Anglo-Arab writer's sense of hybridity and liminality. Other essays move theoretically from a notion of exilic nationalism to the idea of diasporic transnationalism .

Apart from literary values, cultural affinities, and thematic concerns, anglophone Arab literature has recently captured the attention of readers worldwide as a medium through which they can gain a better knowledge of the intellectual and spiritual make-up of Arabs. Literary works accessible in a familiar language can offer plausible interpretation and humanization of Arabs much better than journalism, historical reports or political memoirs. Written in English, works by Fadia Faqir, Ahdaf Soueif, Leila Aboulela, Hisham Matar, Rabih Alameddine, Suheir Hamad, or Mohja Kahf, to name a few examples, serve as cultural mediators. These authors project the Arab by way of themes and types that negotiate between different cultures. They present not the exotic or alien but the comprehensible and acceptable. Moving beyond an internal audience, anglophone Arab writers have the capacity to play a crucial role in disseminating through the wider world their images of hyphenated Arabs and of the Arab people as a whole, thereby fostering acceptance through understanding.

Universities in the USA, Europe, and the Middle East have begun to include courses in their curriculum that incorporate anglophone Arab writing. Although primary sources, independently published, are available, the need for a book that offers a specific critical matrix is more pressing now than ever – a book that recognizes both Arab and Western cultures and is aware of the diverse artistic traditions from which Anglo-Arab literature emerges. This collection of critical essays seeks to meet this need and point out, to both the common reader and the academic, certain sites of inquiry that delineate a growing literature and map its main features.

Contributors to this volume have by and large identified these sites of inquiry as centering on a set of related themes. These may be summarized as double-consciousness, hybridity, in between-ness, transcultural singular experiences, as well as questions of stereotyping, ethnic representation, and reception. Such issues are explored in works that represent several geographical locations. Alhough special emphasis is given to Arab-American literature (Gibran, Rihani, Alameddine, Ahmad, Abu Jaber, Kahf, Chaldean-American literature), considerable attention is devoted to the British-Arab experience (Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Leila Aboulela), the Canadian-Arab (Abboud), and the Australian-Arab (Nada Jarrar, Jad El Hage).

The opening chapter of this volume provides an overview of the history and development of anglophone Arab literature in North America, Britain, Australia, and other parts of the world by reviewing its major exponents. This survey, in seeking primarily to place the writers in an historical and cultural context, is more expositional than analytical, leaving the task of critical assessment and analysis to the individual articles which follow. It cannot claim comprehensiveness, although that has at least been approached. The wide scope of the subject must make this an overview. Much has been said about the emergence of this literature as a whole, but each voice needs to make its echo.

I must apologize in advance for dwelling more on fiction than on poetry, but this was determined by the need to discuss works students are currently more likely to encounter in their courses.

I must, however, hasten to say that this book does not address itself to university students and academics alone, but also to the general reader who might find the subject interesting. I trust that the essays assembled

here will offer them all a valuable resource and encourage future research in the field.

It should also be pointed out that not all anglophone Arab authors writing in different corners of the globe have been given consideration at length. This should, of course, not be taken to imply that those presented are the only ones worth reading.

Anglophone Arab Literature

An Overview

LAYLA AL MALEH

> I left this place by running all the way to California. An exile which lasted for years. I came back on a stretcher, and felt here a stranger, exiled from my former exile. I am always away from something and somewhere. My senses left me one by one to have a life of their own. If you meet me in the street, don't be sure it's me. My center is not in the solar system.[1]

THE IRONY OF ANGLOPHONE ARAB LITERATURE is that it did not gain attention or attain recognition until the world woke up one day to the horror of the infamous 9/11 and asked itself who those 'Arabs' really were. The additional irony is that anglophone Arab writers are perhaps the furthest away from paradigmatic Arabs, themselves being the progeny of cultural espousal, hybridity, and diasporic experience. It simply so happened that their works came in handy in recent years, as they seemed to meet the needs of a readership eager to learn about Arab culture and intellectual make-up in a language that was the lingua franca of the modern age. Bookstores in Western cities and towns began to display on their shelves arrays of anglophone Arab works placed next to Afghan, Pakistani, and Iranian ones.[2] It did not seem

[1] Etel Adnan, "In the Heart of the Heart of Another Country," *Mundus Artium* 10 (1977): 23.

[2] The Afghani-American writer Khaled Hosseini, author of *The Kite Runner*, and the Pakistani-British author Hanif Kureishi were often confused with Arab authors writing

to matter who was who, so long as the names and titles fed the euphoria of luring the reader to a better comprehension of the 'terrorist Other'. I was most amused when I discovered that even Amazon.com, the famous book supplier, was 'resurrecting' and recommending to its readers with Middle Eastern interests books such as Agatha Christie's *They Came to Baghdad* (1950) and *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) for the frisson of the name 'Baghdad'.[3] However, the more significant and noticeable mark of increasing interest in anglophone Arab literature was not in the bookstores but in the growing number of universities world-wide that began to add to their curricula courses which engaged students in the study of the Arab/Muslim mind and Islamic theology, and found in anglophone Arab writers a convenient window on Arab thought and culture. Arabs at last became 'visible'; a pity that this visibility was filtered through 'terror', rather than through the catharsis of Aristotelian 'pity and fear'.

Anglophone Arab literature is certainly not in its swaddling-clothes,[4] and dates back to the turn of the last century when the first Arabs to emigrate to the USA had to grapple with the language and culture of the host country. As Wail Hassan states in his interesting article on Khalil Gibran in this collection, it was in America that writers produced the first anglophone Arab poetry collection, *Myrtle and Myrrh* (1905), the first play, *Wajdah* (1909), the first novel, *The Book of Khalid* (1911),[5] and the first Arab-English autobiography, Abraham Mitrie Rihbany's *A Far Journey* (1914). Save for Gibran Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931), who broke sales records with his *Prophet*[6] and enjoyed unprecedented success for an anglophone Arab writer,[7] very few others were known to the average reader.

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in English, even by academics who offered to contribute to this volume articles on their works.

[3] The titles were recommended to readers, including myself, with an interest in the Arab world.

[4] Dusé Mohamed Ali's *In the Land of the Pharaohs* can be considered one of the earliest works written in English by an Arab; it was published in London and New York in 1911 (London: Frank Cass, 2nd ed. 1968).

[5] On this, see my doctoral dissertation "The English Novel by Arab Writers" (London University, 1980).

[6] The book sold about eight million copies and was translated into some fifty languages.

[7] William Peter Blatty is the only Arab-American novelist (and screenwriter) apart from Gibran to have enormous commercial success. His international fame rested on the theological horror tale of the *Exorcist* (1971), which became a worldwide bestseller,

Gibran's contemporaries, Ameen Rihani (1876–1940), a prolific writer in English and author of diverse genres,[8] and Mikhail Naimy (1889–1988), author of *The Book of Mirdad* and *Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul, or the Pitted Face*, were long better known for their works in Arabic than for those in English, hence geographically confined to readers in the Arab world. Only recently have Arab and Arab-American critics and academics begun to examine the legacy bequeathed to them by their predecessors, celebrating it at times as a literary landmark, at others minimizing or even denying its literary value.[9]

The writing of Gibran and his contemporaries of Arab descent was a blend of messianic discourse and Sufi thought.[10] The authors saw themselves as visionaries and assumed cosmic missions for their lives, a practice not wholly out of line with the traditional role assigned to poets in Arab culture.[11] However, it was this very role of poet–prophet that of late has 'engendered' so much controversy over their writings and 'endangered' their literary standing. In their quest for fame and a place in mainstream American literary circles, the question asked is whether they 'orientalized' themselves to increase sales and acceptance by casting themselves in the image of charismatic genius (see Hassan and Hishmeh's articles), or whether their idea of a happy compromise between East and West merely subscribed to a reductionist, monlolithic idea of a 'spiritual' East drowned in its mystical stupor versus a more alert and dynamic 'rational' West.

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with thirteen million copies in the USA alone (http://www.kirjasto.sci.fi/blatty.htm) (Gregory Orfalea's *The Arab Americans*, 34). Blatty's works include a screenplay *A Shot in the Dark* (1964), *What Did You Do in the War, Daddy* (1966), and an autobiography, *I'll Tell Them I Remember You* (1973).

[8] *The Book of Khalid*, *The Chant of Mystics*, *Around the Coasts of Arabia*, to name but a few of his works.

[9] The past two decades have witnessed academic attempts to resurrect Rihani's scholarship in the USA. Many of his neglected manuscripts were published, several editions of his out-of-print works were released, calls for conference papers and journal articles have featured on almost regular basis, and ceremonial celebrations were given in his honour in Lebanon and abroad, including a bust at Tufts University in Boston, in 2004.

[10] See my essay in this collection.

[11] In *Al Ghirbal*, Mikhail Naimy's book on literary criticism, the author considers the poet or writer "as a prophet or philosopher who is endowed with a special capacity for discovering the truth." Cited by Tanyss Ludescher, "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature," *MELUS* 31.4 (Winter 2006): 96.

There were, of course, those who hailed the early-twentieth-century anglophone writers, seeing them as initiators and pioneers of cultural mediation and early examples of transnationalism and border-crossing.[12] However one regards such arguments, the fact cannot be ignored that these authors wrote not from a sense of inferiority but from wellsprings of confidence that later dried up, to judge from the pessimism characterizing anglophone Arab works of the mid-twentieth century (discussed later). They were the first real cultural mediators between East and West, finding themselves as they did in the conciliatory position of being able, through the medium of English, to dispel misgivings about each culture and establish genuine intellectual rapprochement between the two traditions. Furthermore, their mediatory function extended to reconciling faiths, Islam and Christianity, in their country of origin. Gibran and Rihani wrote in a manner that synthesized Christian and Muslim registers into a more or less unified idiom.

Whether accused of mysticism, naiveté, primitivism, excessive idealism, or self-exoticizing, the first anglophone Arab writers to put pen to paper reflected in their works a sense of collective optimism, celebration, and exultation. Indeed, one cannot fail to detect a note of jubilation, a certain delight in being able to negotiate boundaries beyond the spaces of their birth-place, an in-dwelling contentment quite unlike the expressions of pain and agonizing dislocation that characterize postcolonial hybridity of late. Theirs is a kind of 'metropolitan' hybridity, to borrow R. Radhakrishnan's words, "ensconced comfortably in the heartland of both national and transnational citizenship,"[13] a hybridity that undoubtedly helped them negotiate the 'identity politics' of their place of origin and their chosen abode with less tension than their successors. And theirs was not a literature of displacement – true, there was the typical 'now' and 'then, the 'here' and 'there', the 'them' and 'us', but the writers seem to have maintained their balance amidst the disjunctions of temporal and spatial distance and to have preserved their dual allegiance. Helped by a readership

[12] Describing Gibran, Suheil B. Bushrui states that "Like few men in history, he was able to view the East and the West in parallel. Never seeing the one to the disadvantage of the other, he endeavored always to bring the virtues of both into consonance" (Bushrui, "The Thought and Works of Ameen Rihani," http://www.alhewar.com /Bushrui_Rihani.html).

[13] R. Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations* (Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 1996): 159.

disenchanted by the growing materialism of the West and lamenting a purer, virginal, pre-industrial world, they were strategically well-placed to cater for the taste of a readership that was looking for sources of inspiration beyond its cultural borders. While appealing to these 'new-found' readers, they did not betray their cultural memory, deny their own past or prove disloyal to their country of origin; rather, they viewed both past and present critically. From a 'culturalist' perspective, this amounted to a readiness to accept cultural 'difference', an attitude heralding the greater 'pluralism' that was to characterize much later periods of the twentieth century.

But, of course, the writers desired smooth admittance to mainstream America. Perhaps it is to that end that several of them resorted to writing the personal narrative typical of much immigrant literature. Many chronicled their experiences of migration and of settling into the new host country – Asaad Yacoob Kayat, *A Voice from Lebanon* (1847); Abraham Mitri Rihbani, *A Far Journey* (1914); George Haddad, *Mt. Lebanon to Vermont* (1916); Ashad G. Hawie, *The Rainbow Ends* (1942); Salloum Rizk, *Syrian Yankee* (1943); and George Hamid, *Circus* (1950). The purpose behind writing the self was not just the desire to record a journey and its concomitant hardships. These autobiographies were in the nature of an apologia, as if justifying their authors' abandonment of, or 'defection' from, their country of origin. The writers reason through and explain their motives for emigration. In the lines of Abraham Mitri Rihbani, "Our aim is to conquer / Ignorance by knowledge / Sin by righteousness / Discord by harmony / Hatred by love."[14]

While the autobiographers apologized to the people they left behind, they tended in their memoirs to solicit the sympathy of the people they joined. Ashad G. Hawie, who served in the 'Rainbow Division', Private First Class, US Army during the First World War and who was presented with the Distinguished Service Cross for "extraordinary heroism in action in France," hoped to offer, in his *Rainbow Ends*, sufficient proof of his Americanism and patriotism and hence his right to assimilate and gain acceptance. Writing an autobiography, according to Salom Risk, is a "small little debt he pays back as a citizen of this great land" (USA).[15] This

[14] Abraham Mitri Rihbani, *Far Journey* (Boston MA & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914): 346.

[15] Salom Risk, *Syrian Yankee* (Garden City NY: Doubleday, 1943).

explains why the autobiographies written towards the beginning of the past century were almost 'hagiographic' in the sense that they idealized American life. Settling their debt in this way for admittance to what they saw as a utopia was the least they could do. Many of them, as Lisa Suheir Majaj suggests, stressed their Christian identity and association with the Holy Land for the same purpose of winning acceptance.[16]

1950–1970

Whereas Arab immigrants to the USA in the 1930s and 1940s were busy settling down and assimilating, even vanishing, into mainstream American society,[17] anglophone Arab writing was beginning to shift its locus elsewhere. Arab students, who were mostly the products of missionary and foreign schools that were flourishing in the Middle East, began trickling into British universities or seeking employment on British soil. Many were the subjects of cultural colonialism; imbued with love of the language of their education, fascinated by the English life-style reflected in their textbooks, reared in and formed by Western norms and values, they yearned to express themselves creatively in the language of the 'superior' Other and to internalize the 'Other' in every possible way. In 1946, Edward Atiyah, a British citizen of Lebanese origin and author of *The Arabs* (1958), *An Arab Tells His Story* (1946), *The Thin Line* (1951) (a history, an autobiography and a novel successively), and several other novels, boasted, of his acquired 'Englishness', "I have made English my language, in which I can speak and write as well as most educated Englishmen."[18] This linguistic achievement, as Atiyah tells, was later "crowned by [his] marriage to an English girl," which made him "the next best to a natural son of England, a son-in-law. Surely that is the nearest any gentile can get to being a Jew." "Now," he says, "I can meet any Englishman on a footing of equality. I need no longer feel ashamed of myself, inferior. Everything that an Englishman can boast of having, apart from the blood in his veins, I have inherited."[19]

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[16] "Meaning of Race," 328, cited by Tanyss Ludescher, "From Nostalgia to Critique," 100.

[17] Gregory Orfalea, *Before the Flames: A Quest for the History of Arab Americans* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1998): 3.

[18] Edward Atiyah, *An Arab Tells His Story* (London: John Murray, 1946): 124.

[19] Atiyah, *An Arab Tells His Story*, 124.

Atiyah was the most prolific of the writers that followed. Those who wrote in English after him were mostly single-work authors. Waguih Ghali, an Egyptian Copt, produced one novel, *Beer in the Snooker Club* (1964), before he took his own life. Jabra Ibrahim Jabra, a Palestinian, wrote *Hunters in a Narrow Street* (1960) in English, translating it himself into Arabic many years later. The Lebanese Rima Alamuddin's *Spring to Summer* (1963) was her sole novel, followed by a collection of short stories; she too, had a tragic death. *A Bedouin Boyhood* (1967) by the Palestinian Isaak Diqs was likewise his only work. The literature written could hardly be said to constitute a distinctive literary corpus meriting a place on the map of world literature in English or bearing comparison with the more established anglophone writings from Africa, India or the Caribbean. It was more or less the product of cultural and historical accidents that took the authors in the direction of one culture rather than another.

The writing of these authors differed greatly from that of their predecessors (Rihani, Gibran, Naimy), in that they seemed to grow more out of the European tradition than the American literary scene of the time. Their works mostly reflected their British educational and intellectual formation, a phenomenon that inhibited the rise of a distinctly Arab-English style or register.[20] Unlike the Nigerians, for example, who use the language freely and even irreverently on occasion,[21] Arab authors in English did not venture to innovate through coinages or the incorporation of the local vernacular, or to experiment stylistically. They worked within metropolitan discursive codes and the language they used remained 'very English', to say the least, terse and conservative, except when a deliberate 'foreignization' or 'exotization' was introduced. The reason for this is that 'Arab English', if such a thing ever existed, during this period developed its most vital character from within the boundaries of Western discourse, from the very language of Britain and British schooling, not from a locally emergent language, an appropriation or subversion of it, or from a desire to challenge its dominance.

The writers were not only inhibited by the English language that they used so reverently but also by Western culture in general, consequently seeing themselves and their people through the eyes of Europeans, and

[20] See my doctoral dissertation, "The English Novel by Arab Writers," 15.

[21] "Writing in West Africa," *Times Literary Supplement* (10 August 1962).

presenting mostly a folkloric picture of life in the Arab world. Perhaps the success of some of these works actually derived not from any literary merit so much as from the unfamiliar experiences conveyed. The popularity of a work like Diqs's *A Bedouin Boyhood*, for example, can indeed be largely attributed to the 'magic spell' Bedouin life had cast on a public fascinated by the outlandish and the quaint rather than by any artistic competence.

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

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

Although critical reception varied considerably, many of these publications were warmly received and even reprinted. In 1967, Isaak Diqs's *Bedouin Boyhood* (published by George Allen & Unwin) was described as a "little classic" written in a "biblical language,"[22] a work "of real literary worth"[23] that surpasses in its simplicity and its "manner of writing […] the heightened prose […] of a Doughty or a Lawrence."[24] Praeger pub-

[22] *Scarborough Evening News* (14 April 1967).
[23] *Times Literary Supplement* (5 October 1967).
[24] *Economist* (6 May 1967).

lished an edition of it in the USA and Pergamon Press reprinted it as part of an educational series for children in other countries. Similarly, Ronald Bryden of the *New Statesman* called *Beer in the Snooker Club* "a small masterpiece of a novel," and a reprint of the novel was brought out in the Penguin New Writers Series in 1968. An American hardback edition by Alfred A. Knopf followed. Edward Atiyah earlier met with the same success with his first novel, *The Thin Line*, republished in the USA by Harper and Brothers and in paperback by Avon. Translations of the novel followed, into such world languages aas Norwegian, Spanish, German,[25] Swedish, Italian, French, and Japanese.[26] Two years after its publication, *The Thin Line* was dramatized by H.M. Harwood and was brought to the Whitehall Theatre by the "New Edward Terry Players" group for their production in March 1953.[27] The success of both novel and dramatized version encouraged the Associated British Pictures Corporation to buy the copyright, but work on the film was delayed and a French production appeared instead under the title *Juste avant la nuit*, directed by Claude Chabrol.[28]

The works by anglophone Arab writers in the mid-1950s and 1960s, few as they were, were obviously doing well and seemed to have had a very encouraging start. The authors were praised for a variety of reasons ranging from the "simplicity and directness of [the] writing"[29] (*Bedouin*) to "audacity and vivacity" (*Beer*)[30] and from engaging cultural representation to the authentic political information (*Lebanon Paradise*) they yielded.[31] Much of the acclaim, however, seemed to be due to the feeling

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[25] It was serialized in a German magazine (publisher's note).

[26] *La Linea Sutil*, tr. Elena Torres Galarce (Buenos Aires: Emece, 1955); *Den Tynne Streken*, tr. Eivind Hauge (Bergen: J.W. Eidea, 1952); *La Lama dell'Agnoscia*, tr. Giacomo Gentilomo (Milan & Piacenza: La Tribuna, 1964); *L'etau*, tr. Raoul Holz (Paris: Gallimard, 1963); tr. Jun Fumimura (Tokyo: Hayakawa Shobo, 1954).

[27] The leading lady of the play and the group's artistic director was Miss Iris Terry, granddaughter of Edward Terry and the last of a famous theatrical family.

[28] In 1975, the film was listed by *TIME* magazine as one of "the year's best."

[29] *Scarborough Evening News* (14 April 1967).

[30] Letter from Diana Athill, director of André Deutsch, dated London, 17 August 1976.

[31] The *Jewish Observer and Middle East Review* found *Lebanon Paradise* to contain "more truth and insight than all the writing of Khalidi and [Erskine] Childers combined," Obituary note (30 October 1964): 9, and the reviewer of the *Liverpool Daily Post* found the work of interest "because it is the story from the inside of what

of surprise English critics had at the time when they discovered that Arabs, too, were writing creatively in the language of the British Isles. Arab anglophone authors were often praised for mastering the English language handling it deftly. Reviewing *A Bedouin Boyhood* for an Australian paper, Mary Armitage thought that, "for a former Bedouin shepherd, to write a book in English is an achievement in itself, like the classic dog walking on its hind legs."[32] The shock of surprise and the oxymoronically demeaning praise persisted with the reviewers of *Bible Lands*: "This book is a remarkable achievement. Its author, a Bedu from Southern Palestine who was educated entirely in that country, is writing in the language of a country he has presumably never seen."[33] The 'implausible' subaltern crossing language borders seemed to add to the exotic sensation evoked by such works. Even Edward Atiyah, a prominent speaker, public figure, and proud bilingual who was frequently invited to Oxbridge debates and to press conferences to discuss political issues, and who was frequently read and heard in newspaper editorials and radio programmes, was also commended for the fact that the "author's mother tongue is Arabic, which makes it [*The Thin Line*] all the more deserving of the praise."[34]

It was not only the 'miracle' of foreign-language acquisition that was applauded but also the equally 'impressive' cultural crossing that came with it. In a most patronizing tone, the *New York Times* reviewer commended Atiyah's literary undertaking because it was the work of "a Syrian whose command of the English is as amazing as his insight into English psychology."[35] For Nigel Nicholson of the *Daily Dispatch*, the more remarkable achievement was the fact that the "author could write a book so sharply and accurately western."[36] The subaltern was addressing the West and in its own language and from its own perspective!

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happened to the Arabs who left Palestine after 1948" and maintained that it was "for the political and geographical situation that most people will read and remember and perhaps disagree with it" (6 October 1953).

[32] Mary Armitage, "Growing up in the Desert," *Adelaide Advertiser* (16 December 1967).

[33] Undated clipping from the publishers' collection of reviews.

[34] *Times Literary Supplement* (12 October 1951).

[35] Anthony Boucher, *New York Times* (18 May 1952).

[36] *Daily Dispatch* (31 August 1951).

1970 – Present: Exile or Diaspora?

> The fact of migration is extraordinarily impressive to me: that movement from the precision and concreteness of one form of life transformed or transmuted into another [...] And then of course the whole problematic of exile and immigration enters into it, the people who simply don't belong in any culture; that is the great modern, or, if you like, post-modern fact, the standing outside of cultures.[37]

In the course of one century of anglophone Arab writing, three trends can so far be identified: the *Mahjar* (early-twentieth-century émigrés in the USA); the europeanized aspirants of the mid-1950s; and the more recent hybrids, hyphenated, transcultural, exilic/diasporic writers of the past four decades or so who have been scattered all over the world. The early Arab immigrants came from backgrounds of poverty and even illiteracy and worked their ways up to elitist literary circles; furthermore, they were able, as has already been stated, to preserve a happy balance between East and West, home/host country; conversely, the subsequent generation of the 1950s, as described earlier, came from elite backgrounds and worked assiduously to embrace the identity of the European 'Other', thus typifying the traumas and excruciating experiences of the culturally 'colonized' aptly delineated by Frantz Fanon. Doomed to face rejection by metropolitan power but having cut their moorings to their country of origin, they had no choice but to embrace their own alienation and estrangement.

The third group, those who began writing after the 1970s, is the least homogeneous. There were those – second-, third-, even fourth-generation hyphenated Arabs – who were born and raised on the no longer foreign soil of their immigrant forebears; and there were those who were new immigrants working out of an experience of transculturation. The latter came from diverse intellectual and social backgrounds, faiths, vocations, and political inclinations, and, settling in Canada, USA,[38] Britain, and Australia, had a diverse or divergent connection to the homeland.

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[37] Edward Said, "The Mind of Winter: Reflections on Life in Exile," *Harper's Magazine* 269 (September 1984): 51.

[38] In *Arab American Literary Fictions, Cultures, and Politics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Steven Salaita points to the diversity of Arab-Americans. Those are "Muslim (Shia and Sunni and Alawi and Isma'ili), Christian (Catholic and Orthodox, Anglican and Evangelical, and Mainline Protestant), Jewish (Orthodox and Conserva-

The new Arab immigrants are but part of the mass population movements witnessed world-wide in the past few decades. The reasons for their emigration are legion. The Palestinians' 'Exodus' from their homeland in 1948, the 1967 and 1973 wars with Israel, the Lebanese civil war and its aftermaths, the two Gulf wars and the Iraq debacle, exile, whether forced or self-imposed, flight from dictatorships – domestic (familial) or political – pursuit of self-betterment through education and decent work, the expanding mobility of capital,[39] and people's desire to seek opportunities to improve their life are some of the factors. A recent report[40] submitted by the National Association of British Arabs (NABA)[41] estimated the present number of UK Arabs at 500,000 compared to 200,000 Arabs in Canada (1991 census)[42] and the estimated three million Americans of Arab origin (the fastest-growing group of immigrants) who roughly equal the size of the Native-American population (Arab-Americans form only 1.2 percent of the overall US population).[43] In Australia, more than half a million Australians claim some form of Arab ancestry.[44]

Anglophone Arab writers have much to share linguistically and culturally. They are descendants of a rich heritage, with a shared history, the

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tive and Haredi and Reform), Druze, Bahai, dual citizens of Israel and twenty-two Arab nations, multi- and monolingual, progressives and conservatives, assimilationists and nationalists, cosmopolitanists and pluralists, immigrants and fifth-generation Americans, wealthy and working class, rural and urban, modern and traditional, religious and secular, white and black, Latin American and Canadian." For more information on Arab Americans, see Anan Ameri's *Arab Americans in Metro Detroit: A Pictorial History* (Detroit MI: Arcadia, 2001).

[39] *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1SEC816115

In a period of ten years, 1983–92, a total of 13,379 investors/entrepreneurs came largely from Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, but with strong representation from Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, and Syria.

[40] NABA, http://www.britisharabs.net/ or www.naba.org.uk

[41] Report submitted by a Mr I.K. Jalili, chairman of NABA.

[42] *The Canadian Encyclopedia.* http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=A1SEC816115

[43] Randa Kayyali, *The Arab Americans* (Westport CT: Greenwood, 2005): 97.

[44] *Arab-Australians Today: Citizens and Belonging*, ed. Ghassan Hage (Melbourne University Publishing) http://www.mup.unimelb.edu.au/catalogue/0-522-84979-2.html

wealth of a much-respected literature, and an esteemed language.[45] They may have their individual differences pertaining to religious credo, social practices or political orientations, yet they all subscribe to one broad unifying belief in Arab culture.[46] In their diasporic abodes, anglophone Arab writers were compelled, more out of necessity than choice, to negotiate identities from a vantage-point with firm links to Arab history, even when they were second- or third-generation writers. Indeed, much of what they wrote still reflected a warm relationship[47] to the homeland despite the authors' geographical distance from it.

Anglophone Arab Literature in Britain: 1970 – Present

What characterizes anglophone Arab discourse in Britain in the past thirty years or so is that it is mostly female, feminist, diasporic in awareness, and political in character. Indeed, the presence of female writers is highly visible, vivid and indelible. The literary corpus includes names such as Ahdaf Soueif, author of *Aisha*, *In the Eye of the Sun*, and *The Map of Love*; Fadia Faqir, author of *Nisanit* (1989), *Pillars of Salt* (1996), and *The Cry of the Dove*[48] (2007); Leila Abulela, who wrote *The Translator* and *Minaret*; Zeina Ghandour, the author of *The Honey* (1999) and *Omega* (2006); and Ghada Karmi, the author of *In Search of Fatima* (2002) and *Married to Another Man* (2007), to name the most prominent. Two male names will be added here, those of Jamal Mahjoub and Hisham Matar. All of them are novelists, yet many have tried their hand at political writing as well.

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[45] Arabs, regardless of their faith or political inclination, hold their native tongue of Arabic in great esteem –Muslims for its being the language of the holy Qur'an, Christians for the great literature written in it.

[46] Steven Salaita asserts that "much of the culture of Arab America, despite the religious diversity of its participants, is drawn from Islamic influences"; *Arab American Literary Fictions*, 7. He stresses the fact that "Arab Americans of multiple faiths communicate [effectively] as Arabs" (7–8).

[47] Of course, this does not preclude their occasional criticism of many social or political practices there. Distance grants both clarity of vision, broadening of experience, and freedom of expression. Some have, in fact, tried to demythologize or desentimentalize their homeland from their diasporic positions.

[48] This last work appeared in the UK under the title *My Name is Salma* (London: Doubleday, 2007).

Initially, most of these writers did not immigrate to Britain but were there to study and pursue higher degrees, only to find their sojourn extending to citizenship. Distance from country of origin granted them breathing-space to reclaim their own narratives after they found freedom in hybridity and choice in acculturation. Literary and political activism was particularly attractive to them, perhaps because they found in the diaspora a site of absolute freedom, a free political and intellectual community that could accommodate the non-conformity of their views.

Diaspora has actually attracted to date not only the anglophone Arab writer but also the Arab-speaking expatriate residing in the West who either fled dictatorships, as in Iraq, bloodshed, as in Lebanon, Iraq, and the occupied Palestinian territories, or constricted freedom of speech, as in the entirety of the Arab world. In this respect, diasporic space, despite its inevitably concomitant pain, appeals because it grants the Arab intellectual, regardless of the linguistic tools at his disposal, an open forum for raising his voice in protest or clarification. Today, most literary, political, and cultural activity is taking place beyond Arab borders: the more significant Arab dailies are published in London and the more prominent Arab authors, politicians, opposition leaders and the like reside in and write from their diasporic locations – or, rather, dislocations; some even die in exile (Nizar Qabbani, Jabra Ibrahim Jabra; the list is endless…).

For Soueif and Faqir, Ghandour and Abulela, diaspora granted them a platform from which they could address topics deemed taboo in their countries of origin. The irony, however, is that distance does not always rescue them from their critics 'back home', who take them to task in unsparingly vociferous attacks, relentlessly construing both their choice of foreign tongue and their subject-matter as a reflection of disaffection or lack of national feeling. The writers, nonetheless, find the attack but a small price to pay in return for their salvaged selves. True, they repeatedly have to contend with other infringements on their private freedoms such as the widespread political and institutional prejudice they face in the West, but they find this easier to cope with than national or domestic tyranny.

In their works, political and gender issues intertwine, the one leading to the other. *Nisanit*, Fadia Faqir's first novel, and *Pillars of Salt,* her more accomplished and more acclaimed second, present both themes in equal degree. Maha, the protagonist of *Pillars*, resists the tyranny of her brother, the British, and her male-dominated society in the same breath. Tyranny

has one face but wears many masks. Although the recently published *Cry of the Dove* (*Salma is My Name*), also opens with images of tyranny at home (the now exhausted stereotypical story of honour crime[49]), it manages to avoid the stock sensationalism that often goes along with such stories by broadening the experience of her Bedouin protagonist Salma Ibrahim El Musa, who becomes Sally Ascher, to encompass the harsher realities of immigration and the arduous quest for a foothold on foreign soil. In Exeter, Salma is torn between her desire to assert her identity and to reconnect with her past, brutal as it was, between establishing links with her lost daughter and accommodating herself to an alien society that is both generous and indifferent at the same time.[50]

Diasporic experience certainly leaves its powerful imprint on this literature, and the authors use it to offer their own reformulations of culture and subjectivity. No longer beholden to the dictates of the 'home' community, they benefit from their positions as 'outsiders'/'insiders' and enter into a dialogue with past and present, the distant and the near.

It is from this very standpoint that the Egyptian-born Ahdaf Soueif writes. She is author of two collections of short stories, *Aisha* (1983) and *The Sandpiper* (1996), and two novels, *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992), perhaps the better of the two, and *The Map of Love* (1999, shortlisted for the

[49] See the sensational description of the book in the inside flap of the cover: "As contemporary as today's headlines, as timeless as love and hate – a young Muslim asylum-seeker in England runs from a brother who wants to kill her to save the family's honour." The American edition is little better, its reviewers and suppliers also describing the book in the following words: "Timely and lyrical, *The Cry of the Dove* is the story of one young woman and an evocative portrait of forbidden love and violated honor in a culture whose reverberations are felt profoundly in our world today." http://www.target.com/gp/detail.html/601-02603238667325?asin=0802170404&afid=yahoosspplp_bmvd&lnm=0802170404|Books_:_The_Cry_of_ttthe_Dove:_A_Novel&ref=tgt_adv_XSNG1060. Or: "Salma always sees, lurking in the shadows, the figure of her brother, Mahmoud, coming to "shoot her between the eyes" (Amazon.com).

[50] One cannot avoid comparing this work with *Daughter of the Ganges: The Story of One Girl's Adoption and Her Return Journey to India* by Asha Miro (Atria Books, 2006), which also creates a personal history from two distant worlds (India and Portugal) and delineates the emotional story of those who search into the past (protagonist adopted by Christian orphanage, sojourn in the West followed by search for family in original home country).

1999 Booker Prize).[51] Soueif excels in her writing because, as Edward Said puts it, she

> writes of both England and Egypt from within although for her heroine Asya Ulama [*In the Eye of the Sun*] [...], Egypt is the land of her birth, religion and early education, Britain the land of her post-graduate education, maturity, and intimate expression.[52]

It also excels because, "although the temptations are always there, Soueif in the end does not fall for the East versus West, or Arab versus European formulas." She goes at the end with her heroine Asya, "who is neither fully one thing nor another," and so renders the experience "of crossing over from one side to the other, and then back again, indefinitely without rancor or preachiness."[53] The reason is that Asya is "so securely Arab and Muslim" that she "does not need to make an issue of it." To Said, Soueif's heroine proves that "*hegira* as Asya's in English" can be done *without* much ado and that "what has become almost formulaic to the Arab (as well as Western) discourse of the Other need not always be the case." Said comes to the conclusion that, in fact, "there can be generosity, and vision, and overcoming barriers, and finally, human existential integrity." After all, who "cares about the labels of national identity anyway?"

Faqir, Soueif, and Aboulela got published and were read frequently as part of a world-wide feminist tradition. Faqir's novels were hailed for their "powerful and distinctive [...] writing," which addresses "the continuing personal and political oppression of Arab women."[54] Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*[55] was described as "raw, accurate, searing" and its author as "one of the most extraordinary chroniclers of sexual politics now writing."[56] Likewise, Aboulela's work was enthusiastically received for offering sharp insights into the position of women in the Muslim world. How-

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[51] *The Map of Love* (New York: Anchor/Random House, 2000) has been translated into sixteen languages, including Arabic. It has sold more than half a million copies in English alone.

[52] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2003): 407.

[53] Said, *Reflections on Exile and other Essays*, 410.

[54] Book cover, quoting the *Sunday Times*.

[55] *In the Eye of the Sun* (1993; New York: Anchor/Random House, 2000) was originally banned in the Arab world for its depiction of sexuality.

[56] Book cover, quoting Edward Said.

ever, the pressure of gender concerns and political preoccupations in their writing prompted a slight shift from fiction to non-fiction. Not that they forfeited the creative for the factual, but the weight of political circumstance in the homeland they left behind made the shift justifiable.

Soueif's latest work, *Mezzaterra: Fragments from the Common Ground*, is a collection of essays on the themes of Arab identity, art, and politics that seek to locate the 'mezzaterra', or common ground, in an increasingly globalized world.[57] The collection, projecting both her Muslim and her Western identity, generated a positive response from reviewers, who called her the "intellectual heir to Edward Said."[58] Soueif's political writing seems to be in constant competition with her creative work. Since the publication of her last novel, *The Map of Love* (1999), her cartography has changed;[59] the map she charts now is that of Palestine and the plea she launches is that of justice and peace for the Palestinians. Soueif's political activism began in 2000 with "Under the Gun," the first in a series of articles submitted to the *Guardian* which reflected a brave and fearless desire to "bring out the cleanest and the clearest" of herself and "bear witness"[60] to what goes on in that troubled part of the world. Her testimony has been most touching, painful, and poignant.

Zeina Ghandour is similarly adamant about bearing witness. *The Honey* (1999), her only novel so far, explores the traumatic experience of a suicide bomber who is dissuaded from blowing himself up when he hears the voice of Ruhiya, his childhood love, perform the call to the dawn prayer, which in itself is a breach of Islamic taboos. Ghandour in this novel and elsewhere declares time and again that it is her mission in life to 'tell it all'. She is reminded of a pre-Islamic myth which has it that when a person was murdered, his soul would "take the form of an owl, and that it would circle its own grave, parched and yelling for blood, until the death was avenged, and thus social order restored." Ghandour sees herself as

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[57] It includes reviews of writers from Jean Genet and Amitav Ghosh to Philip Hensher, along with pieces on al-Jazeera, Islamic "queens," and "the veil."

[58] *Publishers Weekly*.

[59] She has translated into English, from the Arabic, Mourad Barghouti's *I Saw Ramallah* (2000; New York: Anchor/Random House, 2003), a political novel on the plight of displaced Palestinians and their plea for a recognized political identity.

[60] *The Guardian* (18 December 2000): http://www.ahdafsoueif.com/Articles/Under_The_Gun.pdf

"one of hundreds of thousands of thirsty birds, who will not rest, until the land of her [ancestors] is restored."[61]

Faqir's mission has been no different. She, too, wrote a number of essays and monographs: *Engendering Democracy and Islam* (1997) and *Intra-family Femicide in Defence of Honour: The Case of Jordan* (2001), a short monologue, "Salma ya Salma," which she wrote as part of *A Thousand and One Nights – Now*, a play by eleven Muslim writers which premiered in Copenhagen in 2001; an essay, *Where is the "W" Factor: Women and the War on Afghanistan*, was published in 2001; she, further, edited and co-translated a collection of autobiographical writings by thirteen Arab women writers, *In the House of Silence* (1998). In brief, what she did not address in a narrative she tackled in an essay, and when a topic was too touchy for an essay to cover, she resorted to book-length format. Her writing, fictional and otherwise, has been a constant attempt to diagnose and understand the problems and issues she had left behind in her country of origin: women's rights, human rights, democracy, and reform.

One writer who maintained several affiliations, involving himself in historico-political interpretation of his life and the life of his people without being labelled an activist or political enthusiast or 'eye-witness' – in short, a writer who typifies the postcolonial plight of intellectuals writing from a diasporic position – is Jamal Mahjoub. Born in London in 1960 to a British mother and Sudanese father, raised in the Sudan, educated in Britain, having lived in a number of places, including London and Denmark, and currently domiciled in Spain, he feels "he's constantly forced to re-invent himself."[62] Mahjoub is the most prolific of anglophone Arab writers in Britain writing today. He is author of seven novels: *Navigation of a Rainmaker*: *An Apocalyptic Vision of War-Torn Africa* (1989); *Wings of Dust* (1994); *In the Hour of the Signs* (1996); *The Carrier* (1998); *Travelling With Djinns* (2003), which won the Prix de l'Astrolabe award at the 2004 Étonnants Voyageurs Festival in France; and, last but not least, *The Drift Latitudes* and *Nubian Indigo*, both published in 2006. His short stories include "Road Block" (1992), "The Cartographer's Angel" (winner of the Heinemann/Guardian African Short Story Award in 1993), "Hands of Lead, Feet of Clay" (1994), "A History of Amnesia" (1995),

[61] "Writing in Exile," http://www.literaturefestival.co.uk/2004/zeina.html

[62] http://www.radionetherlands.nl/features/development/060106agl

and "The Obituary Tango,"[63] which was shortlisted for the Caine Prize for African Writing in 2005. His work in journalism has yielded an endless number of essays, mostly shedding light on the current political situation in troubled Sudan and the Arab world.[64]

Mahjoub straddles many zones of identification and employs modernist techniques to critique colonial history in his home country, the Sudan. In *Navigation of a Rainmaker*, *Wings of Dust*, and *In the Hour of Signs*, he "maps the psychological, political, and historical geographies of postcolonial consciousness in all of its opposing manifestations and from a myriad of perspectives."[65] His protagonists are both 'angry young men' who seek to analyze their estrangment from society and modern sojourners who contemplate their diasporic status and feel nostalgia for a primordial *terre natale*– precolonial and uncorrupted – that could assuage their angst and accommodate their liminality by offering some semblance of meaning or coherence. He is the Arab/African who explores not just the emotional complexity of the postcolonial world but defiantly scrutinizes the results of cultural encounter. Mahjoub delineates the plurality of ethnic affiliations in the Sudan: North versus South, Muslim versus Christian; racial, cultural, political, and economic differences that subvert any attempt to build a nation-state. For his characters, each a wanderer in-between worlds, "*ein Wanderer zwischen den Welten*," the external rift he depicts becomes the rift within, and all Mahjoub can do is interrogate how rootedness and dwelling, uprootedness and homelessness, transrootedness and migration can shape a human being's identity, transforming "one into native, foreigner, colonizer, traveler, migrant, nomad, refugee, or exile."[66]

With Hisham Matar, a Libyan Briton, exile has different shades and meanings. Born in New York, raised in Libya and Egypt, and educated in Britain, he may qualify as another 'wanderer'. His debut novel *In the Country of Men* (2006), should have been "angrier," according to Ste-

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[63] First published in the postcolonial journal *Wasafiri* 42 (Summer 2004), and providing the title for the anthology *The Obituary Tango: A Selection of Writing from the Caine Prize for African Writing 2005* (London: New Internationalist, 2006).

[64] His novels have been translated into French, Spanish, German, Italian, Dutch, and Turkish.

[65] Michael A. Chaney, http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4547/Mahjoub-Jamal.html

[66] Caroline A. Mohsen, "Narrating Identity & Conflict: History, Geography, and the Nation in Jamal Mahjoub's Portrayal of Modern-Day Sudan," *World Literature Today* 74.3 (June 2000): 541–54.

phen Moss, the *Guardian* reviewer, given the author's extraordinary circumstances of having a father kidnapped by Egyptian secret police in 1990, taken to jail in his home country Libya, then 'disappearing' without word from his prison since 1995; also having his friends hanged and relatives jailed.[67] Although the main events of the novel are fictional, the work does resonate with the traumatic life of its author; the anger remains the reader's prerogative. Indeed, it is more than anger that the reader feels as s/he follows the ordeal of Matar's young protagonist, a nine-year-old boy who tells of the extraordinary events that marked his childhood: watching on TV the execution of a neighbour; the kidnapping, imprisonment, and torture of his father; the frustration of a mother who finds solace in alcohol only to realize that idolization of Scheherazade was a mistake – the famed storyteller was no more than a woman who chose slavery over dignified death. The novel is not necessarily political, although the events take place against the backdrop of political upheavals in Libya in 1979 when the regime cracked down on dissidents. It is more about relations among family members, friends, and neighbours who share life under the gaze not of an omnipresent God but of an ominous 'Guide'. It depicts a country where boys must be men,[68] initiated into a world of fear, uncertainty, betrayal, violence, and shame – boys who grow too soon and ache too early in life. "Libya was a constant ache," Matar declares, and "exile is, in essence, an endless mourning."[69]

Matar's poetic novel, shortlisted for the 2006 Man Booker Prize, has fascinated critics and readers alike. Regardless of his subject, he "writes beautifully," says one reviewer:

> In describing the world of seas and mulberries he is a sensualist; when writing of executions and arrests he is a nuanced observer with a gift for conveying both absurdity and raw emotion. His description of a public execution is an exceptional piece of writing.[70]

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[67] http://books.guardian.co.uk/departments/generalfiction/story/0,,1808361,00.html

[68] *The Christian Science Monitor*, http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0206/p13s02-bogn.html

[69] Hisham Matar, "I just want to know what happened to my father," *The Independent* (16 July 2006): http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/africa/hisham-matar-i-just-want-to-know-what-happened-to-my-father-407444.html

[70] Kamila Shamsie, "Where the mulberries grow," *The Guardian* (29 July 2006), http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/jul/29/featuresreviews.guardianreview19

Others valued the psychological insight the novel lent its young narrator in the face of the Orwellian events that mar his innocent life.

In The Country of Men has been labelled "the Libyan *Kite Runner*," as reviewers found numerous parallels between it and Khaed Hosseini's 2003 novel about boyhood betrayal in 1970s Afghanistan. Perhaps what validates the similarity between the two works is not their topical resemblance so much as the warm critical reception the two works were accorded. Works "tied to current affairs, particularly those about Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Libya or anywhere else connected with the so-called war on terrorism" are "eagerly snapped up" by publishers and turned into best-sellers.[71]

Regardless of the verity of such statements, what may hold true is the fact that a whole generation of anglophone Arab writers is coming of age, opening Western eyes to experiences not previously described

North America 1970 – Present

> Leaving a world too old to name
> and too undying to forsake,
> I flew the cold, expensive sea
> toward Columbus' mistake
> where life could never be the same.
> — Sam Hazo, "'Fawzi in Jerusalem"

Nothing matches the vitality with which Arab-American literature has, in the past couple of decades, been carving a place for itself in mainstream American writing as well as among other hyphenated literatures on the American continent. Following a half-century of dormancy, Arab-American literature revived with unprecedented, breath-taking rapidity. What began in the 1980s as a tentative foray into publishing poems or short stories here and there gathered such momentum that the interested reader can at present hardly keep track of what is being produced. Evelyn Shakir, an Arab-American writer and critic, describes the time as "an exciting moment" with Arab-American literature showing "every sign of coming

[71] Samir El-Youssef, "The curse of topicality," *The New Statesman* (31 July 2006), http://www.newstatesman.com/200607310058

into its own," and with "new writers [...] surfacing, new voices [...] sounding."[72] It is a renaissance, as Elmaz Abinader puts it.[73]

Several anthologies of work by Arab-Americans were taken up by welcoming publishers. The twenty-page booklet entitled *Wrapping the Grape Leaves: A Sheaf of Contemporary Arab-American Poets* (1982), at first edited by Gregory Orfalea, one of the main chroniclers of Arab-American history and literature, went through several subsequent editions and additions with slight changes in title. *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry* (with co-editor Sharif Elmusa 1998) was a substantial contribution to the field, expanding in number and quality the earlier version. Several other collections appeared within a few years of each other: Joanna Kadi's *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writing by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists* (1994); *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab-American Writing* (1999), edited by Khaled Mattawa and Munir Akash; *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab-American Women on Writing* (2004), edited by Susan Muaddi Darraj; and *Dinarzad's Children* (2004), edited by Pauline Kaldas and Khaled Mattawa. Although the anthologies were far from being comprehensive, and more often than not were confined to one or two literary genres, they heralded the coming of age of a literature that was successfully embracing an identity of its own. Even *MELUS*, the Journal of the Society of the Multi-Ethnic Literature of the USA, devoted a special issue to Arab-American literature in the winter of 2006. The whole literary scene was thriving for Arab-Americans. As if long-fettered tongues were suddenly released from their cages, American writers of Arab descent, whether second, third or even fourth generation, were coming to grips with and regaining their discourse. In this euphoria of self celebration, they organized literary conferences and launched their own literary journals in emulation of the 'pen-bonds' of their predecessors early in the twentieth century. What started as an amateurish yet ambitious "Arab Writers Group USA" formed by the anthropologist, journalist, and broadcaster Barbara Nimri Aziz, and in 1992 consisting of no more

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[72] 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.

[73] 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

than five members,[74] grew into a "Radius of Arab-American Writers, Incorporated," or RAWI (which means 'storyteller' in Arabic), boasting at present over 150 members – established writers, scholars, critics, and academics. RAWI held its first conference in New York in June 2005, its second in May 2007 in Dearborn, Michigan (heartland of the Arab-American population). The scope and nature of the papers presented reflected one thing: Arab-American literature is there to stay and merits serious academic scrutiny and appreciation.

Slowly but surely, a number of literary magazines began to emerge, offering awards for best writer or devoting 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, offered a locus for Arab voices to be heard from, to "show them as very human members of a diverse culture, with a myriad of background scenarios and individual narratives."[75] 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.

Published quarterly in Maryland, *JUSOOR* is another magazine that supports the publication of books on Arab-American themes or devotes whole issues to relevant topics. Another is *Mizna*,[76] an up-and-coming magazine which describes itself as "a forum promoting Arab culture that values diversity in the Arabic community." *Mizna* is "committed to giving voice to Arab Americans on the local, national and international level through literature, speakers and community events," hosting film and music festivals, dramatic performances, and art exhibitions. Arab-Americans now even have their own *National Arab American Times* newspaper with a wide circulation in forty-eight states.[77] Electronic websites, blogs,

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[74] Lisa Suhair Majaj, "Of Stories and Storytellers," *Saudi Aramco World* 56 (March–April 2005): 24–35.

[75] Judith Gabriel, "Emergence of a Genre: Reviewing Arab American Writers," *Al Jadid* 7.34 (2001). http://www.aljadid.com/features/0734gabriel.html

[76] www.mizna.org

[77] The National *Arab American Times Newspaper* published 61,000 copies in its inaugural run (www.AATimesNews.com). The paper was launched by Ray Hanania,

and other online publications that address Arab-American issues flourish extensively and facilitate communication among the authors themselves as well as their readers.

Many believe that this thriving of Arab-American writing was engendered by the rise of multicultural and ethnic awareness in the USA, starting in the 1970s. Some maintain that what "spurred the growth of Arab American 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."[78] Identifying with an ethnic group and a cultural heritage was no longer shunned but, rather, welcomed and encouraged along the lines of the similarly hyphenated. Arab-Americans found that they, too, could contribute to the rich mosaic of American society and literary culture, ending a far from self-imposed invisibility; they even found 'home' and acceptance in ethnicity.

There were, of course, those who "hoped to pass" as "regular Americans"[79] and remain purely so, such as Ohio-born Vance Bourjaily,[80] the author of several novels: *The End of My Life* (1947), *The Hound of Earth* (1955), *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (1960), *The Violated* (1962), *The Man Who Knew Kennedy* (1967), *Brill Among the Ruins* (1970), *Now Playing in Canterbury* (1976), *A Game Men Play* (1980), *The Great Fake Book* (1987), and *Old Soldier* (1990), as well as of works in other genres – short stories, plays, essays. Nonetheless, the generation of writers that was emerging, particularly in the 1990s and the cusp of the new millennium, was clearly less mindful of ethnic labelling than its predecessors.

The growth of Arab-American literature can also be explained in terms of the political events in the Arab world which contributed to raising the political consciousness of the Arab-American community and solidifying ties with the country of origin. It also has much to do with their collective efforts against denigration, particularly in the media. And consequently it ties in with their attempt to project a more positive image of themselves and of their community as trustworthy citizens. Thus, walking the line be-

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who was named "Best Ethnic American Columnist" in 2006 by the New American Media Association.

[78] Ludescher, "From Nostalgia to Critique: An Overview of Arab American Literature," 106.

[79] Shakir, "Arab American Literature," 6.

[80] See Vance Bourjaily Biography, http://biography.jrank.org/pages/4161/Bourjaily-Vance-Nye.html

tween their Arab origin and their American identity, defending themselves against demonization and prejudice, especially in the wake of the 9/11 events, asserting the virtues of their ancestors, reminiscing about old country and celebrating its landscape and social customs, affirming their humanity and contribution to American society, criticizing both American and Arab society and political systems, and lately addressing issues pertaining to sexual orientation and, of course, gender – these are some of the writers' dominant concerns.

Arab-American literature produced at the start more poetry than prose. Poets like D.H. Melhem, Samuel Hazo, Sam Hamod, Etel Adnan, Sharif Elmusa, among many others, did not find it hard to gain access to an interested audience and get their poems published in the various mainstream journals and magazines (Adnan had her own publishing house, the Post-Apollo Press). And if one had the talent to 'perform' poetry like the Palestinian-American Suheir Hammad, all that one needed was an open microphone and an engaged audience.[81] Hammad, the author of three books – *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996), a memoir; *Drops Of This Story* (1996); and *ZaatarDiva* (2006) – twice winner of the Audre Lord Writing Award, and co-recipient of the 2005 Sister of Fire Award, is best known for her role as co-writer and performer in the 2003 Tony Award-winning Broadway show and HBO series "Def Poetry Jam on Broadway." She often electrified her listeners with a poetry that throbbed with enthusiasm for the oppressed and the downtrodden all over the world, and with a strong sense of her 'Palestinianness' and 'Arabness'. How could she not, herself daughter of Palestinian refugees, but feel the pain of other refugees? She and other Palestinians from Gaza and the West Bank are the people, she says, who would know, more than anyone else, the ache of September 11, would identify with the Katrina hurricane victims, would connect with Bosnians, Haitians, Rwandans, and would feel the 'sisterhood' of pain. In her poem "Of Refuge and Language," she vows not to "use language / One way or another / to accommodate [her] comfort," as she "will not look away."[82] Hammad is the progeny of hip poets, the

[81] More recently, Hammad played a leading role in a feature film, *Salt of the Sea*, directed by the Palestinian American Anne Marie Jacir (May 2008).

[82] Hammad features prominently in *Listen Up! An Anthology of Spoken Word Poetry*, edited by Zoe Anglesey. She is a frequent reader at New York venues, including numerous radio appearances, and has performed with the All That Band and

Beats of the 1950s and protest poets of the 1960s and 1970s. Her poetry readings, as Lisa Suheir Majaj describes them, draw on music from sources as varied as the jazz saxophonist John Coltrane, the Egyptian singer Um-Kulthum, and the Raï star Cheb Mami.[83]

Hammad is by all definitions a political poet who sees her poetry as a means to voice her deep solidarity with other peoples of colour. She moved with her parents to Brooklyn, New York in 1978 when she was only five, and grew up among numerous minority groups – Puerto Ricans, African-Americans, Dominicans, Haitians. This multi-cultural background helped her transcend ethnic borders and reach out for the common humanity that unifies all. She says she remembers "the first time I wrapped my hair in a *gele*, an African head wrap. Using material from Senegal, I wanted to wrap myself in the beauty of sisterhood. The ancestors remembered my name and whispered it to me under the material."[84]

If Hammad captivated her audience with the sharpness of her views and the charm of her performance, the poet Naomi Shihab Nye did so with the simplicity of her verses, the sincerity of her tone, and the softness of her words (very much a reflection of the poet herself). The author of an autobiographical novel called *Habibi* (1999), *Red Suitcase: Poems* (1994), *The Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (1995), and *19 Varieties of Gazelle: Poems of the Middle East* (2005), she writes poetry that has no trace of rancour or bitterness. The daughter of an American mother and a Palestinian father, Nye admirably keeps a humane balance between affinities personal or otherwise. In the words of Evelyn Shakir, Nye "writes loving poems about Greeks, Pakistanis, and Hondurans and about the Mexican neighbors in her San Antonio neighborhood."[85] Even when she handles the thorny political theme of the struggle between the Israelis and Palestinians, she does so with much gentleness, as when she poses such unanswerable questions as "What makes a man with a gun seem bigger / than a man with almonds?"

Rhythms of Aqua. Naomi Shihab Nye has called Hammad's work "a brave flag over the dispossessed" (http://www.thescreamonline.com/poetry/poetry2-1/hammad/).

[83] http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200502/of.stories.and.storytellers.htm

[84] Nathalie Handal, "Drops of Suheir Hammad: A Talk with a Palestinian Poet Born Black," *Al Jadid* 3.20 (Summer 1997): www.aljadid.com/interviews/DropsofSuheirHammad.html

[85] Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," 10.

There were many other poets who were busily and engagingly carving out their literary careers without accommodating their identities and loyalties one way or another. Khalid Mattwa is one who seeks to attain wholeness of self by integrating even the features of his face into a multicultural 'visage'. "History of My Face" is his testimony and his two collections of poems *Ismailia Eclipse* (1995) and *Zodiac of Echoes* (2003) are his proof. Mattawa emigrated from Libya to the USA in 1979, at the age of fifteen. He managed, however, to balance the two worlds remarkably well, not allowing the one to eclipse the other and not letting the issue of cultural representation become a burden.

What was more exciting for Arab-Americans was not only the rise of mature poetry that reflected their multiple sensibilities but also the emergence of a healthy movement of fresh writing that was daring, not of necessity nostalgic, and not unavoidably autobiographical. There is no question that much of the prose literature written so far did rely, in varying degrees, on life stories – a trait typical of much émigré literature. The autobiographies, as Tanyss Ludescher rightly states, tended to "fall into one of two patterns: rags to riches American success stories or nostalgic, sanitized accounts of family and communal life."[86] Yet even the telling now of the self has begun to take different turns from traditional autobiographical narratives. Samia Serageldine's *Cairo House* (2000) uses the life framework as testimony to political changes that took place in Egypt in the post-1952 revolution, and, more importantly, as a means of dealing with the question of hybridity, the doubling of signification which impels the characters to search for an in-between space to straddle two worlds. However, Serageldine, a descendant of an aristocratic family, could not maintain the autobiographical strain for long, and had to hurriedly don the fig leaf of fiction to dissociate her own self from that of her protagonist Gigi, fearing the criticism of the public eye.

Whereas Elmaz Abinader in *Children of the Roojme: A Family's Journey from Lebanon* (1991) recounts the conventional story of immigration, depicting the hardships of World War I, the anguish of abandoning centuries-old villages back in Lebanon, and the strenuous effort to assimilate

[86] Salom Risk's *Syrian Yankee* can be viewed as an example of 'success' stories, and Eugene Paul Nassar's memoir *Wind of the Land* (Belmont MA: Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1979) as an example of the nostalgic sentimental portrait of Arab community. Ludescher, "From Nostalgia to Critique," 107.

in a culturally different society, Fay Afaf Kanafani's *Nadia, Captive of Hope: Memoir of an Arab Woman* (1999), is much more daring in chronicling the story of Nadia, a teenager who is forced into an arranged marriage and who decides to escape the oppression of her family, the sexual abuse of her own father, the tyranny of her brothers, and the loveless wedlock she finds herself in, by struggling to gain independence through an education and a career. As rightly described by Lisa Suheir Majaj in her introduction to the book, "this is no simplistic account of an Islamic woman rescued by the West," it is a testimony to what an Arab woman is capable of in order to overcome and survive her ordeals. The work is replete with acute depictions not only of the personal dilemmas of its characters but also of the political tensions that were ripping the Middle East apart at the time, be it Palestine or Lebanon, and, indeed, of the gender issues surrounding the advancement of women in the Arab world. This memoir was written many years after its author (born in Beirut in 1918) fled Lebanon in the 1980s and settled in California. A fund (The Afaf Kanafain Scholarship Fund) was recently established from the proceeds of this autobiography to offer scholarships and grants to eligible UC Berkeley students whose academic work focuses on women's rights in the Arab world, in the hope that such research will contribute to a better understanding of gender issues in the Middle East and beyond.[87]

Indeed, autobiographies remain popular, yet with a difference, as suggested above. Leila Ahmad's *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America – A Woman's Journey* is a case in point. It shows how historical and political forces shape personal identities. The book is elegant, captivating, and very perceptive, particularly as it succeeds in weaving the public into the personal, whether it be the politics of her day (chiefly the 1952 revolution in Egypt) or the colonial attitudes and class-conscious behaviour of the British in Egypt as well as during the years of her education at Cambridge (where she discovers a harem of a different kind at Girton College). Her description of her experience as a teacher in the Emirates is no less interesting than her encounter with American feminism following her move to live and teach (at Harvard) in the USA. In both, she tells of her liaising with female communities and of her response to each of them, diverse as they were. *A Border Passage*, indeed, crosses many borders,

[87] *IAS International and Area Studies Newsletter* (Winter 2007): http://ias.berkeley.edu/Newsletter/Winter07/w07_center_news.html

cultural, social, political, and personal. Throughout the crossing, Ahmad provocatively reformulates her conception of herself as Arab, Muslim, and feminist. It is in the West that she embraces her Arab/Muslim identity after having long shunned it due to an extensive 'foreign' education "in a faraway land and a culture that […] eventually [stole her] away."[88] After years of denying and defying her heritage, even to the point of despising Arab music,[89] and the Arabic language,[90] and North African food, after questioning the 'Arabness' of Egypt by and large, Ahmad discovers kinship with Hanan El Sheikh, a Lebanese feminist novelist who writes in Arabic and who asserts her Arab identity. With El Sheikh around, Ahmad feels herself to be a Judas, an emblem of betrayal; a woman "caught up […] forever in other people's inventions, imputations, false constructions of who [she was] […] or what [she] ought to think or believe or feel."[91]

If the autobiographical factor remained constant in much Arab-American writing, it did not have to surface in specific life tales but certainly permeated many works. Mohja Kahf, a Syrian-American professor of comparative literature at the University of Arkansas, weaves stories of her home of origin into stories of her place of abode, be it New Jersey, Indiana or Arkansas. Her poems and sole novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* (2006) rely heavily not so much on her own memory of Damascus, the city of her birth, as on memories passed on to her by her parents and relatives: "Being an immigrant means always having other people."[92] The Kahfs, it seems, transported the 'home space' with them when they settled in the USA. Like many similar emigrants, they sought to re-create nostalgically and reflectively, in Proustian manner, the cultural and emotional particularities of locations and connections left behind. Mohja, their daughter, grew up in a community that observed Islamic rituals rigorously and tolerated little dissidence, if any. It did not matter if the practice of the rituals was incongruous with common practice outside the circle of the expatriates, as with a grandmother who "Washes Her Feet in the Sink of

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[88] Leila Ahmad, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America – A Woman's Journey* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999): 111.

[89] Ahmad, *A Border Passage*, 24.

[90] Ahmad, *A Border Passage*, 23.

[91] Ahmad, *A Border Passage*, 255.

[92] Mohja Kahf, "The Pistols of Emir Abdel Qader," in *Emails from Scheherazad* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003): 73.

the Bathroom at Sears" for ablution (*Emails from Scheherazad*[93]), or Muslims spreading their "prayer rugs/in highway gas stations at dawn," fasting "at company banquets / before sunset in Ramadan / [wearing] veils and denim, / prayer caps and Cubs caps, / as over the prairie to halal pizzeria / [they] go."[94] To Mohja Kahf, there was little absurdity in all that, as she was able to emerge from the confluence of cultural affinities unscathed, armed with an exceptional skill to see irony and amusing paradoxes in the fault-line separating Muslims from their Western counterparts. At times she captures the breach in a single sarcastic portrait, as in "Hijab Scene 1": "'You dress strange,' said a tenth-grade boy with bright blue hair to the new Muslim girl with the headscarf in homeroom, his tongue-rings clicking on the 'tr' in 'strange'."[95]

In Kahf's writings, one finds a most interesting amalgam of the academic researcher, as in her insightful and provocative book *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman: From Termagant to Odalisque* (1999), and the playful, impish columnist, as in "Sex and the Umma" on Muslim Wake Up! website. In *Western Representations of the Muslim Woman*, Kahf traces the change that the image of Muslim women in the literature of the West underwent from that of a "termagant," a strong woman of wanton and intimidating sexuality as projected in medieval and Renaissance times, to that of the veiled, secluded, submissive, and oppressed. Kahf draws her examples from medieval chansons and romances, Renaissance drama, Enlightenment prose, and Romantic poetry. She further links the changing images of Muslim women to European relations with the Islamic world, as well as to shifts in gender dynamics within Western societies.

As for her "Sex and the Umma" column (fashioned after the "Sex and the City" TV series), which earned her torrents of attacks, including a death-threat, the author, though at once playful and mischievous verbally and thematically, seems to be putting across a message that seeks to offer an alternative image of Islam: namely, a more progressive, liberal, and permissive one. Islam is not a 'shame' culture, she seems to be saying. Sexuality has always been openly discussed, preached, and practised in the healthiest of ways. Muslims cannot and should not try to escape from

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[93] The book was a finalist in the 2004 Paterson Poetry Prize.

[94] "Move Over," in Kahf, *Emails from Scheherazad*, 40.

[95] Kahf, *Emails from Scheherazad*, 41.

a literary past animated by incredibly vivid and humorous sexuality, from neither the "racy, multicultural, secular" *Thousand and One Nights* nor the "rich heritage of Sufi poetry," where the "inseparability of Eros and spirituality is inescapable."[96]

To many, Kahf remains controversial. On public occasions and in photos, she appears wearing a headscarf, which she insists is an emblem of her Muslim identity. She voices the staunchest criticism of an Islam that practises sexism in places of worship and elsewhere ("Little Mosque Poems");[97] she pokes fun at bizarre practices among members of the US Muslim community, yet projects herself in the same breath as a free thinker, a liberal, and equally a devout Muslim. Kahf is comfortable with all that. Hers is the alternative Muslim voice that permits self-criticism but does not subvert the values of a faith that is at core anti-radical and anti-fanatic.

Nowhere does this exploration of the relation between the author and her faith appear more poignant and relaxed than in her novel *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf*. In it, Kahf tells her readers what it means to grow up in an immigrant Muslim Syrian family in 1970s Indianapolis, where she herself had spent much of her childhood. Her protagonist, Khadra Shami, like herself, grows up in a devout, tightly-knit family and undergoes the same questioning about faith, cultural identity, and belonging as that of the author. The inevitable culture clashes that she depicts as being part of this *bildungsroman* ensue from taunts of "raghead" and "go back where you came from" in reaction to the varying interpretations of Islamic codes among the community's other Muslims. Self-discovery involves a trip back to the country of origin, Syria, where she acquires greater knowledge of her faith and identity. The original manuscript used the Syrian trip as a turning-point in the life of Khadra where she decides, before landing back in the USA, to dump the headscarf, but the author seemed to have had second 'defiant' thoughts about it, and the scarf stayed. The novel has been described as "refreshingly human," "sensitive and passionate," "bright, vivid and important," and, indeed, "beautifully written." The tell-

[96] Cited by Mehammed Mack, "Sex and the Free Thinker," *LA Weekly News* (3 January 2007): http://www.laweekly.com/news/features/sex-and-the-freethinker/15330/

[97] "In my little mosque / there is no room for me / to pray / I am / turned away faithfully / five / times a day / My little mosque: / so meager / in resources, yet / so eager / to turn away / a woman / or a stranger"; http://www.todaysalternativenews.com/index.php?event=link,150&values%5B0%5D=5&values%5B1%5D=1976

ing is certainly charming and the insightful description of human behaviour within the mesh of social relations fascinating. This coming-of-age novel makes of Khadra Shami no less an engaging character than Stephen Dedalus. Like him, Khadra had to question faith, family, and homeland, and, like Dedalus, the protagonist had to leave the country of her birth in search of that which would help her forge her true identity.

Indeed, *The Girl in the Tangerine Scarf* projects a portrait of the artist as a Muslim woman, or 'angry young Muslim' woman, as she chronicles the struggle she has to wage in order to reconcile her faith with a country that is often hostile towards it. Kahf lashes out at Islamic orthodoxy as well as American parochialism, all in a style that can be described as edgy, aggressive, at times confrontational, often cynical and sarcastic, and always audacious. As she admits in one of her poems, she carries "explosives / They're called words."[98]

Kahf was not the first novelist to surprise the Arab-American community with her daring and to practise self-criticism on behalf of the collective. Diana Abu Jaber, a Palestinian American, more than a decade before her, managed to do exactly that, and in the face of much opprobrium. Her *Arabian Jazz*, published in 1993 (Winner of the Oregon Book Award and finalist for the National PEN/Hemingway Award) and regarded by many as the first Arab-American novel, offered what some viewed as a negative and unflattering portrayal of Arab-Americans. The novel speaks of the Ramoud family, Matussem, the father, and his two grown daughters Melvina and Jemorah, who live in a small town in upstate New York and who try to make some sense of their double cultural heritage. Half in earnest, half in jest, but mostly tongue in cheek and with an admirable sense of humour, Abu Jaber exposed the follies of her characters, much to the chagrin of many of her Arab readers. Her candour, they felt, only helped endorse abominable stereotypes which Arab-Americans wished to rid themselves of. The last thing they needed was to see someone from within their midst offer such a negative testimony. It was a question of 'selective' cultural representation: what to launder in public and what to keep from the eyes of the ready-to-criticize 'Other'.

In atonement, the novels that Abu Jaber produced following *Jazz* chose not to desentimentalize Arab-Americans. *Crescent* (1999) passionately evokes the country of origin through appealing to the five senses of char-

[98] "Hijab Scene 7," in *Emails from Scheherazad*, 39.

acters and readers. The sights, smells, food, and sounds of the native land are summoned up in a celebratory fashion, awakening body and soul simultaneously. But the passion is mixed with the sorrow of exile and the pain of longing for *temps perdu.* Through a love story that brings together Han – an Iraqi expatriate and professor at UCLA – and Sirine, a half-American half-Iraqi chef at an Arab restaurant, Abu Jaber creates a world that tries to surmount the loneliness that crushes the immigrant heart. "The loneliness of the Arab is a terrible thing," she writes; "it is all-consuming [...] 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." In Nadia's kitchen where Sirine works, Han is repatriated. He tells Sirine: "You are the place I want to be – you're the opposite of exile." Brinda Mehta's article in this book, "The Semiosis of Food in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent*," sheds much light on cultural mediation through the agency of food rites and rituals and on the plight of the dispossessed.

It is not just the charming love story between two expatriates or the exploration of exile alone that recommends the story to its readers. It is the skilful intermingling of the politics of the day with an Arabian Nights-like fairy-tale that runs parallel to the main narrative, deftly complemented by shrewd yet humorous cultural analysis. The fascination of the novel perhaps lies in its author's ability to lodge Arab characters, through the mediation of cultural rituals such as food, within a larger and more complex context of ethnic signification. This ethnic positioning of characters within the larger multicultural fabric of American society, and the desire to forge identity beyond the boundaries of an insular community, is what rescues the work from the pitfalls of the rigid essentialism at times exhibited by other émigré works.

Diana Abu Jaber has said that she learnt to negotiate identities, mixed race, and issues of immigration and gender from reading Maxine Hong Kingston's *The Woman Warrior*: *Memoirs of Girlhood Among Ghosts.* The fascination came from the fact that "the story traces the links of what it's like for those of us who live between identities." "I was a stranger everywhere," Abu Jaber says, "neither fully Arab nor fully American. Hong Kingston understood this wild strangeness." Reading her, Abu Jaber "felt an electrifying jolt of recognition"; it was the desire [...] for a voice,

a sense of her own power [… an] inkling that there were many kinds of stories in the house of literature."[99]

Crescent won the PEN Center USA Award for Literary Fiction; the *Christian Science Monitor* named it one of the twenty best novels of 2003. It was indeed very well received by Americans and Arabs alike; readers and critics found the work timely, particularly as it humanized Iraq and the Iraqi people at a time that was witnessing the latter's demonization. Iraq, where the first laws were decreed, the first script written, the first epic composed, comes across vividly in *Crescent* through the portrayal of an amiable community and exceptionally affable characters. Although Saddam Hussein looms in the background, threatening the healthy fulfilment of his citizens, the Iraqi people themselves are projected with much empathy and understanding.

Also noticeable in the novel is the degree of freedom and ease of manner with which Abu Jaber approaches the more sensual relations of her two main characters, Han and Sirine. The author does not seem inhibited by taboos which must have been culturally passed on to her by her ancestors. True, Arabic literature does not traditionally shun the erotic, yet Abu Jaber will have been aware of the sensitivity of sexual themes among her Arab readers. Oddly enough, it was not the Arabs who objected to the occasional explicitly sexual scenes in her work but the Americans. Abu Jaber tells how she was approached by a high-school teacher in Texas and asked to "black out […] four offending paragraphs [… so as] to include the book in [the] curriculum." She was both angered and amused by the "irony of blacking out scenes of love-making in a book that's concerned with the depiction of violence, unjust wars and dictatorship." "We all already know this," she says, "in America, love gets bleeped, the violence stays." The two main characters in *Crescent* are in love, and the few sexual passages in the book are far from graphic. Indeed, the scenes in which they cook and eat together are nearly as suggestive as the contested passages.[100]

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[99] Diana Abu Jaber, "Seizing Power from 'The Woman Warrior'," *NPR* (22 November 2007): http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=11163242

[100] Diana Abu Jaber's web page: http://www.dianaabujaber.com/banned.html

The question of whether publishers, readers, and even authors capitalized on ethnicity or propitious political circumstance[101] has also been raised by some who have reviewed her work. Abu Jaber admits in a 2006 interview that success can often depend on the "machinations of publicity and marketing. You write from a kind of cultural perspective, and then your publisher, or the powers that be, decide that is the angle that gives them the handle on who you are. And it seems to mark you as different." Although this maybe good in a way, as it gives the author "a kind of specificity," it "only helps in the beginning" and does not take one very far.[102]

Ethnic specificity took Abu Jaber far enough to write an enchanting memoir, *The Language of Baklava* (2005), a feast of food recipes and rituals that allegorized her life and the life of an Arab-American community shuttling between the USA and Jordan, and between relishing hamburgers and pancakes, kebobs and baklavas. In *Baklava*, everyone "is hungry: for home, for family, for the old smells and touches and tastes."[103] Here, food, as in much ethnic literature of late, becomes an ostensible agent for identity exploration. Yet, as Carol Fadda–Conrey rightly points out, food, "while marking out difference, also becomes a connective bridge that transcends the limitations that this difference might engender."[104] Bud, the passionately and lovingly described father, crosses all borderlines at the end of the memoir. He opens his life-dream restaurant to serve not falafel and kebab but hamburgers, fries, and coke. Even Abu Jaber poses, at the close, the very important question: "Why must there be only one home!"[105] Like the rest of her works, *The Language of Baklava* resonates gently with delicious humour and is rich in successful aesthetic tropes that harness self-mockery, comedy, and acute cultural observation, creating an authentic and credible world.

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[101] For interesting discussions of this and similar subjects, see *Going Global: Reception of Third World Women Writers*, ed. Amal Amireh & Lisa Suhair Majaj (New York & London: Garland, 2000).

[102] Robin Field, "A Prophet in her Own Town: An Interview with Diana Abu Jaber," *MELUS* 31.4 (Winter 2006): 213.

[103] Diana Abu Jaber, *The Language of Baklava* (New York: Pantheon, 2005): 6.

[104] Carol Fadda–Conrey, "Arab American Literature in the Ethnic Borderland: Cultural Intersections in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent*," *MELUS* 31.4 (Winter 2006): 202.

[105] Abu Jaber, *The Language of Baklava*, 325.

To avoid being marked as just an ethnic writer, Diana Abu Jaber distanced herself from Arab-American ethnic themes in her recent novel *Origin* (2007). The work instead tells a noirish detective story of Lena Dawson, a fingerprint specialist from Syracuse who investigates a case of a baby's crib death which eventually stirs tantalizing memories from her dimly recollected childhood. Abu Jaber's narrative latitude is clearly expanding here. True, she did not respond to a professor's advice to change her last name: "If you publish under Abu Jaber," he said "people are always going to think of you as the ethnic writer. You should absolutely change it to an American name and just go for it."[106] Instead, Abu Jaber changed her themes.

Desentimentalizing or demythologizing 'homeland' has not been the choice of Kahf's or Abu Jaber alone.[107] Rabih Alameddine, the Lebanese American and author of *Koolaids* (1999), *The Perv* (1999), *I, the Divine* (2002), and *The Hakawati* (2008), ventures onto thematic and artistic terrain that is unconventional for an Arab writer. His image and memories of the homeland are those of war, death, disease, rape, and insanity, all equally dispersed in his novels to reflect an historical era that is devoid of moral form or meaning. His works are multilocational; his affiliations transgress and rupture the normative fixities of gender, ethnicity, space, and race; in these works, the permitted and the prohibited are constantly intertwined; and the displacement of his protagonists becomes part of a general malaise which can be called a 'spiritual diaspora'. Gay characters, painters and intellectuals, men and women in search of identity torn between aspirations to fit in the West and an urge to belong to a much loved/hated homeland, offer permutations of alienation from family, society, and nation. Alameddine is sarcastically daring, unequivocally honest; he tears apart the two cultures, Arab and Lebanese, not to pronounce the one superior to the other but to chart out the predicament of the diasporic existence of his characters. Carol Fadda–Conrey's article in this collection singles out Alameddine's novel *I, the Divine* (2001) to show how this text affects contemporary understandings of exilic and diasporic Arab-American identities.

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[106] Field, "A Prophet in her Own Town," 213.

[107] This feature is not uncommon among racial minority writers, though it can be argued that much of it may come from anger and frustration at the mainstream culture.

A salient feature that dovetails with the various contemporary Arab-American creative works is an increasing political awareness and a mounting preoccupation with issues particularly relevant to the Arab–Israeli conflict. That many Arab writers have Palestinian origins has been a seminal factor in shaping political affiliations, sentiments, and views. Consequently, commitment to the *terre natale* becomes the sort of signifier or nexus even for those who were not born on Palestine's soil or have never set foot on it. Poet Nathalie Handal, for one, although born in the USA, says: Palestine "was so present in my memory, or rather in the memory of others that I borrowed. It seemed so right to belong to all those stories my grandfather spoke about. I even forgot they weren't moments I had lived."[108] To her, the distinction between memory and reality is insignificant: "not sure if it matters / now that I stand alone / at the corner of a small road / somewhere between my grandfather / and what seems to be my present…"

Memory becomes a pre-text that frames the content of the authors' experiences, and a pretext to construct a dual or juxtaposed picture of their mental and emotional make-up. This position is articulated in Salma Khadra Jayyusi's words: "wherever the diaspora lands the Palestinian, a part of Palestine is forever lodged in his or her heart."[109] Similarly, Laila Halaby, author of *West of the Jordan* and *Once in a Promised Land*, admits that "Palestine has always been central to her [writing]. Love of land, loss, exile, forcible removal, the physical beauty of land being bittersweet because it is so often seen through memory rather than today's life."[110] The poet Etel Adnan, half-Syrian, half-British, gives different reasons for her concern with the Palestinian theme. It became "a continuous thread in most of [her] poetry and writing" because the "Arabs have been demonized by the American press."[111] Similarly, Steven Salaita maintains that the unqualifed American support for Israel has subsequently been conducive to transforming "Arab Americans from a rapidly acculturating

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[108] *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab-American Writing*, ed. Khaled Mattawa & Munir Akash (Syracuse NY: Syracuse UP, 1999): 140.

[109] *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*, ed. Salma Khadra Jayyusi (New York: Columbia UP, 1992): xviii.

[110] Interview with Steven Salaita.

[111] *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab-American Women on Writing*, ed. Susan Muaddi Darraj (Westport CT & London: Praeger/Greenwood, 2004): 57.

immigrant group into a radical mainstream community."[112] No matter what the actual proclivity towards selecting Palestinian themes is, it remains to be said that between mental images and political realities lies a primary desire to retain a Palestinian identity in the diasporic locus and to recount the Palestinian story in order to save it from oblivion in the midst of a headlong mêlée of events.

A great deal of this literature is lodged betwixt home as nostalgia and home as a national duty or political right. It is at once a "first universe," to borrow Gaston Bachelard's words,[113] and a cultural marker that bonds diasporic Arabs together. Shaw Dallal, in his novel *Scattered Like Seeds*, announces that "the anguish of the land of our birth unites us. We all feel it."[114] His protagonist senses the responsibility of being born Palestinian:

> "Everyone, rightly or wrongly, expects something of you because of your father. They feel that because of your father's history, you belong to the homeland – that you're its property and that the homeland has a right to claim you. You're therefore expected to respond to its call."[115]

This complexity of identity and place becomes a focal point for writers, prompting them to explore the political significance and historical implications that demarcate their positions and boundaries. Thus much of the writing is the outcome of the need to, in Edward Said's words, make permanent Palestinian narratives. Ibrahim Fawal's *On the Hills of God*, Shaw Dallal's *Scattered Like Seeds*, Fawzi Turki's *The Disinherited*, Diana Abu Jaber's novels, including the unpublished "Birth,"[116] the poetry of Suheir Hammad, Nathalie Handal, Naomi Shihab Nye, Salma Khadra, Al Jayyousi and many others – all embody from various residences on earth this desire to keep alive the story of a lost homeland. "More importantly," as Steven Salaita, an Arab-American academic and critic puts it, the works "are emblematic of a recent trend in Palestinian literature: writing rooted in diasporic countries but focused in theme and

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[112] Steven Salaita, "Ethnic Identity and Imperative Patriotism."

[113] "For our house is our corner of the world. As has often been said, it is our first universe, a real cosmos in every sense of the word"; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, tr. Maria Jolas (*La Poétique de l'espace*, 1958; Boston MA: Beacon, 1958): 4.

[114] Shaw Dallal, *Scattered Like Seeds* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse UP, 1998): 176.

[115] Dallal, *Scattered Like Seeds*, 177.

[116] Diana Abu Jaber is described by Steven Salaita as the "most artistically refined of the Palestinians writing fiction in English."

content on Palestine."[117] In fact, Salaita adds, the phenomenon is not confined to Americans of Palestinian origin, Palestinian prose has gone global. "Palestinian authors have penned English work in Ireland, England, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand" as well.

An example is Ibrahim Fawal's *On the Hills of God*[118] (winner in 1998 of the PEN Oakland Josephine Miles Award for Excellence in Literature), which gives voice to the Palestinian Exodus of 1948 by recounting the story of Yousif Safi, a seventeen-year-old youth whose life changed dramatically in the wake of the founding of Israel. The novel, based largely on the writer's own experience and that of fellow Palestinians, was met with great enthusiasm by readers who wanted to know "the other side of the story."[119] It has been described as a "passionate and deeply human narrative,"[120] a work indispensable to readers with interest in understanding the political roots of the Middle East crisis,[121] a "monumental book [...] a stunning creation,"[122] and a powerful, emotionally affectting novel that attests to the harmony of idealized communal life in pre-1947 Palestine where Christian, Muslim, and Jewish mothers breast-fed each other's children. In this novel, Fawal does not vilify the enemy; instead, he creates a world where the now warring parties lived in peace: "I show the decency of both sides," he says."[123]

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[117] "*Scattered Like Seeds*: Palestinian prose goes global," *Studies in the Humanities* 30.2 (June–December 2003): 46–59.

[118] Ibrahim Fawal, *On The Hills of God* (Montgomery AL: Black Belt, 1998). Fawal was born in Ramallah, Palestine in 1933 and moved to the USA, where he received a film degree from UCLA. He worked with the director David Lean on *Lawrence of Arabia*. He earned a doctorate in film studies from Oxford University, and has taught for many years at Birmingham Southern College and the University of Alabama at Birmingham.

[119] Bonnie Johnston, *Booklist*.

[120] Richard North Patterson, author of *Degree of Guilt and Silent Witness*.

[121] Ishmael Reed, http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/productdescription /1588382044 /ref=dp_proddesc_0?ie=UTF8&n=283155&s=books

[122] Michael S. Lee, *Washington Report*, interview with author, http://imeu.net/news /article006626.shtml

[123] Massoud A. Derhally, "Palestinian film-maker, novelist hope to make award winning book into a movie," *The Electronic Intifada* (9 July 2004), http://electronicintifada .net/v2/article2891.shtml

Similarly, *Scattered Like Seeds* by Shaw Dallal,[124] shows a human face on the Palestinian problem and aims at offering a true-to-life account of what happened in Palestine over a half-century ago. The author, like Fawal, experienced the 1948 diaspora as a young man, and feels the urge to recount the Palestinian saga especially to American readers, who are mostly misinformed. Steven Salaita describes it as "a landmark work in the Arab-American tradition, not unlike Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* in that of Native America.[125] Perhaps one of the novel's greatest merits is its ability to describe the Palestinians' experience in exile: relations with their host country vis-à-vis their country of origin, their spouses and offspring, their courting of Arab regimes and institutions and the disenchantments that follow. Political negotiation, as Salaita cleverly views it, blends thematically and aesthetically with cultural negotiation to bridge the divide between Palestinian and Palestinian-American discourse. What comes across clearly is the fact that, indeed, "Palestinian identity has endured and managed to articulate itself, both artistically and historically, from within Arab America."[126]

Palestine appeared not only in the novels, poems, and plays of Arab-Americans but also in blogs, stand-ups, rap, and hip hop songs. A famous Arab rapper who called himself Iron Sheik raps about Palestine and the Palestinian diaspora, the demonization of Arabs in present-day America, the victimization of Muslims who are constantly taken for terrorists the minute a shot is heard in the distance. Like Suheir Hammad, Iron Sheik also associates himself with other minorities and ethnic communities. He "connects Arab American discourse in remarkable ways with injustices in the Hispanic, Black and Native communities."[127]

The greater percentage of authors and critics writing in the USA today are of Palestinian origin or are at least the offspring of one Palestinian

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[124] Shaw Dallal came to the USA as a teenager in the 1950s with $27 in his pocket and the advice of an American missionary to strive for the best. He says, of his life full of achievements: "It could only happen in America." He made it all the way, becoming a professor at Cornell University. This is perhaps not so surprising an achievement, given the fact that, for a start, Palestinians "have the highest percentage of university graduates in the Arab world"; Edward Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, with photographs by Jean Mohr (London & Boston MA: Faber & Faber, 1986): 115.

[125] "*Scattered Like Seeds*: Palestinian prose goes global."

[126] Salaita, "Ethnic Identity," 164.

[127] Salaita, "Ethnic Identity," 164.

parent: Salma Khadra Jayyusi, Nathalie Handhal, Suheir Hammad, Diana Abu Jaber, Lisa Suhair Majaj, Naomi Shihab Nye, Laila Halaby, Susan Muaddi Darraj, Amal Amireh, Fawaz Turki, Ibrahim Fawal, Shaw Dallal, and Souad Amiry are but a few names on a much longer list, not to forget, of course, their intellectual mentor, Edward Said. The focus in the works is not always or necessarily political, as is the case with Fawal and Dallal or Fawaz Turki's *The Disinherited*. Both Laila Halaby and Susan Muaddi Darraj in *West of the Jordan* (2003) and *The Inheritance of Exile: Stories from South Filly* (2007), respectively, situate their Palestinian-American characters within a mostly cultural and social context. They offer vignettes of Palestinian-American émigré families in Arizona, California, and South Philly, of female characters caught in the cultural schism of country of origin and the USA, of generational tensions, and of the search for a tangible meaning for 'home'.

Apart from the political, other Arab-American writers opted for the seemingly 'timely' topic of oppressed Muslim females in a male-dominated society. *Mirage*, *Nadia's Song*, and *Mosaic* are three novels by Soheir Khashoggi, of Saudi origin, that depict the subjugation of females to the 'brutal' whims of fathers and husbands and the women's ensuing resistance. The works endorse, by and large, American stereotypes of Arab male savagery and Arab female victimization through exaggerated and insensitive portrayal of a 'backward Arabia'. It is hardly surprising that Arab readers in particular felt quite uncomfortable with Khashoggi's melodramatic tales, feeling that they only satisfied the expectations of an already biased readership which needed no further endorsement from an insider. Besides, there is much bitterness in the writing – bitterness without the either condescending or softening nostalgia for a homeland.

In dealing with family relations, other American writers of Arab origin succeed in offering readers far more complex narratives than those recounted by Khashoggi – Mona Simpson, for example. Simpson has been the winner of a Guggenheim award, 1988; the Whiting prize, 1989; the Lila Wallace Readers Digest award, 1996–99; and the Hadder prize, Princeton University, she was also named one of Granta's 20 Best American Writers Under 40. Simpson does not have the background of wealth and social status enjoyed by Khashoggi (who is the sister of the Saudi billionaire Adnan Khashoggi). The daughter of an American mother and a Syrian father who left his family when Mona was in her early teens, she had to make her own way, all the way to the University of California at

Berkeley (1979), then to Columbia (MFA 1983), before she could reap the success of her well-known novel *Anywhere but Here* (1988), which was subsequently made into a film. Three more novels followed, all published by Alfred A. Knopf: *The Lost Father* (1992), *A Regular Guy* (1996), and *Off Keck Road* (2000).

In most of her novels, Simpson's characters are looking for safe anchorage, for rootedness, longing to inhabit a world that offers its inhabitants something solid but finding no reliable spiritual or religious guides and no firm leadership, as she admits in an interview with Don Swaim.[128] Even the family in her novel fails to provide love, protection, identity or self-respect: fathers abandon their daughters; mothers are troubled or too preoccupied with the pursuit of false dreams, daughters are caught in an almost destructive quest or odyssey to find the fathers who dumped them. Ann in *Anywhere but Here*, Mayan in *The Lost Father*, Jane in *A Regular Guy* agonizingly reflect the pain of famy rupture. The works have been rightly described by Gregory Orfalea as epitomes of "journeying for patrimony, for identity through ancestry."[129]

Simpson has not been included much in anthologies or critical studies of Arab-American literature, few as they are; she has been described as an author who grew up "on the edge or completely outside the Arab hearth."[130] Some did not find her thematic concerns 'Arab' enough, hence turned to more 'ethnically' identifiable figures. The question, however, remains whether her constant search for her own and her characters' lost father does not make her as the 'diasporic' Arab *par excellence*.

No survey of Arab-American writing would be complete without at least a mention of Katherine Abdul-Baki, author of *Fields of Fig and Olive: "Ameera" and Other Stories of the Middle East* (1991), *Tower of Dreams* (1995), *Ghost Songs: A Palestinian Love Story* (2000), and *Sands of Zulaika* (2007). Abdul-Baki is an Arab-American with extensive life experience in the Middle East, especially the Gulf. This becomes her endowment for bearing witness, and an insightful one it is, with its perceptive analysis of cultural schism, and the dexterous juxtaposing of the Arab

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[128] Swaim, Don. "Audio Interview with Mona Simpson," *Wired for Books* (Ohio University, 24 January 1992), http://wiredforbooks.org/monasimpson/

[129] Gregory Orfalea, *The Arab Americans: A History* (Northampton MA: Olive Branch, 2006): 344.

[130] Orfalea, *The Arab Americans*, 344.

and American worlds. The particulars of place emerge as gripping and fascinating, convincingly supported by the author's authentic knowledge of the minutiae of daily life. Abdul Baki has completed a fifth book, a novel, "Hotels: A Marriage in Four Seasons," set in capitals around the world and the first with wholly American characters.

This departure from the ethnic and shift towards the mainstream is not exclusive to Abdul-Baki, but is part of a movement by other Arab-American authors (Abu Jaber and Simpson, to cite just two) desirous, especially of late, to melt into the great American amalgam and mainstream American literature. Perhaps what will be seen from now on are writers treading a course different from the older trajectory of identity negotiation typical of first novels; and authors, as Lisa Suheir Majaj suggests, shall be responding to calls to "forge connections beyond the insular boundaries of group identity."[131] This shall not be "a betrayal," as Majaj asserts, "but an attempt at self-transformation," for only when there is a wide range of depictions of Arab-American experience and culture "will writing that is self-critical be understood for what it is."[132]

This survey of Arab-American writing, equally, should not overlook works by writers such as Said K. Aburish, Leila Lalami, and Patricia Sarrafian Ward. Aburish is the author of *Children of Bethany: The Story of a Palestinian Family*. A cultural schizoid, as he calls himself, his reputation is based mainly on his book *Nasser, the Last Arab*, in which he expresses his admiration for the Egyptian leader. His forthcoming memoir "The Wounds of Change" will be another migrant narrative chronicling the experience of in-betweenness.

Patricia Sarrafian Ward is the author of *The Bullet Collection* (2003), a captivating novel of initiation, coming of age, war, and exile. It focuses on the psychological impact of the devastating civil war in Lebanon on the lives of two sisters, Marianna and Alaine, who are forced to move with their family to the USA, only to yearn for a childhood that never was, a home that could never hold, and an exile that could not fulfil. Elegantly and gracefully written despite its agonizing topic, *The Bullet Collection*

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[131] Lisa Suheir Majaj, "Arab-American Ethnicity, Location, Coalitions, and Cultural Negotiations," in *Arabs in America: Building a New Future*, ed. Michael W. Suleiman (Philadelphia PA: Temple UP, 1999): 325.

[132] Majaj, "New Directions: Arab American Writing at Century's End," in *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing*, ed. Khaled Mattawa & Munir Akash (Syracuse NY: Syracuse UP, 1999): 74.

makes a solid contribution to the genre of anti-war narratives, and not just Lebanese.

Equally painful is the account, in Laila Lalami's *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, of the traumatic ordeal of a group of people who try to leave their homeland (Morocco) and cross the Straits of Gibraltar in a lifeboat in hopes of reaching the alluring Spanish coast. It is not just the horrors of the trip that capture the interest of the reader but the personal histories of the character, each reflecting an intricate mesh of crises, political, social, and emotional. The 'passengers' drift in pursuit of their "dangerous" hope between the two points of departure and arrival, leaving behind a world of corruption, poverty, lack of opportunities, stagnation, and desperation; and sailing towards a world of delusion, false promises of betterment, deracination, and uncertainty. Between the two shores, and in their death-defying endeavour, the illegal immigrants sum up the harrowing larger-than-life story of the rift between North and South, haves and have-nots, fairness and injustice in the world today.

The problem facing a chronicler of Arab-American literary history is choosing between breadth and depth, and it is clear that I have opted for the former and left the latter to the essays included in this volume. It is not just that works are emerging in an unprecedented and incessant flow that challenges comprehensiveness, but also that even 'old hands' cannot have devoted to them the amount of attention they deserve. Such are the worthy oeuvres of Joseph Geha, author of *Through and Through: Toledo Stories* (1990), and Samuel Hazo,[133] author of *Stills* (1998), *The Holy Surprise of Right Now* (1996; poetry), *The Past Won't Stay Behind You* (1993), *Feather* (play), *As They Sail* (poetry), *Spying for God* (essays), *The Color of Reluctance* (1986), *The Wanton Summer Air* (1982), *The Very Fall of the Sun* (1978), *Inscripts* (1975), *Blood Rights* (1968), and *Listen with the Eye* (1964), among many other works. Hayan Charara's recent anthology

[133] Samuel John Hazo was born to Sam and Lottie (Abdou) Hazo on 19 July 1928 in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Hazo earned his B.A. degree from the University of Notre Dame in 1948. A few years later, Hazo retuned to Pittsburgh to attend Duquesne University, where he received his M.A. in 1955. He continued his education by earning his Ph.D. from the University of Pittsburgh in 1957. Hazo is the author of thirty books of poetry and has edited many literary magazines and anthologies. He also was the commentator and narrator on National Public Radio, KDKA, based in Pittsburgh. Hazo is the founder and director of the International Poetry Forum in Pittsburgh, as well as the McAnulty Distinguished Professor Emeritus of English at Duquesne University.

of Arab-American poetry, *Inclined to Speak* (2008), introduces thirty-nine significant Arab-American poets with 160 poems. With all of these poets clamouring to speak, the mainstream will surely have to listen.

Australia

> All of us speak of *awdah*, 'return,' but do we mean that literally, or do we mean 'we must restore ourselves to ourselves'?[134]

With only half a million Australians claiming some form of Arab origin,[135] it stands to reason that the Arabs should be poorly represented in Australian letters. Arab-Australians have, in fact, produced very few writers over the past century, their literature being one of the most recent in the anglophone literary corpus. With the exception of David Malouf, who is Arab (Lebanese) by descent though seemingly not by sentiment, no Arab-Australian author has gained any appreciable international or even national recognition. This may have to do with the fact that Arab immigration to Australia is relatively recent compared with its counterpart in the Americas, and that writers are taking longer to blend into the fabric of the Australian literary scene. Most of the Arab-Australians currently writing (again except for Malouf) were not born on Australian soil, and many thus write from an expatriate perspective rather than from the stance of fully internalized citizenship.[136]

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[134] Edward Said, *After the Last Sky*, 33.

[135] Arab immigrants first came to Australia in the late-nineteenth century. They are a diverse group, both socially and economically. New South Wales, for example, appointed Australia's first Lebanese Governor, while at the same time it was labelling groups of economically deprived young people as 'Lebanese gangs'. Victoria's Premier, Steve Bracks, comes from a Lebanese background. Melbourne has an important Arab business community. http://www.mup.unimelb.edu.au/catalogue/0-522-84979-2.html

[136] For readings on Arabs in Australia, see Ghassan Hage, *Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging* (Melbourne: Melbourne UP, 2002); Albert Hourani & Nadim Shehadie, *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Migration* (Centre for Lebanese Studies and I.B. Tauris, 1992); Trevor Batrouney & Andrew Batrouney, *The Lebanese in Australia* (Australian Ethnic Heritage Series; Melbourne: AE Press, 1985); and Jim McKay & Trevor Batrouney, "Lebanese Immigration until the 1970s," in *The Australian People: An Encyclopedia of the Nation, Its People and Their Origins*, ed. James Jupp (North Ryde, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1988): 666–70.

Born in Brisbane, Quensland in 1934 to a Lebanese-Christian father and an English-Jewish mother, Malouf[137] has lived the greater part of his life in Australia except for a few years spent in Britain and Italy and regular spells in Tuscany. A poet, novelist, playwright, filmscript writer, and opera librettist, and winner of prestigious prizes and awards, he quickly became established as Australia's new talent. His writing is poetic, musical, and firmly grounded in the Australian landscape. He invokes characters from history, myth, dreams, and haunting tales. The 'immigrant' appears only as a hidden, never-declared sub-text dealing macrocosmically with themes of possession and dispossession. Such is *Remembering Babylon* (1993), arguably Malouf's best-known novel; set in nineteenth-century Australia, it tells the story of a young boy (Gemmy Fairley), a castaway who is rescued and taken in by Aborigines. As an adult, Gemmy comes into contact with a group of European settlers and is taken in by the McIvor family. However, he is never completely accepted by the settler community: insider and outsider, familiar yet foreign, he arouses both the desires and distrust of his people. Most disturbing of all, Gemmy no longer feels at home – he has become an in-between figure, a hybrid. Johnno (*Johnno*), Gemmy; Ovid (*An Imaginary Life*) – all have the sense of not belonging to the place where they momentarily are. They and the locality they find themselves in somehow do not fit together, so they are constantly moving – physically and/or spiritually: "They aim at the centre but don't know where the centre is."[138]

It is in the works of more pronouncedly Arab writers in Australia that in-betweenness and hybridity are indelible and strongly remarked. Loubna Haikal, Nada Awar Jarrar, Jad El Hage, and Abbas El-Zein engage in the rhetoric of displacement, exile, and diaspora, the dilemma of inclusion and exclusion, in Australia's culturally diverse society and deal with this young multicultural country's attitudes towards ethnicity, marginalization, and recognition. None of them was born in Australia; they arrived in the country either as a young child, as with Haikal, or as adults, as is the case

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[137] Malouf comes from a diasporic clan which includes Fawzi Malouf, a Brazilian poet ("the Arabic Rimbaud"), and Amin Maalouf, the well-known French novelist, author of *The Rock of Tanios*, *Samarkand*, *Leo the African*, and *The Crusades through Arab Eyes*.

[138] Jörg Heinke, "David Malouf: An Introduction," Contemporary Postcolonial & *Postimperial Literature in English*, http://www.postcolonialweb.org/australia/malouf/intro.html

with the rest. All of them are Lebanese (Nada Jarrar is half-Euro-Australian), many write in Arabic and English, with extensive experience in journalism, and almost all fled the civil war in Lebanon with their families. Thus, exiled rather than diasporic, they nurture a 'homing' desire and rarely sever ties with their country of origin. Bonded to the *terre natale*, they feel the urge to tell stories of their migration – the world left behind – describing in the same breath their laborious efforts to gain admittance to their adopted country. "Our stories are as important as Captain Cook's," declares Haikal in one interview, "our version is equally significant."[139]

The version Arab-Australian writers gave was indeed significant, as it charted not just the physical experiences of migration but also the psychological repercussions of the 1975–93 civil war in Lebanon and the ensuing dispersion of the Lebanese. Migration was not a choice for many of them but a necessity in the face of the brutal civil strife – survival. They left Lebanon reluctantly, impelled by the desire to safeguard family,[140] but the country could not leave them. The literature they wrote kept the homeland in sight and heart; nonetheless, the actual distance from it sharpened their understanding of what happened back 'home', and turned their nostalgic yearnings into insightful reasoning.

In this spirit, Jad El Hage, who emigrated to Australia in 1985 and who now divides his time between Melbourne and Sereel, a small village in north Lebanon, wrote *The Myrtle Tree* (2007), which traces the effects of Lebanon's fratricidal civil war on a village community in 1976 during the Syrian army occupation.[141] His earlier novel *Last Migration: A Novel of Diaspora and Love* (2002), which won the Presentation Prize at the

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[139] Ghassan Nakhoul, "Author of *Seducing Mr Maclean* Loubna Haikal talks to Ghassan Nakhoul about the new Federal government's prize for writers," *SBS Radio: Arabic* (19 December 2007), www.radio.sbs.com.au/language.php?news=archive&language=Arabic&page=4

[140] Australia was not a first choice for Lebanese emigrants. "France had refused us visas at the beginning of the civil war even though my father had served with the French navy and Lebanon was a francophone country. But halfway around the world, Australia took me and my family when we had nowhere to go. And here was the result of that Australian generosity: my two beautiful daughters, unscathed by war, bringing blessed peace to my grieving spirit"; *Last Migration*, http://www.111101.net /Writings /Author/Jad_El-Hage/

[141] The idea for the novel was initially conceived not in Australia but in Greece, and not in English but in Arabic. Only when he returned to Lebanon was he able to put the work together and get it published.

Writers' Festival in Sydney, is another subtly crafted narrative that portrays the restlessness of the Lebanese diasporics, who, however successful and adaptable they may appear to be in their host countries, are profoundly aware of what has been lost – in Lebanon and in themselves. Both novels are deeply passionate and poignant in their depiction of how love, war, and diaspora melt into one sad condition.

The works of Nada Awar Jarrar are likewise concerned with the search for a place one can call one's own. *Somewhere, Home*, which won the 2004 Commonwealth Writers Prize for Best First Book for Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, examines the lives of three women returning to or searching for somewhere they can call 'home'. Jarrar's main characters are ordinary people living in extraordinary times, against the backdrop of war and exile. Like her heroines, the author, born in Lebanon to an Australian mother and a Lebanese father, was separated from her home as a young teenager when the 1975 civil war broke up in Lebanon. Her exile lasted twenty years,[142] after which she decided to return and reclaim her Lebanese identity as decidedly. "Beirut was home," she declared in one interview, "but sometimes we do not realize what 'home' means until we cannot go there anymore." Her words and sentiments were translated into action when she refused to escape from Beirut at the outbreak of the Hezbollah–Israeli war in the summer of 2006. She was not ready for another exile and she had to express her solidarity with the place and attachment to it. "Lebanon is not a hotel you go to when everything goes well and leave when it doesn't."[143]

Jarrar's *Dreams of Water* (2007) is also about the war in Lebanon and the longing for home. Her protagonist, Aneesa, experiences both: the loss of a brother who went missing during the civil war and the ache of missing home while in Britain away from the kind of security that only family and land can offer. A return to Lebanon is imminent, and a resurrection of her family's Druze belief in reincarnation helps Aneesa's mother to deal with grief. Hope needs to be invented, Jarrar seems to be saying, even in the rubble of exile and wars or a second life. Her latest novel, *Unremarkable Acts of Kindness* (2008), paints, in darker colours, on a broader canvas that once again encompasses one woman's life in Beirut during the

[142] She has lived in London, Paris, Sydney, and Washington DC and is currently based in Beirut.

[143] http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/womanshour/01/2007_04_wed.shtml

war but also explores the mysteries of identity surrounding a Beirut neighbour (another woman) in Central Europe during and at the end of the Second World War.

Like El Hage and Awar Jarrar, Abbas El-Zein engages in identifying the signification of home as he negotiates his identity between country of origin and host country. El-Zein, who is a lecturer in civil and environmental engineering at the University of Sydney, is the author of several essays on migration, war, and identity, a novel, *Tell the Running Water* (2001), and a memoir, *Leave to Remain: Chronicles of a Foreign Arab*. (2009) He is perhaps better known to the average reader for a highly controversial article titled "Rubble From Down Under*:* The Tribes of War," published in the *New York Times* during the July 2007 war between Israel and Hezbollah. The article poignantly recounts the author's childhood memories of his grandmother, killed by what he calls a "precision" air raid as she fled her home town during the atrocities of March 1978 in southern Lebanon.

Leave to Remain: Chronicles of a Foreign Arab tells of the life the author, a Muslim Arab, growing up in a middle-class family in Beirut, a city caught between the chaos of self-destruction and the will to survive. In this memoir, El-Zein seeks to explain how a potent mix of culture, religion, history, and place bears upon the formation of identity. The ground he covers is extensive spatially and temporally, taking the reader all the way up to September 11 and the invasion of Iraq. All this is captured in disarmingly simple prose that covers the gamut of experiences affecting those whose circumstances push them out of their birthplace and force them to be 'foreign' both at home and abroad. By giving his own account of what it feels to long and belong, El-Zein

> zig-zags between the many elements confronting migrants: how migration can feel like a form of mutilation; defining 'home' so as to be able to reconstitute it; returning to the 'homeland' and finding that is no longer 'home' either; and, in a very honest reflection, recognizing that by his migration to Australia, he has himself become part of Australia's colonial process.[144]

[144] Victoria Mason, "*Arab-Australians Today: Citizenship and Belonging*, by Ghassan Hage," book review, *Australian Public Intellectual* (June 2002), http://www.api-network.com /cgi-bin/reviews/jrbview.cgi?n=0522849792 &issue=6

It only takes an author like Loubna Haikal to laugh the whole thing off and capture both the sinister and the comic sides of migration narratives – hers , her family's, and those of her friends. "I knew I needed first of all to write a funny novel," Haikal explains, commenting on her debut work *Seducing Mr McLean* (2002). "Migrants have been the funny ones [...]. My idea was to subvert and parody the stereotypes and create caricatures [...]. That's who I wanted to seduce, not Mr McLean, it's the reader." Haikal's medical training must have endowed her with scathing lancet-like skills that helped her probe the physiology of persuasion through humour: "When [readers] laugh, their musculature is relaxed, their diaphragm is expanding, so they're very receptive. They don't think someone who makes them laugh is going to hurt them. Laughter is disarming."[145]

Who Haikal actually tries to seduce beside the reader is Australia itself. "Mr McLean [the dean at the school of medicine at Melbourne University where her protagonist studies] is a metaphor for the 'West'," she says, "the West that the narrator is trying to seduce in order to fit in."[146] Her nameless immigrant protagonist needs to learn how to flirt with the West, or allow it to flirt with her in order to get along with life and become a good Aussie.

Seducing Mr McLean was viewed by Australian critics as one of a kind. Owing to the dearth of literature that speaks of Arab immigrant experience in Australia, the novel was thought to be 'important' and informative, "not only for addressing this cultural vacuum by pulling together the richer aspects of Lebanese culture and putting them into the context of the difficulties of being a young migrant, but for turning the migrant experience into art."[147] The novel is a clever satire which exposes Lebanese idiocies and Australian follies, a comedy of exaggeration close to caricature: the Aussies seduced by the delicious food and exotic dishes passionately prepared in the Lebanese restaurant owned and run by the narrator's father; the presumptuous mother guarding her daughter's reputation and using her skills to ward off the Evil Eye; the sleazy professor

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[145] "A Serve of Lebanon," *The Age* (6 October 2002): http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/10/05/1033538810742.html

[146] Magdalena Ball, "Interview with Loubna Haikal, author of *Seducing Mr McLean*," *The Compulsive Reader* (nd), http://www.compulsivereader.com/html/modules.php?op=modload&name=News&file=article&sid=211&mode=thread&order=0&thold=0

[147] Magdalena Ball, "Interview with Loubna Haikal."

Mr McLean, who poses patronizing questions triggered by his fancies and preconceived notions about the protagonist's culture; and the xenophobic parents of her boyfriend, who cannot get over their son's interest in a 'foreign' girl. Both Arabs and Australians engage in constructing false perceptions of each other. By the end of the work one cannot tell the seducer from the seduced as the welter of seduction, multilayered, targets the entire cast of characters. The cover design of the book contributes to this cultural 'farce' by displaying the torso of a female in a sensational belly-dance outfit. Seduction galore.

Hage, El-Zein, and Awar Jarrar seem not so keen and determined to be called Australian as Haikal is. Now that she lives in Australia, the latter demands full acceptance. "I will not have the margin for a place but the core of the mainstream," she declares in public appearances and interviews. "We have to work to be part of the mainstream: not Indian, Italian or Lebanese but Australian even if written in Lebanese experience because all this is part of Australian heritage."[148] In a women writers seminar, Haikal adds that "by keeping cultures separate, we are excluding them from the Australian identity. The litmus test is ethical, moral and spiritual integrity."[149]

Admission to the Australian mainstream does not, however, preclude the writer's appropriation of a vernacular that is not necessarily the Queen's English, Haikal insists; she does not refrain from writing with a Lebanese accent. Although the practice initially put publishers off, it gradually gained their approval. The author jokes about this – in Lebanon and at home she spoke Arabic and French fluently; in Australia, she says, she learned much of her English in the sleepwear department of Myer, where she once worked. Haikal urges fellow writers in Australia to follow suit and not be intimidated by the foreign language. "Use your own voice even dialect and appropriate English to reflect the Lebanese spirit."[150] Language "is very much a tool that chisels our identity"; correct usage of

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[148] Ghassan Nakhoul, "Author of *Seducing Mr Maclean* Loubna Haikal talks to Ghassan Nakhoul."

[149] Society of Women Writers NSW, summary report on "Sharing a Landscape: A Seminar in Celebration of Difference (Saturday, 14 June 2003) [Session 3 included Loubna Haikal, "Respect and Representation: Multiculturalism in Australian literature], www.womenwritersnsw.org/Seminar_Report.pdf

[150] Nakhoul, "Author of *Seducing Mr Maclean* Loubna Haikal talks to Ghassan Nakhoul."

grammar, she continues, somehow kills the subtext. This, she insists, is much in line with Australia's multiculturalism and pushes no one into the cultural margin.[151]

Rather than appropriating an English that remains foreign to many, several Australian writers of Arab origin preferred to stick to their Arabic mother tongue. Wadi' Sa'adah, a Lebanese poet and journalist, writes beautiful poetry in Arabic, much of which has found its way to translation into English. He is author of *Nass-al Ghiyab* (Text of Absence, 1999) and *Ghubar* (Dust, 2001), where, like his anglophone compatriots, he depicts the trauma of a civil war back home, the internal geography of alienation and loss arising from exiling remoteness, and the emotional burden of memory.[152]

Others have resorted to Arabic first, then translating their works into English themselves. Thus, both *Lina, Portrait of a Damascene Girl* (1995) and *The House on Arnous Square* (1998) by Samar Attar (originally a citizen of Syria) were published in the Middle East before they found their way to Australian publishers in their English version. The one noticeable thing about the works is not the language factor but the realization that, apart from the element of reminiscence and the summoning up of the past, immigration experience is here totally absent, as is Australia. They stand as the literary product of someone who never left the homeland.

Elsewhere

With human mobility on the rise and new identities constantly being formed and re-formed, inclusion and exclusion under a national rubric become increasingly difficult. The question is whether the mere crossing of a geopolitical border amounts to traversing boundaries of space, race, culture, and history. Such is the difficulty of 'locating' someone like Cecile

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[151] Nakhoul, "Author of *Seducing Mr Maclean* Loubna Haikal talks to Ghassan Nakhoul." Haikal declares that writing with a Lebanese accent saved her from the linguistic 'autism' she had suffered from earlier. Migrants, she thinks, must use writing their own stories for their own healing.

[152] See Clarissa C. Burt, "Loss and Memory: The Exilic Nihilism of Wadi' Sa'adah," http://www.geocities.com/wadih2/English4.html; "Connecting Two Shores with Sound: Sa'âdeh's World of Loss," *Edebiyat: Journal of Middle Eastern Literatures* 14.1–2 (January 2003): 133–47.

Yazbek author of *Olive Trees Around My Table: Growing Up Lebanese in the Old South Africa* (2007) within a culturally distinctive or separate category (should such distinctness ever be needed). Yazbek was born in South Africa, with grandparents who emigrated from Lebanon at the turn of the twentieth century. She grew up in a household of Arabic, English, Xhosa, and Afrikaans before shattering events forced her to leave South Africa and head towards another continent – Australia. Although her novel was published in Australia, there is nothing much Australian in it. Most episodes take place in the 'old' South Africa of the 1950s and 1960s and chronicle the life of a Lebanese girl growing up under the shadow of the apartheid system. In short, it is recollections lodged in another time and another place, which leaves the critic with the question of taxonomy: whether to place this under South African or Lebanese literature, or to accommodate it within Australian literature. One should not, of course, deny the interface among different ethnic/immigrant literatures, which may at the end of the day simply call for less rigid taxonomies, ones that are compatible with actual lived experience.

The difficulty of pinning down an author to a cultural 'home' or a single geographic location persists particularly when dealing with anglophone Arab writers, not only because they are literally scattered all over the world but also because that world itself is shrinking in the face of the proliferation of new ideas which re/interpret the very concept of globalization, the nation-state, nationalism, and political constructs. Much has been said and is still to be said on how the growing global cultural interface and interaction is having an effect on the formation of new geo/socio/political and intellectual boundaries that foreground the formation of new genealogies of identity zones and domains. New alignments and affiliations constantly shift borders, causing them to recede, encroach, blur, overlap, or disappear altogether. Within this mesh of permeable and interlacing lines, critics must find it increasingly hard to link authors who write in English from various and constantly shifting locations in the world to specific identity groups, particularly if the selection needs to be done from an endless list of current jargon and nomenclature: national / transnational / translocal / multilocational / territorialized / deterritorialized / crosscultural / multicultural / acculturated / minor / emigrant / exilic and diasporic…

It is with such difficulties in mind that one approaches writers who have settled outside the English-speaking world yet use that language for their literary expression. Yasmine Zahran, Jean Said Makdisi, and Raja

Shehadeh are salient examples. Now living in the Arab world or moving between continents, they are paradigms of the extraordinary mobility of individuals in current times. Mostly by virtue of their multicultural background – Western educated; well versed in at least two languages and often three; abreast of current discursive practices; and opposed to parochial thinking – all three are best described as 'citizens of the world'. Also, considering their topical preoccupations, choice of language medium, publishers, and expected readership, as well as critical responses, their physical geographical location is of little concern to anyone. It is perhaps now understandable why my rubric had to be 'Elsewhere' (or, better still, should have been 'Everywhere').

Arab anglophone authors writing from their 'home' positions in the Arab world, despite the fluidity of the term, seem to display considerable proximity to those writing from other geographical locations. Given the cultural and literary resources that they share, they hold identical positions vis-à-vis, for example, the Lebanese civil war, the Arab–Israeli strife which informs the greater part of their writing; and the desire to negotiate identity through new sets of affiliations involving gender politics or major historical events. In other words, they share what Miriam Cooke rightly terms a "conceptual community" or "psychic space in which individuals feel rooted and to which they feel they belong."[153]

Yasmine Zahran's novel *Beggar at Damascus Gate* (1995) has strong affinities with Arab-American narratives of Palestinian themes; Makdisi's *Beirut Fragments: A War Memoir* (1990)[154] is haunted by the same horrific memories of the internecine war that dogged her counterparts in North America, Britain, and Australia (and Lebanese narratives in Arabic, for that matter). Life stories such as Makdisi's *Teta, My Mother and Me: An Arab Woman's Memoir* (2005)[155] and Raja Shehadeh's *Strangers in the House: Coming of Age in Occupied Palestine* (2003) also find their Arab-American/British/Australian equivalents. The examples picked

[153] Miriam Cooke, "Reimagining Lebanon," *South Atlantic Quarterly* 94.4 (Fall 1995): 1076.

[154] Selected as the New York Times Book Review Notable Book of the Year in 1990.

[155] The work offers an insightful narrative that spans the lives of three generations of Arab women against the backdrop of political events marking nearly a century and a half of Arab history, starting with the Ottoman Empire and ending with the Lebanese civil war.

here are of three Palestinians who have either studied abroad or had contact with Western education (Zahran was born in Ramallah, Palestine, and went to Columbia University, the University of London, and the Sorbonne, where she earned a doctorate in archaeology; Makdisi was born in Jerusalem and studied in Cairo and the USA; Shehadeh was born in Ramallah, studied in Britain, and resides in Ramallah, where he practises law and presides over a pioneering non-partisan human-rights organization). The affinities are salient and extend beyond the topical coincidence.

In fact, this commonality between 'home' anglophone Arab writers (if such a term is ever applicable) and their 'overseas' counterparts can serve as a final word in this survey. The corpus of Arab anglophone writing, regardless of its authors' dwelling-places shares likenesses rather than evincing differences; they are semblances that seem to emanate from some quasi-primordial paradigm of analogous experiences and memories; of parallel life episodes lived similarly in all of their diasporic corners of the world. In this sense, 'diaspora' can be ironically seen as a befitting abode as long as it succeeds in giving them a literary 'home' through which their voices can freely be heard.

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Gibran and Orientalism

WAÏL S. HASSAN

KAHLIL GIBRAN (1883–1931) is the best-known Arab-American writer. National monuments are dedicated to him in Boston and Washington, D.C. His best-known work, *The Prophet* (1923), has sold over eight million copies and has been translated into more than fifty languages, and it remains Alfred A. Knopf's best-selling title ever. *The Prophet* was adapted as a religious drama, repeatedly performed at New York's church of St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, in which services drawn entirely from Gibran's poetry were also held, and whose pastor described another of Gibran's books, *Jesus Son of Man*, as "The Gospel according to Gibran,"[1] "thus making of Gibran the fifth Evangelist."[2] Gibran's other English-language books, and translations of his Arabic ones, remain in print today, unlike the English-language works of his immigrant Lebanese contemporaries, which have long gone out of print. Gibran's phenomenal popularity is in large part based on his aura as spiritual guru or Oriental wise man, bolstered by his self-styled prophetic posture, his use of biblical idiom, his universalist, didactic, and often aphoristic writings, and his paradoxical blend of the Romantic visionary, Nietzschean idealist, Eastern mystic, and Christian evangelist.

Gibran was not the first Arab-American to publish in either Arabic or English. Ameen Rihani (1876–1940) was already a celebrated author in

[1] Barbara Young, *This Man from Lebanon* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1945): 33.

[2] Irfan Shahid, "Gibran and the American Literary Canon: The Problem of *The Prophet*," in *Tradition, Modernity and Posmodernity in Arabic Literature: Essays in Honor of Professor Issa J. Boullata*, ed. Kamal Abdel-Malek & Wael Hallaq (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2000): 324.

Arabic before Gibran's first literary work, *Dam'a wa ibtisamah*, appeared in 1914. Before Gibran published his first English-language book, *The Madman* (1918), Rihani had also published the first Arab-American poetry collection, *Myrtle and Myrrh* (1905), the first Arab-American play, *Wajdah* (1909), and the first Arab-American novel, *The Book of Khalid* (1911), among other works. Likewise, Abraham Mitrie Rihbany (1869–1944) published the first Arab-American autobiography, *A Far Journey* (1914), which was followed by several well-received books on Christianity, Syrian history, culture, politics, and USA–Syrian relations. Yet Rihani and Rihbany are today known only to academic specialists, whereas Gibran's tremendous success and lasting fame have led many Arab-American writers to find in him an exemplary and inspirational predecessor, and some even to regard him as the progenitor of Arab-American literature. This lionization of Gibran is perhaps understandable for members of a US minority that suffers from entrenched anti-Arab racism, and whose literary tradition struggles for recognition in the face of a market-driven culture industry. Reclaiming one of America's most beloved and commercially successful writers as the founding father of Arab-American literature is one way of gaining favour with the mainstream. As Khalil Hawi writes,

> the Lebanese immigrants […] further[ed] the fame and the greatness of their prophet in the eyes of the Americans who looked down on them, considering them as members of the yellow race whose sole purpose in life was the accumulation of money. Gibran's spiritual writings in English furnished them with proof that they came from a better race and had higher aims in life."[3]

Yet Gibran has never been taken seriously by scholars and critics, some of whom regard him as a "charlatan,"[4] or as a writer whose work is no more than "fast food" poetry,[5] a "welcome escape route"[6] for those "ill

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[3] Khalil Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1963): 73.

[4] Evelyn Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," in *New Immigrant Literatures in the United States: A Sourcebook to Our Multicultural Literary Heritage*, ed. Alpana Sharma Knippling (Westport CT: Greenwood P, 1996): 4.

[5] Gregory Orfalea & Sharif Elmusa, *Grape Leaves: A Century of ArabAmerican Poetry*, ed. Orfalea & Elmusa (Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1988): xvi.

[6] Khalil Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 281.

adjusted to life,"[7] or "to late romantics and seekers after the exotic."[8] Shakir's assessment is even more damning:

> Gibran […] actually embrac[ed] and exploit[ed] his status as an Oriental. A native of the Lebanese hills who once claimed to have been born in Bombay, Gibran played to the hilt a role made up in equal parts of Far-Eastern swami and latter-day prophet from the Holy Land. In a sense, he plied the same trade – only at a more sophisticated level – as Syrian peddlers whose stock in trade was holy trinkets from Jerusalem."[9]

Even in the Arabic literary field, in which Gibran's early work made an impact on poetic form and style in the early-twentieth century, his works are generally dismissed as juvenile literature that stirs up the enthusiasm of adolescents and the "annoyance" of adults.[10] There is a great deal of truth to these assessments, which do not chime with Gibran's astonishing popular success in the USA and internationally. Irfan Shahid has argued that such success is reason enough for the literary critical establishment to canonize Gibran.[11] While Gibran's commercial success is no indication of intellectual or aesthetic value, it is significant insofar as it indexes the conditions of possibility of anglophone Arab-American literature, especially in view of the absence of that literature as a whole, not just Gibran, from even the multicultural canon of American literature. The real interest of Gibran for the study of Arab-American literature, I think, does not so much lie in his works themselves, which do not reward rigorous criticism, but in the conditions of possibility of the Gibran phenomenon – its rise, continuing success, and enduring significance for Arab-American literature. That phenomenon is rooted in the contradictions of Arab presence in a country where the popular imagination, at the turn of the twentieth century and now, remains steeped in Orientalism. In such a context, Arab-American writing must at once negotiate, utilize, and contest that discourse in order to carve a space for itself on the US cultural landscape.

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[7] Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 280.

[8] *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 283.

[9] Evelyn Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," 43.

[10] Abdelfattah Kilito, *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, tr. Waïl S. Hassan (*Lan tatakalama lughati*, 2002; Syracuse: Syracuse UP, 2008): 3.

[11] Irfan Shahid, "Gibran and the American Literary Canon," 322–23.

The compelling question, therefore, is not why Gibran has been left out of the canon of mainstream American literature, but what made him so popular in a country where his entire culture is denigrated and the writing of those who share his background is neglected. To answer that question, we would need to consider the options available to a minority writer. In a classic study of Franz Kafka, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argue that "the three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation."[12] First, language in the hands of a minority writer is always defamiliarized through its infusion with words, expressions, rhetorical figures, ideological intentions, and the special world-view of the author's minority group, and which differentiate his or her language from that of the mainstream culture. This is all too evident not only in Gibran's writing, but also in the works of other Arab-American and minority writers. Second, there is little distance between individual concerns and the political status of the minority group, for "the cramped space [of minority literature] forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics."[13] Third, it follows from the previous point that the concerns of the individual are always shared by other members of the minority, that the personal is always collective, again because of the social pressures on the minority group. The second and third features of minority literature appear, at first glance, not to be the case with Gibran, whose English-language works seem to be wholly apolitical, at least when compared to his Arabic works, which earned him the reputation of a social rebel and revolutionary; by contrast, his English works stress – in fact, preach – the freedom of the individual from all familial and social constraints. As we shall see, this last point was the target for criticism by some Arab-American poets, who charge that Gibran's individualist preaching threatens to weaken a community in dire need of solidarity. I will argue here that the repression of politics and the disavowal of collectivity in his anglophone works were an equivocal attempt to transcend the social and political pressures on Arab-Americans in the early decades of the twentieth century, particularly the pressure to melt in the pot of mainstream America.

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[12] Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, tr. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1986): 18.

[13] Deleuze & Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 17.

If Gibran's case seems out of synch with Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minority literature, it is because they do not account for other options available to a minority writer that were not available to Kafka. Gibran's relationship to English was different from Kafka's relationship to German. Kafka wrote in German while living in Prague, whereas Gibran wrote in Arabic and English while living in New York. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, "the impossibility of writing other than in German is for the Prague Jews the feeling of an irreducible distance from their primitive Czech territoriality."[14] Gibran, by contrast, wrote first in Arabic, a major literary tradition in its own right, and even though he wrote outside of its conventional genres and styles, he quickly helped revolutionize them and assumed an important place within that tradition; he, in effect, wrote Arabic as a minor writer – a Christian with little formal education in Arabic who lived in New York. He was able to deterritorialize literary Arabic and revolutionize it in the way Deleuze and Guattari describe when they emphasize that "minor" includes "the revolutionary conditions for every literature within the heart of what is called great (or established) literature."[15] This, incidentally, applies not only to Gibran but also to all the *Mahjar*, or immigrant, poets who contributed to Arabic poetry while living in the USA and South America during the first two decades of the twentieth century.[16]

Gibran's turn to English, however, placed him outside of any tradition. In fact, since he and a handful of others were the first Arabs to write in English, they were quite consciously initiating a properly minor tradition of their own. The fact that he and Ameen Rihani, whose complex writings I have discussed elsewhere,[17] established their fame as Arabic writers first makes their turn to English a deliberate act and begs the question of the strategic choice of language and the discursive shift it entailed. In that respect, therefore, Gibran's choices were somewhat more radical than

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[14] Deleuze & Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 16.

[15] *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, 18.

[16] On the *Mahjar* group's role in the history of modern Arabic poetry, see M.M. Badawi, *A Critical Introduction to Modern Arabic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1975): 203, and Salma Khadra Jayyusi, *Trends and Movements in Modern Arabic Poetry* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1977), vol. 1: 85–138.

[17] See "The Rise of Arab-American Literature: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in the Work of Ameen Rihani," *American Literary History* 20.1–2 (Spring–Summer 2008): 245–75.

Kafka's, the model upon which Deleuze and Guattari based their theory of minority literature – although, without a doubt, Kafka's work is far more complex and rewarding. The point, though, is that Gibran's bilingualism complicates Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minority literature in what are, from their vantage-point, some unexpected ways – unexpected because they do not examine the case of bilingual writers – and by that I mean not simply writers who know two (or more) languages, but those who *wrote* in two languages. As I have demonstrated elsewhere, bilingual writing continues to play an important role in anglophone literature by writers of Arab heritage, a phenomenon that begins with Ameen Rihani and Kahlil Gibran.[18]

What, then, is the significance of the turn to English, and what are its discursive implications? The answer is twofold. First, to write in English at all means confronting the discourse of Orientalism in the trenches. No writer of Arab heritage, whether immigrant or US-born, could write in blissful obliviousness of that discourse; even denying one's ancestry and trying to pass involves a decision about how to deal with Orientalism. There is no escaping the legacy of Orientalism for an anglophone Arab minority writer: the personal is the political and the individual meshes with the collective. Since the minority's status is ever determined with reference to the identitarian discourse of the majority, the minority writer can either accept the premises of the reigning discourse and mobilize its representations, or s/he can question some or all of those premises and write against the grain. Accepting the discourse may lead to self-orientalizing, or alternatively to self-hatred that would in turn lead to silence, or to denying one's roots and trying to pass, as many Arab-Americans did in the 1930s–60s. Even though the critical stance toward the discourse did not reach its peak until the publication of Edward Said's monumental book *Orientalism* (1978), there were attempts at critical engagement with the discourse in the work of the early Arab-American writers. In most instances, however, such critique could never liberate itself entirely from Orientalist presuppositions. Between the two endpoints of acquiescence to and rejection of the discourse, most cases involve various types of negotiation.

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[18] See my "Agency and Translational Literature: Ahdaf Soueif's *The Map of Love*," *PMLA* 121.3 (May 2006): 753–68.

Second, the bilingual writer who explains one culture to another is necessarily a cultural translator. In the case of a writer in two languages, cultural translation is a two-way activity, since s/he explains *each* culture to the other. Moreover, since one does not write the same way in two languages, a two-way cultural translator draws upon a different discourse whenever s/he turns from one language to the other one. This was precisely Gibran's claim: that he could be a critic of East and West. As Hawi reports,

> the prevalent belief among his [Gibran's] Arab friends is that: "He declared his revolt against the West by means of the spirit of the East, just as before he had declared his revolt against the backwardness of the East, drawing his inspiration from what is pure in the spirit of the Western renaissance."[19]

That is, in Arabic he wrote as a Westerner (a Romantic, to be exact), and he wrote in English as an Easterner (a mystic, sage, prophet). His Arabic works are noted for their progressive (if at times naive) social criticism and political awareness, his views evolving all the time, although he all but stopped contributing to Arabic literature in the 1920s. Meanwhile, in English, the vehicle of his creative work from 1918 until his death in 1931, his tone, themes, and stance are as invariable as they are disengaged from politics. His two-way cultural translation consisted of addressing the materialistic West on a spiritual level by means of parables and aphorisms that made a virtue of vagueness and abstraction, and the mystical East on a more material level that comments directly on social conventions, religious institutions, and politics. This reformist project had limitations that were all too clear and crippling, for this sort of translation is based on the Orientalist typology that posits a monolithic East characterized by mysticism, backwardness, and stagnation, against an equally monolithic West dialectically marked by materialism, modernity, and progressiveness. Orientalism, of course, assigns negative and positive values, respectively, to those constructs. Gibran's limited contribution to the critique of Orientalism was not in questioning the validity of those constructs so much as challenging the assignment of values. Both East and West, for him, are in need of reform, and such reform is possible by tempering the essential characteristics of each with the contrasting tendencies of the other. It was

[19] Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 111.

a utopian project, based on the faulty assumption that one can eliminate the hierarchy without liquidating the binarism.

Gibran's approach to cultural translation is revealingly illustrated on the cover of his English-language books. The unmistakably Arabic ring of his name, both in its phonetic properties and in the use of the distinctively Arab pattern of three names, the first and third of which are identical (the grandson named after the grandfather, with the father's name in the middle), are erased when Gibran Khalil Gibran becomes Kahlil Gibran. The tertiary pattern is altered, and the anglicized mispronunciation of his father's name, now used as a given name, is transliterated. Further, the foreign sound of "Khalil," which reflects the correct Arabic pronunciation (across the spoken dialects of Arabic, the 'kh' sound is constant and invariable), is domesticated to Kahlil. According to his biographer-nephews, Jean and Kahlil Gibran, this alteration occurred when the twelve-year-old Gibran entered Quincy School in Boston two months after his arrival in the USA:

> Due either to the impersonal registration procedures or to clerical impatience with a too-foreign name, his name was misspelled and shortened to Kahlil Gibran. And so, except for a few attempts to continue calling himself Gibran Khalil Gibran, the Americanization of the little boy began with his ultimate acceptance of the abbreviated name which was obviously more compatible to the American bureaucratic ear and eye. [20]

This episode foreshadows the manner of Gibran's self-presentation to the American public later on: he embraces the persona projected onto him in the USA, by accepting not only the americanization of his name but with it also American ideas about the Orient, particularly the role of Oriental sage or prophet that he came to impersonate. He conforms to it, whereby he also confirms it for his readers, and, what is perhaps most poignantly interesting, he seems to have believed in it, or willed himself to believe it. Gibran was not a two-faced opportunist who knew how to manipulate racist stereotypes to his advantage, but he was not above self-exoticization

[20] Jean Gibran & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1974): 29.

in his attempts to win the heart of a woman,[21] or lying about his family and class background in order to embellish his image to his readers.[22]

Gibran carefully constructed his own legend in the light of the expectations and tastes of his mentors and benefactors at first, and later of his publishers, readers, and followers. The first of those patrons to recognize and nurture Gibran's talent as a fourteen-year-old boy was Fred Holland Day, Boston's leading publisher of avant-garde literature, a trendsetter, Keats enthusiast, photographer, and flamboyant dandy. As Jean and Kahlil Gibran point out, in the late-nineteenth century, "like all the bright young men around him, Day was searching for relevant movements and causes at 'the sick little end of the century'," as he used to call it, "something […] that would lead them into the approaching century with a glimmer of hope. […] After exploring Jacobism, spiritualism, and decadence, and after dressing young poets' words in fine new packages, he would explore one more art form – pictorial photography,"[23] which allowed him to dress up young street urchins from the slums of South End in ethnic garments and photograph them. Day posed young Kahlil "in mysterious Arab burnooses, just as he dressed Armenians in turbans, blacks in Ethiopian regalia, Chinese with flutes, Japanese in kimonos. […] Through Day's lens ghetto waifs became 'Armenian Princes,' 'Ethiopian Chiefs,' and 'Young Sheiks'." Offensively exoticizing and stereotyping (albeit well-intentioned) as this may be, "Day's titles infused the children with an unexpected sense of privilege and dignity." After the first two miserable years the sensitive boy experienced as a new immigrant living in appalling conditions in Boston's South End ghetto,

> Kahlil […] fortified his self-image and sought to overcome the reality of a poverty-stricken childhood with a vision of nobility and lineage. With Day's lofty labeling, he was no longer a slum child who lived in a dark alley; the silvery image of himself which he saw on Day's platinum-coated plates showed far more. Within a year, he was striving to live up to the grand illusions which Day had caught.[24]

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[21] See Jean & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran*, 9–38, and Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 146–47.

[22] Jean & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran*, 67–70.

[23] Jean & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran*, 50.

[24] Jean & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran*, 54–55.

Day was also Gibran's first publisher, using several of the promising boy's drawings to illustrate books published by Copeland and Day. Day's influence on Gibran must have been worrisome to his family, for they decided to send the fifteen-year-old back to Lebanon to finish his secondary education there and to learn Arabic, which at that time he could speak but neither read nor write. By the time Gibran sailed for Lebanon, he had managed to sell an entire portfolio of his drawings, "striking Oriental designs for book covers," to an editor at Scribner's. The writer who reported the incident in the 2 April 1898 issue of *The Critic* goes on to say that the drawings "remind one, not unnaturally, of the designs of oriental stuffs. Only one was Americanized, and that was the least successful. Now I wonder why more Syrians, Turks, and other Orientals with whom New York abounds have not tried their hands at this sort of work before."[25] Perhaps unwittingly, this writer pointed the way to success for "Oriental" writers and artists in the USA: they can be successful so long as they cater to the perceived public taste for the exotic, but not when they engage "Americanized" topics. As so many Arab-American writers and artists have continued to discover in their experience with editors and publishers, self-orientalizing is the key to success in a market-driven culture industry. Immigrant and ethnic minority writers are limited in their choice of topics by the perceived demands of consumers, a reading public that is believed by the gatekeepers (accurately or not) to be uninterested in what minority and foreign writers have to say about American society – except within certain narrow parameters and narrative patterns of the autobiographical kind.[26] The maxim expressed by the reporter and grasped by Gibran was this: America will reward those writers and artists who confirm its image of itself and of their national, cultural, or racial background. Those who challenge those images are likely to experience various degrees of resistance, editorial censorship, and/or benign neglect by reviewers.

With that in mind, and given the fact that Gibran himself actively collaborated in exploiting his exotic potential, we can understand the way he

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[25] Quoted in Jean & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran*, 65.

[26] See my work on Arab-American autobiography. More than a century later, Arab-American writers continue to experience editorial censorship and pressure to shape their works in certain ways, and sensational marketing strategies – from the choice of book covers to dust jacket blurbs – which many of them feel unable to resist or even publicize, for fear of harming their chances of being published at all.

was marketed in the USA. The blurb on the dust-jacket of *The Prophet* describes him as a "poet, philosopher, and artist [who] was born in Lebanon, a land that has produced many prophets," while the biographical note printed in the back of some of his other English-language books (*The Earth Gods* and *The Garden of the Prophet*) reads as follows:

> Kahlil Gibran, poet, philosopher, and artist, was born in 1883 into an affluent and musical Lebanese family. He was a college student in Syria at the age of fifteen, studied art in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, and had visited America twice before he came to New York to stay in 1912 and adopted English as his literary language.

The facts of his impoverished life and minimal formal education both in Lebanon and in Boston's South End, where his destitute mother and her four children settled upon arrival in the USA in 1895, when Kahlil was twelve, contradict the image he actively projected about his background, not only to his publisher and readers, but also to his adoring disciple and first biographer, Barbara Young, whose quasi-hagiographic book, *This Man from Lebanon*, amplified the legend. The blurbs also cite a fabricated report according to which Auguste Rodin compared Gibran's work to that of William Blake. All of this fits into a well-documented pattern of lies repeatedly told about his family background and education.[27]

The legend and the lies took their cue from the reception of Gibran's English-language works in the USA. As his namesake biographers point out, "by the time *The Madman* was reviewed, Gibran had been introduced to Americans as a mysterious hero and a ready-made genius – the Middle Eastern counterpart to Tagore."[28] The frequent comparisons to Rabindranath Tagore are not surprising, given the Orientalist construction of a monolithic mystical East; Tagore's reputation as a great mystical poet; the fashion for Tagore during the 1910s in Britain, where his *Gitanjali* was published with an introduction by William Butler Yeats, and in the USA, which Tagore toured after winning the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913; and more generally the influence of Hinduism on Emerson and other American Unitarians since the nineteenth century, and which "created a favorable spiritual atmosphere for the reception of his [Gibran's] mes-

[27] Jean & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran*, 325–26; Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 97–99.

[28] Jean & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran*, 326.

sage."[29] As Mahasweta Sengupta demonstrates, Tagore was a great manipulator of his public image through his own English translations of his Bengali poetry, translations that were calculated "to conform to the 'image' of the East as it was known to the English-speaking world of the West."[30] Tagore's self-orientalizing translation of his poetry was responsible for his success in the West and widely believed to have won him the first Nobel Prize awarded to a non-white writer. In such a context, to be compared to Tagore, even to be described, as a reviewer for *Call* put it, as "a far greater poet than Tagore,"[31] is a tremendous boost for a writer who has just published his first English-language book (*The Madman*, 1918), but also quite indicative of the dynamics of literary reception of 'Oriental' writers at the time.

There can be little doubt that such reception played an important role in shaping the next phase of Gibran's career. Until 1918, Gibran published only in Arabic; after that date, he gradually came to concentrate almost exclusively on English. It was in that language that he developed the profile of an Eastern prophet that furnished the title of his best-known book in English. Yet Gibran was a different kind of Oriental sage from Tagore, a more familiar and cosmopolitan prophet who blended Eastern and Western wisdom and fused biblical, Sufi, Hindu, Romantic, and Nietzschean influences.[32] One interviewer perceptively put it this way:

> Tagore [...] is a figure from some canvas Sir Frederick Leighton might have painted of a religious mystic. Gibran is Broadway or Copley Square or The Strand or the Avenue de L'Opera – a correctly dressed cosmopolitan of the Western world.
>
> His dark brows and moustache and somewhat curly hair above a good forehead; the clear brown eyes, thoughtful but never abstracted in expression;

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[29] Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 113. See Arthur Christy's *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau and Alcott* (New York: Columbia UP, 1932), and Thomas Wendell's *Hinduism Invades America* (1930; Kila MT: Kessinger, 2003.)

[30] Mahasweta Sengupta, "Translation as Manipulation: The Power of Images and Images of Power," in *Between Languages and Cultures: Translation and Cross-Cultural Texts*, ed. Anuradha Dingwaney & Carol Maier (Pittsburgh PA: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995):160.

[31] Quoted in Jean & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran*, 326.

[32] Gibran met Tagore and painted his portrait; Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 112.

> the sensibly tailored clothes, smart but not conspicuous – there seemed to me a chameleon-like ease of adaptiveness about him. In his studio in West Tenth Street he looked a sensible denizen of Greenwich Village – for such there be. But had I seen him at a congress of economists, or in a Viennese café, or in his native Syria, I feel sure he would look equally in the picture in each instance.
>
> It is not a case of lack of individuality with him but on the contrary, an unusual common sense and sympathy which transcend differences and enable him to understand so well each environment in which he finds himself that he neither feels nor looks the stranger. […] Notwithstanding his citizenship in the world as a whole, Mr Gibran feels himself a Syrian. To him there is no contradiction here. He is working to bring about a world in which there is a great fellowship of mutual understanding and sympathy.[33]

The exotic features are tempered by genteel, cosmopolitan dress and mannerisms – appealing to Westerners but also cause for suspicion (only mildly expressed here), since the authentic Oriental is expertly disguised with chameleon-like ease. The full range of affects evoked by Otherness – from fascination and attraction (and *mutatis mutandis*) to fear and revulsion – is discernible just beneath the surface of this language of praise. The passage also points to a great paradox that defines Gibran's career after 1918: namely, the incompatibility of the idea of building bridges of understanding, which Gibran professed and his reviewers celebrated, with the image of the chameleon that changes its colours to blend into its environment so that it does not "look the stranger." The chameleon does not try to connect two environments together – quite the opposite: it changes its colours in order to blend into each environment; it adapts itself without attempting to change its surroundings. By contrast, critical cultural translation aims precisely at changing the environment in which it is conducted, through exposing it to new and potentially transformative ideas imported from elsewhere. The difference between transformative cultural translation and chameleon-like adaptation is that while the former has the potential to interrogate and unsettle discursive and ideological presuppositions, the latter adheres to, and in effect confirms and legitimates, the reigning discourse. The one is critical and oppositional, the other is complicit. Joseph Golomb astutely identified the mode of Gibran's self-pre-

[33] Joseph Gollomb, "An Arabian Poet in New York," *New York Evening Post* (29 March 1919): 1, 10.

sentation as that of the chameleon and found it somewhat suspicious. Characteristically, however, for someone who is unaware of the epistemological pitfalls of Orientalism, Golomb misjudges the effectiveness of Gibran's efforts to facilitate cross-cultural understanding. Much of the popular appeal of Gibran's English-language works rests on this fundamental and widespread error in judgment.

The chameleon's disguise is successful precisely in appearing as though it feels at home – in effect, disappearing altogether and becoming indistinguishable from its environment. As for feeling the stranger, that is a different matter, for Gibran's sense of isolation was enormous, as all of his biographers emphasize time and again. One such biographer, Robin Waterfield, who foregrounds the psychology of the immigrant and his desire for success and recognition, argues that Gibran's life in the USA

> evolved organically out of the persona he chose to adopt – that of wounded Romantic, shading into that of poet and prophet – but even an organic development of a persona remains two-dimensional. Whether Gibran was talking to friends or to a public audience, the impression he projected was the same. As an insecure young immigrant he soon learnt that this role could win him ready acceptance, and even adulation; such positive feedback entrenched the role-playing until it became second nature. But, once in a while, his first nature prodded him into awareness.[34]

Hence his famous declaration to Mikhail Naimy, in a moment of clarity in 1921, that he was "a false alarm"[35]– in other words, "that he really had no right to play the role of awakener himself."[36] Interestingly, that realization did not seem to have altered the course of his career. The timing of that well-known episode is significant. In 1921, Gibran had had a taste of the success that his first English-language books *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* and *The Forerunner: His Parables and Poems* (1920) brought him in the USA and he had been working on *The Prophet*, which was to be published in 1923, for some years. Meanwhile, his last significant Arabic works, the philosophical poem "Al-Mawakib" (1919,

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[34] Robin Waterfield, *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran* (New York: St. Martin's, 1998): 4–5.

[35] Nadim Naimy, *The Lebanese Prophets of New York* (Beirut: American U of Beirut P, 1985): 171.

[36] Waterfield, *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*, 3.

'The Procession')[37] and his mystical play, *Iram that al-'imad* (1921, 'Iram, City of Lofty Pillars'),[38] based on a story from the Qur'an, appeared. In that crucial period, Gibran changed course, as is evidenced by his publication record. He no longer wrote significant works in Arabic, despite his by-then great reputation in the Arab world as a rebel against authority, social critic, and avant-garde poet. Instead, he would focus on embracing more fully the role of Oriental prophet and hermit, both in his subsequent books, written in English as collections of parables and aphorisms, and in his private life, increasingly spent in the isolation of his Greenwich Village studio, where he wrote, drew, and literally drank himself to death.[39] As Waterfield puts it,

> he found a home in the West as an exotic Easterner, and became famous in the East for vilifying Eastern customs from a vantage point gained as a result of reading Western romantics. He adopted a persona at an early age and identified with it so thoroughly that it became virtually impossible to find the man beneath the myth. Moreover, since the role he chose to play was that of poet-prophet, it proved hard to live up to. To my mind, then, Gibran was crucified on these dichotomies ['East and West' and 'Man and Myth']. We have seen occasional signs that he was, underneath it all, a deeply unhappy and unsatisfied man.[40]

Like his English books, Gibran's last two Arabic works "assert the oneness of spirit and body"[41] and demonstrate the influence of William Blake, although much of the social rebelliousness of earlier Arabic works informs *Al-mawakib*, which express his rejection of society with its dualisms, in favour of the oneness of existence he claims to find in the

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[37] In *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*, ed. Martin L. Wolf, tr. Anthony Rizkallah Ferris (New York: Citadel, 1951): 359–76.

[38] In *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*, 124–51.

[39] Other than "Al-Mawakib" (Beirut: Mu'assasat Nawfal, 1981) and *Irama dhat al-'imad*, after 1918 Gibran published compilations of brief articles and previously written pieces*: Al-Bada'i' wa al-tara'if* (Best Things and Masterpieces, 1923), *Al-'Awasif* (Storms, 1920), which contained prose poems and narratives written between 1912 and 1918, and then *Al-sanabil* (Spikes of Grain, 1929). Many of those pieces are translated in *A Treasury of Kahlil Gibran*, ed. Martin L. Wolf, tr. Anthony Rizkallah Ferris (New York: Citadel, 1951).

[40] Waterfield, *Prophet: The Life and Times of Kahlil Gibran*, 292.

[41] Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 217.

jungle.[42] From this point on, however, a bifurcation marks Gibran's work in each language. He no longer develops those themes in the short essays and addresses he writes in Arabic, which become more mature in their analysis of Arab social and political conditions. By contrast, his creative activity in English intensifies along the lines drawn in *The Madman* and *The Forerunner*. The clearest and most striking example of that bifurcation is the fact that in 1923, the year in which publication of *The Prophet* marked the culmination of his self-orientalizing, he wrote a penetrating critique of Arab cultural dependency vis-à-vis Europe for *Al-Hilal* magazine, which ran a survey of Arab intellectuals' views on the relationship between the Arab *Nahda* and modern Western civilization.[43] In that piece, he argues that under the conditions of European colonial hegemony over the entire Arab world, Arab renaissance is no more than slavish mimicry of Western thought and tastes, a superficial veneer of modernity,[44] and that a true renaissance embodied in economic cooperation among Arab countries and their political unity and independence – the goal of many Arab nationalists of that period – would never be permitted under Western economic and military dominance, which pursues the policy of divide and conquer.[45]

By the same token, a book such as *The Prophet* would have made little sense to Arab readers. In the Arabic poetic tradition, from classical times to the early-twentieth century, the poet often assumed the voice of the worldly sage who can formulate pithy, wise, and didactic statements in a memorable poetic idiom. Though this role of the poet overlaps somewhat with the European Romantic conception of the poet, there is a fundamen-

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[42] For a detailed exposition of Gibran's religious and philosophical beliefs as expounded in his Arabic and English works, see Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*.

[43] Gibran, '*Nusus kharij al-majmu'*, ed. Antoine al-Qawwal (Beirut: Dar Amwaj, 1993): 235–44..

[44] Gibran, '*Nusus kharij al-majmu'*, ed. al-Qawwal, 235–36.

[45] Gibran, '*Nusus kharij al-majmu'*, ed. al-Qawwal, 239. This position reflects, among other things, Gibran's disillusionment with European colonialism after Britain and France revealed their territorial designs in Greater Syria and reneged on their promises of Arab independence in exchange for fighting the Ottomans during World War I. Before that betrayal, Gibran, like many Lebanese Christians, had imagined French colonialism to be not only benevolent but also "the architect of our new house. France will help us become a living nation." Gibran, *Nusus kharij al-majmu'*, ed. al-Qawwal, 228; see also 60–65.

tal difference. In the Arabic tradition, the poet could be a sage and preacher (among other roles), but never a prophet. Al-Mutanabbi is a case in point: a poet of great stature known for his enormous political ambition, which once drove him to declare himself a prophet, he ever since became far better known by a derisive epithet that literally means 'one who falsely claims to be a prophet' than by his real name. This serves to illustrate the taboo that exists in Arab Islamic and Arab Christian culture on the claim to prophecy, which is understood strictly as a divine mandate given to biblical prophets and, for Muslims, to Muhammad, who is believed in Islam to be the last true prophet for all time. In that sense, anyone who claims to be a prophet after Muhammad is *ipso facto* a false prophet. For that reason, Gibran's prophetic stance, a self-orientalizing development of his Romantic proclivity, could not be expressed in works addressed to Arab audiences, both because of the infamy that such a posture would incur and because self-orientalizing would be superfluous to begin with. A title such as *The Prophet* would have been deeply offensive to Arab readers, Christians and Muslims, and even though the book was later translated into Arabic, it remains, together with his other books translated from English into Arabic, far less known than his earlier, Arabic works.

Even though his prophetic stance was in many ways a deliberate and phenomenally successful feat of self-orientalizing on the part of an immigrant seeking acceptance, it was also a logical, though not inevitable, development within his self-styled Romantic trajectory: from youthful rebel with "adolescent vision"[46] to Oriental sage, and from writing in Arabic to writing in English.[47] For Blake and Shelley, the poet, the visionary and the prophet were more or less synonymous, and, in following in their footsteps, "Gibran initiated nothing in the realm of thought, nor did he revive

[46] Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 280.

[47] On this point, Hawi writes: "Although he addressed his writings to the West and to the Arab world at different periods of his life, the question which remains to be asked is how far he could retain his individuality and integrity while changing his attitude and thought to suit different audiences. Against this there is the unity of attitude which runs through both his Arabic and his English writings. He was not a mystic in the West and a rebel in the East at the same time, but developed from a youthful rebel into a mystic, expressing his later beliefs in both languages. The Madman, his first book in English (1918) was a violent declaration of revolt, while the thematic 'play' Iram dhat al-'imad was a discourse on mysticism, written in Arabic, which appeared in 1921." Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 111.

long-forgotten ideas."[48] But to assume that role within the framework of Orientalism condemned his work, in Hawi's blunt assessment, to a lack in "social and cultural responsibility" and to being "retrogressive and immature," and furnished a proof of Gibran's "primitivism and naivety."[49] As cultural translation, Gibran's introduction of European Romanticism into Arabic poetry was a significant contribution to that tradition. By contrast, his English works imported nothing of value from Arabic into American literature; instead, their anachronistic Romanticism merely recycled tired ideas about the East. The dynamics of literary reception of his work in each language reflected that: qualified critical acclaim for the technical innovations of his Arabic works, if not for their naive sentimentalism, matched tremendous popular appeal and justifiable critical neglect of his English works. Equally important, Gibran's career trajectory also led from poverty to financial security, and from obscurity to fame in his adoptive country.

The price, however, was his increasing isolation as he came to believe in his own act and strove to live by his impossible precept. Indeed, the reclusive suffering of his later years had already been foreshadowed in some of his earlier works and was part and parcel of his conception of the poet–prophet. The protagonists of his Arabic and English prose and poetry are variations on the social rebel who becomes an outcast after securing a following of disciples – a Christ-figure minus the resurrection and godhead. For example, in an emblematic early story, "Khalil al-Kafir"[50] from *Al-Arwah Al-mutamarrida* ('Spirits Rebellious'), Gibran's namesake-protagonist rebels against the tyranny and corruption of the clergy, who call him a heretic; yet he succeeds in unmasking their hypocrisy in a lengthy public sermon that galvanizes the villagers, who offer to make him their chief. He refuses social distinction and continues to live among them as one of them. This idealistic vision of the rebel emancipating his people and realizing a social utopia gradually gives way, in *Al-Mawakib* (1919, 'The Procession'), Gibran's last significant Arabic work, to that of the detached moralist who, finding society irredeemable, glorifies an idealized jungle in which dichotomies dissolve into oneness of being. In his first English work, *The Madman* (1918), the social rebel be-

[48] Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 278.
[49] *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works*, 280.
[50] Translated as "Khalil the Heretic," in *A Treasury*, 243–98.

comes a total outcast, a prophetic madman who seems to speak in a void. In *The Prophet* (1923), he is the hermit al-Mustapha, who has lived in exile for twelve years and is about to depart his adoptive land for the country of his birth before he is prevailed upon to deliver a final discourse. In *The Garden of the Prophet* (1933), which Gibran left unfinished when he died, al-Mustapha has come back to his birthplace only to find that he no longer belongs there; he decides, once again, to leave his disciples behind and undergo another self-imposed exile.

These modulations on the theme of the prophet as a remote, lonesome reformer, isolated from, sometime rejected by, and sometimes rejecting his people, dramatize Gibran's own growing sense of alienation in both worlds. For a minority writer, this solitary posture amounted to advocacy of social marginalization of the poet. This effect had none of the Romantic appeal to many of Gibran's contemporary and later Arab-American writers that it had for Gibran himself, and is one aspect of Gibran's legacy that some Arab-American writers later vehemently rejected. While some have continued to celebrate Gibran's popularity and to embrace the universalism of his message, others have disputed that message and found that it leads to social irrelevance and contributes to weakening the ties that connect Arab-Americans to each other and to their homeland. One example of the first tendency is the title of a pioneering anthology, *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999), edited by Munir Akash and Khaled Mattawa, in which the Lebanese writer is given pride of place as the founder of the Arab-American literary tradition. Intentional or not, the ambiguity of the title ('post-' in many cases denotes not only temporal succession but also critical opposition, as in 'postmodernism' and 'postcolonialism') points to a deep ambivalence toward Gibran that has haunted Arab-American literature from its beginnings and demands scrutiny in any critical reading of the tradition. The following passage from the introduction to the anthology brims with adulation and urges contemporary Arab-American writers to imitate Gibran:

> Kahlil Gibran found his way to the American heart, not because he was a great poet, but because he strove to manifest positive aspects found in our traditional writing. The traditions he mined from are not always concerned with the liturgical, cultic, and esoteric elements of the Gilgameshian spirit, but are nevertheless created according to its norms and principles, according

> to the concept of *man* as a bridge between heaven and earth, the *anthropos*, the Promethean, or, in the Qur'anic sense, the vicegerent of God.[51]

This statement is problematic on several counts – from the metaphysics of a so-called "Gilgameshian spirit" to the assumption of a transhistorical continuity between ancient Mesopotamia and twentieth-century Arab culture, to the conflation of the Promethean defiance of the gods with the Islamic (and Abrahamic) subordination of man to the creator. Moreover, that statement succumbs to the Gibranian logic it attempts to describe – a logic derived from Blake, Shelley, and Whitman, according to which all opposites collapse into oneness of being, which Eugene Paul Nassar has aptly described as "the pseudo-wisdom posture of exultant dualism."[52] Yet Mattawa and Akash point to an important feature of Gibran's spiritualism: the mélange of Hindu, Christian, Islamic, and Nietzschean ideas represents an attempt, however unsatisfactory, to articulate an alternative kind of humanism that answers to the materialism of European secular humanism and its fullest realization in America, by tempering it with Oriental spiritualism, conceived in classic Orientalist fashion as undifferentiated, transhistorical, monolithic, the polar opposite of secular Western rationalism. In other words, it is a humanism steeped in Orientalism. But it is a humanism that asserts the equal value of Orient and Occident and the possibility of a reciprocal relationship between them. This implicit claim of equality and reciprocity is, in the final analysis, the only political content of Gibran's English works.

As such, the latent political project of those works parallels that of the Négritude movement, which was to be launched a decade later in Paris by writers of African descent, as an affirmation of Africanness in the face of white racism. Both projects were flawed insofar as they accepted the dualistic logic of racist discourse, which constructs European identity and its extension in North America in oppositional terms vis-à-vis Africa and the Orient. If the hegemonic discourses of Orientalism and Africanism devalue Africa and the Orient in favour of Europe, Négritude and Gibran's (and his Syrian contemporaries') version of Orientalism simply reverse

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[51] Munir Akash & Khalid Mattawa, *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing*, ed. Akash & Mattawa (*Jusoor* 11–12; Bethesda MD: Kitab, 1999): xii.

[52] See Eugene Paul Nassar's chapter "On the Posture of Exultant Dualism" in his *Essays Critical and Metacritical* (East Brunswick NJ: Associated UP, 1983): 52–64; also 80.

the values attached to Europe and its others without questioning the binary construct itself, so that now African primitivism and Oriental mysticism acquire positive content, while Western modernity and materialism are negatively valued. Jean–Paul Sartre criticized Négritude as an "anti-racist racism,"[53] a characterization that aptly identifies the dialectical movement at the heart of Gibran's posture, which can accordingly be described as an anti-Orientalist Orientalism. By the same token, Frantz Fanon's defence of Négritude not as a philosophically valid creed but as an expression of the psychological needs of the oppressed at a particular stage in the development of their racial consciousness[54] also applies to this early twentieth-century Arab-American version of Orientalism. The persistence of this kind of thinking in the late-twentieth century is evident in the inflationary language of "Gilgameshian spirit," which is followed, one paragraph later, by Akash and Mattawa's description of Arab-American writers as "members of a demonized minority" – a testimony to the fact that, while anti-black racism has been banished from the registers of acceptable public discourse, anti-Arab racism continues to thrive.

By the same token, the very assertion of Arab-American identity and of a literary tradition that builds upon Gibran's success seems to contradict Gibran's message. In a crucial discourse on "Self-Knowledge" almost halfway through *The Prophet*, Almustafa says:

> Say not, "I have found the truth," but rather, "I have found a truth."
> Say not, "I have found the path of the soul." Say rather, "I have met the soul walking upon my path."
> For the soul walks upon all paths.
> The soul walks not upon a line, neither does it grow like reed.
> The soul unfolds itself, like a lotus of countless petals. (55)

Derived from mysticism and Buddhism, which the image of the lotus evokes, the idea of truth as multiple and personal rather than monistic or universalist represents an alternative ethos to the rigidly hierarchical world-view propagated by Orientalism, racialism, and other ideologies of

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[53] Jean–Paul Sartre, "Orphée noir," introduction to *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache*, ed. Léopold Sédar Senghor (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1948): xl.

[54] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952; New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1967): 132–35.

difference. This idea is a solid basis for tolerance and acceptance of difference, not only in spiritual matters but in worldly ones as well. If Orientalism indelibly marked Gibran's career, his search for universal truths that transcend cultural and religious boundaries represents a countercurrent that, however implicitly, challenged the discourse's hierarchical logic. Nevertheless, that universality, which accounts for Gibran's tremendous success,[55] remained at such high level of abstraction that it became effectively unmoored, in its otherworldly spiritualism, from any concrete historical circumstances in which it might have been intended to intervene. The biblical style, the apostolic tone, the poet–prophet's addiction to solitude "among the summits where eagles build their nests,"[56] and above all the nebulous abstraction of his "teachings," not to mention the absence of any reference to Arabs or their culture in his English language works – all combine to divorce Gibran's work from the struggles over representation that have preoccupied his own and our contemporaries.

It was this disavowal of collectivity that some other Arab-American writers rejected. His prophetic posture was unsustainable for US-born Arab-Americans, and because it confirmed so powerfully the idea of the mystical Orient, they predictably wanted to dissociate themselves from it. As Evelyne Shakir puts it, US-born Arab-Americans "who came of age in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s – costumed themselves as 'regular Americans' and hoped to pass, which may be why they produced so little literature."[57] It was not until another generation came of age, in the era of multiculturalism, that Gibran's influence began to be resisted. From within the Arab-American literary tradition, the most extensive critique of Gibran to date has come from the literary criticism and poetry of Eugene Paul Nassar (1935–). In his poetic rebuttal "Disputation with Gibran" (one of two cantos that make up his poetic memoir, *Wind of the Land*), Nassar charges: "O my brother Kahlil, your style enchants but your substance cheats."[58] For Nassar, Gibran's is a metaphysics of evasion:

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[55] Claude Bragdon's blurb, printed on the dust jacket of *The Prophet*, is characteristic: "His power came from some great reservoir of spiritual life else it could have not been so universal and potent…."

[56] Gibran, *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923): 90.

[57] Evelyn Shakir, "Arab-American Literature," 6.

[58] Nassar, *Wind of the Land: Two Prose Poems*, 125.

> Why this exultation in the contraries of life, Gibran, in Good and Evil as one, Life and Death as One, the Darkness as blessed as Light? Is it not simply an avoidance of the fact of death, evil, and darkness?[59]

Elsewhere, in a critical study of "cultural discontinuity" in Gibran's work, Nassar argues that

> the continuity of tone that runs throughout the works of Gibran is that of lonely alienation, of a yearning for connections. Beneath all his prophetic masks […] is the Gibran of unsureness, of profound melancholy, of tragic vision. Gibran is at home neither in the old culture nor in the new, an unresolved dualism vitiates much of the work when, as so often occurs, it pretends to resolution.[60]

In a cogent discussion of such "dualism pretending to unity"[61] in the work of Blake, Whitman, and Gibran, Nassar argues that "all three poets labor under the burden of their transcendent self-projections of unitary truth, and are wholly convincing only when wholly absorbed in dramatizations of their dualistic experiences."[62] In his "Disputation with Gibran," Nassar puts it differently:

> Can you not see that you will not satisfy man, Kahlil Gibran, with your cold abstractions of Love and Life beyond the personal love and life, with your Great Soul or Great Self, or Vast Man or Master Spirit? We have had it all before (postcards to Blake and Whitman). Man will have his Heaven with private rooms and his personal immortality with his shoes on.[63]

Emphasizing the perspective of Lebanese villagers, Nassar satirizes both Gibran's hermetic individualism and his rarefied abstractions:

> *Your children are not your children*. O my Gibran, have you ever made a greater miscalculation? No village rebel ever made a greater. *You may strive to be like them, but seek not to make them like you.* O my God, worse and

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[59] *Wind of the Land: Two Prose Poems*, 132.
[60] Nassar, *Essays Critical and Metacritical*, 87–88.
[61] Nassar, *Essays Critical and Metacritical*, 95.
[62] Nassar, *Essays Critical and Metacritical*, 100.
[63] Nassar, *Wind of the Land: Two Prose Poems*, 107.

> worse! Watch out for Shafee'a, Kahlil, she will eat you alive! And Abdullah will expose your weaknesses to laughter.[64]
>
> Almustafa the prophet should have married Almitra the seeress. Their gloom might have been dissipated by a child in the arms.
>
> Would he have left Orphalese if a sweet daughter-in-law had given him a granddaughter for the eyes of his old age? [65]

Another Arab-American poet, Sharif Elmusa, strikes a similar note in his poem, "Dream on the Same Mattress":

> Do not eat from the same dish,
> said Gibran;
> but the prophet never married.
> Drink from the same cup,
> I say,
> and dream on the same mattress.[66]

Nassar finds Gibran's enormous reputation within Arab-America to be troublesome:

> And a young man has been reading to me
> the poetry of Kahlil Gibran
> And wise he is in many things, O my
> children, and schooled in sound,
> But his is not the needful poetry, O my
> cousins,
> For he is too lonely and would make a
> blessing of loneliness. [67]

Elmusa and Nassar find particularly worrisome Gibran's distaste for family bonds, which are of supreme importance not only in Arab culture, but also, and especially so, for Arab-Americans, for whom ancestral tradi-

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[64] Nassar, *Wind of the Land: Two Prose Poems*, 112. Both italicized sentences are quoted from *The Prophet* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1923): 17. (Nassar's emphasis.)

[65] Nassar, *Wind of the Land: Two Prose Poems*, 138.

[66] Allusions to *The Prophet*, 15; Sharif Elmusa, "Dream on the Same Mattress," in *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab American Poetry*, ed. Gregory Orfalea & Sharif Elmusa (Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 1988): 233.

[67] Nassar, *Wind of the Land: Two Prose Poems*, 147.

tions represent a haven of security within a larger society that views them with suspicion. Nassar's address to "my children" and "my cousins" stresses the importance of family ties, which Gibran's teachings would sever; to heed his admonition to "seek not to make [your children] like you" amounts to severing their cultural ties to the Old Country, effectively to melt indistinguishably in the pot of Euro-America. The alternatives that Nassar proposes in his poem are "the tales of our grandmother/and the wisdom from her lips," the love and security found in the powerful family ties, and attachment to the values of the Old Country:

> America has indeed been lavish in the
> casting of flowers,
> Of flowers that do not grow in the old
> country villages,
> Generous, open, accessible in the highest
> of glories.
> But what of the flowers, the country
> flowers of the village,
> Simplicity, serenity, and joy, the
> sense of belonging? [68]

A descendant of Lebanese immigrants, Nassar is nostalgic for the land and culture of his ancestors, which he tends to idealize. Gibran's rejection of the family is a revolt against manifestations of patriarchal tyranny, such as parental coercion and forced marriages, which he observed in his Lebanese homeland, and which he began to attack in his earliest Arabic works. His rejection of religious authority and its abuses by corrupt and hypocritical clergymen also belong to the same order. It was this work that made Gibran famous as a progressive revolutionary in the Arabic literary field. We can see that his position towards those social structures persisted in his English works, albeit in more abstract, universalist terms. By contrast, the position Nassar describes as "thoughtful conservatism" celebrates the same patriarchal values that Gibran rejects, but for reasons that have to do with Nassar's diasporic position in a society prejudiced against his heritage:

> Beneath the bravado of the prophetic robes, Gibran really had no adequate replacement for the richness of the cultural heritage, both peasant and intel-

[68] Nassar, *Essays Critical and Metacritical*, 146.

> lectual, of the Christian East, that the bread and wine in the hill village in Lebanon is perhaps a better bet for a life than the winds of solitude at the top of a mystic mountain, or the studio apartment at West Tenth Street in Manhattan. . . .[69]

The strong family ties that Gibran found stifling are for Nassar nurturing, and the old customs that the former considered outworn are for the latter a reassuring link to Lebanese heritage. The two poets represent contrasting tendencies that turn conventional wisdom upside-down: the US-born and -raised poet rejects the American-style individualism of the Lebanese immigrant: "out of / our sometime loneliness, O brothers, / Comes the memories of a past that was not / lonely."[70] For Nassar, emigration and biculturalism are no passport to superior wisdom, and Gibran's case is an exemplary "drama of a talented émigré at home neither in the old country nor in the new."[71]

Gibran's work illustrates the failure of cultural translation to carve a new space through dialogue and critique because, as a minority discourse, it operated within the orbit of a dominant discourse it ought to have challenged. He tried to negate Orientalist negation through Orientalist transcendence, a move that ensured the failure of his project on the personal, social, and intellectual levels, although it brought him tremendous popular and commercial success. That he alone has been so rewarded is both ironic and indicative of the forces that still shape public views of Arabs today.

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[69] *Essays Critical and Metacritical*, 100.

[70] Nassar, *Wind of the Land: Two Prose Poems*, 146.

[71] Nassar, *Essays Critical and Metacritical*, 101.

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Strategic Genius, Disidentification, and the Burden of *The Prophet* in Arab-American Poetry

RICHARD E. HISHMEH

THE NOTED COLUMNIST Nicolas Von Hoffman writes that, since the 1970s, Arabs have dubiously been "the last ethnic group safe to hate in America."[1] Maha El Said argues that this has been particularly true since the events of 9/11, and that "the attack that brought down the World Trade Center labored to increase the height of the wall that separates 'Self' from 'Other'" for Arab-Americans. She claims that this division "was enforced by the simplistic view expressed by the U.S. foreign policy, where the world is divided into 'good' and 'evil,' 'with us' or 'against us'," concluding: "in the midst of this new schism, Arab-Americans [...] become trapped in an attempt to redefine their identity, and reconstruct a hybridity that seems impossible in a world that is divided into 'us' and 'them'."[2] While the work of the Arab-American poets represented here was written before the events of 9/11, Said and others attest to how 9/11 intensified pre-existing cultural attitudes and prejudices towards Arab-Americans. As a result, there now exists a particular urgency for a critical reassessment of Arab-American poetics and of Arab-American identity.

For many Arab-American poets, contested identity has meant a re-negotiation of their relationship to the world of Western letters; it has

[1] Gregory Orfalea, *Before the Flames: A Quest for the History of Arab Americans* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1988): 5.

[2] Maha El Said, "The Face of the Enemy: Arab-American Writing Post 9/11," *Studies in the Humanities* 30.1–2 (2003): 201.

required these poets to re-tune their voices to a key in harmony with Western poetics. In American poetry, one such voice has been that of Romantic genius. While Romanticism encompasses a wide range of poets and thinkers, particularly relevant to Arab-American poetry is a prophetic strain that has informed American poetry and culture from Walt Whitman to Bob Dylan. Exemplified in the works of European forbears such as William Blake and the early Wordsworth, this visionary Romanticism (here, interchangeably referred to as Romantic genius) often embeds a politically significant revolutionary stance within narratives of personal experience and intense spiritualism. Often detached from its original political potency, this trope has remained viable in American poetry and culture well into the era of postmodernism, particularly as a highly effective identity used by publishers, poets, and writers to sell their works.

If some of this visionary Romanticism seems at odds with the tenets of postmodernism – purged of its spiritual insights and relegated to a marketable cultural construct – Arab-American poetry is one place where depictions of Romantic genius seem compatible with postmodern claims regarding the wholly discursive aspect of language that takes over from the realities of authorial existence and intent. By evoking the trope of visionary Romantic genius in a way that is neither a nostalgic return to Romanticism nor an exclusively marketable gesture, many Arab-American poets have found fresh ways of engaging Romanticism that reinvigorate its political implications and can be productively discussed within the discourses of postmodern theory.

George Lipsitz's concept of "strategic anti-essentialism" and José Muñoz's concept of "disidentification" help clarify how Arab-American poetry's engagement with visionary Romanticism achieves these ends. As these theories attest, marginalized groups often survive, or resist, through calculated and complex intersections with dominant, mass culture. In this context, the trope of Romantic genius found in much Arab-American poetry becomes something more than an attempt to simply mimic Western authors, or a marketing ploy to sell books.

As Lipsitz observes,

> When people confront obstacles to direct expression of their aspirations and interests, they sometimes take a detour through fictive identities. These may seem escapist. They may involve the appropriation, colonization, or eroticization of difference. But appearances of escape and appropriation can also provide protective cover for explorations of individual and collective iden-

> tity. Especially when carried on by members of aggrieved communities – sexually or racially marginalized "minorities" – these detours may enable individuals to solve indirectly problems that they could not address directly.[3]

Building on Gayatri Spivak's notion of strategic essentialism, Lipsitz labels the process described above as "strategic anti-essentialism." Whereas in Spivak's model an individual or group may wish to ignore issues of cultural heterogeneity in order to reassert their own cultural uniqueness, Lipsitz suggests instead a process by which marginalized figures disguise their uniqueness in identities not their own.[4] In doing so, Lipsitz argues, these figures or groups are able to "highlight, underscore, and augment an aspect of [their] identity that [they] can not express directly" (62). He concludes:

> the key to understanding each of these groups is to see how they become 'more themselves' by appearing to be something other than themselves. Like many members of aggrieved populations around the world, these strategic anti-essentialists have become experts in disguise because their survival has depended on it. (63)

Aggrieved in their own right by widely held prejudices against Arabs in the USA, and certainly as representative voices for aggrieved Arab populations globally, Arab-American poets enact a survival strategy similar to Lipsitz's description.

In an amalgamation of Spivak's strategic essentialism and Lipsitz's strategic anti-essentialism, many Arab-American poets, beginning with Kahlil Gibran, donned the disguise of Romantic genius as part of this survival strategy. At times, that is, they play to essentialist notions of the East and of Easterners by capitalizing on the perceived strangeness of the East best described in Edward Said's monumental work *Orientalism*. Gibran's awareness of this essentialist version of the East gives rise to many of his works, including *The Madman* and *The Prophet*. Playing to Western conceptions of the East as a place of mystical wonder, Gibran and subsequent Arab-American poets embrace this essentialist view in order to highlight their own cultural uniqueness.

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[3] George Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads* (New York: Verso, 1994): 62.

[4] For a more thorough explanation of Gayatri C. Spivak's groundbreaking concept of strategic essentialism, see her own work *Outside in the Teaching Machine* (New York: Routledge, 1993): 3–4.

At the same time, however, these poets abandon such essential roles to engage the dominant culture more directly. Participating in Western poetic traditions and tropes, Gibran and others evoke the visionary Romanticism of Blake, Whitman, and (as I will show) Neruda and Stevens, in a process akin to Lipsitz's strategic anti-essentialism. Via a combination of essential and anti-essential strategies, Arab-American poets negotiate the dominant culture.

Muñoz's notion of disidentification provides another theoretical model for understanding how the trope of visionary Romanticism functions in the works of many Arab-American poets, particularly because it demonstrates how marginalized groups negotiate the market from within institutions of power in order to assert their own cultural and historical validity. Muñoz's concept of disidentification revises the psychoanalytic concept of "identification," defined by Diana Fuss as "a detour through the Other that defines the self."[5] In order to explore the opposite notion of identification, Muñoz proposes "disidentification" as a process that simultaneously accepts and rejects dominant modes of identification:

> Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded message of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recruits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture.[6]

Muñoz shows how marginalized groups are able to work with, on, and against mainstream culture in order to assert their own identities. He argues that the process of disidentification is neither wholly aligned with, or against, the mainstream but is, rather, an attempt to transform the mainstream by operating within its codes, institutions, and assumptions. Through this delicate negotiation, minority groups are often able to achieve specific cultural agendas. The persistent cultural cache of visionary Romanticism

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[5] Cited in José E. Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Cultural Studies of the Americas 2; Minneapolis: Minnesota UP, 1999): 13. Originally in Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995): 2.

[6] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 31.

within American poetry and popular culture make it a perfect vehicle by which Arab-Americans can perform these acts of disidentification.

Muñoz's concept of "counterpublic narratives"[7] is especially useful in the context of Arab-American poetry. Muñoz defines counterpublics as "communities and relational chains of resistance that contest the dominant public sphere," and claims that "counterpublicity is disseminated through acts that are representational *and* political interventions in the service of subaltern counterpublics."[8] In short, counterpublic narratives make possible a critique of mainstream values through channels of mainstream discourse. By evoking the Western trope of visionary Romanticism in their works, many Arab-American poets, beginning with Gibran, participate in counterpublic politics. By establishing themselves within mainstream culture, these poets are subsequently able to prompt significant reappraisals of mainstream values and attitudes.

Despite Eugene Paul Nassar's 1980 essay on Gibran,[9] which called for a significant critical reappraisal of the oft-ignored poet, little of note has been written in English on Gibran over the last two decades. This is especially surprising because Gibran achieved more fame and renown than any Arab migrating to the USA in what is commonly known as the first wave of Arab immigration.[10] Indeed, very few figures of Arab de-

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[7] In his explanation of counterpublicity, Muñoz borrows the phrase "attention, knowledge, technique" from Foucault, who, in his own *The History of Sexuality: The Care of the Self* (New York: Vintage, 1988), hypothesized an "ethics of the self" whereby subjects work on themselves for others. It is upon Foucault's "ethics of the self" that Muñoz builds his theory of counterpublicity.

[8] Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 146–47.

[9] Eugene Paul Nassar, "Cultural Discontinuity in the Works of Kahlil Gibran," *MELUS* 7.2 (1980): 21–36.

[10] For a good summary of these two waves of Arab immigration to the USA, see Alixa Naff, "The Early Arab Immigrant Experience," in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994): 23–24. To these, Gregory Orfalea adds a third wave, which he dates from 1967–85 (Orfalea, *Before the Flames*, 177). A contention underlying my more explicit argument is that these waves of immigration influence the development of Arab-American poetry. For instance, as a first wave immigrant writer, Kahlil Gibran achieved great success by playing to a stereotype of Arabs as mystical prophets from the East. That this version of the Arab was so readily consumed is both a consequence of a particular time and place as well as a strategic maneuver on behalf of Gibran. Less willing to engage in the cultural stereotypes characteristic of Gibran's work, post-World War II Arab-American writers found themselves in a duplicitous situation regarding their celebrated

scent have so penetrated the American popular imagination, and Gibran's acceptance into the popular American imagination is so thorough that his very Arabness has practically been negated. Gibran's ability to transcend his Arab ancestry – by dissolving his ethnic heritage into an image much more palatable to an American public – has much to do with his immense and continued popularity; however, embedded in Gibran's palatable public reputation is a counterpublic figure that was instrumental in gaining recognition for an Arab minority largely invisible to mainstream America in the first half of the twentieth century. Long before the Middle East became an unsettling and highly mediated signifier in US politics, Gibran was an advocate and activist for Arab causes both globally and in the USA.

Simultaneously pursuing careers in drawing and literature, Gibran produced his first significant publication in Arabic appeared in 1905, in the emigrant Arabic newspaper *Al-Muhjer*. Over the next decade, Gibran continued publishing works in Arabic, with moderate success. Chief among these are his novel *Broken Wings* (1912) and a long ode in classical Arabic, *The Procession* (1919). Still, while Arabic was Gibran's first language, he did not become fully literate in that language until well into his teens. The success of Gibran's Arabic writing is further complicated by his preference for free-verse poetry and the prose poem, which go against the grain of the classical Arab *qasida*, a strict, monorhymed form, and by the relatively small audience of Arabic readers in the USA.

All of these factors are likely to have combined to prompt Gibran's first publication in English, *The Madman*, in 1918. In this and subsequent works, Gibran enacts what might be called the process of strategic genius. Drawing on Spivak's and Lipsitz's respective theories of strategic essentialism and strategic anti-essentialism, strategic genius is, at once, both an essentializing and anti-essentializing process. On the one hand, in works like *The Madman*, Gibran willingly indulges an image of himself as a mystical Easterner who possesses special, visionary powers. To use Said's phrase, Gibran deliberately orientalizes himself, but does so, as Spivak describes it, to highlight his own cultural uniqueness. On the other hand, by adopting the voice of Western poets and philosophers, particularly

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forbear. Writing in the shadow of Gibran's *The Prophet*, which sold over eight million copies, a new generation of Arab-American writers needed to reconcile their relationship to the trope of genius that pervades both Gibran's life and art.

Blake, Whitman, and Nietzsche, Gibran masks his own cultural uniqueness and engages in a poetic with appeal to American mass culture. By making his poetic familiar and accessible to American readers, which necessarily meant abandoning the Arabic language, Gibran successfully gained recognition from a mainstream audience hitherto oblivious to an Arab presence in the USA. Gibran's process of engaging the mainstream in a voice based on Western visionary Romanticism is akin to Muñoz's "disidentification," a process that both accepts and rejects dominant modes of identification.

The Madman is a series of parables and poems that begins with the madman's explanation of his condition. Stripped by thieves of the "seven masks" he wore in seven previous lives, the madman declares his liberation, asserting: "And I have found both freedom and safety in my madness; the freedom of loneliness and the safety from being understood, for those who understand us enslave something in us."[11] From the outset of this work, Gibran's own struggle with identity can be glimpsed through the voice of his narrator. Gibran's narrator articulates the dilemma of living between two cultures of which Gibran, the poet, often complained. In his private letters and journals, Gibran frequently reflected on his conflicted identity as both Arab and American, and lamented his inability to wholly embrace either of these cultures in his art.[12] This identity-struggle is manifest in the opening lines of *The Madman*, quoted above.

Willingly wearing the mask of madness, perhaps understood as the mask of Western stereotypes that see Arabs as irrational or mystical, Gibran's narrator claims to have found freedom. This freedom is reminiscent of the freedom W.E.B. Du Bois hypothesized as existing behind the veil for African-Americans, and Gibran's struggle to exist between two worlds

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[11] Kahlil Gibran, *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* (1918; Mineola NY: Dover, 2002): 8.

[12] In a letter to his friend Mary Haskell, for instance, Gibran wrote of being "between two worlds." He goes on to lament, "Were I in Syria, my poetry would ensure notice to my pictures, were I an English poet, it would ensure them English notice. But I am between the two and the waiting is heavy." Jean Gibran and Kahlil Gibran, "The Symbolic Quest of Kahlil Gibran: The Arab as Artist in America," in *Crossing the Waters*, ed. Eric J. Hooglund (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1987): 162.

is certainly akin to Du Bois's famed concept of double-consciousness.[13] Acknowledging the loneliness of freedom from behind the veil, Gibran's narrator nevertheless insists that a real understanding of him would only further enslave him; like Du Bois, Gibran's narrator seeks shelter behind the veil:

> Leaving, then, the world of the white man, I have stepped within the Veil, raising it that you may view faintly its deeper recesses,–the meaning of its religion, the passion of its human sorrow, and the struggle of its greater souls.[14]

Gibran's madman seems willing to indulge one essentialized self in order to avoid further such versions from surfacing. Strategically embracing this essentialized self, the madman asserts wisdom in contradistinction to his perceived madness.

The work proceeds in a series of poetic vignettes, ranging in length from one to two pages. As with most of Gibran's canon, the influences of Nietzsche and Blake are keenly felt in *The Madman*. Gibran argues for a version of the self that transcends the moral assumptions of time and place, and looks inward to discover greater truths. Such truths are often related in brief parables such as "The Fox" and "On the Steps of the Temple." These pieces recall Blake's "Proverbs of Hell" in their ironic reappraisals of common morality, and anticipate much of Gibran's less ironic didacticism in his greater work, *The Prophet*. In "The New Pleasure," for example, Gibran firmly aligns himself with the figure of the visionary poet, often related to Romantic genius:

> Last night I invented a new pleasure, and
> as I was giving it the first trial an angel
> and a devil came rushing toward my house.
> They met at my door and fought with
> Each other over my newly created pleasure;
> The one crying, "It is a sin!" – the other,
> "It is a virtue![15]

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[13] See W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folks*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. & Terri Hume Oliver (1903; Centenary Edition; New York: W.W. Norton, 1999).

[14] Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, 5.

[15] Kahlil Gibran, *The Madman*, 31.

Blake's influence is clear; this piece evokes Romantic genius through its emphasis on the new, and through its description of the poet as one who can, through his own soul, create things. The visionary qualities of the poem are manifest in the images of angel and devil, and in the poet's creation of an abstract, intangible pleasure. In his essay on Gibran and modernity, Antoine Karam observes:

> Romanticism was basically a comprehensive revolt against the established order in all folds of thought, taste, and expression…the romantic philosophy held by Gibran and the spirit of romanticism which permeated his works were not only very radical and comprehensive, but also fundamentally those of a visionary writer. Like a mystic, he aspired to unveil the world of the unseen and discover the unknown.[16]

According to Karam, one revolutionary aspect of Gibran's Romanticism is his abandonment of traditional Arabic forms and language. Engaging the works of Western writers while writing in English, Gibran broke new ground in Arab literature. If, as Karam's passage also suggests, breaking new ground meant engaging in stereotypes that coded Arabs as mystics, Gibran was only too ready to do so. While simultaneously participating in such stereotypical depictions, Gibran demonstrated his ability to write within the conventions of Western literature and to do so as competently as Western writers.[17]

Still, nothing in Gibran's oeuvre compares to the success of his 1923 work, *The Prophet*, and it is in this work that Gibran's visionary poetic is most manifest. Framed around the story of Al Mustafa, the chosen one, this work tells of the hero's departure from the city of Orphalese. While leaving, he is stopped by a crowd and asked to speak on various subjects. The work addresses twenty-six topics in all, ranging from love and houses to clothes and time, concluding with religion and death. Gibran's oft-quoted advice on marriage is here: reminiscent of Rilke, he instructs, "But let there be spaces in your togetherness, / And let the winds of the heavens

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[16] Antoine G. Karam, "Gibran's Concept of Modernity," in *Tradition and Modernity in Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa Boullata & Terri De Young (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 1997): 34.

[17] Houston Baker Jr.'s discussion of "mastery of form" and "defamation of form" in the context of African-American literature may also be useful here. See Baker's work *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987).

dance / between you."[18] Whitman's influence is also present in lines such as "And I say that life is indeed darkness / save when there is urge / and urge is blind save when there is / knowledge."[19] Here, Gibran directly echoes "Song of Myself," where Whitman decrees, "Urge and urge and urge / Always the procreant urge of the world."[20] Gibran's prophetic declaration, "And I say," is also borrowed from Whitman, who uses it throughout "Song of Myself" – in section 21 of that poem, for instance, Whitman declares, "And I say that it is as great to be a woman as to be man, / And I say there is nothing greater than the mother of men"; later in the poem, Whitman again declares, "And I say to any man or woman, Let your soul stand cool and/composed before a million universes. / And I say to mankind, Be not curious about God."[21] Such echoes resound throughout *The Prophet*, aligning Gibran with the visionary Romanticism best illustrated in Blake, Whitman, and, after Gibran, Allen Ginsberg.

Another example of where Gibran directly borrows from Whitman occurs in Gibran's section "On Work." As the Prophet reflects on the topic of work, he says the following:

> But I say, not in sleep but in the over-wakefulness of noontide, that the wind speaks not more sweetly to the giant oaks than to the least of all the blades of grass; And he alone is great who turns the voice of the wind into a song made sweeter by his own loving.[22]

Echoing any number of lines from Whitman's "Song of Myself," these lines directly reference Whitman's own title, *Leaves of Grass*, as well as the numerous allusions to grass throughout Whitman's poem.[23] In section 31 of "Song of Myself," Whitman claims, "I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,"[24] a sentiment very similar to that found in Gibran's passage. Gibran follows Whitman by pointing up the universality of all men and by delighting in nature, where he finds his

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[18] Kahlil Gibran, *The Prophet* (1923; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2003): 15.

[19] Gibran, *The Prophet* , 26.

[20] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, ed. Sculley Bradley & Harold W. Blodgett (Norton Critical Editions; New York: W.W. Norton, 1973): 31.

[21] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 48, 86.

[22] Gibran, *The Prophet*, 28.

[23] Most famous, perhaps, is the extended discussion of grass in section six of the poem, prompted by the child's question: "What is the grass?" Gibran, *The Prophet*, 33.

[24] Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 59.

most apt metaphors. The passage's repetition of the word "sweet" also resonates with lines from "Song of Myself" such as "clear and sweet is my soul, and clear and sweet is all that is not my soul" and "I find no sweeter fat than sticks to my own bones."[25]

Even Gibran's use of the word "song" seems inextricably linked to Whitman. By aligning his work and voice so closely to Whitman's, Gibran enacts Lipsitz's strategy of anti-essentialism.[26] Performing as the Other, Gibran seeks to illustrate his own cultural uniqueness. Posing in the clothes of the Western Romantic genius, Gibran's Prophet asserts himself as a viable Eastern voice worthy of Western attention. Similarly, Gibran's use of Whitman is one Muñoz would describe as disidentification – a recycling of Whitman used to empower Gibran's minority status as an Arab-American.

In part because of its immense success, many critics have found it difficult to take *The Prophet* seriously.[27] As a work that celebrates Thoreauvian anti-materialism[28] but has also sold over eight million copies to date, *The Prophet* seems to inhabit a contradiction. Indeed, even the publishing and marketing strategies that continue to surround Gibran's works seem contradictory to the poet's philosophies. While ornate, collector's editions of *The Prophet* pervade the market, paperback and thrift editions of

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[25] Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 31, 47.

[26] For two other very good accounts of Gibran's use of Whitman, see Eugene Paul Nassar's essay "Cultural Discontinuity in the Works of Kahlil Gibran" and Suhail Hanna's "Gibran and Whitman: Their Literary Dialogue," *Literature East and West* 12 (1968): 174–98.

[27] A common critical dismissal of Gibran's work is the obvious pun that refers to the work as Gibran's "The Profit." Even more unsettling, however, are remarks by critics who claim to champion Gibran, but similarly dismiss *The Prophet* for its success. In the introduction to their anthology of Arab-American poetry, for instance, Gregory Orfalea and Sharif Elmusa write of *The Prophet*: "Those whose disregard for Gibran rests only on reading that overwritten, aphoristic book should be encouraged to examine some of the early lyrics such as the powerful 'Defeat'" (Orfalea, "Introduction" to *Grape Leaves*, xvi). While this point is well taken, it seems to unnecessarily dismiss many of *The Prophet's* merits on the basis of its popular appeal.

[28] Gibran's anti-materialism is perhaps most keenly felt in his section on "Giving," where he writes, "For what are your possessions but things/you keep and guard for fear you may need them tomorrow?/And tomorrow, what shall tomorrow bring to the overprudent dog burying bones in the trackless sand as he follows the pilgrims to the holy city?" (*Prophet*, 19).

Gibran's works remain rare. Such marketing may suggest that Gibran's work was somehow insincere, but it may also suggest the extent to which he succeeded in penetrating the fabric of popular American culture. Indeed, its being overlooked by critics who choose to dismiss the literary relevance of book because of its overwhelming commercial success is how the contradictory status of Gibran's work represents what Muñoz terms an act of disidentification. Having successfully penetrated the fabric of popular American culture, Gibran used his popular position to forward a political agenda often at odds with Western values.

In their work, Jean and Kahlil Gibran[29] observe the following about Gibran's success in the USA:

> … the unprecedented success of *The Prophet* is not an unexplainable mystery or accident. Gibran's long association with early twentieth-century idealists, his exposure to one of America's great bookmakers, his affiliation with many prominent figures in Symbolist art, and his duality of cultural and linguistic background combined to fill a need for millions of readers. Gibran's attraction for today's generation endures. Those youths who reject the materialistic era and share a concern with those same mysteries and exotic hallucinogenic fantasies, the visionaries who wear beads and dally in Eastern religions, reenact conditions concurrent with the inception of Symbolism.[30]

This passage reveals how a number of factors combined to make Gibran as successful as he is today. In part, his success is due to the marketing strategies of an intuitive publisher. Capitalizing on the market of Western fetishists, those "visionaries who wear beads and dally in Eastern religions," Gibran and Knopf were able to sell millions of copies. At the same time, however (albeit somewhat ironically), Gibran pursued a particular social agenda that offered a harsh critique of Western capitalist values. Given his minority status, had he not evoked the figure of the prophet and allowed himself to be fetishized in this manner, he would possibly have remained a relatively unknown struggling artist.

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[29] Jean and Kahlil Gibran are husband and wife and have written much on Gibran the poet, including an essential biography entitled *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1974). For clarity, it is important to note that Kahlil Gibran, the biographer, is the cousin and namesake of Kahlil Gibran the poet. Jean Gibran bears the name as a consequence of her marriage, and is not directly related to Gibran the poet.

[30] Jean and Kahlil Gibran, "Symbolic Quest," 169.

That *The Prophet* became a battle hymn for the 1960s counterculture should not surprise. Despite its mass-culture appeal, its Thoreauvian anti-materialism and its strong themes of love, peace, and an individual, transcendent morality coincided with much of the countercultural rhetoric of the 1960s. Moreover, Gibran's immense commercial success never wholly obscured his own political activism: he wrote and spoke energetically against Ottoman oppression in his home country of Lebanon, and on behalf of the early women's rights movement in America. His essay "The New Frontier," written in Arabic in 1925 about the state of the Middle East, is now widely regarded as the original source of John F. Kennedy's famed exhortation "ask not what your country can do for you…." Indeed, it was also Kennedy who earlier declared that we stand "on the edge of a new frontier," perhaps again borrowing from Gibran's work.

When Gibran died in New York of liver failure in 1931, his body was moved back to Lebanon, where he was buried in his hometown of Bsharri. Perhaps the most resounding testament to Gibran's successful penetration of the American cultural fabric is the 1991 dedication of a memorial garden to the poet in Washington D.C. Used as a political panacea at the onset of Desert Storm, this event again underscores the ways in which the figure of the poet can be publicly manipulated. In an effort to demonstrate US tolerance of Arab people, this event capitalized on Gibran's American reputation to quell accusations of racism and injustice as the USA invaded Iraq for the first time. Implicit in this 1991 event is the continued, limited understanding of Gibran that underscores even more strongly why he and his work require thorough re-evaluation. Under what I have termed "The Burden of *The Prophet*," later generations of Arab-American poets had to deal precisely with this misunderstanding of Gibran. Following him, these poets had to negotiate their own reputations carefully, to at least two ends: avoiding the stigma of selling out to an essentialized version of themselves as Arab mystics, these poets nonetheless needed to find a way to assert their own authority and cultural legitimacy; and their evocation of the trope of genius needed to be even more strategic than Gibran's.

The 1960s prompted the mobilization of a number of marginalized groups toward political and cultural legitimacy, and Arab-Americans were no exception. Faced with many of the same challenges as other marginalized groups, Arab-American poets evoke visionary Romanticism in order

to reclaim a notion of an individual self that was being infringed upon in multiple ways. These later writers had to find ways to rescue the authority of Gibran's prophet from the stereotype in which this authority was embedded. A difficult task in its own right, this process was complicated by philosophical and theoretical developments in the 1960s that sought to wrest all authority away from authors. Following Spivak, a number of critics, including Traise Yamamoto, observe that the theoretical bias toward indeterminacy that grew out of the 1960s ironically made it even more difficult for marginalized groups to assert their own cohesive identities.[31] As Yamamoto and others demonstrate, the final assault on the autonomous self of marginalized figures was the theoretical dismantling of that self in literary and cultural studies that coincided almost exactly with the newfound liberties of minority and women's voices.

For minority authors,writing in the USA during (and after) the 1960s, this theoretical development was untenable. To assert their own cultural validity without standing firmly behind a knowable self was counter-intuitive and seemed to play into the hands of those who, already in power, had stifled these marginalized voices in a number of ways prior to this final blow. It is no mistake, then, that in the era of postmodernism a poetics of indeterminacy[32] and of multiculturalism arose side by side. While a large number of writers, mainly belonging to the white majority, were finding ways to debunk the authority of self in their works, an equally strong contingent of minority writers were attempting to re-assert notions of self-authority in their own works.

Naomi Shihab Nye is one such poet and is perhaps the most noted name in post-1960s Arab-American poetry. Born in St. Louis, Missouri in

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[31] For example, in her work on Asian-American poetry, Yamamoto observes:

> … moves toward privileging indeterminate fragmentation must and should involve recognizing the ways in which dominant culture subjects rely on a granted, assumed coherency that may then be both bracketed and deconstructed. For subjects marked by race, or by gender and race, fragmentation is very often the condition in which they already find themselves by simple virtue of being situated in a culture that does not grant them subjecthood, or grants them only contingent subjectivity.

— Traise Yamamoto, *Masking Selves, Masking Subjects: Japanese American Women, Identity, and the Body* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999): 74–75.

[32] This phrase is borrowed from Marjorie Perloff's work *The Poetics of Indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage* (Chicago: Northwestern UP, 1999).

1952 to a Palestinian father and American mother, Nye lived briefly in Jerusalem between 1966 and 1967, but was primarily raised in Texas. Her second and more notable collection of poetry, *Hugging the Jukebox* (1982), was selected for the National Poetry Series and was an American Library Association Notable Book in 1982.[33] In 1988, W.S. Merwin chose Nye for the prestigious Lavan Award from the Academy of American Poets. In addition to writing her own poetry, Nye has played an active role in the Project of Translation from Arabic (PROTA), successfully translating a number of Arab poets into English. Since 1974, Nye has worked as a "writer-in-the-schools" for Texas's Commission of the Arts. She served as Holloway Lecturer of Poetry at the University of California, Berkeley, and as a poetry lecturer at the University of Texas, Austin. All of these positions demonstrate Nye's ability to work effectively within institutions of power while simultaneously producing a counterpublic narrative that draws attention to Palestinian oppression and Middle East politics more generally. Nowhere is this more evident than in Nye's work with the United States Information Agency's "Arts America" programme. As part of this programme, Nye presented her poetry in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Jordan, the West Bank, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and India. Given that much of her poetry is openly critical of US foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly regarding Palestine, her work for the USIA may seem surprising. Yet through this work Nye enacts Muñoz's concept of disidentification, working within institutions of power in order to transform the codes, institutions, and assumptions of the mainstream.

Nye uses visionary Romanticism to such ends throughout her work, including her first collection, *Different Ways to Pray* (1980). Rather than evoking visionary Romanticism via Whitman, as Gibran had done, Nye chooses instead the visionary voice of Pablo Neruda. While some of Neruda's own voice extends clearly from Whitman's influence, Nye's decision to model her voice so closely on Neruda's subtly distances her from what might be perceived as a canonical, white majority position, and makes it appropriate for recounting her travels in Central America. In "The Indian in the Kitchen," about these travels, Nye writes:

> … Tell me the story
> you have not told anyone,

[33] Because the critical attention given to the poets I discuss here is relatively little, I provide extensive biographical data to best frame the discussion of the poetry.

the tale braided into your skull and tied with a string.
Describe the sky on the night you wandered out into the village,
calling for your father who left Huehuetenango
and never returned.
The shift in your mother's eyes –
how suddenly there was a rock ledge no one could climb.
Tell me of the brothers dancing with piglets
The day before they were sold
or the nights the goats were restless in their pens
and the rooster crowed at the wrong hour,
Before Volcan Fuego spit hot sand into the air.
My hands would learn the colors your hands know,
blue and purple, threaded together on the loom.
How you weave the ducks and frogs
so they line up end-to-end across the cloth.

Listen, no one introduces us,
yet all evening it is you I am visiting. [34]

I quote at length here both to retain the beauty of Nye's language and to show the exactness with which she adapts Neruda's voice in *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*. In the twelfth and final section, Neruda writes:

Mírame desde el fondo de la tierra,
labrador, tejedor, pastor, callado:
domador de guanacos tutelares:
albañil del andamio desafiado:
aguador de las lágrimas andinas:
joyero de los dedos machacados:
agricultor temblando en la semilla
alfarero en tu greda derramado:
traed a la copa de esta nueva vida
vuestros viejos dolores enterrados.
Mostradme vuestra sangre y vuestro surco,
decidme: aquí fuí castigado,
porque la joya no brilló o la tierra
no entregó a tiempo la piedra o el grano:
señaladme la piedra en que caísteis
y la madera en que os crucificaron,

[34] Naomi Shihab Nye, *Words Under the Words: Selected Poems* (Portland OR: Far Corner, 1995): 4.

encendedme los viejos pedernales,
las viejas lámparas, los látigos pegados
a través de los siglos en las llagas
y las hachas de brillo ensangrentado.

Yo vengo a hablar por vuestra boca muerta.[35]

[Look at me from the depths of the earth,
tiller of fields, weaver, reticent Shepard,
groom of totemic guanacos,
mason high on your treacherous scaffolding,
iceman of Andean tears,
jeweler with crushed fingers,
farmer anxious among his seedlings,
potter wasted among his clays –
bring the cup of new life
your ancient buried sorrows.
Show me your blood and your furrow;
say to me: here I was scourged
because a gem was dull or because the earth
failed to give up in time its tithe of corn or stone.
Point out to me the rock on which you stumbled,
The wood they used to crucify your body.
Strike the old flints
to kindle ancient lamps, light up the whips
glued to your wounds throughout the centuries
and light axes gleaming with your blood.

I come to speak for your dead mouths.]

Nye models her poetic voice closely on Neruda's in order to affect a visionary Romanticism that was often critical of Western imperialism and complacency in the Third World. Whereas this is certainly only one dimension of Neruda's poetic (and Nye's), it is perhaps the most significant point at which their poetics intersect. Like Neruda before her, Nye uses images of individual suffering to show the effects of this imperialism and complacency. Through a process similar to Lipsitz's strategic anti-essentialism, Nye takes on the voice of Neruda – a voice familiar and

[35] Pablo Neruda, *The Heights of Macchu Picchu*, tr. Nathaniel Tarn, preface by Robert Pring–Mill (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1966): 67.

palatable to Western readers[36] – in order to assert her own cultural uniqueness as an Arab-American. Like Neruda, Nye asserts a political agenda that – addressed more directly – would have been reluctantly received by a mass American audience. She learns from Neruda how to disguise her politics in a poetic voice in tune with Western ears; like Neruda's own channelling of a politics highly critical of Western values through modalities often congruent with those voiced by Whitman, America's great self-proclaimed poetic father, Nye uses the visionary voice of Neruda to call attention to her particular status as an Arab-American, and to assert a political agenda at odds with a mainstream American audience.

Neruda's voice and imagery appear throughout Nye's collection, especially in poems like "Negotiations with a Volcano," "Bolivia," and "Adios"; yet Nye's poem "Coming into Cuzco" is perhaps the best example of where she disguises her political agenda in Neruda's voice. Once the capital of the Incas, Cuzco is the gateway to Macchu Picchu; as such, Nye's poem about the city immediately recalls Neruda's masterpiece. Nye incorporates many of Neruda's central images from *The Heights of Macchu Picchu* into her poem. For example, her "I was a broken jug, / nothing could fill me" evokes both Neruda's "empty net, dredging through streets and ambient atmosphere, I came [una red vacía, / iba yo entre las calles y la atmósfera, llegando y despidiendo]," and his more specific metaphor of mortality as the "black cup they trembled while they drained [una copa negra que bebían temblando]" (3, 13).

Nye also incorporates one of Neruda's most recurrent symbols, the rose, into her poem. In the closing lines of the poem, Nye writes "Vamos! And she handed me one pink rose, / because we had noticed each other, and that was all. / One rose coming into Cuzco and I was thinking / it should not be so difficult to be happy in this world" (47). In section seven of his poem, Neruda writes of the "everlasting rose [la rosa permanente]" (35). Robert Pring–Mill observes in his preface to Neruda that the rose "is one of Neruda's favorite symbols, taken up in the *Oda al edificio*" as the "the collective rose […] the edifice of all mankind" (xvi). Pring–Mill

[36] Despite Neruda's decided Marxism and a politics that is often openly anti-capitalist, he remains a beloved poet in Western markets, including the USA. His collections such as "Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair" and "Odes to Common Things," as well as his status as a Nobel Laureate, have much to do with his continued reputation. Neruda's ability to remain popular, despite his politics, is certainly one of his many appeals for poets like Nye.

suggests that Neruda's "everlasting rose" from *Macchu Picchu* points in the direction of these later works, and Nye seems to follow this logic by making her rose a redeeming symbol that signals happiness in a world of suffering. Finally, Nye's journey in her poem – from bus, to plane, over the mountains, and into Cuzco – mimics the movement in Neruda's poem from the depths of despair to redemption at the heights of Macchu Picchu. The key to Nye's use of Neruda, however, is found midway through the first section of the poem, where Nye imagines her father: "I was listening to the herd of them wailing on the runway, / thinking the man in the center was the same shape as my father, / thinking, this is Peru, this is more than Peru" (47). In another poem from this collection, "My Father and the Fig Tree," Nye uses her father to show the struggle of Arab-Americans to maintain their cultural heritage while living in the USA:

> For other fruits my father was indifferent.
> He'd point to the cherry trees and say,
> "See those? I wish they were figs."
> In the evenings he sat by my bed
> weaving folktales like vivid little scarves.
> They always involved a fig tree. (20)

Nye's father becomes a symbol for a culture in jeopardy, and his struggle to keep old country habits and traditions alive in the USA – where such values are often misunderstood and neglected – spiritually binds him to the people Nye encounters in Peru. The image of her father "weaving folktales" links her father to the woman weaving in the above-cited lines from the "Indian in the Kitchen," a connection made explicit in the lines about her father in "Coming into Cuzco." In these lines, the suffering of the people of Peru becomes greater than Peru; imagining her displaced Palestinian father to be "the same shape" as the Peruvian man allows Nye to hypothesize a universal, human suffering often overlooked by middle-class America. By creating a slippage between the suffering in South America and the suffering of her own, Palestinian people, Nye enacts Lipsitz's strategic anti-essentialism. That is, by choosing to identify with a culture not fully her own, Nye begins to "solve indirectly problems that [she] could not address directly."[37] Likewise, by using Neruda's familiar

[37] Lipsitz, *Dangerous Crossroads*, 62.

voice to forward a counterpubic narrative, she participates in Muñoz's process of disidentification.

Read in the context of her more overt political poems about the Middle East, specifically those about the struggles for Palestinian independence,[38] it isn't hard to imagine that embedded in Nye's South American poems is a critique related to Palestinian oppression. In the voice of the visionary, Nye, like Neruda before her, speaks for and through people suffering everywhere at all times. Working within US institutions, such as the USIA, that facilitate her travel to regions like South America, Nye uses her mainstream position as a diplomat, and the mainstream poetic discourse of visionary Romanticism, to critique the mainstream values that underlie these systems.

Lawrence Joseph is another post-1960s Arab-American poet who uses visionary Romanticism in ways similar to Gibran and Nye. Born in 1948 among the large population of immigrant Arabs living in Detroit around that time, Joseph was born to Lebanese and Syrian immigrants. In 1982, he produced his first collection of poetry, which was awarded the Agnes Lynch Starret Prize of the University of Pittsburgh Press, and in 1984 he gained a National Endowment for the Arts Poetry Award. In 1988, he published a second collection of poems, entitled *Curriculum Vitae*. An attorney by profession, Joseph has practised law before the Michigan Supreme Court, and has taught law at both the University of Detroit Law School and St. John's University School of Law in New York City. Like Nye, Joseph has been able to work successfully within systems of power bringing attention to Arab-American minorities and the issues that concern them.

Given his profession, it may not surprise that Joseph chooses Wallace Stevens as his visionary Romantic model.[39] Many critics have gone to great lengths demonstrating how Stevens brought to Modernism some of the concerns and tropes most often found in Romantic poetry, including

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[38] For good examples of such poems, see "Lunch in Nablus City Park," "Jerusalem," and "Two Countries," among others. These are all to be found in Nye's third collection of poetry, *Yellow Glove* (Portland OR: Breitenbush, 1986).

[39] While Stevens' position as vice-president of Hartford Accident and Indemnity is widely recounted, worth mention here is that he entered the insurance business as a bonding attorney for the New York Office of the Equitable Surety Co. of St. Louis in 1914. He had graduated from New York Law School in 1903 and passed the New York bar in 1904.

attributing a religious importance to poetry.[40] Indeed, in early works like "Sunday Morning," Stevens evokes Romantic thought by contemplating a place for poetry that can replace religion in an increasingly secularized culture. More important for Joseph, however, may be the tropes most often associated with Stevens' later work. In addition to poems like "Rubaiyat," "Sand Nigger," and "In the Beginning was Lebanon," where Joseph directly confronts issues of Arab-American identity, many of his poems, interestingly, also use the same visionary, self-questioning figure that animates Stevens – a figure caught up in imaginative revelries, which, for Stevens, underlie a preoccupation with rational thought and provide the ground on which mere reality can stand. Perhaps indicative of their shared personal professions as lawyers, Joseph and Stevens centre many of their poems in this imagining figure who both considers carefully the constructed world in which he lives and envisions new imaginative realms within that world.

This is especially true of the late Stevens, as in "Notes Toward a Supreme Fiction," and the haunting poem "A Quiet Normal Life." As seen in this poem, Stevens' figure never fully escapes the confines of the material, constructed world in which he sits but, by contemplating it and by trying to envision ways beyond it, he rallies himself against it. The poem concludes by striking a balance between the mundane existence of Stevens' figure and the possibility of something more. Stevens writes of some unnamed insight, heard "above the crickets' chords":

> Babbling, each one, the uniqueness of its sound.
> There was no fury in transcendent forms.
> But his actual candle blazed with artifice.[41]

Evoking the creative fire of visionary Romanticism, these final lines point up the human need to discover the imaginary in places where the imaginary is seemingly outmoded and, more importantly, where the most basic sensory experiences may themselves constitute a sort of re-envision-

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[40] See, for instance, Joseph Carroll's *Wallace Stevens' Supreme Fiction: A New Romanticism* (Baton Rouge: Louisana State UP, 1987). Also, for a good collection of critical essays on Stevens, see Steven Gould Axelrod and Helen Deese's *Critical Essays on Wallace Stevens* (Boston MA: G.K. Hall, 1988).

[41] Wallace Stevens, *Collected Poetry and Prose*, ed. Frank Kermode & Joan Richardson (Library of America 96; New York: Library Classics of the United States, 1997): 444.

ing or re-imagining. By incorporating this late-visionary-Romantic voice int his work, Joseph similarly depicts the desperate need for imagination within the constructed world-views of much postmodern thought.

Joseph begins his 1988 collection *Curriculum Vitae*[42] with a passage from Stevens' essay "Three Academic Pieces": "Both in nature and in metaphor identity is the vanishing point of resemblance." In many ways, this epigraph is the key to what Joseph achieves in this collection. Stevens' passage is not inconsistent with Lipsitz's notion of strategic anti-essentialism, wherein individuals are able to assert one identity by forwarding another.[43] Indeed, throughout his collection, Joseph is concerned with the slipperiness of identity-formation and its specific relevance for Arab-Americans. In the title poem, for example, Joseph begins, "I might have been born in Beirut, / not Detroit, with my right name" (7). Given the telling title *Curriculum Vitae*, it should not surprise us that much of Joseph's collection, including this poem, deals with the ways in which identities are constructed and re-constructed. For Joseph, the rigidity of identity becomes surmountable through Stevens. As a poetic figure through which Joseph can model his poetic voice (in an act of disidentification), and as a voice which allows for imaginative acts in the world of postmodernism, Stevens becomes a necessary channel through which Joseph can assert his individual politics.

Stevens' visionary Romanticism is present throughout Joseph's work, in poems on topics as various as global economy, Arab-American identity, and world politics; but it is Joseph's seemingly direct allusion to Stevens in "That's All" that demands specific attention. Joseph's poem begins as follows:

> I work and I remember. I conceive
> a river of cracked hands above Manhattan.
>
> No spirit leaped with me in the womb
> No prophet explains why Korean women

[42] Lawrence Joseph, *Curriculum Vitae* (Pittsburgh PA: U of Pittsburgh P, 1988).

[43] I am not suggesting that this passage is in any way directly related to notions of individual identity; rather, Stevens' observations in this piece about the three types of imaginative resemblances can, in fact, inform such discussions of identity. This is especially true for minority writers like those discussed in this essay, who, through imaginative acts, try to re-envision personal identity.

> thread Atomic Machinery's machines
> behind massive, empty criminal tombs. (34)

The enjambment between the first and second line of this poem creates a strong emphasis on the poet's role as one who "conceives." Consistent with notions of not only the Cartesian self but also, more explicitly, Romantic genius, the poet's ability to conceive emanates from within rather than from external sources. Thus, in the next two lines, the poet reiterates his individuality, perhaps even his own godliness, by insisting on his isolated nature. In the womb, there is no external spirit, but there is very certainly a "me." Likewise, if there is no external prophet, as indicated in the fourth line, understanding and prophecy must emanate from the speaker himself. These lines point back to Stevens's claim in "Sunday Morning" that "Divinity must live within herself" (53).[44]

More directly connected to Stevens, however, are these lines from the poem:

> Why do I make my fire my heart's blood,
> two or three ideas thought through
>
> to their conclusions, make my air
> dirty the rain around towers of iron,
>
> a brown moon, the whole world? (34)

If Joseph's "air" that "dirt[ies] the rain around towers of iron" recalls Stevens' oft-cited weather of the mind,[45] it does so for all of the above-cited reasons. Joseph evokes Stevens in the same way that Nye evokes Neruda and that Gibran evokes Whitman and other visionary Romantics: all of these poets, through a process I call strategic genius, attach their own poetic voices to those familiar to American audiences. In doing so, they assert unique identities, performing what Muñoz might agree are counterpublic acts.

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[44] Joseph's image of "Atomic Machinery" also echoes Ginsberg's "hydrogen jukebox" from "Howl" – significant in view of Ginsberg's reputation as another late-Romantic visionary.

[45] See, for instance, "A Clear Day and No Memories," where Stevens asserts, "Today the mind is not part of the weather. / Today the air is clear of everything" (*Collected Poetry and Prose*, 475).

At times, Joseph's visionary Romanticism seems to combine elements of both Stevens and Gibran, and it is important to see that Arab-American poets like Joseph are rarely able to fully escape from under the shadow of Gibran. Indeed, much of Joseph's poem "That's All" seems haunted by Gibran's prophetic voice. Joseph writes, "Truth? My lies are sometimes true / Firsthand, I now see God." Here, as determinations about truth and self are described as written *by* the speaker rather than *on* the speaker, the poem's visionary voice elevates to assert prophetically a sort of individual legitimacy. Identity becomes a creative, imaginative act, and in a Gibranian prophetic voice, Joseph, like Stevens, searches for ways to assert individual identity in a world where meanings are constructed. The poem concludes:

> I don't deny the court that rules
> my race is Jewish or Abyssinian.
> In good times I transform myself
>
> into the sun's great weight, in bad times
> I make myself like smoke on flat waves.

Subverting the court that seeks to control his identity, the speaker in Joseph's poem reclaims the authority of the visionary Romantic and "transforms" his identity to match his own desires.

Finally, in "London," another poem from *Curriculum Vitae*, Joseph makes his relationship to visionary Romanticism transparent: "Aged malt whiskey and cigarettes / consumed to enhance consciousness / – read Blake" (47). These lines open Joseph's poem, a poem that proceeds to discuss economic and social inequalities seen throughout London. Like Blake's own "London," Joseph's poem is fervent in its politics; moreover, it is deeply concerned with questions of identity-formation and subjectivity. Like the other works discussed in this essay, "London" demonstrates how many Arab-American poets revitalize Romantic tropes by offering them new modes of expression. In the works of these poets, the political relevance of visionary Romanticism is reinvigorated, and, through processes similar to those described by Lipsitz and Muñoz, these poets assert their political legitimacy and individual identities. Other Arab-American poets, such as Suheir Hammad, have brought this voice even closer to the mainstream, further demonstrating its subversive and resis-

tant potential.[46] As these poets struggle – fluctuating between a voice that is sometimes that of Romantic genius and sometimes something altogether different – they seek to progressively re-define what it means to be both Arab and American.

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[46] Born in 1973, in Amman, Jordan to Palestinian refugees, Hammad was raised in Brooklyn, New York where she and her family moved when she was five. Most noted for her role in "Russell Simmons' Def Poetry Jam on Broadway," Hammad is a well-known artist in New York's spoken-word poetry scene. In addition to her own publications – a book of poems, *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (London & New York: Writers & Readers, 1996), and a memoir, *Drops Of This Story* (New York: Harlem River, 1999) – Hammad is prominently featured in *Listen Up! An Anthology Of Spoken Word Poetry*. As a poet and activist, she has received numerous awards, including the Audre Lorde Writing Award from Hunter College, the Morris Center for Healing Poetry Award, and a New York Mills Artist Residency in Minnesota. Most recently, her interests have turned to filmmaking; she has produced a documentary film, *Half A Lifetime*, and is scripting a film entitled *From Beirut To Brooklyn*.

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The Dialectic of the Nature/Man/God Trilogy of Acceptance and Tolerance in the Works of Amine F. Rihani

BOULOS SARRU

WHEN, IN THE COURSE OF ITS BECOMING, humanity faces calamitous times and forebodings of doom; when, in its march for self-realization, humanity is plagued with dumb blindness that strangles the sound of guiding lights; when all human kindness, compassion, and solidarity wane before hatred, guile, and dissent; and when all hope seems lost, a primordial sentiment *sous-generis* surfaces in the arena of existence, makes itself manifest in cataclysmic pronouncements of the will of the race proclaiming its continuity and inevitable progress toward the achievement of its destiny.

The truthfulness of the phenomenon of asserting the inevitability of human achievement needs no apology. *Ex nihilo* was chaos a raw material moulded in the mind of the Creator into order, life, beauty, and the Garden; from the Garden to expulsion and suffering to the promise of salvation; from annunciation to nativity to the mission to crucifixion and resurrection; from ignorance and hatred were martyrdom and renaissance; and the cycles continue in fierce regressions, resulting in the slow ascent of the human race. This is the lower level of the secret fabric of life: threads of love and doom woven on the loom of common destiny of man. But the weaver contemplating these threads looks at the higher level of the fabric: the one final cloth that is not made of individual threads but of a bond of wills variegated in origin, independent in themselves, yet the thread and the carpet at the same time. The weaver is always confident of, and happy

about, the quality of his carpet; he transcends the individual lines into the final pattern and, from the varied opposites, he weaves the harmony and oneness of diversity.

Amine Fares Rihani was this kind of weaver, destined, as if by a higher authority or commissioned by an inner delegation, to look at the universe from a holistic perspective and to forge in the smithy of his hallowed being the vision and practice of acceptance and tolerance emanating from the living universe, and which, at the same time, are requisites for its existence. As early as 1900, Rihani had diagnosed the malady of modern man and community to be that of intolerance, and he prescribed tolerance as the cure. Looking at a world, and an Eastern world in particular, torn by dissension, cowardice, and hypocrisy, Rihani writes:

> The general meaning of tolerance is to accept that which is different from you. The specific meaning of tolerance is the licensing of religious dogmas and rites different from those commonly accepted.[1]

Inherent in religious tolerance are the "respect and consideration which we must show toward the creeds of our fellow human beings, though these creeds be contradictory to ours" (35–36). Duality is thus in the nature of tolerance, and for tolerance to exist, it has to accept its opposite, fanaticism: "These two words [tolerance and fanaticism] are opposites; are dualities of nature such as those of light and dark, good and evil, justice and injustice; without one the other will not be" (36).

Lest these statements be misunderstood to suggest that Rihani, in his acceptance of intolerance, is condoning acts of intolerance, one has to understand the levels on which, and the conditions under which, intolerance or fanaticism are accepted. After assessing the human condition under a state of intolerance and the atrocities that are visited upon mankind under the auspices of religious and political intolerance, the author finds that the only possible and immediate solution for these evils is to be tolerant. Strong nations, disguising their political interests in the garb of religion, subdue weak nations cruelly and unjustly, imposing on them their own creeds and dogmas. Explication of the state of human suffering under intolerance is by necessity a condemnation of man. This miserable human condition warrants reconsideration of the basic precepts of religion

[1] Amine F. Rihani, *Ar-Rihaniyyat* (1900; Beirut: Dar al-Jil, 1982), vol. 1: 35. Translation here and elsewhere my own. Further page references are in the main text.

by which humanity abides. Hence, on the first level Rihani is accepting diversity of opinion as a means of resolving conflict. An attitude of tolerance will, on the one hand, grant the other the right and space to exist; and, concomitantly, will dilute, if not eliminate altogether, obsessive animosity toward the other. On the second and higher level of understanding, Rihani accepts opposites on earth: i.e. within the context of the variable and transforming, but absolutely not on the level of the transcendent. Distinguishing between mundane human experience and divine intention, Rihani states that our fanaticism has foiled Christ's mission for mankind: "In vain did Christ come to the world" (37). Indeed, once fanaticism is accepted it ceases to be so, its psychic brimstone burning away within the self. If our understanding of the lower level of human transaction is so impaired, our understanding of the higher level of God will be much more complicated and imperfect. Rihani's simple, commonsense, and subtle advice for mankind is to acknowledge its limited capacity, collectively considered, to grasp the mind of God and to accept the creeds of others as being good for them as our creeds are good for us:

> Why are we fanatics and we are wavering in our weakness to understand so many religious matters that the human mind has not encountered yet? [...] Let us then be tolerant in religion since we do not know [all]; and he who pretends to know is the one who does not know that he does not know. (40–41)

Acceptance of diversity liberates human beings from the limitations imposed by fanaticism and intolerance in all aspects and venues of transaction. Tolerance is not only religious, but covers all political, social, and philosophical domains. It is the prerequisite for healthy and sublime institutions. Rihani's plea for the rejuvenation of society is centred in his belief that tolerance should be the cornerstone of human institutions:

> When shall we form the society of tolerance, build the church of tolerance, erect the school of tolerance, publish the paper of tolerance, open the hostel of tolerance, and all our actions become informed by tolerance? When will this state include us? (44)

The virtues of tolerance are not restricted to religious concerns; they encompass all human transaction. Although religion suffuses the theme of tolerance, civil concerns become the focal points of application. Tolerance is at the root of all progress, liberation, and achievement:

> Tolerance is the foundation of modern civilization and the cornerstone of civil gathering.
>
> Tolerance fortified the will of free men that their minds produced the noblest thoughts.
>
> Tolerance gave rise to progress and development in all branches of science, religion, and philosophy.
>
> Tolerance supported the authority of conscience, and trampled the rule unauthorized by God.
>
> Tolerance gave every man his right to enjoy and practice freely and independently. (44)

The creative powers of tolerance touching beings and things and rendering them anew in the garb of beauty and freedom are better informed by the essence of tolerance. Indeed, Rihani hails these powers as divine as he explicates the different manifestations of tolerance: "Tolerance opened the heart of fanaticism with the dagger of justice and flayed it with the sword of mercy" (36), and "tolerance is mercy, care, patience, and peace" (45). It is the great equalizer and progenitor of basic realities that are often blurred, violated, or annulled by blind intolerance. Tolerance is the recipe for man's freedom, dignity, and salvation; it is a fundamental doctrine denied neither by the Bible nor by the Qur'an (45). The power of affirmation that tolerance gains by all religions makes of it the path to heaven:

> Tolerance is the only path beneath which run the rivers and trees grow on its right and left. It is a path which yields milk and honey; an even straight path that does not lead us astray from the gardens of heaven. (45)

This Qur'anic approximation of tolerance culminates in the paramount Christian metaphor of the Lord being the path, the right, and life:

> Tolerance is the path, the right, the life, and the spirit of God. It is the first and last step in the ladder of existence; it is the Alpha and the Omega. Tolerance is the door; whoever enters through it will never perish. Let us enter! Let us enter! (46)

Charging the word with so many meanings, derivatives, and synonyms makes of tolerance not only a key concept that incorporates the various associations of freedom, equality, dignity, holiness, and truth, but also a mode of thought that amounts to an espoused religion. The great resemblance between tolerance as an even path and the Opening of the Qur'an [Al-Fatiha], bestows upon tolerance the thematic summation of the

Qur'an as rendered in the Opening. Moreover, the exact resemblance between tolerance and the Christian metaphor of the road needs no apology. Hence, utter the word "tolerance" and you will be reciting the Qur'an and chanting the New Testament.

Despite this summary, representation of the religious truth of tolerance, like the Bible and the Qur'an, is better understood in its various recitals/manifestations. These manifestations revolve around the well-being of man and his ultimate elevation to the status of the Man/God. This well-being is summarized in *Ar-Rihaniyyat* and emerges more specifically in "The Great City" (1909), "Equality" (1909), "Manners" (1912), and "In the Spring of Despair" (1928). Except for the last essay, the arguments constitute Rihani's earliest configuration of the right condition of man as opposed to his fallen state. Synonymous with freedom, the great city celebrates

> its poets, scientists, artisans, and craftsmen. [...] It honors its heroes and geniuses not by erecting statues, but by following in their footsteps in deeds and teachings. [...] It is the city that resents outside interference. In it every man is his own ruler and the living example of liberty and fraternity. It is the city where the rulers are the servants of the people. [...] The Great City is where truth triumphs in word and deed. (138–40)

Should one speculate on the feasibility of this utopian city, Rihani distinguishes between two levels of utopian achievement: the absolute and the realistically attainable. In the context of the second level, equality in the absolute is not attainable:

> The truth is that equality does not exist among human beings; what we can achieve after much toil and perseverance in the domain of elevating ourselves is for every one to know his own worth and to render unto others their dues. This, in my opinion, is true equality. (143)

Furthermore, equality is in serving justice, whether in the form of punishment or of reward. Once this second level is attained, men will be truly free, in that they are equal in virtue and dignity (144).

The first level of equality, though not fully presented in the above texts, is clearly alluded to in several passages of *Ar-Rihaniyyat* and made explicit in "In the Spring of Despair." And although the full treatment of this theme is the subject of the subsequent paragraphs of this essay, a glimpse of what Rihani envisions in this 1928 essay is still in order.

Having mapped the arena of human practical action and determined the several obstacles hindering the progress of man in the path of Man/God, Rihani counters the "despair of prophets" about man's ever reuniting with his true self with a pantheistic vision of God:

> If my mother says: Virgin Mary, I say God
> If my Christian brothers say: Christ, I say: God
> If my brethren in the East say: Buddha, I say: God.
> If my Arab brethren say: Mohammed, I say: God.
> If my Farsi brother says: Ahora, I say: God.
> If my Chinese brother says: Confucius, I say: God.
> My voice, even if it were one of despair, is of the voices of God.
> Had it not been for these voices sent from despair as rays and life to renew hope and perseverance, generation would not have marched to the highest pilgrimage. (304)

This is a culminating statement of tolerance and acceptance. Rihani has accepted into himself all the diversity of individual voices, from mother to the Chinese, and has forged them into one resonating voice/entity of God. Each is happy with his/her preferred idol or godhead, but he who welcomes all into his being is the happiest and the first to reach the summit.

Attaining the summit is not simply a matter of rhetorical approximation or wishful thinking. Although Amine Rihani took a mostly theoretical approach to the exegesis of his early approach to the higher level of tolerance, he was at his most vocal in exploring the full extent of man's quest for self-realization in the divine dimension. In *The Book of Khalid* (1911), *The Chant of Mystics and other Poems* (1921), *The Path of Vision* (1921), and hints at *The White Way and the Desert* (1898–1939),[2] Rihani maps the rites of integration, transformation, and passage from the world of matter to the world of God, enlisting tolerance and acceptance to expound and expand his human being from the simple and seemingly insignificant iota into the fully-fledged God.

In this regard, *The Book of Khalid* becomes the record of a practical experience of initiation, integration, and transcendence. Granting the validity of the several interpretations of the book, I believe that Rihani's

[2] Amine Rihani, *The Book of Khalid* (1911; Beirut: Librarie du Liban, 2000); *A Chant of Mystics and Other Poems* (1921; Beirut: Rihani House, 1970); *The Path of Vision* (1921; Beirut: Rihani House, 1970); *The White Way and the Desert* (1898/1939; Washington DC: Platform International, 2002).

choice of name and place are not matters of fictional or authorial coincidence. Khalid, the truant boy from Baalbek, is a paradigm of natural simplicity and spontaneity: uneducated muleteer, informally poetical, dreamer, and, most importantly, in harmony with nature. His name is resonant of primordiality and immortality. The city derives its name from the Phoenician deity, hence holy and ancient. Whether built by the Romans or by some other people, it stands as a monument of past grandeur, holding its own "against Time and the Elements."[3] The boy and the city, twin-like, reflect ancient worth and present boyhood. The boy inherits the city's glory, and she partakes in his youth – an amalgam of age in youth and youth in age, two sides of the same coin cast up on the desert's rim and nature's startings. The greatness, ambition, and spirit of the city are dormant in the boy; he has to unfold within himself to discover himself, realize his city, and achieve his humanity. Hence, Khalid's journey is essentially more of a journey within and into the self than a journey in the outside world, though this outside world is oftentimes incorporated into the journey. Moreover, Khalid's journey encompasses the three alternatingly concentric circles/domains of Man, Nature, and God, approached within the framework of tolerance and acceptance.

In the first domain of Man, Khalid begins his journey at the lowest point of human spirituality and the highest point of instinctive manifestation. Goaded by an ambition to explore the New World, Khalid thrusts his innate glory into the background and resigns himself to a mode of treatment unbecoming of human dignity. On their way to the New World, the two passengers, Khalid and Shakib, are cast into the bowels of the ship like animals and handled accordingly, denied any human decency. The brutal treatment by the crew and the exploitation of the "sharpers," whether in Marseilles or in New York, makes one wonder whether an animal is not treated better. "Their rugs were spread out not far from the stalls in which Syrian cattle are shipped to Egypt and Arab horses to Europe or America" (26). But this Via Dolorosa must be travelled before the summit is reached. Despite occasional flights of nostalgia, Khalid persists in his quest. He accepts the hardships and humiliation, transforming them into agents to his purpose. His lute is the tool of spirit that applies itself to the world of ugly matter and "translates it into a new tongue," to quote Walt Whitman in "Song of Myself."

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[3] Rihani, *The Book of Khalid*, 15.

From the basement of the ship to the cellar, progress is minimal. Transacting in the commodities of the world to sustain the faculties of the flesh is paramount. Despite the hardships of expatriation, the attitudes of tolerance and acceptance are much more manifest. Khalid is positively, indeed happily, reconciled to his cellar and peddler's trade. It is the bank account that counts and his lentils dish of *mojadderah* that is the most satisfying among his culinary preferences (44). "He would baptise the ideal in the fire of the real" (51). Passing through this state is imperative for the cultivation of awareness and status; it is part and parcel of the human condition. Without this stage, passage to and through other stages will be impaired and incomplete.

But if life on the lower level is satisfactory it is not sufficient. Khalid's cellar experience is punctuated by flights of imagination into the beautiful and the sublime. His lute, the vehicle for transportation and momentary transformation, is an emblem of the original soul that seeks to manifest itself in the world of matter; it is also the safety-valve for Khalid's spirituality. Khalid's devotion to the lute is different from Shakib's adherence to the teachings of the radical freethinker and poet Al-Maari, in that it is personal, spiritual, and redeeming, whereas Al-Maari for Shakib is cerebral, dispassionate; Al-Maari teaches wisdom, whereas the lute inspires beauty and the sublime. Oftentimes, aspirations to the sublime goad him as if his lineage (or his inheritance, the lute) had awakened in him the need to recapture the noble past. At this stage, however, these flights are momentary and transient; the world of matter is still dominant.

The dominance of the world of commodities and basic instincts begins to fade away. Having reached a culminating point in this world, Khalid's departure from it is imminent. The emblems of departure vary: the lute, the pamphlets, Jerry the seller of second-hand books, atheism: "He even entered such mazes of philosophy, such labyrinths of mysticism as put those Arabian grammaticasters in the shade" (58). All these gradually replace his cellar world, and as a result he burns his peddling box after reflecting on the credit accumulated in the first stage of his quest. The second stage, that of self-education, includes the first and goes beyond it; it accepts it as a phase integral to experience but not as an end in and of itself. By self-education Rihani does not mean the traditional institutionalized process of education; rather, he means openness to all that comes his way, whether in theoretical exposure to the mind of authors through pamphlets and books, or through direct contact with diverse tendencies of

thought or modes of behaviour. The intensity of experience, explained mostly in terms of intensity of exposure (to the seemingly unorthodox conduct of a self-declared dervish), is liable to misinterpretation if considered from a merely conventional perspective. But a more tolerant reading of this episode in Khalid's education will yield the profound significance of this experience. Khalid is not simply an Arab youth gone so astray in the jungle of New York as to indulge himself in the gratification of instincts. On the contrary, he opens himself up to the torrent of sensations, ideas, and associations, absorbing the full diversity and contradictoriness of human action. The fact that Khalid is portrayed as a happy-go-lucky philosopher/dervish/renegade/debauchee, his spirit blowing this way and that, is metaphoric of eddies of the soul receiving all the particles of Man's life and imparting them anew in one coherent orb of reconciled opposites. A statement in the "Al-Fatiha" of Book the First provides the essence of Khalid's experience:

> It is [the book], as it were, the chart and history of one little kingdom of the Soul – the Soul of a philosopher, poet and criminal. I am all three. I swear, for I have lived both the wild and the social life. (vi)

This type of experience is at the basis of the mystical process of education, a process impossible without tolerance. For radical opposites to be admitted into the self, the self must accept them first. Any familiarity with Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself" (namely, the first sixteen sections) is bound to render our approximation valid. Without this elaborate process of reconciling opposites, Khalid would not have been justified in writing the following in "To Man," the prologue (more, I would say, the epilogue) to the first book of *Khalid*:

> No matter how good thou art, O my Brother, or how bad thou art, no matter how high or how low in the scale of being thou art, I still would believe in thee, and have faith in thee, and love thee. For do I not know what clings to thee, and beckons to thee? The claws of the oneand the wings of the other, have I not felt and seen? (4)

This practice of profound acceptance is deeply rooted in Khalid's being. One important keyword for understand this aspect of Khalid is his status as a "loafer":

> For when [Khalid] loafs, he does so in good earnest. Not like the camel-driver there or the camel, but after the manner of the great thinkers and

> mystics: like Al-Fared and Jelal'ud-Deen Rumy, like Socrates and St. Francis of Assisi, Khalid loafs. (11)

Loafing is the major mode for communicating and being one with whatever comes within the range of sight and sentiment; it is the vehicle utilized by Walt Whitman for initiating himself into mystical experience, and is used throughout "Song of Myself" to enlarge the poet from the single and limited individual into the companion of the great Camerado. In a similar manner, Khalid the loafer invites all the outward objects of the senses into himself as he unfolds within himself a realization of the full entity of Man, the first leg in the tripod/component of Being.

But the fulfilment of Man is not a matter of wishful thinking or religio-philosophical approximation. And although Khalid has achieved an advanced state of being Man, he is, nevertheless, subject to temptations which curtail this achievement. Khalid's Tammany experience and his degeneration into an agent of Mammon, harrowing as it is, sharpens his awareness of himself and of his fellow man. More importantly, this experience, culminating in prison, intensifies Khalid's appreciation of Nature. Although Khalid is reluctant to admit that prison life has had a negative influence on him, he nonetheless cannot hide his sense of humiliation and disillusionment. Viewed from a transcendental (especially Whitmanesque) perspective, the prison becomes a metaphor of loss of original and healthy contact with self, nature, and God. But in a more elaborate consideration of the terms of the consequences of imprisonment and release, the prison becomes a sign of atonement for the degradation which Khalid has passed through in the service of the material world. This prison experience, though not condemned, is not necessarily welcomed either. It is a stage that Khalid must go through, and the price to pay, to purge himself from the limitations of spiritual confinement. Characteristically, the two books he reads while in prison, Rousseau's *Émile* and Carlyle's *Hero Worship* (119), celebrate the themes of human freedom, nobility, and achievement. It is for this purpose that Khalid does not condemn prison, though in it he contracts a pulmonary illness, a sickness that is to be partially remedied in Nature.

If the blow to his dignity has been received by the world of Man in his fallen state, the remedy will be found in a right state of Nature. By the right state of Man and Nature is not meant a denial of the collective worth of both as previously accepted and tolerated but is, rather, meant as a pre-

ference for Man and Nature without corrupting temptations. The suffering which Khalil goes through is not due to the innate corruption of Man and Nature as much as it is a result of the temporary deviation from true Nature and Man. To find the straight path again will be restorative and curative. Khalid takes a "stroll in the Flower Gardens" and enters "the hemlock grove. Here, in a sequestered spot near the river bank, I lay on the grass and sleep for the night" (123). Bronx Park awakens in Khalid "his long dormant love of Nature" (125) and yearning for home.

At home, the true sacredness of nature is further explored. The more challenging the confrontations Khalid has to face, the more glorified nature becomes. Khalid's confrontation with the Jesuits over his marriage to his cousin Najma, his excommunication, the imminent threat to his life, and his failing health, leave him no place in the world of conformity; he lights out for the wilderness, to become the hermit of the pines. Khalid's retreat into nature is not an enforced escape from society but, rather, a preference for the simplicity, originality, and honesty of nature. After all, his quarrel is with an intolerant and intransigent conventionality. True to his conviction, he is willing to accept the lower level of tolerance, but intolerance of conformity finds no counterpart. He accepts "flounces and ruffles" – appendages and appearances – because others cannot do without them. He understands the passion for appearances and appendages among the simple and naive as well as among the shrewd and cunning. He yields to Najma's preference for a ruffled wedding dress, but is unwilling to succumb to the machinations of extortion that the Jesuit priest and his superiors are experts at. Khalid's strong convictions are deeply rooted in his reverence for original, immaculate, and holy nature: "The first church was the forest; the first dome, the welkin; the first altar, the sun" (162). Khalid sees a higher level of "flounces" in the demonstration of divine will, and this he accepts:

> And I, Khalid, what am I but the visible ruffle of an invisible skirt? Verily, I am; and thou, too, my Brother. Yea, and this aquaterrestrial globe and these sidereal heavens are the divine flounces of the Vesture of Allah. (166)

Khalid's residence in Nature is a transaction with heaven. There he restores not only his physical health but, most importantly, his spiritual calm and divine stature. Consecrating a chapter to "the divine beauty and peace of Nature" (182), Khalid lives the "natural succession" of a "winter of destiny" (182). This winter of destiny, counterpoised to Richard II's

"winter of our discontent," is the seasoning of Khalid in natural tranquility, peace, wisdom, and holiness. In his hermitage, Khalid is purified of the malady of the body, and enlightened about the Universal religion. True worship in nature annuls excommunication, opening onto vistas of spiritual transaction with the highest principles of Truth. Khalid walks in the footsteps of Thoreau, the hermit of Walden, joins Emerson, the high priest of Nature, lounges on Whitman's uncut grass, and treads the path of Farid Ed-din Attar and Ibn Al-Fared:

> They [inhabitants of my terraces] come, almost slain with thirst, to the Mother Fountain. They come out to worship at the shrine of the sweet-souled Rabia of Attar [...].
> O, these terraces would have delighted the heart of [...] Thoreau.
> [...]
> This is the keynote of the Oriental mystics poets.
> [...]
> And the grass here is not cut and trimmed as in the artificial gardens [...]. (183–85)

Khalid's residence in nature, resonant of Thoreau's declared intention "to suck the marrow of life," is to "heal [his] soul in the perfumed atmosphere of the celestial vistas" (190). In this pursuit of celestial vistas, Khalid seems to out-achieve his neighbour the hermit. This claim of superiority, however, is not to be declared by Khalid, as he is not a seeker of worldly dross. But once he attains his objective, he is ready to quit the forest; he has had his fill of solitude. True hermitage, he contends, is in benefiting mankind; it is both a Temple and Vineyard.

Khalid's hermitage would not have yielded so much sanctity, wisdom, and health had not Nature been such a reservoir of all these and more. Expectedly, Nature becomes the foothold of God, and in this capacity functions as a medium between God and Man:

> O Mother eternal, divine, satanic, all encompassing, all nourishing, all absorbing, O star diademed pearl-sandaled Goddess, I am thine forever and ever [...]. O touch me with thy wand divine again [...]. Anoint me with the chrism of spontaneity that I may be ever worthy of thee. – Withdraw not from me thy hand, lest universal love and sympathy die in my breast. I implore thee, O Mother eternal, O sea-throned, heaven-canopied Goddess. (97–98)

The accomplishment of Man/Nature is incomplete without the achievement of the third component, God. And although the focus in the first two books of *Khalid* has been on Man and Nature, God has never been absent. On the contrary, the presence of God, though not necessarily the god of a single, specific religion, has punctuated Man and Nature. The latter two did not move in a void, but were integrated in each other. In the first book, man contained Nature to become Man; in the second, Nature contained Man to be translated through him. In these two manifestations, God was never consigned to oblivion; He was in the background, informing and being informed by Man and Nature. And though the focus in the third book is on God, the first two are not in the least oblivious of Him, hence the Trinitarian manifestation of the Trilogy of Man/Nature/God. The three tolerate each other in mutual acceptance, to become one another.

God's immanence thus needs no further preamble. Khalid has had so much exposure to the rays of God in the first two manifestations as to be ready for his apotheosis. Raising himself beyond the restrictions of time and space, triumphing over the weakness of the flesh, Khalid defeats darkness (236) and becomes a "citizen of the Universe" (237). Reconciling "contrarieties" by accepting the consistency in his diversity, Khalid joins Nature and God, East and West, the natural and the spiritual, merging all in the man of consciousness:

> I tell thee then that Man, that is to say consciousness, vitalized and purified, in other words Thought – that alone is real and eternal. And Man is supreme only when he is the proper exponent of Nature, and Spirit, and God. (241–42)

The relation is so cohesive and reflexive that if one element is amiss the whole structure crumbles: "God, Nature, Spirit, Passion – Passion, Spirit, Nature, God – in some panorama would I paint the life of a highly developed being" (242). This highly developed being is the fulfilment of man through apotheosis, the man of Light, Love, and Will; the man who tolerates and accepts all: "Ay in the lakes of Light, Love, and Will, I would baptize all mankind. For in this alone is power and glory. O my European Brothers; in this alone is faith and joy, O Brothers of Asia" (247).

The realization of Man/Nature/God entity is a prerequisite for the configuration of a new world, more human, more natural, and more divine. Rihani calls for a new path of vision that supplants the conventional one and transcends it into a comprehensive, collective path fit for a new universe and a new man. *The Path of Vision* becomes a guidebook to the

conduct of the self and the world. Standing at the vantage-point of the realization of his protagonist in *Khalid*, Rihani prescribes the freedom of the enlightened soul as the force and catalyst for human liberation. Lest this statement be misunderstood, or considered among the clichés of critical reasoning prevalent since the mid-nineteenth century, it is necessary to note that Rihani condemns free-thinking in the Nietzschean sense of iconoclasticism. He points out the deficiencies of pragmatism, utilitarianism, and pure materialism. More importantly, he attributes our drifting away to our subscription to too many "visions" at the same time, whereas what we need is one consistent vision of ourselves and the universe. Once we have decided on the right path of vision, we will be seeking

> the light that bridges the darkness between the eye and soul, and without which there can be no vision. For a path of vision, which isolates for a time the individual, brings him in the end, if his patience and devotion do not give way, to complete union, like the Sufi, with humanity and God."[4]

This unity is "the harmony we achieve within us" through the acceptance of diversity; and this acceptance is the key to lasting triumph: "Nay, there is no such thing as defeat for those achieve harmony within" (27). Here lie true wealth and heroism:

> And no matter how humble and obscure [...] the spiritually-bound and spiritually-directed of men, though they may not be counted among the great of history, are the true heroes of the race, the agents of the World-Spirit. (27).

These heroes could not become denizens of Light without tolerance. "Experience is knowledge. [...] Experience is wisdom. [...] Experience is tolerance" (28), not induced by apathy. This realization is at the heart of Rihani's prescription for the greatness of Man and Universe; he did not deny or undermine the importance of a baseline of reality in the formation of that which is above it; the importance of the physical for the spiritual. One should not understand this statement, however, as meaning that Rihani equated matter and spirit; he did not. He simply acknowledged the significance of matter as matter, important for itself and as an agent in the greater design of the Universe. It is in this regard that we are invited to understand Rihani's appreciation of Man and Nature; they are material venues for the spiritual:

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[4] Rihani, *The Path of Vision*, 26.

> But the world seldom recognizes the spirituality in the material ideals of the poor. [...] They are called base, worldly, sordid, by those professional idealists of religion and literature and art. And yet, a loaf of bread can regenerate a soul; a loaf of bread can precipitate a revolution. (36)

This is a paramount statement of the democratic principle of tolerance, highlighting spiritualism in materialism. Indeed, Rihani never fails to accentuate the prominence of the "divine inner flame in man" (37). To the skeptics, he offers "the perfume of the rose, the light of the sun, the emanation of the firefly, the aura of a planet, to say nothing of human understanding" (37). Those who can decipher the signification of the outer garb of the spirit and fathom its deep ramifications are the leading intellects of mankind: "Only a well-rounded intellect, a spirit nourished in the eternal sources of intelligence and culture, of justice and wisdom, is a safeguard against both indifference and skepticism" (45).

The well-rounded intellect is not important for and of itself. As a matter of fact, it cannot be, in Rihani's understanding, individual and secluded. Like itself, it has to be all-engulfing, all-representing, all-endowing, and all-becoming. It is a genius with a purpose much higher and far more complete than all the individual schemes that have been offered to mankind so far by the so-called geniuses and radical iconoclasts of contemporary times such as Nietzsche and totalitarian anti-Christs. It is not a single regime, or a special race, or a group of supermen that will bring about the new world, but a man complete in himself, fully imbued with Nature, and divine: "But to interpret Nature and inform it with a human personality that rises above it, invokes the divine in it, is the work of genius" (75). On this elevated plane, the vision of the cosmos becomes more comprehensive, illuminating, and loving. It is the groundtone of the chant of mystics.

The mystic's chant is the highest and most symbolic expression of tolerance. Having passed through the various manifestations of man and Nature from the initial level of materialistic transaction to the concluding level of all-embracing spirituality, tolerance changes into its corollary manifestations of democracy, equality, and divinity with all the attendant characteristics. And as tolerance unfolds in the different spheres of Man's transaction with Nature and God, so it unfolds within itself to realize its fullest manifestation. It is at this stage that tolerance is purged of all possible negativity, whether in the form of conflict or in that of denial. All the particles of the cosmos fall into their destined, but freely acquired, har-

monies. Such a level of achievement, inaccessible to mediocre, base sensibilities, accessible to those illumined by the light that shines within and withal, is expressible only in terms of the most simple, subtle, complex, paradoxical symbolism.

The symbolism of *The Chant of Mystics* bespeaks the Man/Nature /God trinity; of the elevation of man and nature to the seat of the all-embracing God who transcends diversity by rejecting divisibility without condemning individuality; God who prides Himself on His humility; God who contains opposites within the unending orbit of harmonies. It suffices to list the titles of some of the "chants" to decipher the broad juxtapositions of opposites, light/dark, beginning/end, chaos/order, life/death etc., lined up in a consistent parade of the greatness of Man, Nature, and God. "The Towers and the Night" where man, says the night, "shall crown the stars / With flowers of thought divine" (27):

> But in the bone-strewn waste I saw a snail
> Crawling out of the socket of skull,
> Exultant still; –
> Rising from the universal bane
> To thank the rain.[5]

As man rids himself of accumulated ballast and vaults free, the secrets of the Universe are divulged unto him. Nature becomes an open ledger for the word, deed, and mind of God. In "The Song of Siva," the still and dormant night is pregnant with life and birth of the spirit of East and West, and the river becoming the man-river, inundant and undulating:

> The night of the birth of the spirit
> Of the East and the West;
> [...]
> For the River inundant is calling on me.[6]

These new combinations of birth and formation become clearer and more accessible within the context of circuitous opposites, or, in simpler terms, when opposites run their full cycle they become their opposites. This is not to say that Evil becomes Good and Satan becomes God, for evil and Satan exist only on the lower, divisible plane. On the highest plane of

[5] Rihani, "The Cataclysm," 29.
[6] Rihani, *The Path of Vision*, 34.

existence, the seemingly opposite entities are simply diverse representations in one universe: death, sickness, etc. are not evils like killing, hatred, greed. Satan does not have a place in an all-loving context, as Attar's Rabia contends in *The Book of Khalid*.[7] Love, the highest manifestation of tolerance, conquers death and liberates man from the fetters of limitations. A new faith in the union of mankind is the translation of an ultimate human desire for freedom:

> To reconcile the Crescent and the Cross
> And wash thy hands of thine unholy past;-
> When with the faith of new-born East and West,
> Which spans the azure heights of man's desire,
> The spirit of thy people, long oppressed;
> Is all a-glow with its undying fire.[8]

The ultimate translation of freedom is in the ultimate union with God. Though Rihani explores different types and degrees of union – union with rivers, trees, humans, religions – his path leads inevitably to God. This union is achieved, after the manner of Whitman, through reason and faith. But faith, whose agent is love, is higher than reason:

> Even so her heart, by knowledge dismayed,
> One Love's one altar with thy hand upreared,
> To Love's one God is evermore endeared.[9]

The identification with Christ, though not total, follows. In "The Lost Disciple," the poet goes through an experience analogous to being anointed with precious oil and his feet dried with the Magdalene's hair:

> I have dared, O my Master, to envy thy feet,
> And to yearn for the love of a Magdalene fair;
> I have dreamed that mine, too, in the heart of the street,
> Were laved with her own hands and dried with her hair. (70)

But the resemblance is incomplete due to the temptation which the poet goes through. As God, Christ did triumph over the temptation of the flesh; but the poet, still man, could not:

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[7] Rihani, *The Book of Khalid*, 183.
[8] Rihani, "Constantinople," in *The Path of Vision*, 36.
[9] Rihani, "The Pagan," in *The Path of Vision*, 68.

O Master, my lips her devotion have stained,
For her soul's precious ointments were offered too late;
I have lost in the fire of my lust what I gained
In my longing and love for her and thy fate. (71)

The poet's recognition of limitations serves as an incentive for a purgation that is brought about by Eucharistic incarnation:

And in my heart he (Love of Zahra) eats and drinks;
He drinks my blood, of wines the best,
And eats my burning flesh. [. . .] (71)

The Eucharist is Christ, the ultimate pattern of love, self-negation, and sacrifice. And as the Eucharist becomes one and the same with the recipient's being, so this being becomes one and the same with the Eucharist; the two are transformed into one in the miraculous kiln of Love and "self-oblivion":

"Whose there!" a voice within, "Thy name?"
"'Tis I," he said. – "Then knock no more. ..
There is no room herein for thee and me."
The pilgrim went again his way
And dwelt with Love upon the shore
Of self-oblivion; and one
He knocked again at the Beloved's door.
Whose there?" – "It is thyself," he now replied,
And suddenly the door was opened wide. (79)

This oneness of God and Man, however, does not entail that Man has become God. True, Man achieves his apotheosis, but he is never beguiled into assuming ultimate omnipotence:

I am God: thou art Man: but the light
That mothers the planets, the sea
[. . .]
[. . .] the gulfs of the night,
They are surging in thee as in me. (82)

Once this apotheosis is realized and the path of vision merges with the vision of God, the new world becomes inevitable. Man realizes that the all-embracing God is Love, the absolute manifestation of tolerance. The individual man restores his infant innocence and goes beyond his ego to

the Universal one where all merge in God. The new world is not that of the deaf and blind disputing among themselves but, rather, an all-oving world where the individual evils of pride, dissension, and hatred fade upon gaining sight of the world of God. In a statement that parallels the Christian paradox of having to lose this world to gain the afterlife, Rihani writes:

> Yea, Man is as near the Beloved
> As far from the world he may be;
> [...]
> Life and the world we abandon
> That the Life of the world we may see.
> [...]
> For they who all things abandon, everything find. [10]

This gained Life is entire; division and compartmentalization belong to the world in its divided self, not to the true form of the enlightened world. The emerging oneness of the world is exhilarating and liberating:

> Nor Crescent Nor Cross we adore;
> Nor Budha not Christ we implore;
> Nor Moslem nor Jew we abhor:
> We are free.
> [...]
> We are not of the East or the West;
> No boundaries exist in our breast:
> We are free. (106)

Freedom absolute is attained and Man walks in the company of God 'sight-seeing' in the immensity of unbounded Nature. In this state of freedom, Man becomes his companion and what he sees, thus realizing the Trinity.

The ultimate point of achievement is the marker of return. Man, endowed with new vision, returns to the world of the detailed and specific, now reconciled, reinterpreted, and harmonized. Moreover, this return brings the Alpha to the Omega and vice versa, each mirroring the other and himself at the same time. Man, who has achieved his apotheosis, stands at the beginning and the end of Being, weaving all within himself,

[10] Rihani, *A Chant of Mystics*, 104, 116.

by himself, and for himself. This reciprocal mirroring informs the overall worth and complementarity of the Universe. It is through this reciprocation that I find Rihani bringing his thesis of tolerance and acceptance to its final stage. In *The Way and the Desert* (1898–1939), Rihani undertakes the full journey from cloistered individualism to all-encompassing love and understanding:

> The only way of behaving in a gentlemanly manner towards each other, therefore, is to understand and appreciate each other's point of view and point of direction. Mutual tolerance is the stepping stone to mutual respect [...]. The heart yields spontaneity; the mind bends to understanding.
>
> But we cannot understand each other if our sympathies are always safely tucked away [...]; we can never wholly understand each other, and rise to the level of mutual esteem at least, if we do not invest in that fellow feeling that triumphs over class and creed and race and color – that one touch of nature that makes all the world kin![11]

The welfare of mankind is the desired objective, and this cannot be seen, and ultimately achieved, except by those who have been there for all mankind; those who see the essences behind appearances, seek the genuine and everlasting, not the transient and ephemeral, and chant in unison with each and every atom in the cosmos the song of love and becoming.

Rihani rests his case with his protagonist/interlocutor encompassing East and West and is in both at the same time. The geniuses of the West are the emissaries of intellectual wealth to the East, and the exalted spirits of the East bestow upon the West a much-needed spirituality. The split between mind and spirit will render the world a necropolis for rigid minds and aimless spirits. Coming from the desert of the East, this Eastern protagonist/missionary meets with a blank-white desert of neon civilization; it is the real physical desert of lost souls and masked beings. He returns to his desert in the East to resume his transaction with heaven. After all, and with some critical license, a desert is a heaven of sand on earth, as the heaven is a desert of stars in the sky and both are the hieroglyphics of God:

> Indeed, in the desert you become a discoverer. You discover your soul, which had been submerged in vain pursuits, which had been lost in the coils and toils of modern life. You discover your kinship with nature and man,

[11] Rihani, *The Way and the Desert*, 22.

> which is evoked by the naturalness and gentle humanity of the natives of the desert, and you'll also discover God.[12]

Rihani's universal vision of human welfare is not a simple matter of philosophical exegesis. More importantly, it is a profound conviction and a deeply-rooted sentiment that is informed by an innate tendency to accept and seek to elevate mankind. I do not hesitate to contend that Rihani's inclination to tolerance, spirituality, and enlightened reasoning are deeply rooted in his Lebanese tradition. They are not results of Sufi or Maari influences, although he found in the latter two resonances of his own beliefs, tendencies, and aspirations. Rihani was joining a world chorus of believers in human tolerance, equality, and divinity, and tendering multiple coloured threads of insight to a guild of weavers whose rugs are woven on the loom of heaven and earth.

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[12] Rihani, *The Way and the Desert*, 40.

The Last Migration
The First Contemporary Example of Lebanese Diasporic Literature*

SYRINE HOUT

> I have an ache to be home, except that I don't know where home is. Maybe somewhere between dream and nothingness, somewhere in the geography of my soul.[1]
>
> Nostalgia [...] is a terminal disease [...]. There is more to life than shadows of the past.[2]

JAD EL HAGE'S first English-language novel, *The Last Migration: A Novel of Diaspora and Love*, published in Australia in 2002, is here considered as an example of post-war Lebanese fiction. It won the presentation prize at the Writers' Festival in Sydney, and has been translated into Italian and French. In discussing the attitudes and sentiments that El Hage's uprooted characters maintain or develop vis-à-vis Lebanon, I define unresolved feelings towards one's homeland, both positive (nostalgic) and negative (critical), as equally debilitating, and therefore as fostering a mental condition of exile. Further, as it offers a balanced perspective on the effects of living abroad on personal and collective identities, by contrast to other novels permeated by unsettled

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[1] Fawaz Turki, *Soul in Exile: Lives of a Palestinian Revolutionary* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988): 77.

[2] Jad El Hage, *The Last Migration: A Novel of Diaspora and Love* (Melbourne: Panache, 2002): 82. Further page references are in the main text.

responses towards one's origin, I argue that it is a prototype of Lebanese diasporic literature, and may usher in a new brand of postwar fiction.

Born in Beirut, Lebanon, in 1946, El Hage was from 1967 onwards a reporter for Lebanese newspapers and later a broadcaster in Paris and Athens. In London, from 1979 to 1981, he was with the BBC World Service. From 1982 to 1985 he was an editor for the London-based newspaper *Al-Hayat*, after which he relocated to Sydney, Australia, with his family. Currently, he divides his time between the North Lebanese village of Sereel and his family home in Melbourne. In addition to his debut novel in English, he has published another novel, seven collections of poetry, one of short stories, a radio play and four for theatre, all in Arabic. His second anglophone novel, *The Myrtle Tree: A Novel of Love and Dreams in Post-war Lebanon*, was published in 2007.

By contrast with other anglophone authors – whose departure from Lebanon in the mid-1970s at a younger age[3] made them choose expatriation as their major theme – and by contrast with Arabic-language writers residing in Lebanon (for example, Elias Khoury, Rashid al-Daif, and Hassan Daoud) in whose writings geographical exile is secondary to civil strife, 61-year-old El Hage seems to cover both expatriation and civil strife, but in reverse order. *The Last Migration*, an anglophone diasporic novel, was followed by the Arabic-language, war-centred play *Bint Asl*; four years later came the 'post-war' anglophone novel about the war years, *The Myrtle Tree*, illustrating his claim that the "only certainty is that we killed each other for more than fifteen years."[4]

In discussing *The Last Migration*, I differentiate it from Lebanese anglophone postwar narratives, an ever-growing genre, of which the most recent is Nada Awar Jarrar's *Dreams of Water* (2007). Its subtitle, *A Novel of Diaspora and Love*, clearly identifies the novel as diasporic and not exilic. 'Diaspora' derives from the Greek word for being scattered (in Arabic *al-shatat*), whereas 'exile' is latinate and means to be banned from one's place of origin. 'Diaspora' is "less inclined towards suffering and

[3] Alameddine was born in 1959, Hanania in 1964, Ward in 1969, and Jarrar in 1958.
[4] Quoted in www.inpressbooks.co.uk

longing" than exile;[5] the "homing desire" produced by migration leads to physical and/or symbolic acts which establish sites promising a certain existential security away from one's "foundation." The concept of diaspora thus "places the discourse of 'home' and 'dispersion' in creative tension, *inscribing a homing desire while simultaneously critiquing discourses of fixed origins*."[6] Instead of pining for Lebanon, the homing desire of El Hage's protagonist in *The Last Migration*, the forty-something Lebanese journalist Ashraf, activates his yearning to belong to a self-devised, portable 'home' and performs affective as well as intellectual work which make possible a more meaningful future. Home, therefore, is continuously "produced [and reconfigured] through the movement of desire."[7] Ashraf's dynamic diasporic identity contrasts with that of other Lebanese exilic characters, who illustrate in different guise the almost transhistorical figure of the exile as "quintessential[ly] 'alien,' solitary and melancholy, out of place."[8]

Other anglophone Lebanese novels stress the exclusions of exile rather than the adaptations of diaspora. Rabih Alameddine's *Koolaids* (1998), subtitled *The Art of War*, shows fighting, like the AIDS virus, causing privation and death. Alameddine's homosexual characters, painfully trapped, whether in their original or in their adopted homelands, eventually die; as the narrator says, "In America, I fit, but I do not belong. In Lebanon, I belong, but I do not fit."[9] The same in-betweenness applies to Sarah in Alameddine's *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001): "Whenever she is in Beirut, home is New York. Whenever she is in New York,

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[5] Juliane Hammer, "A Crisis of Memory: Homeland and Exile in Contemporary Palestinian Memoirs," in *Crisis and Memory: The Representation of Space in Modern Levantine Narrative*, ed. Ken Seigneurie (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2003): 185.

[6] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996): 192–93 (emphasis in the original).

[7] Anne–Marie Fortier, "Making Home: Queer Migrations and Motions of Attachment," in *Uprootings/Regroundings: Questions of Home and Migration*, ed. Sara Ahmed, Claudia Castañeda, Anne–Marie Fortier & Mimi Sheller (Oxford: Berg, 2003): 129.

[8] Sophia A. McClennen, "Exilic Perspectives on 'Alien Nations'," *CLCWeb Comparative Literature and Culture: A WWWeb Journal* 7.1 (March 2005): para. 5, http://clcwebjournal.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb051/mcclennen05.html (accessed 6 February 2007).

[9] Rabih Alameddine, *Koolaids*: *The Art of War* (New York: Picador, 1998): 40.

home is Beirut."[10] Attempting to make sense of her "divided" life, Sarah never gets beyond preliminary sketches of her memoirs. Tony Hanania's *Unreal City* (1999), referring to war-torn Beirut, features a young, privileged Lebanese man driven by guilt to Islamic political fanaticism in the form of a suicide mission undertaken in London. In Patricia Ward's *The Bullet Collection* (2003), young Marianna tells her and her older sister's stories of growing up in the horrors of civil strife, revealing a pathology of "the disintegration of personality"[11] in a "tableau [...] familiar to *exiles* [my emphasis] everywhere."[12] Nada Awar Jarrar's Aida in the second story of her tripartite novella *Somewhere, Home* (2003) is so crippled by nostalgia when abroad as to find psychological balance and maturity impossible. In short, despite different manifestations of their "suffering and longing,"[13] these characters all "converge in the common loneliness of physical or psychological displacement" that is typical of exilic literatures and even "reaches beyond nationality and time itself."[14]

In discussing new anglophone literatures – also Commonwealth literature, postcolonial literature, new literatures in English, and world literature in English – John Skinner states that it is preferable to be "*pre*-this" than "*post*-that," and ideally to belong to an autonomous category in one's own right.[15] While he refers specifically to postcolonial literatures, his view is also relevant to post-war or post-1990 Lebanese fiction written in English, most of which pertains to the larger body of exilic/diasporic literature. Although English is not Lebanon's "stepmother tongue" in the politico-

[10] Rabih Alameddine, *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (2001; New York: W.W. Norton, 2002): 99.

[11] Anon., review of *The Bullet Collection*, *Kirkus Reviews* 71.3 (February 2003): 179.

[12] Jeff Zaleski, review of *The Bullet Collection*, by Patricia Sarrafian Ward, *Publishers Weekly* 250.16 (April 2003), *EbscoHost*, http://web1.epnet.com (accessed 9 November 2004).

[13] Juliane Hammer, "A Crisis of Memory," 185.

[14] Paul Ilie, "Exolalia and Dictatorship: The Tongues of Hispanic Exile," in *Fascismo y experiencia literaria: Reflexiones para una recanonización*, ed. Hernán Vidal (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985): 227.

[15] John Skinner, *The Stepmother Tongue: An Introduction to New Anglophone Fiction* (New York: St Martin's, 1998): 5.

historical sense, as Lebanon was colonized by France,[16] a significant number of Lebanese authors living in anglophone nations today have "*adopted* and then *adapted*" English as their medium of literary expression.[17] Skinner further argues that exilic and/or diasporic writings are "privileged" by postcolonial theory because they exemplify "New Literatures in New Worlds" and thus correspond to the co-ordinates of "their" land/"their" language.[18]

Although exilic and diasporic writings both involve a "rhetoric of displacement" which displays the "struggle to assert identity out of place," they can be differentiated.[19] Exile, associated with early-twentieth-century literary modernism, presupposes a coherent subject and well-defined realities of 'here' and 'now' (country of current residence) vs 'there' and 'then' (original homeland); diaspora – connected to postcolonial, poststructuralist, and postmodernist theories – accounts for hybridity and performativity which complicate notions of nation, location, and identity in an age of globalization.[20] The *Encyclopedia Judaica* (1972) distinguishes between diaspora as voluntary and exile as forced dispersion, on the grounds that, since Israel was created a state in 1948, Jews who voluntarily remained abroad turned their exile (*galut*) into a diasporic existence. Many Lebanese left their country during its fifteen-year civil war (1975–90), but others remained; of those who left, some returned, while others stayed away. Interestingly, databases yield titles with "diaspora" and "literature" as matching keywords predominantly in post-1990 critical works.[21]

The phenomenon of the Lebanese diaspora has received its share of attention, being designated as 'modern' (recent) rather than 'historical'

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[16] Lebanon was under French colonial rule between 1918 and 1943, the year of its national independence.

[17] Skinner, *The Stepmother Tongue*, 11.

[18] *The Stepmother Tongue*, 18.

[19] Nico Israel, *Outlandish: Writing Between Exile and Diaspora* (Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2000): ix.

[20] Israel, *Outlandish*, 3.

[21] In addition to Israel's *Outlandish,* see, for example, Amy K. Kaminsky's *After Exile: Writing the Latin American Diaspora* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), Zohreh T. Sullivan's *Exiled Memories: Stories of Iranian Diaspora* (Philadelphia PA: Temple UP, 2001), and Juliane Hammer's *Palestinians Born in Exile: Diaspora and the Search for a Homeland* (Austin: U of Texas P, 2005).

(established in antiquity) or 'incipient' (in the making).[22] The ratio of Lebanese abroad – in Egypt, Syria, the Persian Gulf States, Argentina, Brazil, Mexico, the USA, Australia, Canada, France, and West Africa – to those in Lebanon (about four million) is five or six to one.[23] Michael Humphrey asserts that the term 'diaspora' moves between the particularity of an historical experience and the existential condition which metaphorizes postmodernity in its characteristics of "uncertainty, displacement and fragmented identity";[24] contemporary use of the phrase "Lebanese diaspora," stemming from the displacement of over 274,000 citizens (para. 16) during the Lebanese civil war, is therefore the by-product of national disintegration and subsequent resettlement (para. 5). Humphrey contends that homogenizing the Lebanese diaspora as a cultural, political, or national community (para. 43) is impossible, because these immigrants "are the product of quite different migrations with their own very distinct relationships [...] to contemporary Lebanon" (para. 6). Differences in religious denomination, socio-economic status, political ideology, reasons for departure, timing and the type of host societies into which they integrated cannot make them conceive of the "imagined present" or "past" in the same way (para. 6). Since the significance of the war remains politically unresolved, and Lebanon is yet to be constructed as promised in the Ta'if agreement (1989), diasporic identification remains primarily sectarian or communal (para. 44). Although the July–August 2006 Lebanon–Israeli war precipitated national unity, sharp political divisions at home and abroad have resurfaced. In the Lebanese diaspora, Humphrey concludes, "recovery of the imaginary homeland [...] resembles the broader predicament of our times: social transience, fluid identities, and individual uncertainty" (para. 54) rather than what Benedict Anderson calls "long-distance nationalism": i.e. "a nationalism that no longer depends as it once did on

[22] Gabriel Sheffer, *Diaspora Politics: At Home Abroad* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003): 75.

[23] Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1996): 269.

[24] Michael Humphrey, "Lebanese Identities: Between Cities, Nations and Transnations," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 26.1 (Winter 2004): 31–50 (54 paras): http://find.galegroup.com (accessed 5 June 2006): para. 4. Further online paragraph references are in the main text.

territorial location in a home country."[25] The senseless brutality of the Lebanese civil war stirred a generation of writers, "tinged with the heavy burden of the war years,"[26] who dealt with "internal exile" as a psycho-social phenomenon without addressing the themes of actual exilic or diasporic lives. Subsequently, a group of mostly younger anglophone Lebanese writers – Rabih Alameddine, Tony Hanania, Patricia Sarrafian Ward, and Nada Awar Jarrar – has "broadened and complicated the notion of Lebanon,"[27] although, since they had the option of repatriation, they are not, strictly speaking, exilic writers.

Unlike these Lebanese anglophone postwar narratives, which it superficially resembles, Jad El Hage's *The Last Migration* is a "moving account of the *interactions* between East and West."[28] Many are initiated by Ashraf Saad in his pursuit of true love with a woman, which could replace his love for his southern Lebanese village Cana. The book's jacket (by Dunia A. Beydoun) features a shoeless, ghost-like male figure passing through the village in search of an alternative ideal, and its epigraph is four lines of verse by the Australian poet A.D. Hope, in which the birds' migratory life is forever linked to self-renewal. The narrative is framed by a Prologue, dated November 1995, and an Epilogue, dated a year later, November 1996. The nineteen chapters are identified by nineteen letters from the Arabic alphabet (out of twenty-eight). The novel defines "love [as] the end of waiting." Diaspora is "being away from loved ones", but also "a way of life" for Ashraf, whose "family and friends [are] scattered around the globe" (9), because diasporans relate to people living in other

[25] Benedict Anderson, "Western Nationalism and Eastern Nationalism: Is there a Difference that Matters?" *New Left Review* 9 (May–June 2001): 42.

[26] Elise Salem Manganaro, ed. "Bearing Witness: Recent Literature from Lebanon," *The Literary Review: An International Journal of Contemporary Writing* 37.3 (Spring 1994): 378.

[27] Elise Salem, review of *The Bullet Collection*, by Patricia Sarrafian Ward, *Literary Review* 46.4 (Summer 2003): 771.

[28] Encompass (British Council Arts): http://www.encompassculture.com (accessed 2 February 2007). My emphasis.

nation states as well as in their host nation-state.[29] Ashraf's mother (68), his only relative left in Cana, uses "diaspora" as an alternative for those with relatives abroad, to remaining in the village. For Ashraf, who left Lebanon with his wife and daughter at the outbreak of the civil war in 1975 and has resided abroad for twenty years (the novel opens in 1995), repatriation is never an option. Most of Alameddine's, Hanania's, and Jarrar's characters also leave in 1975, when in their teens, many remaining trapped psychologically between war-ravaged Lebanon and the West. In contrast, because Ashraf had worked as a journalist in Paris in 1968, departure from Lebanon with his family seven years later was less traumatic than for the younger generation of teenagers and pre-teens which Alameddine, Hanania, Jarrar, and Ward depict.

Initially refused entry visas to France, luckily for Ashraf he and his family were taken in by Australia "halfway around the world [...] when [they] had nowhere to go."[30] Unlike characters in other postwar narratives who leave for countries of their choice where they have relatives (mostly the USA and Western Europe), Ashraf's lack of options forces him to adapt to an entirely foreign culture whose official language he already masters, and whose "generosity" allowed his daughters (his second child is born in Australia) to remain "unscathed by war" (34); home remains a "tenuous memory" (138). By contrast, Lebanese immigrants in France – a nation historically tied and geographically close to Lebanon – have felt in transit or at "home away from home" because they could return; unlike those who emigrated to the distant continents of North America and Australia to find "an alternative home."[31] Ashraf's eighteen years in Australia, then two in London, lead him to contrast Australia's "vastness" and

[29] Judith T Shuval, "Diaspora Migration: Definitional Ambiguities and a Theoretical Paradigm," *International Migration* 38.5 (2000): 45.

[30] Between 1976 and 1978 some 17,289 Lebanese arrived in Australia under a relaxed humanitarian immigration program, increasing the Lebanese-born population by 34 percent (Michael Humphrey, "Sectarianism" 458). The total Lebanese-born community in Australia was approximately 100,000 in the early 1980s. See Trevor Batrouney, "The Lebanese in Australia, 1880–1989," in *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration*, ed. Albert Hourani & Nadim Shehadi (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992): 431.

[31] Percy Kemp, "The Lebanese Migrant in France: *Muhajir* or *Muhajjar*?" in *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration*, ed. Albert Hourani & Nadim Shehadi (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992): 685–86.

natural scenery which "unleashed the wild in [him] with the 'narrowness' of Europe" (35), where "Copenhagen had the colours of Prague which had the colours of Paris which had the colours of Rome" (101). European cities become in his emigrant's eyes what André Aciman calls "mnemonic correlates," or mirrors of one another (29). This "grafting" or process of uncovering parallels is, for some expatriates like Aciman and Ashraf, more exciting than locating a permanent home. For both, certain places become surrogate or analogue variations "from which [they] can begin to be elsewhere."[32] Whereas "elsewhere" for these two resembles a chain of endless signifiers, for other characters in postwar Lebanese fiction this "elsewhere" which forever allures or haunts them is restricted to the native soil as a signified, however tangible or abstract, in the binary opposition of exile and homeland.

Furthermore, like other immigrants who decorate their homes with objects from their native cultures, Ashraf acts in ways which reinforce the crucial components of his personal identity, providing spatial, temporal, and social integration[33] Not only does he listen to Lebanese folkloric music "with the power of awakening cultural genes" (34), cook Lebanese food, and prepare coffee Arab-style, but he also invites his Western friends to partake of these delights. He surrounds himself with photos and paintings of natural scenery from his village. What signifies home is not fixed to walls but is, rather, an experience of sharing part of one's heritage with interested others.

Ashraf's successful career exemplifies the paradox of the higher socio-economic diasporan – of either maintaining relations with the homeland or facilitating integration with the host country and reducing relations with the homeland.[34] Although he is comfortably settled in London, his work requires and pays for travel, allowing him to revisit Lebanon. His multiple roots are thus connected by familiar routes. To compensate for his occasionally surfacing nostalgia, in which 'home' is never a physical entity, Ashraf visits his daughters in Australia and his mother in Lebanon. Mar-

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[32] André Aciman, "Shadow Cities," in *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. André Aciman (New York: New Press, 1999): 30.

[33] Leon & Rebeca Grinberg, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*, tr. Nancy Festinger (New Haven CT & London: Yale UP, 1989): 131–33.

[34] Fred W Riggs, "Diasporas: Some Conceptual Considerations" (1999): para. 38, http://www2.hawaii.edu/~fredr/diacon.htm (accessed 21 October 2005).

wan, his childhood friend now working in London, believes that Ashraf's "homing desire" – for intellectual, emotional, and sexual involvement with a suitable woman – has become his substitute for home. Such relationships are what make Ashraf "stop [...] feeling a fugitive" (159). In his desperate attempt to preserve his relationship with Jenny, he calls her a "refuge island" (135) for his "amputated soul" (110). Home is mobile, portable, circumstantial, and transferable from person to person. Accordingly, the question of whether he would prefer to be buried in Lebanon or in any country where he "had the best of [his] life" elicits the response: "When we're dead we don't know where the hell we are anyway" (3). This differs radically from the typical exile's fear of "double death": of dying abroad, thus making the return home and spiritual reunion with one's ancestors impossible.[35] In comparison, in *Koolaids* many of Alameddine's AIDS-afflicted characters encounter double death, away from home and loved ones, while in *Somewhere, Home* Jarrar's old female protagonist Salwa dies in Australia surrounded by family members but holding onto a photograph of an ancestral home in the Lebanese mountains. The double death of Hanania's suicide bomber in *Unreal City* is voluntary and thus conducive to what he (mistakenly) believes will redeem him in the eyes of his "brethren" back home.

Ashraf's association with individuals of multiple Western and Arab nationalities further distinguishes *The Last Migration*. Refusing to fall into the "dissociative mechanism[s]" by which many immigrants idealize either the old or the new place to the detriment of the other,[36] Ashraf remains critical of both. Unlike the persona of the "professional exile" who is "forever homesick, forever misunderstood,"[37] his ability to "read" one culture's space and time from that of another, and thus conduct a transcultural critique, manifests "diasporic double consciousness": i.e. a state of mind alert to contradictions and incongruities.[38] Equally, as the consummate expatriate whose attitude and behaviour strike a balance between

[35] Leon & Rebeca Grinberg, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*, 161.

[36] Grinberg, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*, 8–9.

[37] Charles Simic, "Refugees," in *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. André Aciman (New York: New Press, 1999): 129.

[38] Samir Dayal, "Diaspora and Double Consciousness," *Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 29.1 (Spring 1996): 57.

total rejection of and full immersion in the host society, Ashraf eludes the mould of the classic immigrant who goes "the full nine yards of transformation"[39] Only expatriates like him achieve Edward Said's "contrapuntal consciousness": the inevitable double or plural vision arising from awareness of two or more cultures.[40] That is, Ashraf is neither "ocnophilic" (holding onto familiar people and locales) nor "philobatic" (seeking out new relationships and places).[41]

Jarrar's, Hanania's, and Ward's characters, by contrast, exhibit ocnophilia, which they pay for in emotional stagnation, suicide or homicide and mental disturbance. Most of Alameddine's characters trying to find middle ground are cut short by war and disease. Although he refers to himself as an "unidentifiable alien" (76), Ashraf has strong links to Westerners and Middle Easterners alike, and experiments with bringing them together: he takes Scottish Jenny to meet a long-time British resident of Yemeni descent because of their shared interest in pottery, and wants her "to *feel* the experience" (122, my emphasis) of the Najis' typical Arab hospitality. In this respect, he exemplifies Eva Hoffman's claim that the emigrant gains both retrospective and prospective perspectives which turn him or her into an "anthropologist and relativist."[42]

As Rayyan al-Shawaf maintains, El Hage's Arabs "emerge as islands of stability, largely unruffled by their [Western] neighbors' depravity."[43] Abdo Naji, for example, listed in the *Sunday Morning Herald* as among the ten best potters in the UK, is not the only "rags-to-riches" (117) story

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[39] Bharati Mukherjee, "Imagining Homelands," in *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. André Aciman (New York: New Press, 1999): 71.

[40] Edward W. Said, "Reflections on Exile," in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha & Cornel West (New York: New York Museum of Contemporary Art; Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1994): 366.

[41] The Hungarian psychoanalyst Michael Balint coined these Greek terms, meaning 'to grab hold of' and 'to walk on one's hands', respectively.

[42] Eva Hoffman, "The New Nomads," in *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. André Aciman (New York: New Press, 1999): 51.

[43] Rayyan al-Shawaf, "*The Last Migration*: Jad El Hage's Tale of Diaspora and Love: Novel Draws on Author's Experiences as a Journalist in Europe," *The Daily Star* (23 March 2004): para. 10, http://www.dailystar.com.lb (accessed 10 December 2004).

of Arab immigrants in the diaspora. Another is Fehmy, a long-time Lebanese immigrant in Glenory, Australia, who has "stayed away from the skirmishes of the Lebanese community in Sydney" (47). Success lies partly in the ability to re-invent oneself. Fehmy transforms himself from an actor in prewar Beirut to a tomato farmer in Australia, exemplifying that "model immigrant success stories [...] remind us [...] that the author [is] an 'other,' while simultaneously celebrating the supposedly complete transformation of that identity."[44] Being an 'other' yet also an assimilated and industrious member of the host society distinguishes a diasporan from an exile, for whom any professional achievement or lack thereof is related to the loss of the native place. Producing artefacts and fruits, respectively, illustrates these two Arab characters' creativity, adaptability, and attachment to a literally new soil as a new source of revenue. Both fulfil James Clifford's criteria for a diasporic life: "the skills of survival: strength in adaptive distinction, discrepant cosmopolitanism, and stubborn visions of renewal"[45] By contrast, the novel's inflexible characters "feel degraded, holding a lifelong grudge against their new trade" (49), or start depending "on the dole" (47) of the host country, scenarios that nurture dependency, regret, rage, and apathy.

Fehmy's two sons do not plan to return to Lebanon, but will move to Singapore as computer specialists. He and his wife Asma "daydream about globetrotting" (49). So the novel shows immigrants both in their new homes and also dispersing in pursuit of money and happiness, as members of an "opportunity-seeking" diaspora in the context of globalization.[46] None of the other post-war novels portray the Lebanese in the centrifugal or radial motion typical of diasporic life; instead, their exilic movements resemble a pendulum, forever suspended between opposite poles. In *Koolaids*, Mohammad's success as a painter in the USA hinges on his portrayal of an untainted pre-war Lebanon and is cut short by his being tainted by AIDS. After completing his confessional manuscript and spilling out his guilt towards his compatriots, Hanania's brilliant but

[44] Frederick Buell, *National Culture and the New Global System* (Baltimore MD: Johns Hopkins UP, 1994): 148.

[45] James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9.3 (August 1994): 312.

[46] Michele Reis, "Theorizing Diaspora: Perspectives on 'Classical' and 'Contemporary' Diaspora," *International Migration* 42.2 (2004): 49–50.

drug-addicted writer in *Unreal City* consumes himself in a suicide mission targeting a "renegade" Muslim author in London. Jarrar's psychologically stagnant Aida in *Somewhere, Home* returns to Lebanon at thirty-two but then leaves so that she may continue her imaginary conversations with the ghost of a man who had cared for her as a child before she fled in 1975.

Ashraf's longing for individuals rather than places illustrates Norman Nikro's statement that "in the Diaspora one must continually accept oneself as irremediably incomplete."[47] Although marriage to a Lebanese wife, Sabina, ends in divorce, Ashraf attaches himself to new girlfriends. At first, he tries to recover from the shock of Claire's sudden death. With her, he had felt "at home," teaching her how to write her name in Arabic, learn Arabic songs, and enjoy Lebanese food. He tries to cope with his grief by looking for a new "love-as-home" in Jenny; a "perfect Londoner" (2), living at ease in the ethnic mix of Shepherd's Bush, Ashraf is kept rooted by people, not sites: "What would I do in London without my lifelong friend [Marwan]?" (158). In exilic fictions, by contrast, those who leave never supersede memories of childhood friends, despite occasionally forming relationships in foreign countries. Several minor characters, however, usually siblings of protagonists in the stories by Alameddine, Jarrar, and Ward, make the transition with relative success, leaving the others to struggle with AIDS, nostalgia, rage, guilt, depression, self-mutilation, attempted suicide, and political and religious radicalism.

Unlike these narratives, *The Last Migration* depicts Lebanon not as a polar opposite to the (temporary) host country but as a "stopover" (63) while travelling between cities lying to its east and west. While in Lebanon for nine hours to visit his mother after a two-year absence, Ashraf refuses to succumb to nostalgia by underscoring the difference between pre- and postwar Lebanon. The trip to his hometown evokes joyful memories, now remote, "like they never really happened" (65). His once picturesque village is now "a lost Paradise" (156), and "Beirut's Golden

[47] Quoted in Marie–Jose Tayah, "A Novel of Diaspora and Love," *NDU Spirit* 33 (April 2005): 10.

Age" (157) is forever gone, despite postwar reconstruction. His visit only confirms his initial decision to leave, showing him as neither a "patriate" (a citizen outside the home state who supports the ruling power) nor an "activist" diasporan (one who opposes the regime at home).[48] Instead, his sentiments are closer to the fragmentary "ironic nostalgia" which "accepts [...] the paradoxes of exile and displacement."[49] (Ashraf deflates the romanticized view of home by emphasizing the irreparable damage done to the country and reaffirming his diasporic life.

Ashraf's relationships create a string of "dwelling places," substituting for his original hometown. But excessive alcohol consumption, casual sex, and sporadic outbursts of "bottled-up violence" (132) are short-term remedies for his lingering sorrow and frustration, symbolized by his aching shoulder, symptomatic of non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. Despite his heavy drinking, Ashraf's narration remains reliable, in contrast to Hanania's first-person narrator, whose dependence on sleeping tablets and opium compromises his veracity. Almost all the exilic texts contain first-person testimonies of progressively debilitating physical and psycho-social ailments, but *The Last Migration* depicts triumph over cancer and the loss of loved ones. Furthermore, it avoids the lengthy rendering of the physical and mental crises of exilic characters in postwar fiction. It passes over those years prior to Ashraf's new life in Australia (where he had emigrated twenty-one years earlier), as a "reformed exile," his exilic sentiments diminishing after years of cautious integration, yet engaging in sporadic "compulsive retrospection" and living in "permanent transience."[50] It opens twenty years after Ashraf's departure from Lebanon; apart from a few flashbacks, his and his family's initial period of psycho-social "disorganization" in Australia is omitted; only one year (1995–96) of his subsequent "reorganization"[51] is recounted. The second, equally significant

[48] Fred W. Riggs, "Diasporas: Some Conceptual Considerations" (1999): para. 18, http://www2.hawaii.edu/~fredr/diacon.htm (accessed 21 October 2005).

[49] Svetlana Boym, "Estrangement as a Lifestyle: Shklovsky and Brodsky" in *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Durham NC and London: Duke UP, 1998): 241.

[50] André Aciman, "Permanent Transients," foreword to *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile, Identity, Language, and Loss*, ed. André Aciman (New York: New Press, 1999): 13.

[51] Grinberg, *Psychoanalytic Perspectives on Migration and Exile*, 14–15.

time period compressed by the narrative corresponds to the seven months following the bombing of Cana, which ends the main narrative. Ashraf's diagnosis of cancer, his chemotherapy, and later remission are mentioned in the Epilogue (dated November 1996).

As Jana Braziel and Anita Mannur explain, the diasporic person's hybridity "opens subjectivity to a liminal, dialogic space wherein identity is negotiated"[52] and renegotiated upon relocation and expanded to include others through marriage and parenthood. Accompanying Ashraf during his recovery is British Anna, now pregnant with his child. In the course of a year, Ashraf metamorphoses from an idealist in search of eternal love as a substitute for his geographically fixed home to a realist who finally pieces his life together. Past, present, and future are intertwined in and embodied by his mother, daughters, new wife, and their unborn child, respectively. His mother, the oldest yet most recent member of this endo-diasporic[53] family, sums up: "This is my first and my last migration" (184). En route from the UK to Australia, bypassing Lebanon, Ashraf comes to emblematize all Lebanese living contentedly in the diaspora.

Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin argue that diasporic cultural identity is superior to exilic identity, because the former demonstrates how "cultures are not preserved by being protected from 'mixing' but probably can only continue to exist as a product of such mixing."[54] By entering into a "mixed" (international) marriage with Anna, who nurses him back to health, Ashraf has literally preserved himself and "procreated." As Amin Maalouf explains, no individual possesses more than one identity; instead, each contains "many components combined together in a mixture that is unique" (3), as "a meeting ground for many different allegiances" which may conflict (5). Unlike other major characters whose national identity as Lebanese remains tied to Lebanon, Ashraf surpasses his national identity by fostering non-conflictual allegiances to multiple "centres," making it

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[52] Jana Braziel & Anita Mannur, "Nation, Migration, Globalization: Points of Contention in Diaspora Studies," in *Theorizing Diaspora: A Reader*, ed. Jane Evans Braziel & Anita Mannur (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2003): 5.

[53] An endo-diasporan leaves the homeland at any age; an ecto-diasporan is born in the diaspora (as a second-generation member) and has never lived in the homeland. Fred W. Riggs, "Diasporas: Some Conceptual Considerations," para. 31.

[54] Daniel & Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19.4 (Summer 1993): 721.

"rarer" and "more particular"[55] than others. If, as John Peters claims, diaspora "teaches the perpetual postponement of homecoming and the necessity [...] of living among strange lands and peoples,"[56] then Ashraf has done just that. The homeland-as-place in exilic literature is gravid with meanings which condition memory and attitude. In diasporic literature, however, modified memories, a critical stance, and personal desires condition and refashion the homeland. In other words, 'home' undergoes a semantic extension from exilic to diasporic writings. Compared to the corpus of postwar anglophone Lebanese fiction, *The Last Migration* goes further in complicating the notion of home by relocating it in what the Palestinian author Fawaz Turki calls "the geography of [the] soul."[57] By reconceptualizing home as an internal map of love and desire, this novel may indeed be read as the prototype of contemporary literature of the Lebanese diaspora. As long as this nation's history continues to be marked by inner political turmoil, intermittent violence, and millions of Lebanese living abroad under a myriad of conditions, it seems only natural that its fictional output, whether written in Arabic or in a Western language, should continue to bear witness to both exilic and diasporic situations and states of mind.

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[55] Amin Maalouf, *On Identity*, tr. Barbara Bray (1998; London: Harvill, 2000): 15.

[56] John Durham Peters, "Exile, Nomadism, and Diaspora: The Stakes of Mobility in the Western Canon," in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy (London: Routledge, 1999): 39.

[57] Fawaz Turki, *Soul in Exile: Lives of a Palestinian Revolutionary* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988): 77.

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Transnational Diaspora and the Search for Home in Rabih Alameddine's *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters*

CAROL FADDA–CONREY

> Writing about the loss of home brings one home again. You can't go home again – except in writing home. The rapture of writing rupture.
> — Susan Stanford Friedman, "Bodies on the Move"

THE PERIOD EXTENDING from the 1990s onwards has witnessed a rich variety of Arab-American writing that is not only characterized by an emerging and assertive political consciousness, but also by a complexity that Evelyn Shakir describes as "a new artistic maturity."[1] Accompanied by a "de-mythologizing [of] the homeland,"[2] such complexity is reflected in the works of writers such as Rabih Alameddine, Diana Abu Jaber, Elmaz Abinader, Joseph Geha, and, more recently, Laila Halaby. Writing about the Lebanese-American writer Alameddine and his first novel *Koolaids* (1998),[3] Shakir emphasizes the "new dimension [that he adds] to the depiction of the homeland, yoking it to a human drama from which many Lebanese [as well as other Arabs and Arab-Americans] would recoil."[4]

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[1] Evelyn Shakir, "'Imaginary Homelands' – Lebanese-American Prose," *Al Jadid* 9.42–3 (2003): 23.

[2] Evelyn Shakir, "'Imaginary Homelands'," 23.

[3] Rabih Alameddine, *Koolaids: The Art of War* (New York: Picador, 1998).

[4] Evelyn Shakir, "'Imaginary Homelands'," 23.

The present essay singles out Alameddine's *I, the Divine*[5] to show how this text affects contemporary understandings of exilic and diasporic Arab-American identities. Exemplifying the current ease in the movement of bodies and information across the globe, *I, the Divine* stresses a dynamic and complex diasporic relationship with the homeland – here Lebanon. The novel's depiction of a more immediate, and more critical, transnational connection widens the scope of the early immigrant model, which often propagated what Lisa Suheir Majaj calls "nostalgic longing for a return to origins [that] often results in a reification of the past, making transformation of oppressive elements singularly difficult."[6]

The forever elusive, cosmopolitan, sexual, transnational, and infinitely complex protagonist Sarah Nour el-Din dominates (and manipulates) *I, the Divine*'s narrative. Born and raised in Beirut to a Lebanese father and an American mother, she lives in Lebanon through part of the Lebanese civil war (1975–90), eloping with her boyfriend Omar to New York in 1980 at the age of twenty. As an adult, she shuttles constantly between the USA and Lebanon, enacting physical and ideological negotiations of both cultures that are deeply informed by an anti-nostalgic critical standpoint. This critical perspective contributes greatly to the way in which *I, the Divine* updates and revises traditional definitions and portrayals of Arab, and specifically Lebanese subjects in the USA, whether they be immigrants, exiles, or diasporics – so much so that the homeland ceases to be exclusively the focus of nostalgic yearning, but is also viewed from a removed transnational standpoint that furnishes the viewer with the space to pose probing cultural questions, thus reaching a higher level of self-understanding in the process.[7]

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[5] Rabih Alameddine, *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (New York: W.W Norton, 2001).

[6] Lisa Majaj, "Arab American Literature and the Politics of Memory," in *Memory and Cultural Politics: New Approaches to American Ethnic Literatures*, ed. Amritjit Singh, Joseph T. Skerret, Jr. & Robert E. Hogan (Boston MA: Northeastern UP, 1996): 274. As Majaj points out, such early Arab-American works include, for instance, Abraham Mitrie Rihbany's *A Far Journey* ((Boston MA & New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), Vance Bourjaily's *Confessions of a Spent Youth* (New York: Dial, 1960 & London: W.H. Allen, 1961), and Eugene Paul Nassar's *Wind of the Land* (Belmont MA: Association of Arab-American University Graduates, 1979).

[7] This reconfiguration also surfaces in Alammedine's *Koolaids* (New York: Picador, 1999), for instance, in which Lebanon becomes the site of repressed homosexual identities and an incomprehensible war. Similarly, Diana Abu Jaber's *Arabian Jazz* (New

By focusing primarily on the transnational nature of Sarah's diasporic experience in the USA, this article shows how Alameddine breaks down simplistic notions of home, national belonging, and dual cultural identities, thus depicting a more nuanced and complicated version of contemporary diasporic belonging. The emphasis on the transnational aspect of Sarah's diaspora is meant to underscore her quizzical attitude toward Lebanon from her US-based perspective, as well as her simultaneous questioning of the USA as a permanent homefront. This critical standpoint brought about by transnationalism characterizes many Arab-American lives, especially since an increasing number of Arabs who hold dual citizenship divide their time between the USA and their country of origin instead of having a fixed and permanent home in one country.

Sarah is the epitome of what I call the transnational diasporic subject that cuts across the Lebanese and American cultures, but is nevertheless displaced in both and belongs completely in neither. I use transnational diaspora[8] as a theoretical basis in this essay to underscore the contradictory impulses inherent to Sarah's characterization. Despite the fact that she enters the USA on an F1 visa when she elopes with Omar, I identify Sarah as a diasporic rather than as an immigrant or a student, or even an exiled subject, particularly because she already possesses a distinct Arab-Ameri-

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York: Harcourt, 1993) sharply undercuts certain Arab cultural mores such as arranged marriages and the privileging of white skin over dark features by the novel's Jordanian-American characters. The image of the homeland as an unproblematized haven is replaced in such works by a more cynical rendition when the characters themselves criticize the violence and xenophobia inherent in some Arab countries.

[8] This concept of transnational diaspora is based on Khatchig Tölölyan's discussion of diaspora(s) and what he calls "the transnational moment" in his essay "Rethinking Diaspora(s): Stateless Power in the Transnational Moment," *Diaspora* 5.1 (1996): 14, which Pnina Werbner reads as Tölölyan's mapping of the "transition [...] in the modern era [...] from exilic nationalism to diasporic transnationalism"; "Introduction: The Materiality of Diaspora – Between Aesthetic and 'Real' Politics," *Diaspora* 9.1 (2000): 16.

Although I rely here on this concept of "diasporic transnationalism," I have nevertheless slightly altered it to obtain the term 'transnational diaspora' instead. This switch in terms is intended to underscore the fact that the transnational is an elemental adjective determining the nature of Sarah's diasporic identity in *I, the Divine*. Moreover, placing such two concepts next to each other immediately juxtaposes the transnational aspects of fluidity and border-crossing with notions of enclosure and ghettoization traditionally attributed to diasporas, thus encapsulating a significant tension that needs to be explored in the context of this novel.

can heritage, albeit a burdensome one, before her arrival in the USA.[9] Moreover, what distinguishes her from other immigrants, diasporics, and exiles is that she moves voluntarily to the USA and has the financial means to travel back and forth between Lebanon and the USA. Her in-betweenness hinges on a physical and emotional transnationalism that suspends her between two countries yet equips her with the critical powers to assess each of the two cultures from a removed, more objective standpoint. Although such in-betweenness is increasingly a staple of contemporary living (Arab-American or otherwise), it nevertheless is often restricted to a more affluent class that avoids assimilation or diasporic belonging by assuming a more cosmopolitan and transcultural life-style.

This article will outline the concept of transnational diaspora as used in my discussion of *I, the Divine*, then undertake an in-depth analysis of its role in the characterization of Sarah and her negotiation of her Lebanese and American identities. I will then proceed to highlight the ways in which the novel revises the concept of a stable concept of home, replacing it with a more fluid and flexible form of cultural and relational identification, indicating in the process why these concepts are valuable to transnational Arab-Americans generally and Lebanese-Americans specifically.

Framing the Transnational Diasporic

Entrenched in the prime models of the Greek, Jewish, and Armenian diasporas, traditional definitions of the term 'diaspora' that emphasize the dispersal and scattering of groups of people from their homelands and the "suffering that accompanies many sorts of exile"[10] have undergone various revisions in migration and diaspora studies. Diaspora as a concept is now regarded as being deeply embedded in "global processes of de-territorialization, transnational migration and cultural hybridity,"[11] attributes that are emphasized by my use of the term 'transnational diaspora' in this

[9] Since diaspora as a concept usually connotes a communal rather than an individual identity, labelling Sarah as a diasporic is still somewhat problematic, since she does not exhibit or nurture any sense of belonging to the Arab-American communities in the US cities she lives in, whether it be in San Francisco or in New York.

[10] Tölölyan, "Rethinking *Diaspora*(s)," 11–12.

[11] Waltraud Kokot, Khatchig Tölölyan, and Carolin Alfonso, "Introduction" to *Diaspora, Identity and Religion: New Directions in Theory and Research*, ed. Kokot, Tölölyan & Alfonso (London: Routledge, 2004): 1.

essay. James Clifford, for one, notes that "diasporic cultural forms can never [...] be exclusively nationalist [... for] they are deployed in transnational networks built from multiple attachments."[12] Further revisions locate the term diaspora in twentieth- and twenty-first-century settings, solidly identifying diasporic communities as "both hybrid and heterogeneous," constituting "historical formations [... that] change over time and respond to the different political and social contexts in which their members find themselves."[13]

The heterogeneous quality of diaspora communities plays a crucial role in Arab-American diaspora formations, especially since the term 'Arab-American' encompasses a variety of national backgrounds, religions, and class and cultural identifications. In this way, instead of mapping the Arab-American community as a block diaspora, the variety in diaspora identities encourages a more malleable approach, constituting what can be referred to as multi-diasporic communities or what Pnina Werbner defines as "segmented diasporas."[14] As Steven Salaita points out, evidence of diasporic subgroupings can be detected even in the framework of Arab-American literature. Such subgroupings include Arab-American works focusing on Palestinian dispossession, diaspora, and the Palestine–Israel conflict, while other works deal exclusively with the experience of living through and surviving the Lebanese civil war (whether at home or abroad), and still others focus on the "American social landscape."[15]

Arab-American literary subgrouping of transnational diaspora can be added to the list, and one can claim that narratives like Alameddine's

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[12] James Clifford, "Diasporas," *Cultural Anthropology* 9.3 (1994): 307.

[13] Pnina Werbner, "Introduction: The Materiality of Diaspora," 5.

[14] Werbner, "Introduction: The Materiality of Diaspora," 16. Although critics like Kim Butler and William Safran determine a group's displacement from more than one home to be an important staple of diasporic identity, I do not subscribe here to the belief that such multi-displacements are necessary constituents of Arab-American diasporas. Conditions of multi-displacements, nevertheless, apply to some Arab-American groups, such as Palestinian-Americans, many of whom, after the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948, were displaced to neighbouring Arab countries such as Lebanon and Jordan, only to leave these locations in search of "better" homes in the USA.

[15] Steven Salaita, "Roundtable on Teaching Arab American Literature," Kallimuna: Speak to Us! The First National Conference of RAWI (Radius of Arab American Writers), New York City: 3–5 June 2005.

come under this sub-category.[16] The experiences of the multiple segments of the diaspora, however, still directly inform and shape the larger context of the Arab-American community. For, although depicting transnationalism and in-between identities from Sarah's somewhat narrow personal perspective, *I, the Divine* nevertheless succeeds in laying the groundwork for a discussion of the complexities of transnational diasporas pertaining to the broader Arab-American context.

William Safran points out:

> Today, [the term] 'diaspora' and, more specifically, 'diaspora community' seem increasingly to be used as metaphoric designations for several categories of people – expatriates, expellees, political refugees, alien residents, immigrants, and ethnic and racial minorities *tout court*.[17]

By focusing on what Tölölyan defines as "the transnational moment" in diaspora studies,[18] it is perhaps more convenient to avoid the conflations cited by Safran, so that transnationalism – the movement between/across two nations and the identity politics resulting from such movements – becomes an important condition of the diaspora under study.

Aihwa Ong dissects the meaning(s) of transnationalism, pointing out that "*Trans* denotes both moving through space or across lines, as well as changing the nature of something."[19] What is questioned and revised in *I,*

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[16] This essay does not incorporate discussions of second-, third-, or even fourth-generation Arab-Americans, focusing instead on literary characters, such as Alameddine's Sarah, who arrive in the USA as adults during the contemporary period of globalization and transnationalism. Such characters, although living in the US, retain strong physical and emotional attachments to their homelands, as a result living in suspension between the two places but belonging to neither. Examples of other Arab-American works that portray such characters include Patricia Sarrafian Ward's *The Bullet Collection* (St. Paul MN: Graywolf, 2003) and Laila Halaby's *West of the Jordan* (Boston MA: Beacon, 2003).

Needless to say, not all immigrants experience such in-betweenness equally; the myth of the melting pot and the search for success, or even the burial of traumas, are strong enough motives that might drive recent immigrants to totally integrate themselves and ascertain their place within mainstream culture.

[17] William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora* 1.1 (1991): 83.

[18] Tölölyan, "Rethinking *Diaspora*(s)," 14.

[19] Aihwa Ong, *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 1999): 4.

the Divine as a result of such transnational movement is the notion of a stable and unproblematic notion of home and national belonging. What also comes under revision is the concept of a diasporic subject that can easily negotiate dual or multiple identities solely from the vantage-point of his/her diasporic home. Instead, we are faced with a protagonist who comes to exemplify how transnationalism opens up opportunities for ethnic individuals and, by extension, communities, to move beyond the either/or options of assimilation and/or ghetto life for cultural survival in their host countries, in this case the USA. As a result, new (transnational) ethnic vistas are created, altogether "changing the nature" of diasporas – here Arab-American one(s).[20]

Transnationalism, however, is not a new phenomenon; as Peggy Levitt and Mary C. Waters point out, "earlier waves of migrants also displayed strong connections to their homelands,"[21] as exemplified by the Arab-American New York Pen League. This literary group of immigrant writers was formed in 1920 and consisted of Lebanese and Syrian writers, including Kahlil Gibran, Ameen Rihani, and Mikhail Naimy, who maintained deep attachments to their homelands, which they repeatedly wrote about and visited.

Alameddine, however, diverges drastically from the often romantic and nostalgic transnationalism as first introduced by these Arab-American writers; a novel like *I, the Divine* retains a strong critical standpoint that undercuts all forms of nostalgia and thus problematizes forms of national belonging, whether they be nostalgically entrenched in a Lebanese identity or assimilated into the American milieu. The novel's movement across multiple geographical locations, including Beirut, New York, and San Francisco, renders the borders between Lebanon and the USA highly fluid and permeable, and, by extension, makes the concepts of national belonging and citizenship malleable and open-ended. By depicting an

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[20] It is important to note here that diasporas do not only exist in relation to their homeland, but are also fostered by their relationship to each other as they form satellite diasporic communities across the globe. Large Lebanese diasporic communities located in the USA, Australia, Canada, South America (primarily Brazil and Argentina), as well as in some European countries like Denmark and France, for instance, maintain strong relational ties with each other and, more importantly, with the homeland.

[21] Peggy Levitt & Mary C. Waters, "Introduction" to *The Changing Face of Home: The Transnational Lives of the Second Generation*, ed. Levitt & Waters (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002): 5.

ongoing and inconclusive suspension between several locales, *I, the Divine* shows how transnationalism facilitates the articulation of dual and in-between identities for some Arab-Americans, as in the case of Sarah, who is able to view and assess her multiple national and cultural backgrounds more critically thanks to her detached transnational perspective.[22]

"Transnational Lives"[23] and Travelling Identities: The Movement of Bodies between Here and There

Composed exclusively of "first chapters," *I, the Divine* repeatedly retells and revisits the past from the varying first-person perspective of Sarah, ultimately comprising this protagonist's fragmented and botched attempts at writing her memoir, which nevertheless never ventures beyond a repeated drafting of the first chapter – hence the subtitle of the book, "A Novel in First Chapters." In this way, with Sarah's memoir being made up only of beginnings, albeit multiple ones, the reader is ultimately left with the task of piecing together her scattered life narrative into a coherent and chronological whole.[24] Such fragmented beginnings jump back and forth between Lebanon and the USA, repeatedly switching from one important event in Sarah's life to another, with no attention given to chronological order.

Moreover, the scattered information that Sarah chooses to include in each of the chapters (which are occasionally given actual titles), is at times redundant and at other times wholly original for that chapter, which is what provides the necessary links to Sarah's larger narrative. *I, the Divine*, then, puts in question the concept of an indelible and unchanging past within a transnational context, offering through the mediation of the first-person narrative an array of interconnected pasts and presents located in multiple 'homes'. The novel also often shifts to the third-person point

[22] I distinguish transnational diasporics like Sarah from other diasporics or immigrants, since the ease of her transnational movements might not be readily available for members of the two latter groups, whether for political, legal, or socio-economic reasons, or even on grounds of personal choice.

[23] The term "transnational lives" is taken from the title of José Itzigohn's review of Peggy Levitt's *The Transnational Villagers*, "Living Transnational Lives," *Diaspora* 10.2 (2001): 281–96.

[24] This fragmentation of plot also characterizes Alameddine's first novel, *Koolaids*, which equally experiments with notions of genre and representation.

of view, interspersing chapters written in English with the same chapters rewritten in French, thus multiplying the narrative articulation of one experience, rendering it more linguistically nuanced. Such innovative and complex reconstructions of her present and past reveal deep-rooted dilemmas of identity faced by Arab-American Sarah, whose perpetual feeling of alienation and disconnection (from both parts of her hyphenated identity) define and dictate her narrative perspective.

Unlike other hyphenated characters in contemporary Arab-American literature, however (such as the Iraqi-American Sirine in Abu Jaber's *Crescent*), whose in-betweenness remains a psychological and emotional rather than a physical state, Sarah literally oscillates between her American and Lebanese identities by constantly travelling back and forth between the USA and Beirut. Her awareness of the conundrums accompanying travelling identities becomes clear when she states, "Home is never where she is, but where she is not,"[25] thus underscoring one of the main challenges of a transnational identity.

Many of Sarah's challenges in the book point up some of the difficulties of her transnational identity. Her love affairs, played out across the various first chapters of the book, detail an aspect of these difficulties. She replicates her parents' illicit love affair[26] by falling in love with a fellow engineering student, Omar Farouk, in the same place where her parents had met, the beach at the American University of Beirut. Rebelling against both her well-established Beiruti Druze[27] family and his wealthy

[25] Rabih Alameddine, *I, the Divine*, 99.

[26] The relationship between Sarah's parents, Janet and Mustapha, was regarded by the novel's Lebanese community as problematic and even scandalous not only for the fact that the former is American and the latter is Lebanese, but also because Mustapha is Druze, and inter-religious marriage in the Druze community (as well as in the general Lebanese community) is strongly discouraged. Since, as Alameddine notes in *I, the Divine*, "One could not convert to the [Druze] religion, but had to be born into it," and since there is no civil marriage in Lebanon, Janet and Mustapha get married in Cyprus. Despite the fact that "Janet became more Druze than any Druze woman, even though she could not actually become one" (48), she was still considered as an outsider in her husband's family. As for Sarah and her siblings, they are legally accepted as Druze, since, "according to Lebanese law, children follow the religion of their father: therefore, the children of a Druze father are ipso facto Druze." Fuad I. Khuri, *Being a Druze* (London: Druze Heritage Foundation, 2004): 240.

[27] The Druze religion is an offshoot of Islam and was founded in the ninth century by the Egyptian caliph al-Hakim Bi-amr Allah and spread by a preacher by the name

Greek Orthodox parents, twenty-year-old Sarah and Omar elope and leave for New York, where Omar pursues his studies at Columbia University and Sarah gives birth to their son Kamal, eventually going back to school at Barnard. This cycle of rebellion continues when Sarah divorces Omar and subsequently marries and divorces the Jewish Joseph Adams, only to fall head over heels in love with David Troubridge, who in fact fails to live up to his name, being neither 'true' nor a bridge to American inclusion, hiding his homosexuality from Sarah, and ultimately leaving her brokenhearted with no explanations.

All the while, Sarah shuttles between Beirut and New York, and then between Beirut and San Francisco, where she moves after her second divorce "to see the sun set in water." However, she quickly realizes that the Pacific is not the Mediterranean, and San Francisco is not Beirut, "for the sunset" in San Francisco, among a list of other things, "was wrong. The sun disappeared into oblivion at strange angles and with the wrong colors." Thus, for Sarah, watching the sunset on a San Francisco beach is in sharp contrast to, and disappointingly pales against, what, for her, is the unparalleled experience of sitting "on a *real* beach [in Beirut], under a *real* sun."[28] Nevertheless, as Susan Stanford Friedman points out in her broad-ranging exploration of home and diaspora, "the word [homesickness] opens up into opposites: sick *for* home and sick *of* home."[29] For, despite her longings for the "*real*," which she associates closely with Beirut, Sarah hesitates togo back to Lebanon permanently, resisting her parents' and sisters' cajoling and insistence on her return by claiming that "her life was there [in the USA]." She confesses to her sister Amal, "I have nothing here anymore. [...] Beirut holds terrible memories for me," to which her sister replies, "'Stand in line. Come back and deal with them'."[30]

In reality, Sarah's intensely traumatic memories of Beirut go beyond the horrors of huddling during bombings in the "stairwell, [which] seemed the safest place," enduring the "banal and clichéd" smell of "cordite [...]

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of Darazi (who is now considered to have distorted the religion). The Druze religion is highly exclusive, with its two- to three-hundred-thousand members living mostly in Lebanon and Syria.

[28] Rabih Alameddine, *I, the Divine*, 57. (My emphases.)

[29] Susan Stanford Friedman, "Bodies on the Move: A Poetics of Home and Diaspora," *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature* 23.3 (2004): 191.

[30] Rabih Alameddine, *I, the Divine*, 272.

garbage, urine, and decaying flesh," and having her half-sister Rana killed by an infatuated Syrian soldier (38–39). Her memories extend to rape, which she endures at the age of sixteen on the hands of two armed men who in turn force a young adolescent boy, accidentally coming upon the scene, to also rape her. In the expanse of one hour during a hot Beiruti summer evening, Sarah remembers how "her life [… came] to an end. In only one hour, she thought bitterly, she had become a woman" (199). Even when she finds out that she is pregnant as a result of the rape, the shame of the experience and the value that her society places on family honour and virginity inhibit Sarah from seeking out her family's support. With the help of her best friend Dina, she gets an abortion and deeply buries her trauma. Metamorphosing into the embodiment of her traumatic experiences, Beirut gradually engenders a love/hate relationship in Sarah, whose longing incorporates a simultaneous sickness "*for*" and a sickness "*of*" this city, and all the personal and communal trauma that it represents.

Sarah's trauma, then, occurs on multiple levels, with the nature of her debilitating memories of Lebanon being closely intertwined with and simultaneously embedded in personal and communal tragedy (encompassing civil war and rape). Moreover, her personal trauma also extends to the dissolution of her parents' marriage when she was two years old, resulting mainly from the fact that her American mother Janet did not provide her seemingly liberal husband with the long-awaited son, producing Sarah instead, the third in a row of daughters. The fact that Sarah's father Mustapha Nour el-Din succumbs to family pressure, sending his wife "packing" (46) to the USA and marrying a young Lebanese girl who dutifully provides him with the desired son (but who nevertheless grows into an independent wife), invests Sarah early on with a sense of rebellion as well as a fragmentation that haunts her entire life. Her rebellion is mainly against her family, her "tribe," her community in Lebanon, with the fragmentation resulting from her constantly being pulled geographically westward toward her mother in New York and eastward toward the rest of her family in Beirut. Such disconnections repeatedly surface throughout her memoir drafts, in which the fragmentation is literally reproduced on paper through the non-linear narrative and the obsessive attempts at first chapters.

In large part due to her personal trauma as well as the history of her conflicted mixed parentage, Sarah's irreversible fragmentation is deeply rooted in the geographical, manifesting itself in her sense of not fitting in

either of her parents' cultures or countries despite the apparent ease of her transnational movement. What seems like Sarah's effortless ability "to float between two worlds" (226), which in fact is not effortless at all, is predicted by an old Lebanese woman reading Sarah's mother's fortune, telling the young American Janet, whose sense of adventure had led her to study at the American University of Beirut, that she will marry a Lebanese man from a strong family and as a result lose her American individuality. The old woman reassures Janet that her third child, a boy, will resolve her dilemma: "'He'll be the bridge'" (225) between two worlds, she says, warning her that she must nevertheless learn from him "'to float not swim'" against the tide of her husband's "family river" (226). Instead of a boy, however, it is Sarah that Janet gives birth to – opening a rift between her parents, rather than being the bridge between their two worlds. Sarah herself defies the old woman's predictions and does not perfect the art of "floating," for her own transcultural and transnational roaming itinerary is fraught with grave difficulties that result in a constant struggle to reconcile the two different parts of her identity and what they represent. "Throughout my life," she writes,

> these contradictory [Lebanese and American] parts battled endlessly, clashed, never coming to a satisfactory conclusion. I shuffled ad nauseam between the need to assert my individuality [represented by the USA] and the need to belong to my clan [located in Lebanon], being terrified of loneliness and terrorized of losing myself in relationships. (229)

In this way, transnational diasporic unbelonging replaces a secure and unproblematic national belonging, creating a space of negotiation that constantly revises traditional notions of diasporic identity.[31] Although the physical and psychological oscillation between Lebanon on the one hand and the USA on the other as manifested in Sarah's transnational diasporic identity is pursued here, there nevertheless remains a danger in taking the character's perception of these two countries as discrete and well-defined entities. The Lebanese and American components of Sarah's identity are far from being neatly separated, with the half/half categorizations inter-

[31] Born in Jordan to Lebanese parents, having lived in Kuwait, Lebanon, England, and the USA, and currently living between Beirut and San Francisco, Alameddine himself represents this model of transnational identification that he succeeds so well in portraying in *I, the Divine*.

acting and affecting each other, creating, as a result, a new identity that encompasses both cultures and locales but fitting neatly in neither.

This new identity manifests itself in Sarah, who, despite the fact that she views herself as being completely like her mother, having "inherited her exotic looks, her artistic tendencies, her mood swings, [and] her Americanness" (149), she inevitably internalizes her father as well:

> I did not forgive my father his treatment of my mother until I repeated the same story, taking on the roles of Mustapha and Janet simultaneously. Like Mustapha, I fell out of love with my husband, and like Janet, I am no longer with my child. (49)

But Sarah's resemblance to both her parents goes beyond their roles and actions, since she embodies the uneasy tension that results from their two social and cultural backgrounds coming together, a tension that is constantly negotiated through Sarah's transcultural and transnational enactments.

Sarah's transnational diasporic identity enables her to strip off the gauze of nostalgia through which diasporics often view the homeland. When she moves to New York with Omar, for instance, she is initially elated by her newfound freedom away from what she perceives as her family's stifling Lebanese social environment and the "unwavering gazes" and "pernicious tongues" of Beiruti society (98–99), all of which are an obstacle to success in Sarah's struggle to achieve an autonomous identity. "I did not understand his [Omar's] alienation in New York," she writes, "I loved the city, he hated it. I felt at home while he felt like a foreigner [...]. I was having a ball, while he was counting the days until we could get back" (53). Omar only "felt human in Beirut" (212), with his understanding of humanity hinging on the plurality of the collective as opposed to the singularity of the individual.

This difference in attitude between Sarah and her husband toward their American relocation highlights Sarah's more nuanced diasporic identity. This identity distinguishes her from other Arab-American diasporics due to its transnational and transcultural makeup, which eases the transition between locations but complicates it at the same time. For although imbuing Sarah with a sense both of release and of independence, her decision to stay in New York and divorce Omar (who takes their child back with him to Beirut) nevertheless leads to severe dislocation and alienation,

compounded by a clarity of vision that enables her to ruminate on the two cultures that she exists between.

She quickly realizes that she could not easily slip into her newfound American individuality: "She does not feel part of this cool world, [despite the fact that she's] free for the first time" (99). "Tugged on by both worlds," she walks the thin line of in-betweenness, repeatedly asking herself, "How can she tell the difference between freedom and unburdening? Is freedom anything more than ignoring responsibilities, than denying duty?" The source of her freedom, Sarah realizes, lies in anonymity, something that is hard, if impossible, to retain in Beirut. But the price of this anonymity is steep, even extending to a form of emotional dismemberment. Anonymity or no anonymity, she concludes, "her heart remains there [in Beirut]. To survive here [the USA], she must hack off a part of herself, chop, chop, chop" (9), which often becomes the ultimate price exacted by the "diasporic home."[32]

Sarah's case thus heralds the formation and development of a new "diasporic home" characterized by a transnationalism that does not necessitate choosing either here or there (as in the case of Omar, for instance, who chooses Beirut over New York), but instead facilitates transitions between the two and enables a character like Sarah[33] to simultaneously connect with and be connected to both worlds. As Sarah states, "There will always be *there*," an important statement that ironically comes right after her decision to "put it [Lebanon] behind her." Instead of regarding the former statement ("There will always be there") as a flippant postponement of dealing with her dilemma between here and there, it is one of the first signs of Sarah's complex acceptance of her transnational identity and the inevitable constant presence of the homeland in her everyday American life (and vice versa).

It becomes evident from Sarah's narrative that she in fact does not succeed in completely "put[ting] Lebanon behind her," but spends her time mentally and physically between the USA and Lebanon, hastily catching a plane to Beirut every time there is a family crisis, and relying

[32] Layla Al Maleh, "Diasporic Communities: The Arab-American Case," paper presented on the panel "Arab-American Imaginings of Home and Identity" at the MELUS conference on "Urban Ethnicities," Chicago: U of Illinois at Chicago, 7–10 April 2005.

[33] Rabih Alameddine, *I, the Divine*, 99.

on emails and phone calls when she is in the USA to stay in touch with her son, sisters, father, and stepmother in Beirut. In this way, whether through actual travel, email, or telephone, the presence of Lebanon is always palpable and immediate in Sarah's life in the USA, ultimately invading her American individuality and freedom, and even dominating the larger portion of her memoir. The abundance of details about her ties to Lebanon, for instance, saturates her fragmented life narrative and leaves a great deal unsaid about her life in the USA.

Multiple Unbelongings: Rewriting the Meanings of Home

I, the Divine ultimately revises the concept of "home," undercutting its standard characteristics of comfort, rootedness, and security to invest it with more complex and problematic properties, so much so that it becomes the graveyard of trauma and haunted memories, and the site of social pressure. Instead of disengaging herself from this burdensome concept of home when she moves to the USA (followed by her constant movement back and forth between the USA and Lebanon), Sarah transports it with her and becomes more and more involved in deciphering its powerful hold on her life. In writing her memoir, Sarah is in a way trying to articulate and come to terms with her experience and understanding of home – to give it a specific dimension, albeit a fragmented one. For Sarah, home, with all its contradictory components (Lebanon vs. the USA, community vs. individuality, social pressure vs. loneliness, her mother vs. her father), is so ingrained in her conflicted identity that she must constantly shift locations and perspectives in order to avoid the dulling effect that consistent, monotonous surroundings might have on her analytical outlook. Her avoidance of a single, secure definition of home ultimately leads her to a better understanding of her multiple homes, and consequently to a fuller understanding of herself within/without each of these homes.

Analyzing the relationship between the concepts of body and home, Friedman writes:

> Home may in fact be constituted upon an act of violence against the body, even as that body travels, migrates, or goes into exile. Safety might reside neither in home nor homeland, but only in flight.[34]

[34] Susan Stanford Friedman, "Bodies on the Move," 199–200.

And it is precisely flight or constant movement (as embodied in the identity of the transnational diasporic) that Sarah is so fixated on as a way to handle the physical and emotional "act[s] of violence" that she has been exposed to; the new places that she escapes to are in no way better or emotionally safer than what she has left behind, but they provide her with the necessary space to reflect on and contend with her past (and the people in it), which constantly shadows her present. Hence, rather than instilling in Sarah a sense of safety, the act of fleeing endows her with a critical and analytical perspective that inches her closer to a clearer understanding of what a sense of (being at) home might ultimately entail for her.

Carole Boyce Davies elucidates such a strategy by stating that "home can only have meaning once one experiences a level of displacement from it."[35] Friedman corroborates such a revisionary viewpoint by stating: "Being home involves the condition of being away from home."[36] Despite the availability of multiple physical homefronts for Sarah, she avoids committing herself to only one location, thus, as mentioned earlier, finding in her transnational diasporic identity a means to negotiate multiple homes. It is from such a seemingly unhinged and multiple position, then, that Sarah can better pinpoint her true home, which bell hooks defines thus:

> that place which enables and promotes varied and everchanging perspectives, a place where one discovers new ways of seeing reality, frontiers of difference. One confronts and accepts dispersal and fragmentation as part of the construction of a new world order that reveals more fully where we are, who we can become, an order that does not demand forgetting.[37]

Sarah's memoir is a testament to a "construction of [such] a new world order that [...] does not demand forgetting," in which she latches on to the fragments of her experiences (past and present, American and Lebanese), replicating them on paper in a desperate effort to come to grips with herself. For it is through writing that she slowly unravels herself, reaching a fuller understanding of who she is by physically and mentally switching

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[35] Carole Boyce Davies, *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (London: Routledge, 1994): 113.

[36] Friedman, "Bodies on the Move", 195.

[37] bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (Boston MA: South End, 1990): 148.

perspectives and thus detaching herself from the oppressive burdens of her backgrounds. As Alameddine states, "I see Sarah's journey, as well as my own, not as an attempt to escape the past, but to escape oneself.[38] Sarah is, in fact, escaping her own self by moving with Omar to the USA – specifically, escaping the way in which her identity had been rigidly defined and boxed in by her Lebanese culture and society. Nevertheless, it swiftly becomes apparent that movement, whether national or transnational, can be a means to understand the self instead of merely escaping it. Sarah analyzes such movement by way of her memoir, for, by looking at herself "on paper," she gradually comes to realize and accept the fact that she is a mere extension of the whole that she has been so desperately trying to escape from:

> I had tried to write my memoir by telling an imaginary reader to listen to my story. Come learn about me, I said. I have a great story to tell you because I have led an interesting life. Come meet me. But how can I expect readers to know who I am if I do not tell them about my family, my friends, the relationships in my life? [...] I have to explain how the individual participated in the larger organism, to show how I fit into this larger whole. So instead of telling the reader come meet me, I have to say something else.
> Come meet my family.
> Come meet my friends.
> Come here, I say.
> Come meet my pride. (308)

These observations, which close the final chapter of the novel, come to Sarah after she watches a PBS documentary on lions, braving herself for another "attempt to enter the fray again" for another "frustrating writing session." "Every time I tried something new with my memoir," she states, "I felt the memoir become Touché Turtle, fighting me all the way," with Touché Turtle being a "fencing turtle musketeer [cartoon] figure" she liked as a young girl (306).

By confirming the importance of her family and friends at the end of the novel, Sarah comes to the ultimate realization that she was not only deluding the reader (who might not have been so easily deluded as she thought) but was in fact also deceiving herself by seeking to identify her-

[38] Rabih Alameddine, "A Conversation with Rabih Alameddine," *I, the Divine: A Novel in First Chapters* (New York: W.W Norton, 2001): 313.

self as separate from her clan. Sarah's call to the reader at the end of the novel to "come meet my pride" should not be regarded as an unproblematic resolution or as a way to celebrate a unique representation of her Arab-American self, however, since the dramatic finale that it connotes offers a simplicity that directly contradicts Sarah's complex and playful character. As readers who have been led through the wilfulness of Sarah's narrative strategies but who have nevertheless fallen for her charm, we are left with our own assumptions about what lies beyond Sarah's closing statements. We can only hope that opening her "pride" to public scrutiny will ultimately result in more openness, leading to the detachment necessary for writing her memoir, a detachment that derives from her status as a transnational diasporic.

Writing as Detachment

Sarah thus transcends binary either/or national identifications and expresses her identity mainly through relationships, whether these relationships exist in the USA or in Beirut. Alameddine echoes this assertion in an interview, in which he states that a sense of place or a home emanates from an emphasis on relationships, whether they be with his friends in San Francisco or with his family in Beirut. Nevertheless, Alameddine goes on to point out that the staple of good writing is the ability to detach oneself from what can become suffocating ties to places and people (as in Sarah's case), something that Sarah desperately seeks to accomplish. Alameddine underscores the importance, for a writer, of being what I call a transnational diasopric and achieving the precious transcultural perspective that is such a formative part of Sarah's character (and writing):

> I fit in no matter where you put me, in many ways, and at the same time I don't fit anywhere. [...] This in-betweenness is very frustrating, but it is also an essential quality for a writer because if you actually fit completely, if you belong, then you cannot detach. [...] You are able to write [...] only if you [... physically and emotionally] detach.[39]

In his book *On Identity*, the Lebanese-French writer Amin Maalouf states:

[39] Rabih Alameddine, "Transcontinental Detachment: What Shelf Are You On?" interview with Carol Fadda–Conrey, *Al-Jadid* 9.44 (2003): 38.

> If you have gone away [from your home country], it is because there are things you have rejected – repression, insecurity, poverty, lack of opportunity [as well as war and social pressure]. But this rejection is often accompanied by a sense of guilt.[40]

And it is this same sense of guilt, inevitably accompanied by the yearning that underlies Sarah's freedom, that coats Sarah's ambivalence toward "*here* and *there*" like a "patina."[41] Most importantly, however, it becomes apparent that, for Sarah, the guilt generated by her initial rejection of her Lebanese half is not caused primarily by her betrayal of family or communal loyalty so much as being related to self-betrayal:

> I wanted to identify with only my American half. I wanted to be special. I could not envision how to be Lebanese and keep any sense of individuality. Lebanese culture was all consuming. Only recently have I begun to realize that like my city [Beirut], my American *patina* [represented by her newfound American freedom] covers an Arab soul. These days I avoid Umm Kalthoum, but not because I hate her. I avoid her because every time I hear that Egyptian bitch, I cry hysterically. (229)

Alameddine's stark and uncompromising depiction of Lebanese culture contains a heartfelt criticism of a society that is so "over-consuming" that "it takes over."[42] His portrayal of this society is stripped of all nostalgia, so much so that *I, the Divine* contributes significantly to the "revisionist spirit of [… many contemporary Arab-American narratives], whose writers have set about de-mythologizing the homeland," often with brutal honesty.[43] Consequently, a new sub-genre can be added to the Arab-American canon, one that holds the transnational diasporic subject at its centre. In fact, more of such "de-mythologizing" honesty is needed in contemporary Arab-American literature and criticism, especially since the current treatment of Arab-Americans generally as a demonized minority in the USA has placed Arab-American writers and critics in an unenviable and discomforting defensive position. Faced with general US-sanctioned suspicion and even downright hatred of Arabs and their treat-

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[40] Amin Maalouf, *On Identity*, tr. Barbara Bray (London: Harvill, 2000): 33.

[41] Rabih Alameddine, *I the Divine*, 99, 229.

[42] Rabih Alameddine, "Transcontinental Detachment," 38.

[43] Evelyn Shakir, "'Imaginary Homelands' – Lebanese-American Prose," *Al Jadid* 9.42–3 (2003): 21.

ment as the current Other (whether these Arabs are located in the USA or in the Middle East), Arab-American writers and thinkers are left with the role of defending the Arab part of their hyphenated identity in what often amounts to an awkward balancing act. With the intense pressure of battling negative stereotypes about Arabs and Arab-Americans by educating their American audience about Arab culture and contesting easy religious and national conflations, Arab-American writers and thinkers are left with little room to carry out the important act of self-criticism, which can target either the Arab homeland(s) or the Arab-American community as it exists in the USA.

This act of self-criticism (targeting both the USA and Lebanese locales) is easily accessible to Sarah due to her dual citizenship, which enables her to generate the sense of detachment inherent in being a transnational diasporic and necessary for her writing. Her Lebanese identity and family ties ensure a tight and supportive (albeit often suffocating) bond, while her American identity acts as the ticket that gives her the much-needed option to distance herself physically and emotionally from the demands of such an overpowering community, whether in the context of Lebanon itself or in the diaspora. Sarah's duality reflects a very common phenomenon world-wide, in which members of struggling countries that allow dual citizenship strive hard to become naturalized American or European nationals. Even if they ultimately choose not to reside in these (mostly Western countries), they retain their dual citizenship, thus ensuring for themselves a safety net in cases of political and/or economic crises in their native countries. As for those who choose to emigrate and become active citizens of their new nations, Robin Cohen points out the flexibility that can accrue to them:

> many immigrants are no longer individualized or obedient prospective [or current] citizens. Instead, they may retain dual citizenship, agitate for special trade deals with their homelands, demand aid in exchange for electoral support, influence foreign policy and seek to protect family immigration quotas.[44]

Of course, Sarah performs none of the above actions, for, in addition to the fact that she acquires her dual citizenship by way of her mixed parentage (and not due to a purposeful migrant-to-citizen identity shift),

[44] Robin Cohen, "Diasporas and the nation-state: From victims to challengers," *International Affairs* 72.3 (1996): 519.

she does not cultivate any apparent identification with a communal Arab-American diaspora. The duality of her outlook is deeply embedded in a personal and individualistic interaction with place (whether represented by Beirut, New York, or San Francisco), in addition to one-on-one ties to family and friends inhabiting these spaces. For instance, apart from the succession of men in her life, the only other close relationships Sarah maintains while in the USA is with Dina, a childhood friend who had emigrated before her to the USA, and with her gay half-brother Ramzi, who also lives in San Francisco with his lover. In fact, Sarah's identification with communal national identity occurs only on a close-encounter basis within the confines of Beirut – more specifically, within the narrower framework of her tightly knit family there. Her ability to perform the transnational diasporic feat of juggling both American and Lebanese citizenships derives from her privileged social and economic position, which, just like her traumas, she easily transfers from Beirut to the USA. Unlike typical immigrant stories that involve tremendous effort and hard work to achieve recognition and status in the new world, Sarah arrives in the USA already equipped with the socio-economic privileges that she grew up with in Beirut.

Thus, by fleshing out an Arab-American identity like Sarah's, one that is steeped in the transnational diasporic, *I, the Divine* answers Majaj's call to "not only to claim and reshape the meanings of both 'Arab' and 'American', but also to explore an identity [and by extension a literature that is] still in the process of being constructed."[45] In this way, *I, the Divine* succeeds in getting beyond simplistically singular literary representations of Arab-American identity, emphasizing the complexity of Sarah's character and thus contributing to an articulation of transnational diasporic identities that can nudge Arab-American literature, and consequently Arab-American culture, in new directions.

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The Dynamics of Intercultural Dislocation
Hybridity in Rabih Alameddine's *I, The Divine*[1]

CRISTINA GARRIGÓS

INTERCULTURAL DISLOCATION in contemporary literature is closely linked to the recent critical concept of hybridization, and often articulated by means of a postmodernist aesthetic with a focus on the revision of historical conflicts connected to personal memoirs. In this essay I will discuss *I, The Divine* (2001), by the Lebanese writer Rabih Alameddine, a novel that, through a highly experimental and fragmented narrative, attempts to reconstruct the life of an Arab-American woman, and in so doing re-examines a critical episode in the recent history of his country, the war in Lebanon, while at the same time reconsidering the contemporary situation of women in an Arab society as compared to the USA and thereby re-evaluating the significance of the family in this context.

Rabih Alameddine (1959–) belongs to a generation of Lebanese writers (together with Jad El-Hage, Tony Hanania, Nada Awar Jarrar, and others) who lived their childhood and youth in Lebanon during the war (1975–91) and are now producing post-war narratives, often from other countries such as the USA, Canada, and Australia.[2] Elise Salem Manganaro sees in this phenomenon an indication of a new conception of

[1] This essay is part of a research project titled "From Multiculturalism to Postethnicity: A Study of Ethnic Identity in Contemporary US Culture," (HUM2004-02759) funded by the Spanish Ministry of Education and Science.

[2] See Syrine C. Hout, "Of Fathers and the Fatherland in the Post-1995 Lebanese Exilic Novel," *World Literature Today* 75.2 (2001): 285–94.

Lebanese literature, since these authors write from a different country and use a foreign language, which gives them the necessary perspective and hindsight to write about the war at a critical distance. Moreover, in Salem Manganaro's opinion, these authors resort to such modes as parody, irony, and satire (modes and narrative techniques normally associated with Western postmodernism) to write about their native land. This has given their fiction distinctiveness and uniqueness of character as compared to much of the local Lebanese literature being produced nowadays.[3]

The relevance of the war in Lebanon is evident in all of Alameddine's literary production so far. In his own words:

> [The war] permeates every corner of my life. I can't seem to write about anything else. The war taught me how to deal with impermanence, how to sharpen my sense of the absurd, and how to function in a chaotic world. Wars and disease bring one closer to mortality.[4]

This is especially evident in *Koolaids: The Art of War* (1998), a novel, centred on a young Arab homosexual, that has been labelled as "perhaps the most merciless indictment of Lebanese society"[5] and in which the author equates the AIDS pandemic with war. His collection of short stories *The Perv* (1999) also explores the author's criticism of both his native country and his adopted one, and further pursues the characters' longing for a home(land), although, in the opinion of Syrine Hout, home, rather than being a specific location, becomes a conflicted site in a political and psychological sense, reflecting the consciousness of racial, sexual and cultural dislocation.[6]

In this essay, I will focus on the various ways in which Alameddine employs Western postmodernist literary techniques in his novel, *I, the Divine,* to convey intercultural dislocation, and in so doing I hope to demonstrate that what we have in this novel is not an instance of assimilation but a cosmopolitan and post-ethnic perspective that privileges an anti-

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[3] Syrine Hout, "Memory, Home and Exile in Contemporary Anglophone Lebanese Fiction," *Critique* 46.3 (2005): 219.

[4] Kieron Devlin, "A Conversation with Rabih Alameddine," mississippireview.com 16 Oct.http: //www.mississippireview.com/2003/leilani-devlin-alameddine.html

[5] Evelyn Shakir, "'Imaginary Homelands': Lebanese-American Prose," *Al Jadid* 9/42–43 (Winter–Spring 2003): 23.

[6] Syrine Hout, "Memory, Home and Exile in Contemporary Anglophone Lebanese Fiction," 226.

essentialist attitude, rejecting a fiction of authenticity and cultural purity to embrace instead hybridity and cross-pollination. Likewise, I hope to show that *I, the Divine* is a novel permeated by dislocation, both in the tales it tells and in the form that the narrative takes. Briefly, it is the account of a woman, Sarah Nour Al-Din, who is trying to write the story of her life but is unable to put all the pieces together. She can only manage to write the first chapters of her memoirs, and fails to write a linear story connecting all her fragments. Thus, the book becomes a novel of beginnings, written only in first chapters, fifty of them, with neither a central plot nor a conclusion. In this sense, *I, the Divine* is an excellent example of a postmodernist aesthetic, since the author addresses personal dislocation by constructing a text that defies fixedness and postulates the implausibility of cleaving to a centre. As the narrator says at one point in the novel, "Can there be any *here*? No. She understands *there*. Whenever she is in Beirut, home is in New York. Whenever she is in New York, home is Beirut. Home is never where she is but where she is not."[7]

Many critics have pointed out the recurrence of a postmodernist aesthetic in multicultural literature as a means of representing the destabilization of the subject in relation to the problematization of ethnicity.[8] This approach falls in with current theories of postethnicity[9] and hybridity that see identity as a question of affiliation, rather than as a given thing. As opposed to narratives that try, in a modernist desire to look for a unified centre, to depict an essentialist approach to ethnicity, works by writers such as Sherman Alexie, Gerard Vizenor, and Maxine Hong Kingston opt for a fiction that resists closure, deconstructs itself, and foregrounds a postmodern subject by making the reader aware of the protagonist's multiple selves. This type of fiction has recurrently been classified as hybrid, to the extent that hybridity and postmodernism have become synonymous. Thus, the use of narrative strategies such as collage, pastiche, parody, intertextuality, fragmentation, and the combination of different literary

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[7] Rabih Alameddine, *I, the Divine* (2001; London: Phoenix, 2003): 99.

[8] See works such as W. Lawrence Hogue, *Race, Modernity, Postmodernity* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1996), Robert Lee, *Multicultural American Literature* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2003), or Ana Manzanas and Jesús Benito, *Intercultural Mediations* (Münster: LIT, 2003). This last volume is especially useful for an extensive analysis of hybridity and border literature.

[9] David Hollinger, *Postethnic America: Beyond Multiculturalism* (New York: Basic Books, 1995).

genres, of diverse languages etc. are textual representations of a hybrid reality where the authors are confronted with a plural, multicultural, and multilinguistic experience.

Albeit aware of the complexities and different nuances of the word 'hybridity', I believe the postethnic and hybrid approach is very useful when dealing with the fiction of authors who wish to make explicit in their texts a certain problematization of their 'authentic' identities. Hence, I agree with Homi Bhabha's conception of the hybrid, derived mainly from Bakthin's theories in his *Dialogic Imagination*, that sees identities and cultures as formed and established in what Bhabha calls the "Third Space," a place in-between.[10] However, whereas Bhabha's hybridity is primarily ethnic, Bakhtin referred specifically to language and literature, which for him are inherently hybrid. Bakthin distinguished between unintentional and intentional hybridity, the former being related to any language, and the second to what he calls "intentional artistically oriented hybridisation": i.e. the literary production of textual hybridity as a complex network of intercultural tensions affecting languages, cultures, genders, religions, and history. In this case, there is no assimilation, or fusion, but, rather, the "collision between different points of view on the world."[11] Thus, in this view, and as Manzanas and Benito rightly point out, while hybridity induces fusion, it also describes a dialectical articulation.[12]

In *I, The Divine* we can witness the "intentional artistically oriented hybridization" of the text as Alameddine resorts to techniques and modes that deconstruct the idea of a final truth to be represented and reveal the split in the bicultural subject inhabiting the contemporary world. Influenced by the writing of authors such as Naipaul, Nabokov, Borges, Kundera, Rushdie, and Patrick White, he applies these practices to his work in order to further explore and problematize the notions of identity and ethnicity. In this novel, textual hybridity is evident in the combination of different genres (epistolary, fable, memoir, etc.), of different languages (English and French), and of different narrative personae. All this gives the novel

[10] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

[11] Mikhail Bakthin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Caryl Emerson, tr. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1992): 360.

[12] Ana Manzanas & Jesús Benito, *Intercultural Mediations: Hybridity and Mimesis in American Literatures* (Münster: LIT, 2003): 70.

its fragmentary structure, in combination with the first-chapter device, a technique that Alameddine acknowledges he learned from Italo Calvino:

> *If on a winter's night, a traveler* is one of my favorite books. I wanted to have the same writer doing different chapters, struggling to find a voice. It allowed me to experiment with forms. The idea of inventing and reinventing oneself has always appealed to me. It enables the narrator to figure out which incidents and people were the primary determinants of who she is. Every writer does that when writing a memoir. It's important for setting the tone of the story.[13]

Thus, the novel is constructed by means of a kaleidoscopic technique that allows the protagonist, Sarah, to revise her life and consequently to re-invent herself. She wants to narrate, to give sense to her story – which is to say, the history of her country and her people – but she cannot achieve wholeness. Textual hybridity becomes the symbol of cultural and racial mixing. As Alameddine himself acknowledges when discussing his Arab origin and his American present: "I am both *us* and *them*. Or more accurately, neither."[14] The author's problematization of ethnicity is projected onto the characters, particularly in the case of Sarah, whose identity is defined by her in-betweenness, her not belonging to one place or the other, and by the consequent destabilization of her experience, which is, in turn, the cause of the text's transgressiveness. Sarah is defined by the narrative, as Kieron Devlin states:

> She's a maker of false starts, born and reborn into a confused world where layers of national identity wear worryingly thin, and the past breaks through [...]. Sarah tries to fit in too many times and realizes perhaps that the search for individuality itself may be an illusion, for she is nothing without family.[15]

Through her fragmented narrative, we get glimpses of the story of her family: of her parents (an American mother and a Lebanese father); her stepmother, her sisters and her half-brother, all this together with her own experience of two unsuccessful marriages and one unhappy relationship in

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[13] Kieron Devlin, "A Conversation with Rabih Alameddine," *New Mississippi Review* 16 (October 2002), http://www.mississippireview.com/2003/leilani-devlin-alameddine.html

[14] Devlin, "A Conversation with Rabih Alameddine."

[15] Devlin, "A Conversation with Rabih Alameddine."

which she fell in love with a closet homosexual. Sarah's story is thus a succession of unconnected sequences, which focus on her fractured self, a division which she partly blames on her double breeding:

> I have been blessed with many curses in my life, not the least of which was being born half Lebanese and half American. Throughout my life, these contradictory parts battled endlessly, clashed, never coming to a satisfactory conclusion.[16]

Although cultural hybridity in the novel is made pretty clear by Sarah's being the offspring of an American mother and a Lebanese father, and the product of two very different cultures, linguistic hybridity is also evident: the book is written in English, but it includes chapters written in French, and the chapters that take place in Lebanon betray a Lebanese register. Textual hybridity is thus the product of both cultural and linguistic hybridity, since the text seems unable to hold together as a whole: the multiple fragments of the novel are bits and pieces of Sarah's life, whose memoirs are impossible to tell chronologically. In this sense, devices such as fragmentation or the inclusion of the epistolary genre or the fable are textual strategies customarily employed to focus on the intercultural dislocation of the protagonist. This kaleidoscopic technique allows the reader to gain a fairly complete idea of the terrible effects of war on the life of Beirut as well as the psyche of the protagonist, let alone the consequences of Western influence and the changes that the second half of the twentieth century brought to this country, including the different groups that make up the Lebanese social and political fabric: the Druze, those in favour of the PLO, allies of the USA, Syria, or even Israel. All these options/factions will be represented in the personal story of Sarah and her family, mostly Druze and pro-American.

It is worth noting at this point that the novel has strong echoes of the life of its author; both protagonist and author are Lebanese, moved to the USA, lived in San Francisco, and are engineers, besides being writers and successful painters. Although written by a male writer, the book's main narrator is, as mentioned before, a woman who tries to understand (and to make the reader understand) her disjointed personality, which she explains by her relation with her family and the historical situation that she has witnessed. The past becomes, then, as in the modernist tradition, the

[16] Rabih Alameddine, *I, the Divine*, 229.

best way to understand the present, but unlike the modernists' obsession with subjectivity and the search for a final truth (family, country, religion, etc.), the postmodernist subject is unable to believe in a centre and is condemned to uncertainty and schizophrenia. In Sarah's case, disorientation comes precisely from the destabilization of the centres that should contain her: family, country, and affective ties.

In postmodernist 'ethnic' literatures, families are crucial to the development of personal identities and ideologies, and this novel is no exception. The family is related to the idea of nation and, as such, the figure of the father and the mother become central. In Syrine Hout's discussion of three Lebanese post-war novels – Alameddine's *Koolaids* (1998), Toni Hanania's *Unreal City* (1999), and Hani Hammoud's *L'Occidentaliste* (1997) – the critic points out that in her view, in these novels

> The father is perceived as being either altogether too domineering and intolerant or too weak and indifferent. The mother is altogether absent or too submissive to effect change in the strained relationship between husband and son.[17]

Alienation from the father is, for Hout, proportional to estrangement from the father-figure. In the case of *I, The Divine*, the fact that the mother is an American, a foreigner, who is forced to leave the country and as a result abandons her daughters, is crucial for the fractured personality of the protagonist. The father replaces Sarah's mother by a submissive woman whom the protagonist characterizes as the evil stepmother of fairy-tales, becoming herself a Cinderella or Snow-White figure. The presence of the father, a prominent doctor in Beirut, equates with Lebanon and its traditions.

Like her mother, who was rejected by her father and sent back to her country for not being able to give him a son, Sarah will also move to the USA, but unlike her mother, it will be her own decision, since the Arab traditions and the oppressive family life in Lebanon suffocate her. In the belief that she will find a better life in the USA, she deserts her husband Omar and her son Kamal, and decides not to go back to Lebanon. And yet, she cannot forsake her roots and will never be completely disconnected from her country and her family, since this would imply the total erasure of her psyche. Physical and psychological division is inevitable

[17] Syrine Hout, "Of Fathers and the Fatherland," 286.

for her, and she is therefore forced to travel back and forth from the USA to Lebanon, unable to be detached from her Arab half.

Thus, intercultural dislocation and in-betweenness result in a situation of extreme anguish for the protagonist, who spends her life trying to fit into one place, but is always out of context. Even her name, which was her grandfather's choice due to his admiration for the actress Sarah Bernhardt, marks her as different in an Arab context, where the rest of her family have Arab names (Lamia, Amal, Rana, Ramzi). Moreover, at the end of the novel, we find out that there is another Sarah, a Druze, a heroine whose story was purposely hidden from her. Her grandfather, in his admiration for the West, filled Sarah's head with mythical stories of Sarah Bernhardt, but he was silent about the other Sarah, the Druze. As happens with the rest of the characters in the book, whose true nature and feelings are revealed in the end, we discover her grandfather's misogyny when we (and the protagonist at the same time) learn of his mistreatment of Janet, Sarah's mother, and how he manipulated history to make Sarah believe that the Druze were descended from the Prince of Believers, and not from a woman.

From the very beginning of the novel, we are aware of Sarah's liminality, not only for her cultural inner division, but for her condition of being a woman living under the constraints of patriarchy. Apart from her Western name and physical appearance (of all her sisters she is the one who looks more like her American mother, with a white complexion and reddish hair), her displacement is evident from the moment she is sent to an all-boys school in Beirut. She will be the only girl in the class, until the arrival of her best friend, Dina, who also happens to be the best soccer player in her class, which is very unusual for a young girl in an Arab country. Alameddine's choice of female protagonist is not accidental. This allows him to reflect on the situation of women in Lebanon as compared with that of women in the USA. It has been pointed out, correctly, that Alameddine is writing about a very specific segment of the population in Lebanon, not just women obsessed with appearances and exclusive designer dresses. Bearing this in mind, the situation of women is clearly placed under scrutiny in this novel. Sarah's mother, Janet, is the first and most conspicuous example of the abuse of authority on the part of a father-in-law and a husband who do not appreciate her efforts to adapt to her new life, country, and situation. Her rejection will mark her life and that of her daughters and will lead her ultimately to commit suicide in her Manhattan

apartment, alone and alienated. Janet's story accordingly serves to criticize the situation of women in an Arab country, as opposed to the freedom that the USA apparently represents.

Her three daughters, Lamia, Amal and Sarah, also suffer the consequences of this rejection, especially Lamia, who will write letters to her mother, which she will never send. These letters, included in the body of the text as part of the epistolary text-within-the-text, are written in ungrammatical English, as a representation of the speech of a person who has not mastered that language and focusing on the linguistic and cultural distance between mother and daughter. In these letters, Lamia tells her mother of the abuses of her husband and how she finally decides to put her patients to death because they were bothering her at night. The letters seem to indicate that the mental disorder which leads her to murder is directly related to abandonment by her mother, for which her father is ultimately responsible. Amal, the other sister, also appears to be trapped in an unhappy marriage and dominated by an abusive husband. However, her situation, in contrast to that of her sister Lamia, is resolved when she is put in charge of her stepmother's company and finds in her business and extramarital relations reasons to be happy. Women like Amal or Saniya, Sarah's stepmother, who are intelligent and resourceful and who lead a secret life unknown to their husbands are the ones who survive in this society.

Saniya is presented at the beginning of the novel as the evil character in a fairy-tale, but little by little the perspective changes as we move from a little girl's perception to that of a grown-up woman. Then we understand that there was no fairy-tale involved and that the stepmother is herself yet one more victim of patriarchy. While very young, she was married to an older man whom she did not know, only to be put in charge of three stepdaughters who saw her as an intruder. According to Fatima Mernissi (and, before her, Edward Said), Western literature and art have created a stereotype of Arab women based on harem stories and a distorted view of the tales in *The One Thousand and One Nights,* by focusing on eroticism and disregarding the intelligence and intellectual capacity of women.[18] This distorted view of Arab women is radically deconstructed in *I, The Divine*, as Sarah is presented as a modern Sheherazade who maintains suspense

[18] See Fatima Mernissi, *Scheherazade Goes West* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001).

and the reader's attention by means of chain stories. Moreover, her tales portray a group of resourceful women who have careers and are successful in their professional lives, like Sarah, the engineer, although they do not seem to find happiness in their relationships with men.

The critique of the patriarchal regime imposed upon women in many Arab countries is quite evident, and never clearer than when Sarah recounts her own rape. This episode, along with the murder of her sister Rana at the hands of a soldier who was infatuated with her, are probably two of the most brutal scenes in the novel. The narration of Rana's death, combined with fragments telling about the war in Lebanon, help to contextualize an experience otherwise difficult to explain and verbalize: "On July 1, 1978, the Syrians began an intensive bombing campaign against East Beirut, and a seventeen-year-old soldier by the name of Izzat Ghalaini laid eyes on Rana."[19] The brutality and senselessness of the war, together with the insane resolution of a boy-soldier and the unawareness of his madness on the part of Rana, generate a dramatic situation and the ultimate death of two human beings, since, after killing Rana for rejecting him, the soldier commits suicide. The final scene, with the unexpected appearance of the soldier's mother, disturbs everybody except Saniya, Rana's mother, who, understanding her suffering and aware of the illogic and craziness produced by the war, establishes a connection with the murderer's mother, as they are both suffering mothers who have been deprived of their children.

As a result of the war in her country, Sarah´s life is surrounded by death and desertion. Like many of the members of her family, Sarah is lonely and unhappy, searching for a home, which, as Hout points out when discussing the stories in *The Perv*, is, rather, a state of mind, geography being ultimately affective:

> Feeling 'at home' is determined less by a spatial reality and more by an emotional one that stretches beyond the definitional confines of one's nation as homeland.[20]

Sarah is neither Lebanese nor American, but the sum of the two and of what she has become through all the circumstances that marked her life.

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[19] Alameddine, *I, The Divine*, 64.

[20] Syrine Hout, "Of Fathers and the Fatherland," 226.

The importance of the family as an institution in Arab countries is foregrounded and juxtaposed with membership in the American family, more concerned with independence but consequently more detached and lonely. For instance, when Janet, Sarah's mother, visits a fortune-teller with her Lebanese friends, the diviner foresees the failure of her future marriage:

> Tell her I see trouble. Tell her I see trouble, but she can avert it. Tell her she has to change. Tell her the man comes from a strong family. They will swallow her. She can't resist. Tell her she has to change, become lighter, learn to float. She'll no longer be able to be herself, she'll become part of a larger whole. She can't move independently, she has to move with the family river. She'll become the family. She can't change that. The family swallows. It's difficult for her. She is beautiful. She is strong. She is American. They don't understand family over there. She has to adapt, she must learn to accept. She will change. (225)

But even though Janet takes this advice into account and tries to adapt and change, becoming a humble and submissive wife, the fact that she cannot have a son is decisive for her husband to send her away to America. The husband marries a young Lebanese woman with no education or experience, only so that she can give him an heir. The final irony is that this so much expected son, Ramzi, turns out to be homosexual and quits Lebanon for the USA.

As stated above, Sarah is the one who is more like her American mother. Hence, while the rest of her sisters remain in Lebanon, she, like her mother, will go away to the USA although this will ultimately not resolve her sense of inadequacy, as she ironically admits:

> I moved from the land of conformism to the land of individualism. I moved from a country that ostracized nonconformists to one more tolerant and more hypocritical. I moved from Lebanon to the United States. (227)

However, the American dream of freedom and independence proves to be a mirage, since most of the characters that live there are lonely and unhappy. Sarah depends on sleeping pills and often drinks too much. Her second ex-husband, Joseph, while successful in his job, lives an unfulfilling marriage with a superficial woman. David, her lover for four years, turns out to be a closet homosexual who leads a double life, having a male lover for ten years and seeing Sarah in secret. Sarah's mother, Janet, lives by herself in her apartment and rejects any affectionate ties with Sarah or

with her grandson and finally commits suicide in her bathtub. Paradoxically, after her death, Sarah learns that even though her mother refused to have any connection with her Arab past she went by the name of Janet Nour-Al-Din. This revelation is a surprise for her because, even in her will, Janet ignored her daughters and left everything to an artist's colony. The only memento that Sarah keeps from her is a kaleidoscope which functions as the metaphor for the whole novel, referring both to the external form of the narrative and to the fragments of Sarah's life that the reader is allowed to see in glimpses.

To Kieron Devlin's question of whether novels such as these help to avoid stereotyping of the Arab/American experience, Alameddine replied:

> I write about a small segment of experience. Again, let's switch that around. Does the work of Philip Roth help to avoid the stereotyping of the Jewish/American experience? The work of Toni Morrison, the African/American? Edmund White, the gay male experience? And whose novels help to avoid the stereotyping of the white male American? If we are able to read a combination of say different Jewish American authors, we can get a better picture, not a whole one, but still better. Maybe my work does help a little, but the Arab experience is so immense and diverse that to think my novels are representative terrifies me. A Lebanese reader once accused me of perpetuating the stereotype of Lebanese for Americans. I assume he saw *Koolaids* as not Western enough! He was probably right. His Lebanese experience was different from mine.[21]

Alameddine's experience of America and Lebanon is certainly unique. Being also a painter, Alameddine combines visual effectiveness with verbal cunning; although some reviewers have pointed out that the novel fails precisely at this undecidedness of beginnings, because it doesn't seem to take off. But, in my opinion, this technique is what gives the novel its coherence, making it a good example of the complexities of cultural hybridization. Hybridization is also represented in the combination of the Arabic and the American literary traditions. Alameddine's work partakes of characteristics from the Arabic oral tradition and from North American fiction. In Lebanese post-war literature, suffering is not hidden, but foregrounded, but many of the things that happen or that the protagonist narrates would be impossible to reproduce without a sense of

[21] Devlin, "A Conversation with Rabih Alameddine."

humour. Hence, the novel combines the narration of brutal and tragic circumstances, such as the above-mentioned episodes of the death of Sarah's sister and Sarah´s rape, with comic situations in order to convey satire. The author introduces a disruptive comical element into the text with the intention of breaking down the seriousness of the events being told. For instance, the gravity of AIDS as a terminal illness is lightened when Sarah becomes an AIDS emotional-support volunteer, in the belief that this will help her own spiritual welfare, and all her patients die before she has the chance to meet them. This technique is not meant to deny the magnitude of tragedies such as the war or AIDS, but aims to provide a distance so that human beings, Sarah or the reader, can survive in a senseless world.

Satire is also directed at the senselessness of the contemporary world and consequently of modern art, as is evident in the episode of Baba Blakshi.[22] In an oedipal reference to her father, "Doctor Baba," Sarah creates Baba Blakshi, her artistic alter ego, who is the author of pieces of mock-art such as "Jesus-on-a Tortilla" or "Jesse on the Toilet." As the narrator says,

> The pieces were not only the hit of the exhibit- the other works in the show were childish- they were talked about for months afterwards. There was more interest in the works of Baba Blakshi than there ever was in those of Sarah Nour el-Din. What I thought was a joke took on a seriousness all its own. Baba ridiculed the hypocrisy of the art world and the perfidious art world swallowed Baba up. (107–108)

Alameddine's satire on the superficiality of the American way of life as compared to existence in Lebanon is evident throughout the novel. Although living in Lebanon proves to be too oppressive for the spirit of the protagonist, the USA is no panacea. It is in the combination of independence and individualism and the affection of the family that Sarah seems to find her middle way. Therefore, even if she writes from a foreign land in a foreign language, Lebanon and her family are always present in her life and in her narrative. As she confesses to the reader at the end of the book,

> I had tried to write my memoir by telling an imaginary reader to listen to my story. Come learn about me, I said. I have a great story to tell you because I

[22] *I, the Divine*, 106.

> have led an interesting life. Come meet me. But how can I expect readers to know who I am if I do not tell them about my family, my friends, the relationships in my life? Who am I if not where I fit in the world, where I fit in the lives of the people dear to me? I have to explain how the individual participated in the larger organism to show how I fit into this larger whole. So instead of telling the reader, Come meet me. I have to say something else.
> Come meet my family.
> Come meet my friends.
> Come here, I say.
> Come meet my pride. (308)

Sarah's pride in her family is only made explicit to the reader at the end, because, from the beginning, the portraits she presents of her family and friends are of people full of unresolved problems, completely unadjusted to the reality of their own circumstances. However, as the protagonist learns in this particular *künstleroman*, it is precisely because of the fact that they are all maladjusted that she finds she has a place among them.

At the end of the fragmented narration of her life we can see that Sarah has come to terms with her multiple selves, with her family, her friends, her countries and their different cultures. But whereas the integration of her personality is not complete, as it might have been in a modernist work, where nostalgia would be the dominant mode forcing the protagonist to choose between one place or the other, in this case, fragmentation is cherished as multiplicity becomes enriching. The end of the novel shows that the postmodernist subject of this Arab and American woman is, in the last analysis, not disjointed but kaleidoscopic.

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The Semiosis of Food in Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent*[1]

BRINDA J. MEHTA

ARAB CUISINE OFFERS A DAZZLING VARIETY of regional and locally prepared dishes that cover a wide territorial expanse ranging from North Africa to the countries of the Persian Gulf. Dishes such as *tajine* (stew), *felafel* (chickpea fritters), *kebab*, *couscous*, *biryani* (saffron-flavoured spiced rice with meat), and desserts such as *baklava*, *halwa*, *loukoum* (Turkish delight), and *zlabia* (flower-shaped golden fritters) have titillated the indigenous palate for centuries and have also made their mark on the contemporary international gastronomic scene. While appetizers or *mezze* such as *hummus* (chickpea dip), *dolma* (stuffed grape leaves), *tabbouleh* (mint flavored bulgar salad), and *baba ghanoush* (puréed eggplant in a roasted sesame sauce) have already become staples in salad bars and sandwich shops in metropolitan US cities, *couscous* has captured the French imaginary as an accepted form of national cuisine, and *kebabs* have been listed as a priority item on short-order British menus. The frequent references to food in the Qur'an testify to its divine origin, whereby the very possibility of minimal cultivation in the desert birthplace of Islam symbolizes God's generosity, magnificence, and benevolence. It could therefore be stated that Arab cuisine is divinely inspired, judging by its ritualized preparation, its aesthetically pleasing presentation, the fragrant intoxication of the senses by the artful combination of

[1] This article, originally part of the author's *Rituals of Memory in Contemporary Arab Women's Writing* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse UP, 2007), appears with the kind permission of the publishers. It has undergone extensive revision for publication here.

'heavenly' spices such as cumin, saffron, sumac, and thyme together with the anointed perfume of rose and orange-blossom water. Reflecting the bounties of the divine garden of Paradise, Arab cuisine represents the godliness of wholesomeness, nutrition, flavour, and dietary balance to promote a culinary cosmovision of international repute. Within the complexity of this culinary world-view inscribed in the North American diasporic location of Los Angeles, Diana Abu Jaber's novel *Crescent* establishes the important link between cuisine and identity in which the preparation of food provides the protagonist Sirine with the basic ingredients for the healthy negotiation of her mixed-race Arab-American identity.

As the main chef in the Lebanese-owned Café Nadia, situated in a predominantly Iranian and therefore non-Arab location, Sirine confronts the multiplicity of diaspora in her cooking as a reflection of her own ontological duality as an Iraqi-American. In other words, her culinary explorations in the kitchen reveal the in-betweenness of her position as the daughter of an American-Christian mother and Arab-Muslim father who is nevertheless deprived of both sources of parental identification as a result of their untimely death in Africa. Positioned within the tentativeness of interstitiality, Sirine seeks roots in the preparation of Arab and fusion cuisine, finding new meaning for the pain of loss and death in culinary creations as the vestiges of memory, this "odor of forgotten memories," evoked in the novel.[2] At the same time, her attempts to reconfigure the mainstream American diet of "meatloaf" and "frozen chocolate layer cake"[3] signifies her reclamation of "mainland space" in resistance to ethnic assimilation and the further loss of identity. The present study indicates how Sirine's profession as a cook endows her with the primal consciousness of ancestral culinary affiliations despite, and because of, her parents' demise, wherein food becomes a memorial, keeping a cherished memory alive. As an Arab-American living in the USA, Sirine has been obliged to repress her Arab roots in a culture that continues to associate Arabs with cultural and religious deviance. Cooking Arab food thus becomes her 'underground' resistance to cultural conformity and assimilation, allowing her to reveal her inner landscape of Arabness through 'memorable/memorial' subversion.

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[2] Diana Abu Jaber, *Crescent* (New York: W.W. Norton): 15.

[3] Abu Jaber, *Crescent*, 72.

Within this context, food provides a particular semiotics of expression, a system of culinary codes and signifiers that constitutes a "literary strategy capable of generating multiplicity of meaning within the text"[4] In other words, culinary practice as a multi-layered palimpsest historicizes the significance of food as a cultural and social system with its own language of culinary 'authenticity'. Arab cuisine as the manifestation of a particular world-view provides the necessary codes for deciphering the cultural, social, and racial markers of identity and group affiliation by which the culinary complexities come to reflect the cultural systems that are the guiding rituals of social life (260). Cooking, as a highly expressive language, thus itself becomes a form of social praxis. Sabry cites as an example the famed custom of Arab hospitality, which has always been articulated in terms of food, drink, and the idea of providing guests with nourishment (*qira al-dayf*), with food simultaneously representing many elements such as nutrition, generosity, welcoming rituals, class status, and cultural pride (260). Culinary practice thereby furnishes the essential semiotic script of social meaning; it is an enduring signifier of cultural retention and identity. Sabry explores the diverse manifestations of the culinary semiotic code by

> examining the ways in which narrative writers use culinary codes as signifying tools in their work, through a study of their socio-cultural implications, their interaction with the spatial presentation of the narrative, [...] the association between the culinary and the erotic [...] the interaction between food and religious practice and between culinary customs and changing social values. (257)

In other words, the culinary semiotic code provides a strategy for reading fictional narratives to uncover systems of meaning concealed in the associations evoked by food. My analysis will therefore focus on Sirine's 'involuntary' acts of culinary memory as these reveal the cultural semiosis of Arab food habits, which also provide the script for gendered negotiations of hyphenated identity. Sirine's cooking as a commemorative act is part of a complex of Arab-Muslim expression that affirms daily cultural practice through culinary rituals.

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[4] Hafez Sabry, "Food as a Semiotic Code in Arabic Literature," in *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, ed. Sami Zubaida & Richard Tapper (London: Tauris Parke, 2000): 257. Further page references are in the main text.

As a female chef with a mission to mediate past memories while creating new paradigms based on present experiences, Sirine becomes a culinary cultural agent in her own right. She politicizes the kitchen as a diasporic space catering to a community of locals, exiles, and international students through the vehicle of food. Sirine's kitchen provides the necessary location in which race, class, gender, and nation intersect to form the mosaic of a café culture that both reveals and disrupts the displacement of transnationality. Her rites of cultural and culinary initiation are nevertheless the inheritance of a longer history, as is revealed by her uncle's gift of an old Syrian cookbook, *On the Delights and Transfigurations of Food*, published in 1892, which provides her with a valuable locus of origin as well as a reference guide. As the novel indicates,

> That night, after she's done with work and alone in her bedroom, she sits on the bed [...] and stares at her old Syrian cookbook. The recipes are pared down to the essentials: simple equations, the ideal calibrations of salt to vegetable to oil to meat to fire. They're little more than lists, no cooking instructions or temperatures, but scattered among the pages are brief reflections on the nature of animals, forest, flowers, people, and God. Sirine browses through the book, lingering equally over the reflections and lists of ingredients, which seem to her to have the rhythms and balance of poetry. There is one for a roast chicken that she decides she may try preparing for a daily special: chicken, saffron, garlic, lemons, oil, vinegar, rosemary. Following the ingredients the anonymous author has written and her uncle has translated: "Praise be to Allah for giving us the light of day. For these creatures with air and flight in their minds if not in their bodies." It is a prayer or a recipe? She reads it several more times and can't tell.[5]

The calibrated cookbook contains an ancestral food cosmology as evidence of an Arab culinary world-view that embraces the natural, the human, and the divine in a measured symbiosis to reveal the semiotic codes of an ancient culture and cuisine. The call to prayer manifested in the cookbook recipes mirrors Sirine's professional calling as a chef, endowing her with special powers to maintain the spiritual and cultural ethos of her Arab ancestors through the devout preparation of food; cooking becomes the essential link between the ancestral land and its diasporic configuration in the USA.

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[5] Diana Abu Jaber, *Crescent*, 315.

> There is a lot more to food than eating and cooking. Behind every dish lies a world, a culture, a history. Dishes have social meaning, they have emotional and symbolic significance. Food is about power. It is an expression of identity and ideology.[6]

The novel demonstrates the corporeality of food by indicating that Sirine's knowledge of ancestral Arab cooking runs skin deep in the form of "skin knowledge," as the language of ancestral memory. As the novel indicates,

> Her arms are dashed with red slivers of burns, and as she bends to scrape the grill surface she feels its smell passing into her hair and clothes. Even after a day off, she can still catch whiffs of it as she turns her head. (17)

Culinary tattoos in the form of cuts and minor burns leave the graphic imprint of an ancient form of cultural production on the body, providing a living text for such inscriptions in the form of the "red slivers" of memory. The body is thus the site of culinary memory, its different sensorial impressions animating all the senses by "a delicate golden thread of scent" (50). The delicacy of sensorial evocation illustrates the sense of harmony and balance needed to maintain the culinary ethic of Arab food that bases itself on a "culinary grammatology" of preparation, its syntactic elements including "roasted lamb, rice and pine nuts, tabbouleh, salad, apricot juice" (22). The delicate balance between different food combinations invalidates the binary distinctions between spicy and sweet, raw and cooked, hot and cold to produce a holistic meal in which the intensity of contrast and the individuality of each seasoning vitalizes a particular sense to create a complicated culinary symphony of texture, smell, and taste. Food patterns are regulated by "syntactic rules that govern the combination of foods to create a 'grammatical meal'."[7]

The grammar of food follows a certain method of preparation; the proportionate mixing of spices and the combination of food groups involves the skills of an alchemist. The wrong combination can adversely affect the

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[6] Claudia Roden, "Foreword" to *A Taste of Thyme: Culinary Cultures of the Middle East*, ed. Sami Zubaida & Richard Tapper (London: Tauris Parke, 2000): vii..

[7] Linda Brown & Kay Mussell, "Introduction" to *Ethnic and Regional Foodways in the US: The Performance of Group Identity*, ed. Brown & Mussell (Knoxville: U of Tennessee P, 1984): 12.

physical and spiritual well-being of a person. Like the chemical potions of the alchemist, spices need to be ground, mixed, and then roasted with a certain expertise to avoid the dangers of overcooking or burning that will either inhibit the complete expression of their flavour or significantly alter their taste. Spices also need to be measured and used in perfect proportion to create a tasty dish composed of a delicately balanced assortment of flavours. Any imbalance in measurement can lead to particular spices upsetting the blend, thereby lessening the pleasure of both cooking and eating. Well-balanced meals maintain a society's social and spiritual equilibrium, as demonstrated by Sirine's attempts to create the appropriate dishes that will dispel the exilic imbalances experienced by her clientele. In this respect, the alchemy of cooking becomes a scientific enterprise of calculation and experimentation:

> She tastes everything edible, studies the new flavors, tests the shock of them; and she learns, every time she tastes, about balance and composition, addition and subtraction. (185)

The scientific precision of a meal regulates the body's internal chemistry through culinary accuracy, balance, and refinement.

The maintenance of a culinary balance in her meals also provides Sirine with a stabilizing support to confront her own contested identity. The novel establishes a link between the body's rhythms and the rhythm of cooking to effect this balance:

> All that matters is the swirl of the movement, so familiar to Sirine, giving thought over to the body: repetitive, sustaining. Like stirring a pot. (236)

Like the whirling dervishes who seek communion with God and nature through repetitive movement, Sirine seeks wholeness in her life via the reiteration of cooking rituals that provide her with an existential centre. The rituals also embody the religious value of spiritual incantation. The repetitive swirling of the cooking pot equates with the headiness of ritualistic prayer, establishing cooking as a form of religious divination. As the novel indicates, "She pulls her uncle's topaz beads out of her pocket and settles herself by thinking of braised squab: a sauce for wild game with motes of cinnamon and smoke" (26).

The prayer beads as a medium of religious reflection inspire Sirine's culinary meditations, establishing a parallel between the kitchen's cinna-

mon and smoke and the mosque's myrrh and incense. This rapport inscribes the Arab-Muslim culinary aesthetic in the realm of the Islamic religious imaginary as revealed in the text.[8] As mentioned before, the Qur'an abounds with references to food and drink, as revealed in two Suras or chapters, Sura 55: "Paradise is planted with fruit trees, the palm and pomegranate," and Sura 47, which also describes the holy paradise as an abundant garden:

> Rivers of water unstalling, rivers of milk unchanging in flavor, and rivers of wine [...] a delight to the drinkers, rivers, too of honey purified, and therein for them is every fruit and forgiveness from their Lord.

In other words, the Qur'an describes the Islamic paradise in purely sensual terms using natural imagery to highlight the connection between Allah, food, and nature; "In the Koran, paradise is a purely sensual image of sight, sound, and taste."[9] The religiosity of the holy supports a culinary sensuality of expression to establish the kitchen as a paradisiacal sacred space animated by nature's bounty, as a sign of God's presence.

The novel associates the primacy of a nature-inspired aesthetic of food with an existential sensibility to combat the solitariness of the human condition, as the Iraqi character Han searches for a sense of community in the USA. The novel reveals this sense of solitude, magnified by the expansiveness of nature:

> Um-Nadia says 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 [...] That is the way Sirine suspects that Arabs feel everything – larger than life, feelings walking in the sky. And sometimes when she is awake in the center of the night, the night cool and succulent as heart of palm or a little chicken kabob, Sirine senses these feelings rushing in her own blood. (19)

The reference to nature as a summons to prayer is intended to manifest the 'divine revelation', a key to comprehending the mysteries of life that are

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[8] This statement does not imply that all Arab food is exclusively Muslim in its expression. Its culinary richness also includes signifiers of Arab-Jewish and Arab-Christian identity.

[9] Cf. Clifford A. Wright's on-line article, "Some Facts about Mediterranean Food History," http://www.cliffordawright.com/history/muslim_paradise.html

the very source of human anguish. Similarly, the medium of cooking inspires Sirine's primal memories of ancestral belonging as a means of connecting with the spirit of her dead parents, thereby easing the solitary burden of her sense of loss.

The novel highlights Sirine's process of remembering:

> 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. (19)

Sirine's recipes for remembering the past are prayers of commemoration to her parents inspired by the sanctity of the newly discovered kitchen space of Nadia's Café. The café becomes the starting-point of a culinary pilgrimage and the site of creative exploration. Armed with basic ingredients, the pilgrim-chef begins her spiritual and professional trajectory in the kitchen as she seeks the culinary transcendence to be found in the transformational magic of ancestral food. This transcendence is represented by the nomadic diet that sustains itself on a divinely provided scheme: "Nothing a small cup of coffee and a plate of bread and olives can't cure" (37). The transformational sustenance of this diet indicates the metaphoric and nutritional value of bread, "signifying life from its most basic to its most luxurious,"[10] together with the life-enduring qualities of olive oil, and the restorative essence of Arab coffee.

The spirituality of a dish is also reflected in the pristine quality of its presentation and preparation in adherence with the Qur'anic codes of hygiene and purification. The novel connects the spiritual aesthetic with the aesthetic pleasure of seeing a well-presented, "unadulterated" dish that exudes a certain purity of smell found in ingredients such as saffron. At the same time, each dish displays the symmetry of decoration, colouring, and flavouring through a harmonious balance of seasoning, perfuming, and adornment.[11] Like the sensory delights of paradise, food must reflect a

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[10] Sabry, "Food as a Semiotic Code in Arabic Literature," 262.

[11] Manuela Marin, "Beyond Taste: The Complements of Colour and Smell in the Medieval Arab Culinary Tradition," in *A Taste of Thyme*, ed. Sami Zubaida & Richard Tapper (London: Tauris Parke, 2000): 206.

visual and olfactory aesthetic of beauty in the elegance of its preparation. "Combining the pleasures of taste and smell in a joint gustatory experience [...] is one of the most characteristic aspects of Arab culinary tradition."[12] The visual impact of a dish must complement its olfactory impression via the vibrancy of colour and perfume to reveal the same splendour of aesthetic organization manifested in nature. The novel describes the aesthetically pleasing appearance of food: "Everything glows – the butter, a handful of chopped tomato, a bowl of parsley – ripe colors clear as a painting."[13] Sirine's meals provide a collage of "ripe colors" brushed by the creamy texture of butter onto a flavourful canvas that is brought to life by the pungent aroma of fresh parsley.

The culinary artistry of her meals continues to dazzle her admirers with their distinctive aroma and pleasing colours, reviving the senses through creative perfection. Sirine's culinary mastery is capable of transporting the body beyond its customary ability to taste and smell into the realm of the sublime, just as the devotee's spiritual expertise connects him/her with the transcendence of the soul in ecstasy. As the novel reveals,

> He holds the spoon in his mouth for a moment. She knows what he is tasting, how the broth is flavored with pepper and garlic and lustrous, deep smokiness. "And try this," she says. Vibrant vegetable greens, garlic, and lemon. "And this". Herbal, meaty, vaguely fruity. He places the spoon on the counter. He closes his eyes and inhales [...]. He touches his lips. (193)

When Sirine prepares her Iraqi lover Hanif's childhood foods, she has the power to send him on a subliminal journey of recollection. This 'imagined' journey bonds him to the homeland so that he can figuratively reach the original Garden of Eden and its sensory abundance of olives, fruits, dates, lemons, herbs, and leafy greens.

The Jouissance of the Kitchen

The staples of bread and olive oil as foundational elements of Arab cuisine become Sirine's tools of feminist inquiry to politicize the kitchen as a site of cultural and personal subjectivity. The novel describes the

[12] Manuela Marin, "Beyond Taste," 214.
[13] Abu Jaber, *Crescent*, 192.

kitchen as an energizing space for the protagonist, for whom the rigour of routine parallels the rigour of critical inquiry:

> Sirine wakes early and braves the cars in order to ride her bike from West L.A. to Westwood. She's used to the quick rhythms and physical demands of the kitchen and she likes to exert herself. (25)

The physical exertion of the body complements the intellectual action of the mind to transform the kitchen into a site of knowledge and learning. The protagonist constructs her script of subjectivity in the kitchen aided by the recipes of creativity, contemplative reflection, and family history:

> 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. (58)

As a site of meditation where the chopping of carrots resembles the ritualized telling of prayer beads, the kitchen becomes the sanctuary of family memories that centre the heroine by providing her with a genealogy of origin. The kitchen as feminine space is the locus of feminist knowledge imparted by the mother to the daughter, unmediated by patriarchal constructions and expectations:

> Like a homeland without borders, the safe environment of a feminist kitchen provides a space where gender is no longer a given image defined by the masculine, but a means of exploration to a whole spectrum of sensual, sexual, and textual possibilities.[14]

The kitchen's expansive space reflects the open-ended nature of critical exploration, facilitating the reclaiming of self through experimentation, adaptability, and creative spatial remappings. Sirine's mother learns these lessons in her own mixed-race marriage, in which food provides the basic language skills needed for cultural dialogue. By giving her daughter the practical, hands-on 'recipes' to negotiate life, the mother imparts valuable survival skills to her daughter, who must likewise negotiate the duality of her own life. The mother's knowledge constitutes a kind of coherent

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[14] Maria Claudia André, "Culinary Fictions," in *Chicanas and Latin American Women Writers Exploring the Realm of the Kitchen as A Self-Empowering Site* (Lewiston NY: Edwin Mellen, 2001): 17.

feminist culinary narrative that provides "practical recipes and samples on the 'how-to' perform a variety of feminist tasks such as deconstructing phallocentric discourses, cooking desire to the point of *jouissance*, or simply tuning up to the Mother's primal song."[15]

The mother's primal song resonates in specific dishes that preserve her memory in an inward culinary landscape, providing the framework of reference needed by her daughter. The maternal culinary heritage depicted in Abu Jaber's novel reflects the cultural agency of resistance and endurance and is based on textural complexity, stylistic fluidity, subtle flavouring, and nutritional vitality. In other words, the mother teaches her daughter the importance of certain 'memory foods' that inscribe an entire ethos of harmonious living as her best defence against cultural alienation. As the novel indicates,

> Sirine learned about food from her parents. Even though her mother was American, her father always said his wife thought about food like an Arab. Sirine's mother strained the salted 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. (50)

By assimilating the preparation of Arab food to her own identity as an American woman, the mother disrupts fixed notions of Americanness based on a whiteness/alterity binary. She creatively seasons the platter of absolutisms with fragrant additions that both sensitize and arabize these nationalistic definitions of identity. As a culinary activist, the mother provides a paradigm of contestation for her daughter's future engagements with Americanness in adulthood.

Stuffed grape leaves and baklava are the mother's 'memory food', encoding the oral culture of cooking. Grapevines grow abundantly throughout the Arab world and in North America, where they are used for winemaking and fruit consumption. Cooked grape leaves provide the very soul of Middle Eastern food in the form of dolmas that are stuffed with rice, olive oil, garlic, lemons, onions, herbs, and ground lamb. The Arab-American scholar Therese Saliba indicates that grape-leaf picking was an important ritual for the women of her family, notably her grandmother, who introduced her granddaughter to a female cultural heritage that provided

[15] André, "Culinary Fictions," 21.

the backbone 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."[16] As sturdy vines that negotiate identity in the Arab diaspora, grape leaves also provide the necessary taste of ancestral memory located within their folded leaves. Sirine associates the making of dolma with a childhood activity. She learns the art of preservation through the tactile skills of rolling out the leaves and filling them with the appropriate quantity of the meat mixture:

> Sirine's earliest memory was of sitting on a phone book on a kitchen chair, the sour-tart smell of pickled grape leaves in the air. Her mother spread the leaves flat on the table like little floating hands, placed the spoonful of rice and meat at the center of each one, and Sirine with her tiny fingers rolled the leaves up tighter and neater than anyone else could – tender, garlicky, meaty packages that burst in the mouth. (50)

The preservation of memory in neatly packed garlicky capsules highlights the oral component of historical documentation. The family collectively inscribes its personal history of exile, migration, identity, and cultural authority on the flattened leaves, which resemble archival pages. The inscription of memory is a bitter-sweet act of commemoration wherein the sweetness of remembering is mixed with the painful bitterness of loss and death to leave a tender yet pungent aftertaste in the mouth. Together with the honey-toned sweetness of baklava or nut-filled layers of filo dough, these foods encompass the entire sensory range of Arab and Middle Eastern cuisine based on the mathematical precision of layering and filling. The techniques are vital tools of cultural construction and conservation.

The very process of making baklava symbolizes the act of making memories through communal effort. The layering of nuts and paper-thin dough to create a refined culinary treat parallels the tenuous progression of memory,whose delicate texture provides a lifeline to the past. Like the folds of memory, baklava-making involves a fragile internal organization in which a combination of liquid and solid substances preserves the composition of each sweetened square:

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[16] Therese Saliba, "Grapeleaves," *Food For Our Grandmothers: Writings by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminists*, ed. Joanna Kadi (Boston MA: South End, 1994): 189.

> Mondays are for baklava, which she learned to make by watching her parents. Her mother said that a baklava-maker should have sensitive, supple hands, so she was in charge of opening and unpeeling the paper-thin layers of dough and placing them in a stack in the tray. Her father was in charge of pastry-brushing each layer of dough with a coat of drawn butter. It was systematic yet graceful: her mother carefully unpeeling each layer and placing them in the tray where Sirine's father painted them. It was important to move quickly so that the unbuttered layers didn't dry out and start to fall apart. (58–59)

Baklava-making involve the precision, complexity, and dexterity of the choreographed movements of a dance troupe; one false step can jeopardize the synchronicity of group effort. The harmonious integration of the self into the ensemble subdues the egotism of the individual while promoting the group ethos of community building in a hostile environment, as an act of love. Consequently, making baklava in a society that continues to marginalize its Arab-American and mixed-race citizens becomes the ultimate act of spreading love in a hate-filled milieu, while valorizing the sanctity of an Arab-Muslim and American-Christian union in marriage. The holy union of Sirine's parents testifies to this love:

> This was one of the ways that Sirine learned how her parents loved each other – their concerted movements like a dance; they swam together through the round arcs of her mother's arms and her father's tender strokes. (59)

This harmonized act of love symbolizes the very order of life as a coded and fragile palimpsest pregnant with the ethereal essence of "sugar, cinnamon, chopped walnuts, clarified butter, filo dough" contained within "its crackling layers, all lightness and scent of orange blossoms." The memory of her parents' baklava-making routine embraces the senses of the adult Sirine several years later as evidence of their sensorial presence in death. Memory thus establishes its primacy of origin in Sirine's psyche through the profoundly traditional act of making baklava. Its disruption stems from sensory inversions that displace the order of life, heightened by the tastelessness of forgetting: "And Sirine feels unsettled when she tries to begin breakfast without preparing the baklava first; she can't find her place in things" (59). Her sense of 'placelessness' is revealed in the apparent 'visibility' of her americanized physical appearance of blonde hair and white skin, which superficially aligns her with normative markings of mainstream identity. The visibility of difference eclipses her internal

Arab landscape; grafted onto the invisibility of her soul, this is articulated in the orality of food:

> She is so white. Her eyes wide, almond-shaped, 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. (205).

> Let the beauty we love be what we do.
> There are hundreds of ways to kneel and kiss the ground[17]

The idea of landscape has particular resonance in the novel, given the link between the culinary garden and the garden of paradise, as mentioned earlier. Reflecting the mother's internal language, the landscape

> is also inevitably tinged with smells, foods, colors, emotional connectedness, psychological closeness or distancing, nostalgia, and individual history. The idea of landscape is, therefore, a complex one that is often shaped by individual history, culture and emotions.[18]

Landscape provides a blueprint for the sensory nuances of memory as a multi-textured palimpsest of psychic and emotional impulses, individual and collective history, creative expression, and corporeal affiliation. The mother's culinary skill imprints itself on her daughter's consciousness at an early age via a conjuring act that constantly renews her culinary spell over the family. The novel compares the enticing aromas of the mother's cooking to a magic spell that bewitches the beholder: "The smell of the food cooking always brought her father into the kitchen. It was a magic spell" (50). Food becomes the mother's love-potion for her family, a potent talisman of care and protection that envelops them in the aroma of memorable enchantment.

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[17] Jalal ad-Din Rumi, "Spring Giddiness."

[18] *Infinite Divisions: An Anthology of Chicana Literature*, ed. Tey Rebolledo & Eliana Rivero (Tuscon: U of Arizona P. 1993): 157.

Similarly, the kitchen becomes a laboratory of pleasure for Sirine when she participates in the sensory gratification of cooking for others, and a means of erotic exploration via the intensity of flavours that titillate the taste-buds while bursting forth in fragrant (and mouth-watering) expression. The mother's culinary secrets become the daughter's initiation rites into the realm of *jouissance* or the process of 'coming-into-being' through the links between food, sex, and poetry, as vibrant forms of orality. In other words, the aesthetic of *jouissance* encompasses the complementarity of erotic pleasure, appetite stimulation, and the sensuality of literary knowledge. The kitchen becomes the very site of '*jouissance* production' where the fires of artistic creation ignite the passion and intensity of a primal female energy that unleashes its creative potential in the smouldering proximity of smell (food) and scent (body).

> There are so many slight things she can distinguish between with her senses: she can smell the difference between lavender and clover honeys; she can feel the softening progression of ripeness in a pear; and she can sense how much heat is rising in a panful of gravy, lentils, garlic. She knows all of these subtle things through her skin. (318)

The chemistry of the female body provides its own manual for love-making through the erotics of 'alimentary pleasure'. The body's internal thermometer regulates the rising heat of passion symbolized by the panful of flavoured gravy together with the softening progression of sweet kisses on the pear-shaped face of the lover. The novel also reveals how Sirine and Han's chemistry synchronizes with the chemistry of food to produce a combustible language that speaks the intimacy of love and sexual passion:

> She believes that at one time the elements inside Han and herself had called to each other, like the way ingredients in a dish speak to each other, a taste of ginger vibrates with something like desire beside a bit of garlic, or the way a sip of wine might call to the olive oil in a dish. (318)

The private language of love is spiced with aphrodisiacs such as ginger that stimulate the appetite while heightening orgasmic pleasure.

In his study *God's Banquet*, Geert Jan van Gelder argues that metaphors of food and sex are intimately connected in Arab literary thought: "Consumption and sexual consummation are obviously linked, for instance in

the Arabic expression *al-atyaban*, 'the two good (or nice) things'."[19] Cooking, eating, and sex are basic forms of pleasure and sustenance for an individual. To be deprived of food and sex is synonymous with death as a form of sensory paralysis, also reflected in the tastelessness of processed and commercially fabricated foods that dominate the American diet and its culinary commodification. The US penchant for TV dinners and frozen foods leads to desensitization and the body's chemical imbalances that have contributed to the neurosis of the Western diet marked by allergies, nutritional deprivation, and food fads. Dietary restrictions constitute a form of culinary aggression against the consumer; food loses its sensory and nutritional value to become an object of fear contained in insipid capsules and bottled remedies.

> She sits on the edge of a cluster of movie people slouched in lawn chairs who are comparing the foods they're allergic to – wheat, dairy, corn, nuts, coffee, chocolate, yeast, wine, onions, eggs – which turns into a conversation about different diets they've tried – Blood Type, Scarsdale, Grapefruit, D.N.A. – which turns into a conversation about their favorite Chinese herbs, aromatherapies, tinctures, and vitamin supplements. The chatter bores Sirine [...]. (41)

The dietary dysfunction that is the staple meal plan of bourgeois living reveals a corresponding sexual impotence that seeks remedy in the herbal cures and supplements of trendy health-food stores. The globalization of the bourgeois health ethos indicates spiritual, emotional, and physical impoverishment in the absence of curative alternatives such as "the daily pounding of spices – sesame, thyme, sumac" (218), the very ingredients of a healthy and well-balanced life-style.

The pounding of spices infuses new life into the body through the movements of the hand as a life-producing force. The novel pays tribute to the sanctity of the cook's hand that creates life in the kitchen, a wondrous act worthy of a poetic blessing: "*Tisslam eedayki*," he says, *Bless your hand* – the compliment to a cook" (200). Like the nurturing hands of the mother shaping the spirituality of her daughter's culinary awareness, the cook's hand nourishes the demoralized spirits of her clientele via the culinary energy produced in the kitchen. This force also enables her lover

[19] Geert Jan Van Gelder, *God's Banquet: Food in Classical Arabic Literature* (New York: Columbia UP. 2000): 109.

Hanif to experience the heights of subliminal ecstasy. Maria André confirms the empowering agency, for the female cook, of the kitchen, "a place of jouissance, an unbridled libidinal zone, where the feminine is allowed to realize any imaginings."[20] These imaginings become the key to sexual and sensory receptivity. The culinary discourse enables the two lovers to 'eat their differences' through the sharing of food. Food becomes a neutralizer of cultural alterity; culinary differences are both absorbed and appreciated in new bonds of understanding.

In fact, food becomes a special language of communication between Han and Sirine by obliging them to revise their stereotypical misconceptions of each other based on an initial absence of sensory responsiveness. This impasse is reflected in Sirine's cultural alienation from her Arab roots without the supporting culinary systems of identification, and Han's textbook knowledge of American culture based on his mediated 'foreign' perceptions. Han reduces Sirine's identity to a racialized relativism based on norms of an acceptable/unacceptable Arab essence. He measures her ability to conform to the 'purity' of an ambiguous ideal. By limiting identity to a differential equation, he situates Arabness in diametrical opposition to Americanness as two composite entities without any integrative potential; notions of Arab culture and American culture become monolithically ratified racialisms. This binary is reinforced when Sirine betrays a certain unfamiliarity with the specifics of her father's culture in the absence of specialized knowledge: "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). Her involuntary ancestral imaginings are concealed behind her projected Americanness, as witness her profound ignorance of her father's culture and her inability to speak Arabic.

However, the loss of her father's language is made up for by her recovery of the language of Arab cuisine. The revival of this dimension of her dual heritage is occasioned by Han's presence, when she begins to rethink her American identity in terms of plurality and a cultural symbiosis of experience, reflected in her re-imagining of a traditional Thanksgiving meal: "At work, Sirine announces that this year will be an Arab Thanksgiving with rice and pine nuts and ground lamb in the turkey instead of cornbread, and yogurt sauce instead of cranberries" (184). The recreated meal displaces the centrality of the normative by introducing the

[20] André, "Culinary Fictions," 33.

possibility of culinary synthesis as a marker of identity. This awareness also helps Sirine to de-essentialize Han's identity, correcting the romantic nostalgia that has distorted her search for an idealized Arab authenticity represented by his exotic foreignness and exilic status.

Similarly, Han attempts to understand Sirine's duality through the excitement of culinary experimentation. His inability to converse with her in his native tongue, which he assumes she should speak fluently as proof of a legitimate claim to partial Arabness, prompts a desire to learn how to cook American food from a quintessentially American cookbook, Rombauer and Becker's *The Joy of Cooking*. The novel describes his efforts to acquire a new language:

> But Han just seemed 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. (68)

These attempts indicate his willingness to engage in 'culinary bilingualism' as a way of communicating with a woman whom he perceives to be authentically American ("'I meant for tonight to be all-American for you'," 68) despite her protests to the contrary ("'But I'm not really all-American'," 68). The proverbial association of the act of falling in love with the process of learning a new tongue is concretized in the foreplay of eating to reveal the "analogies between love and cooking, food and love, eating up the other, as well as revising the traditional versus the new ways of production."[21]

Knaffea, a baklava dessert of vermicelli noodles filled either with whole pistachios, a nut mixture, cream or mozzarella cheese,[22] symbolizes the food of desire. The art of making this delicate dessert reflects the tender poetics of love: "Sirine stands in the front kitchen and slides the morning pastry out of the oven, fragrant with brown spices, and layered with nuts and sugar and cheese. "'Ah, you've made knaffea today'," Um-Nadia says as she sails past Sirine. "'Who are we in love with, I wonder?'" Then her dark, secret laugh" (38). The preparation of *knaffea*, as a

[21] Maria Claudia André, "Culinary Fictions," 32–33.

[22] Nawal Nasrallah's cookbook, *Delights from the Garden of Eden: A Cookbook and A History of the Iraqi Cuisine* (Boston MA: 1st Books, 2003), provides superb recipes for different varieties of *knaffea*. See pp. 478–82.

labour of love, becomes an invitation to penetrate the hidden mysteries of the pastry's nest-shaped browned noodles, their delicately sweetened centre moistened by the erotically inspired culinary fantasy of sublime taste. Later in the novel, references to the orality of food and sex are made explicit in corporeal exchanges between Sirine and Han, who feed each other through the intimacy of the erotics of pleasure:

> Han fills Sirine's plate and feeds her a morsel of lamb from his fingers, as if food is their private language [...] the words flow into the eating. And she eats and eats. The flavors are intense in her mouth, the sweet-almondy fruitiness of the pistachios beside the smoky sour taste of the sumac, delicate saffron, and herbal notes of olive. Her stomach begins to ache, unused to so much food. (266)

The lovers participate in a sensory extravaganza as an 'afterword' to their lovemaking, creating their own script of culinary and sexual fulfilment.

Food and love thus provide the basic vocabulary for the language of corporeality, in which orality becomes a sensual form of bodily expression, further reinforced by the oral gratification of poetic recitation:

> She tries to be casual, inspects her nails, smells traces of butter left over from cooking lunch, an incense of oil and grass. But her mind still veers between poetry and Hanif. (26)

The traces of cooking on the body resemble the after-taste of lovemaking as the true inspiration for poetic creation. If love provides food for the body, poetry furnishes the essential sustenance for the soul, soaring beyond the bounds of diaspora into the realm of an ancestral timelessness exemplified thus:

> the image of an old man sweeping the streets in Baghdad, Jerusalem, and Damascus. Sirine sees trees filled with birdcages, sparkling with colored songbirds. She sees sinewy sands, palm trees bending in the sky. These sound like places she might like to visit. (27)

Arabic poetry and cuisine provide Sirine with similar referents of ancestral affiliation; poetic and culinary flights of fantasy engender an enabling discourse to mediate the anxiety of belonging.

Diasporic Gatherings

Nadia's Café becomes a site to mediate such anxieties of belonging by providing a culinary diasporic space consonant with Homi Bhabha's "gatherings"[23] amid the dispersal of exile and immigration. Avtar Brah describes diaspora space thus:

> Diaspora space is the intersectionality of diaspora, border, and dis/location as a point of confluence of economic, political, cultural, and psychic processes. It is where multiple subject positions are juxtaposed, contested, proclaimed or disavowed; where the permitted and the prohibited perpetually interrogate; and where the accepted and the transgressive imperceptibly mingle even while these syncretic forms may be disclaimed in the name of purity and tradition.[24]

According to Brah, diaspora space is a contested site of translocation, a space that 'imagines' itself through creative spatial remappings of located-ness and displacement to become a migratory space or space in-formation. As an alternative to spatial hegemonies that frame the permanence of border markings, diaspora space reveals the impermanence of fixed boundaries by re-creating itself through transnational solidarity. These affiliations transgress and rupture the normative fixity of nationally conceived spaces figured solely in terms of race, class, and ethnicity. Nadia's Café imagines a culinary nation in which the socio-cultural practice of eating Arab food as a reminder of home in the diaspora – "they love her food – the flavors that remind them of their homes" (17) – provides a common locus of integration across racial, linguistic, and national lines. Culinary routes establish the primordial link between the homeland and its diaspora via fragrant traces of memory as beacons of orientation. The café becomes a point of diasporic *rassemblage* in the USA through the commonality of food habits. These habits provide an alternative channel of 'affiliation-in-dispossession' experienced by a transnational diaspora of ethnic 'minorities', exiles, international students, refugees, the psychically alienated, and other constituencies relegated to the margins.

The novel describes the diaspora space of the café:

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[23] See Homi K. Bhabha's edited volume, *Nation and Narration* (London & New York: Routledge: 1990).

[24] Avtar Brah, *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* (London: Routledge. 1996): 208.

> Nadia's 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 around 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 blues hollows in their throats, blue motes for their wives and children back home [...]. (17)

The café re-creates the familiarity of 'home' through the dynamic of home cooking; its familiar tastes and fragrances are powerful signifiers of memory. The *mezze* provide affordable appetizers, easing entry into a foreign space. This space eventually becomes a welcoming hearth, offering the lonely students the comfort of home food: "They order the smallest, cheapest dishes: bean dip and garlic; bread and olives and thickened yogurt" (37). By breaking bread together, the students survive the trauma of foreignness by creating an imagined family with its communal roots in the olives and the thickness of the *laban* or yoghurt as a symbol of the mother's nourishing milk.

The welcoming space offered to the wandering tribes of students and immigrants by Um-Nadia, the diasporic mother, is, according to Bhabha,

> more hybrid in the articulation of cultural differences and identifications – gender, race or class – than can be represented in any hierarchical or binary structuring of social antagonism.[25]

By observing the ethics of conduct governing the café, its clientele emerges as a non-nationally constituted extended family that must transcend its partisan 'tribal rivalries' to be accommodated within this space. As a cultural agent, Sirine provides the framework for these codes of ethical behaviour through the language of food when she renders her guests speechless via the magnificence of her cooking. Instead of becoming the traditional victims of domestic space through backbreaking kitchen labour, Sirine and Um-Nadia control the dynamics of the socio-spatial interactions within the café by manipulating the sensory reactions of the diners. The seductive 'authenticity' of Sirine's cooking lures them back for more, in a ritual of repetitive submission to a woman-centred mode of cultural production. It is interesting also to note that the clients of Nadia's Café are predominantly male. The novel suggests that diasporic

[25] Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 292.

Arab women are capable of achieving a greater sense of self-sufficiency and diasporic adaptability by cooking meals in their own kitchens:

> The few women who do manage to come to America are good students – they study at the library and cook for themselves, and only the men spend their time arguing and being lonely, drinking tea and trying to talk to Um-Nadia, Mireille, and Sirine. (17)

The vulnerability displayed by the men who need the protective care of the women of Nadia's Café invalidates Western stereotypes of Arab machismo while negating dominant misperceptions of Arab female passivity and subservience. The women become their own agents of production via the autonomy of food preparation.

Nadia's Café embraces several intersecting diasporas:

> Um-Nadia, the owner of the café and all-around boss, is always tilting her hip against the students' chairs, keeping them company [...] while her daughter Mireille, and Victor Hernandez, the young Mexican busboy hopelessly in love with Mireille, and the Central American custodian Cristobal, and Sirine the chef are in motion around her. (17–18)

An internal pan-Arab diaspora merges with a larger 'Third-World' Latin-American diaspora that further accommodates a local US community of truncated identities represented by the Iraqi-American chef. This assembly reveals the richness of transnationality maintained by the collaborative politics of food. The spirit of cooperation demonstrated by this culinarily inspired 'united nations' provides a new model for multilateral communication in which the heavy hand of the law and its policing of national borders loses its relevance. In fact, the police presence becomes an accommodative, habitual presence in the local geography of this culinary diaspora, succumbing to its powerful flavours and the hypnotic influence of Bedouin soap operas:

> There are two American policemen – one white and one black – who come to the café every day, order fava bean dip and lentils fried with rice and onions, and have become totally entranced by the Bedouin soap opera plotlines involving ancient blood feuds, bad children, and tribal honor. (20)

By absorbing Arab food and Arab popular culture, what for the police had been the criminality of diaspora space becomes a locus of learning. Mainstream US misconceptions of Arabs as terrorists and religious fanatics

who warrant close surveillance for reasons of 'homeland security' are neutralized by narrative reversals in which police aggression against Arabs metamorphoses into a hunger for cultural stimulation. This hunger for difference is betokened by the policemen's need for the 'security' of fried lentils and the comfort of the soap opera's romantic fantasies.

The policemen's law-enforcement interventions become irrelevant in Nadia's Café, where the diasporic occupation of space occurs peacefully via the metaphoric presence of the 'olive branch' of particular Arab dishes and the cooking medium of olive oil that flavours all the food. The diasporic space of the café achieves its autonomy – indeed, sovereignty – through non-violent culinary persuasion, thus arabizing space on the 'mainland' instead of being relegated to the suburban periphery:

> At Nadia's Café, there is a TV tilted in the corner above the cash register, permanently tuned to the all-Arabic station, with news from Qatar, variety shows and a shopping channel from Kuwait, endless Egyptian movies, Bedouin soap operas in Arabic, and American soap operas with Arabic subtitles. 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. (21)

In diaporic space, Arabic becomes an American language while Al-Jazeera becomes the mainstream news source. The homelands of Kuwait, Qatar, Egypt map their location in the USA through spatial reconfigurations of home mediated by a virtual presence and further consolidated by the regularity of habit.

The presence of the two police regulars legitimizes these cultural reversals, in which Arabic ceases to become a foreign language and Arabs regain their humanity as normal, peace-loving people via indigenous media representations that challenge Western bias. Similarly, the metropolitan area of Los Angeles gets a creative face-lift when its Iranian residents stake their claim in the city by renaming it "Teherangeles, with the beauty parlors and bookstores and food markets and the names of everything in Farsi with its Arabic script and different meaning" (24). If identity is situated in terms of place, the Iranians affirm their rootedness as US citizens by deconstructing the national demarcations of boundaries through linguistic makeovers that invalidate the categories of 'acceptable' citizenship established by the immigration and naturalization services.

At the same time, this discussion of police presence in Nadia's Café is a significant contrast to the previous restaurant, where the CIA presence forced the Egyptian owner out during the Gulf War. The owner of the former "Falafel Faraoh" was under surveillance for an entire month for supposedly harbouring terrorists disguised as Middle-Eastern students and supporting "terrorist schemes developing in the Arab-American community," even though "he'd never heard of such a thing in his life" (18). As the beginning of the novel demonstrates, police presence is not always benign, especially in terms of differential equations of gender. Arab men are more likely to be targeted as 'objects' of suspicion and criminal activity in accordance with the police department's race- and gender-biased codes of profiling and harassment. The Egyptian man's 'obvious' Arabness, determined by phenotype, skin colour, and accent, contrasts with the light-skinned europeanized features of Sirine and Um-Nadia, to establish a racialized dichotomy between 'unacceptable' male terrorism and 'acceptable' female exoticism. This negative dualism reduces the Arab characters to fetishized commodities in a terror/seduction paradigm created by the racist gaze of the policemen and CIA agents.

Food of Peace

In an effort to circumvent the creation of ethnic enclaves, the very location of Nadia's Café becomes a possible site of peace negotiations. Food provides a means of brokering peace to alleviate ethnic tension through culinary exchange:

> Even though Nadia's Café is in the middle of an Iranian neighborhood, there are few Iranian customers. After the long, bitter war between Iraq and Iran, some of Um-Nadia's Iranian neighbors refused to enter the café because of Sirine, the Iraqi-American chef. Still, Khoorosh, the Persian owner of the Victory Market up the street, appeared on Sirine's first day of work announcing that he was ready to forgive the Iraqis on behalf of the Iranians [...] He asked if she knew how to make the Persian specialty khoresht fessenjan, his favorite walnut and pomegranate stew, and when she promised to learn, he returned later in the day and presented her with a potted pomegranate tree. (20)

Food speaks a common language reflected in the cultural exchange of spices and other ingredients via different spice routes that have further

refined local cuisine as evidence of the "national, communal and global dimensions of Middle Eastern food cultures."[26] This commonality is found in the reference to the Persian specialty *fessenjan* as a possible inspiration for its Iraqi counterpart *fasanjoun*, a similarly prepared sweet-and-sour pomegranate stew with walnuts and meat.[27] Khoorosh's peace-offering of a pomegranate tree indicates the need to reaffirm the cultural ties between the two countries established since medieval times by their cuisine despite (and because of) the current politically engineered rivalries.

The pomegranate tree is a symbol of good intent and one of the most sacred trees in Persian and Arab cosmology. Referred to as a gift from Allah, it occupies a place of eminence in the Qur'an alongside the date palm and olive tree. As Sura 6 reveals,

> It is He who sends down water from the sky with which We bring forth the buds of every plant. From this We bring forth green foliage and close-growing grain, palm-trees laden with clusters of dates, vineyards and olive groves and pomegranates alike and different. Behold, their fruits when they ripen. Surely in these there are signs for true believers.[28]

Noted for its medicinal properties, thirst-quenching qualities, vibrancy of colour, and delectable taste, the fruit of the pomegranate tree, as a peace emissary from God, is the food of diasporic consciousness. Just as the fruit's multiple grains are preserved within a crimson-red protective skin as a reflection of nature's glory, the gathering of a community of diasporic Arab-Muslim believers indicates the importance of realizing *tawhid* or the unity of body and spirit within a reconstituted '*Umma* or collectivity in the US metropolis.

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[26] Sami Zubaida, "National, Communal and Global Dimensions in Middle Eastern Food Cultures," in *A Taste of Thyme*, 33–45.

[27] Nawal Nasrallah, *Delights from the Garden of Eden*, 229.

[28] *Al-An'am* 6:99, referred to in Lytton John Musselman's on-line article, "Trees in the Koran and the Bible." http://www.fao.org.DOCREP/005/y9882E/y9882e11.htm Musselman uses N.J. Dawood's translated version of the Koran (*The Koran with Parallel Arabic Text* [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1997]).

Diasporic Feasting

The novel celebrates the importance of community through two important communal feasts, Thanksgiving and Ramadan, as two integral parts of Sirine's identity. These parts are connected by the fragile membrane of her diasporic culinary consciousness, which can be compared to the careful preparation of *leben* yoghurt. "She cannot stop stirring because it is a fragile, temperamental sauce, given to breaking and curdling if given its way" (346). The delicate composition of the yoghurt reflects a straddling of cultures, a balancing act that can either energize syncretic movement on the "dance floor" of the Arab-American hyphen or lead to the dislocating effects of cultural alienation. The Thanksgiving feast is thus a pretext for a 'Third-World' gathering within the comfort of a diasporic home:

> By noon there is Han, Mireille, Victor Hernandez, and his cousin Eliazer, Aziz the poet, Nathan, Um-Nadia, Cristobal the custodian, Shark, Jenoob, Abdullah, Schmaal, and Gharb – five of the lonely students from the café – Sirine, and her uncle. (193)

The sharing of a quintessentially 'American' feast creates a new family of diasporic pilgrims who affirm their 'Third-World' roots in the 'new world' by re-routing the Mayflower's compass along familiar Mediterranean seaways to trace the history of Middle-Eastern migration to the USA as another chapter in the country's history.

Sirine's uncle blesses this new voyage of discovery in which food embodies the immigrant's special language of longing and nostalgia, as reflected in the crescent moon and mint tea: "'Well, look at us'," Sirine's uncle says,

> "sitting around here like a bunch of Americans with our crazy turkey. All right, now, I want to make a big toast. Here's to sweet, unusual families, pleasant dogs who behave, food of this nature, the seven types of smiles, the crescent moon, and a nice cup of tea with mint every day. *Sahtain*. Good luck and God bless us everyone." (193)

By claiming the turkey as a part of their meal and 'arabizing' it with the cinnamon-scented fragrance of the ancestral home as a potent flavour of love, the new pilgrims feast on a palatable meal by re-inventing a mainstream culinary tradition through ethnic affirmation. Sirine initiates these

culinary explorations of identity, aided by her uncle's navigational skills as a long-time Iraqi immigrant in the USA:

> In the past Sirine would be absorbed for weeks with thinking about what she would cook for Thanksgiving. It was her mother's favorite holiday and the traditional American foods always made Sirine think of her, the warmth of their table in the fall; it was among the earliest and best of her memories. But things are different now. Her mind has been taken up by Han. (184)

Traditional Thanksgiving as a remembrance of the past is converted into sweet memories of the present in which the past and present merge into an enduring culinary time-and lifeline preserved by lingering aromas. When she re-creates the Thanksgiving meal, Sirine also performs an explicitly political act by 'imagining' diasporic affiliations between an ancient Arab and a pre-Columbian culinary past as evidence of a revised 'New World Americanity'. The unacknowledged cultural appropriation of indigenous foods from the Americas such as turkey, squash, pumpkin, and corn by the 'First-World' Pilgrim Fathers to create their 'founding' meal is reversed by a gesture of 'Third-World reclaiming' in the novel through the politicization of presence represented by Victor, Cristóbal, and the other Latino characters. The latter symbolically rectify the original exclusion of their indigenous American ancestors from this 'authentically' designated American meal by joining Sirine and her other guests at the Thanksgiving table in bonds of transnational communion.

At the same time, one of the characters, Nathan, comments on the ironies of the Thanksgiving meal by contrasting it with the hardships faced by those malnourished by sanctions in Iraq: "'The real irony of today is that this sort of all-American feasting and gorging is going on when, back home, they are starving'" (197). His criticism exemplifies the problematic seduction of the food paradigm in the face of these power inequities wherein Iraqis in exile can enjoy the privilege of cooking and eating a copious meal while their compatriots, especially children, die of malnutrition and starvation resulting from trade sanctions and food embargoes imposed by the USA. The Thanksgiving celebration is thus inscribed in the politics of death and destruction when the USA feeds and sustains itself uncritically at the expense of the 'human targets' of its foreign policy. The power imbalance between First-World feasting and Third-Word abjection revives the memory of the founding Thanksgiving

meal in which the Pilgrim Fathers enjoyed/appropriated the bounties of the indigenous harvests before decimating Native Americans populations.

The novel also describes Ramadan as a celebration of diaspora in a month-long ritual of communal fasting and eating commemorated in specific foods as markers of identity and religious identification. As Richard Tapper and Sami Zubaida affirm, "those who eat together implicitly mark their common identity and equality, particularly on religious occasions."[29] The inscription of the personal in the social and religious Qur'anic ethics of conduct manifests itself in the communal breaking of each day's fast with sweetened milk and dates as food from Paradise. Paradise is depicted as an oasis of free-flowing milk and abundant date palms, the favourite foods of the Prophet Mohammed:

> Tomorrow is the start of Ramadan, a month of daily fasting, broken by an *iftar*, a special meal after sunset and a bite before sunrise. Han has told her that 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).

Ramadan symbolizes the special nature of food as evidence of God's generous presence, urging the believer to give thanks through a regime of discipline and sacrifice. The partaking of food should be earned as a reward for having led a pious life; it is not a sign of entitlement, to be taken for granted. Fasting also strengthens the body's powers of endurance, by rehearsing control of the appetite in times of prolonged shortage and deprivation resulting from man-made disasters such as famine, war, and trade embargoes. Physical control becomes a sign of spiritual control to embrace the Divine in acts of moderation, will-power, and eventual self-mastery. At Ramadan, the devout observance of food rituals embraces the philosophical foundations of Islam, counteracting the precepts of Western individualism and the capitalist consumption/production of food. The choice of foods with which to break the fast is thus important as a reflection of the spiritual and social cosmovision of Islam, concretized in "sweet qatayif crepes and cookies and creamy drinks and thick apricot nectar. Sirine decides to distract herself by looking up some of the more unusual dishes in honor of the month" (244).

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[29] Tapper and Zubaida, *A Taste of Thyme*, 11.

The preparation of Ramadan food becomes Sirine's first-hand introduction to the Islamic side of her Arab-American heritage, correcting her previous unfamiliarity as exposed in Han's comments: "'I saw that you had some prayer beads – ' He holds out one hand as if imitating her. 'The way you held them was very delightful – very American'" (28). While she initially submits to Han's tutelage, Sirine progressively becomes her own culinary apprentice by experimenting with different Ramadan meals, culminating in the *Eid* feast that signals the termination of a month of spiritual rigour and sensory delight. This meal, as a reflection of "Allah's Banquet," includes the customary preparation of "whole stuffed lamb, baklava, and knaffea pastry with sweet cheese" (265) together with the acquired mastery of new items, "special treats like killaj pastry, qatayif pancakes, zalabiyya fritters, and ma'mul cookies. Sirine no longer has time for anything but cooking and baking" (265). The discipline and concentration required to cook and bake these delicacies parallels the rigours of fasting that initiate Sirine into Islam as a sign of her 'submission' to the laborious preparation of these foods imprinted with the sweet essence of the Divine.

Cooking brings Sirine full circle in her search for ontological wholeness via an exploratory trajectory of initiation, experimentation, and realization in the kitchen. The novel focuses on the restorative powers of Arab food as a means of rehabilitating the self from the tension of hyphenation and cultural invalidation: "Only when she cooks, in those moments of stirring and tasting, does she feel fully restored to herself" (340). The success of the protagonist's existential quest is based on the ultimate recognition that she does not have to choose between the two sides of her identity as evidence of a binary conflict. She can rightfully claim her subjectivity by being Arab and American simultaneously through culinary epiphanies in the kitchen that teach her important lessons in negotiation and affirmation. The language of Arab cuisine as a scripted culinary semiotic provides Sirine with the necessary instruments with which to negotiate the complex American landscape where she finally achieves a sense of place 'at home. She thereby honours both her parents and the nomadic desert ancestors via ritualistic repetition in the diaspora as a consecration of memory. Ancestral family traces survive the Atlantic crossings of the immigrants in perfumed whiffs of memory that emanate from the kitchen of Nadia's Café. These culinary rituals of memory mark their authority in the Arab and American diasporic consciousness. Sirine's culinary explorations in the

kitchen establish her reputation as a cultural chronicler endowed with the historical consciousness necessary for infusing the American diet with Arab gastronomic delights as an accepted variant in America's foodways. This awareness also preserves an ancient culinary legacy in the diaspora through a subtle resensitizing of American taste-buds, which now long for more "garlic, grilled lamb [...] rice cooked with saffron and toasted pine nuts" (290). The American palette yearns to satisfy its newly aroused sensitivity to this masterful form of 'Arab cooking for the senses'.

Eating Difference: Appreciation or Appropriation?

The creation of such culinary utopias that facilitate dualistic affirmations of identity shows the power of literature to imagine alternative paradigms of cultural being as a token of hope for the future. In the discursive imaginary, Sirine's "invisible American half"[30] can occupy centre-stage on a tenuous racial platform that is nevertheless indelibly marked by the very real internal and external contestations of Arab-American identity. The levelling public and private forces of racism, indigenous patriarchal sexism, cultural and religious differentiation, generational experience, and homophobia continue to embroil this constituency in a racialized polemic of Otherness in the USA. Consequently, the trope of eating Arab culinary ethnicity can also be located within the dual problematic of the cultural appreciation and/or appropriation of difference. Empires have always assimilated the Other's cuisine with voracious pleasure because foreign foods have tickled the hegemonic palate as an acceptable (read: non-threatening) form of cultural exchange. The 'culinary democratizing' of Empire props up its façade of multiculturalism while strengthening the 'constitution' of its imperial citizens through healthy eating. The consumption of ethnic food for variety, out of curiosity, as dietary choice, or as multicultural posturing can become a neo-liberal means of incorporating difference through an imaginary, ethnically constituted culinary nation, while simultaneously retaining inherent prejudices against a particular culture. That is to say, the frequent ingestion of Arab food as a sign

[30] See Mervat F. Hatem's article "The Invisible American Half: Arab American Hybridity and Feminist Discourses in the 1990s," in *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*, ed. Ella Shohat (Cambridge MA: MIT Press: 1998): 369–90.

of multicultural open-mindedness does not necessarily lead to any politicized awareness of foreign-policy biases against the Arab Middle East or cultural sensitivity toward Arab-American populations. For the multicultural consumer, the sweetness of baklava can act as a flavourful medium to sugar-coat the sour nefariousness of politics at the close of a copious meal. The sensory overload of such a meal can induce satiety, impeding critical reflection and informed political awareness of the 'cooked' culture that has been served for consumption on a colourful platter.

While cooking undoubtedly ensures the economic and cultural survival of a community, it can also become a manipulable tool of assimilationist control in the hands of the colonial chef and capitalist food corporations. The food industry's commodification of ethnic cuisine through colonialistic makeovers results in cultural disengagement and the anonymity of assembly-line production as a projection of racial ambivalence. Moreover, the culinary assimilation of the ethnic Other furthers the 'cannibalizing' of its basic sustenance as found in olive oil, bulghur wheat, garbanzo beans and other products as a form of culinary vampirism, thereby modifying the Other's dietary staples through the colonialistic chic of *nouvelle cuisine*. The New-Age altering of the culinary code of Arab cuisine from its original signifying systems favours the rewriting of cultural scripts in accordance with the master version of the metropole. In the revised codes, the spirit of fellowship offered by couscous, pilaf, *mezze* platters and other communal dishes degenerates into an ego/ethnocentric presentation of microscopic individualized portions. Arabs and Arab-Americans (Muslims in particular) become morsels of consumption/objectification on the multicultural smorgasbord of the dominant ethnic polity.

The bitter aftertaste of racial profiling, suspect citizenship despite proven allegiance, cultural invalidation in the face of sustained literary, artistic, and culinary production, and political disenfranchisement – all this can dull the sweetness of memory for a community that has constantly to re-member itself amid the racialized anomie of the USA. The cathartic value of literature can thus heal old and fresh wounds through the curative balm of "lemons, figs, and olives" (215), as poeticized revisionings of a more favourable future conjured up by the sanctity of spiritual invocation: "He recites the *athan*, the call to prayers to Sirine outside on the floor of the balcony. It sounds like singing to Sirine, but he says no – this is praying, which is pure" (71). Han's recitations offer sweet

songs of hope, primal chants of faith, as affirmative rites of passage that lead from the darkness of marginality to the transcendence of cultural illumination. As the necessary ingredients for a truly revised definition of US multiculturalism, these trajectories convert the proverbial melting-pot of cultural assimilation into a vibrant cultural mosaic that reflects specificity within difference. Arab cuisine provides a model for these future reworkings of culture. The particular flavours of sumac, zatar, cumin, and saffron reveal the dynamism of a translocational cultural heritage of kebab, dolma, *knaffea*, baklava and other culinary specialties that nevertheless retain their individuality through regional and local distinction as evidence of a well-balanced ethos of living.

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How to Be a Successful Double Agent

(Dis)placement as Strategy in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*

DIYA M. ABDO

> Yes, women can take liberties with language.[...] have had to interpret, manipulate, and modify language, have had to transgress its rigidity, in order to secure ourselves a forum of expression, of representation. [...] The hegemonic, dominant discourse keeps us limber, increases our flexibility through the intense linguistic maneuvers we undertake to make it relate to our experiences as women. It is all the more so when that dominant discourse is twice removed from us, as foreign and colonizing.[1]

IN HER PIECE "LOST IN TRANSLATION," Fadia Faqir describes how Arab writers, owing to the "difficulty of publishing in their own countries and the problems of translation," are driven to live in the West and "adopt the 'language of the other'."[2] For the censors, governmental or self-appointed, attack, "ban, burn or confiscate publications if they consider they violate political, moral and/or religious sensitivities."[3] Writing in English and having those books translated is not a viable option, either. And so, Arab writers living in the West have to jug-

[1] Nada Elia, "The Fourth Language: Subaltern Expression in Djebar's *Fantasia*," *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*, ed. Lisa Suhair Majaj & Paula W. Sunderman (Syracuse NY: Syracuse UP, 2002): 192.

[2] Fadia Faqir, "Lost in Translation: The Arab Book in the Language of the 'Other'," *Index on Censorship* 33/211 (2004): 166.

[3] Faqir, "Lost in Translation," 166.

gle these multiple disadvantages; their solution is to "cut out the middleman and create an 'Arab book' in the language of the other." Because these writers in exile are culturally displaced, they sometimes write "transculturally"[4] and, sometimes, even translinguistically. Fadia Faqir's novel *Pillars of Salt*, an anglophone Arab text, inhabits just such a transcultural/translinguistic position, which also means that it inhabits an ambiguous position in its relationship with its audience. On the one hand, the text assumes a Western audience; it was originally written in English for the British and North American market. On the other, its language assumes, on some level – since Faqir intersperses the narrative with literally translated phrases and expressions – knowledge of the Arabic language and Arab culture for thorough understanding of its content. And by "understanding" I do not just mean actual linguistic comprehension but also the familiarity of exposure to something that falls within one's linguistic and cultural comfort zone. The lines of directly translated Arabic expressions, proverbs, and phrases of Bedouin dialect in *Pillars of Salt* create unsettling gaps and fissures within the body of the text, placing the English-only reader in a state of unease.[5] In some instances, the alienation is so

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[4] Faqir, "Lost in Translation," 168.

[5] This technique is by no means unique to Fadia Faqir. In her article "The Perils of Occidentalism: How Arab Novelists Are Driven to Write for Western Readers," Jenine Abboushi Dallal describes a similar effect in the work of the English-Egyptian writer Ahdaf Soueif, who writes "*in* translation; that is, in English, but as if she were translating from Arabic, and thus imparts a sense of strangeness to the English"; *Times Literary Supplement* (24 April 1998): 8. Also speaking of Soueif, but highly applicable to Faqir, Hechmi Trabelsi states that though her "command of English is impeccable, ranging from the highly idiomatic to the elegantly formal, she has transfused ethnic, Arab blood into it. Arab people reading her can actually hear the Arabic as it comes through in English words. Even non-Arabophones can sense the presence of another tongue underlying the printed English words"; Trabelsi, "Transcultural Writing: Ahdaf Soueif's *Aisha* as a Case Study," *Jouvert* 7.2 (2003): http://social.chass.ncsu.edu/jouvert/v7i2/trabel.htm (10 June 2004). Unfortunately, his examination of Soueif's *Aisha* remains descriptive and offers little insight into the nature and effect of this "transculturation." Miriam Cooke notes yet the same narrative strategy in the works of Arab women writing in French; this "second language provided the richness, the otherness that allowed the writer to appropriate the first. This appropriation was most commonly achieved in French by arabizing, by making French strange to the French"; Cooke, "Mothers, Rebels, and Textual Exchanges: Women Writing in French and Arabic," in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. Mary Jean Green (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996): 142–43. And, according to G.J.V.

complete that sentences sound as if they have been rendered by someone with a limited knowledge of English. Unless the reader knows Arabic, for example, as well as something of Bedouin marriage customs, Sheikh Nimer's response to Shaikh Talib's pressure for an answer from the former regarding giving his daughter Maha in marriage, "'Ay, by Allah, you would be delighted'," seems like a non-sequitur. Sheikh Talib's retort, upon approval of the request, "'Your coffee is drinkable and your daughter is worthy of being engaged',"[6] sounds equally nonsensical to the strictly English-speaking reader. Moreover, the fact that these phrases appear within passages of beautifully constructed English serves to heighten that reader's confusion.

These and other intricate linguistic moves by Faqir serve multiple functions. We will see how, by (dis)placing literally translated Arabic words, phrases, expressions, and proverbs as well as culturally specific moments and actions in her English text, Faqir offers both audiences, English- and Arabic-speaking, a strategy that enables the text to subversively, yet almost invisibly, critique both cultures. Hence this hybrid text, through its braiding of languages and cultures, and ultimately consciousnesses, does not simply enable the text to address multiple audiences successfully, it also creates a third language and space that critiques these cultures and consciousnesses by alienating English-speaking readers from their own language and estranging Arabic from the Arabic-speaking readership. On the one hand, this cultural and linguistic estrangement and alienation place these Arab cultural moments in an unfamiliar light, exposing their inner workings, an act that exposes and re-scripts the Arabic language, hence culture, for Arab readers. On the other, to an English-speaking audience this (dis)placement effects a rewriting of personal, religious, self-identity, and orientalizing narratives and an unsettling of comfort zones. It denies informancy (the text as 'native informant'), despite initial appearances, by exposing, alienating, and exiling English-speaking readers from their own language. Fadia Faqir and her text then become 'double agents', with

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Prasad, "Indian English writers are […] using various strategies to make their works read like translations"; "Writing Translation: The Strange Case of the Indian English Novel," *Post-Colonial Translation: Theory and Practice*, ed. Susan Bassnett & Harish Trivedi (London & New York: Routledge, 1999): 54.

[6] Fadia Faqir, *Pillars of Salt* (New York: Interlink, 1996): 23. Further page references are in the main text.

"fragmented selves, languages and loyalties"[7] masquerading as faithful to both readerships while subtly critiquing both.

'Double agency' notwithstanding, there are many reasons why an Arab woman is driven to write in English. Fadia Faqir herself has stated that the "Arabic language is misogynist and whenever the gender is not clear the masculine overpowers the feminine"[8] and that "dominant written Arabic was found to be inadequate to present sexual, religious, and social experiences."[9] Like the Scheherazade of whom she writes (arguably her alter ego), Faqir

> wanted to safeguard her integrity, and purity of her tales. [...] She refused to let her song be silenced or distorted. She would sing loud and clear and so she crossed from one language into another, committing herself to a life in exile.[10]

In this regard, Faqir is not alone as an Arab woman writer. Others who write in English or French rather than Arabic, such as Leila Ahmed and Assia Djebar, have explained their philosophy on the masculinist normative infrastructure of the Arabic language (the two above in *Border Passage* and *Women of Algiers*, respectively). The woman writer then creates a counter-discourse to multiple oppressive traditions, especially the Arabic or Islamic; the use of the language of the colonizer, whether French or English, is itself an act of rebellion against and resistance to the burden of national, cultural, and religious 'authenticity' and loyalty expected of her by her own culture. The language chosen to effect this emasculation of the Arabic in this case is the language of the colonizer, English.

But writing in English is highly problematic if the writer is aware of heeding, not only her "feminist longings" but also her "postcolonial condition."[11] Hence, the Arab woman writer must avoid simply exchanging

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[7] Fadia Faqir, "Lost in Translation," 170.

[8] Fadia Faqir, *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, ed. Faqir (Reading: Garnet, 1998): 18.

[9] Quoted in Hussein Kadhim, "Review of *Mothballs*," *World Literature Today* 71.4 (September 1997): 857.

[10] Fadia Faqir, "Stories from the House of Songs," *New Statesman and Society* (11 October 1991): 3.

[11] Lila Abu-Lughod, "Introduction: Feminist Longings and Postcolonial Conditions," in *Remaking Women: Feminism and Modernity in the Middle East*, ed. Abu-Lughod (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1998): 3–32.

one master, one misogynistic patriarchal normative system, for another, jumping from the old patriarch's arms into those of a new one. This woman writer must contend with writing not only in the voice of the King (as Gilbert and Gubar claim of British women writers' own authorial anxiety)[12] but also in the voice of the foreign, invading king. Hence, the colonizer and his English language must also be emasculated, since the woman writer "often finds herself at odds with [this] language, which partakes in the white-male-norm ideology and is used predominantly as a vehicle to circulate established power relations,"[13] which in this case are colonial, political, and orientalist. Faqir herself has made clear her concerns with the English language, and her discussion reveals the ways in which such a woman writer navigates the use of the colonizer's tongue. In interviews and autobiographical pieces, she confesses to the problems involved in writing in English and her sense of having betrayed her culture by doing so: "Later, I came back to Jordan, wanting to study Arabic. I felt I needed to decolonize the tongue and come back to Arabic."[14] Like the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, she at first saw English as the "language of her colonizer and invader," "contaminated," "corrupt," and "terminating." "May this tongue never utter another word in English," her autobiographical alter ego Scheherazade vows.[15] But her heroes change; Chinua Achebe becomes the example of successful activism and anticolonial resistance. English is, after all, needed to "transact our business, including the business of overthrowing colonialism."[16] So she "begins to talk herself into being" again, "to write herself into their literature," to "write her colours back into the predominantly white tapestry."[17] *Pillars*

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[12] Sandra M. Gilbert & Susan Gubar, "Infection in the Sentence: The Woman Author and the Anxiety of Authorship," *Feminisms: An Anthology of Literary Theory and Criticism*, ed. Robyn R. Worhol & Diane Price Herndl (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 2nd ed. 1993): 290.

[13] Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman, Native, Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1989): 6.

[14] Marwan Asmar, "A Chance Encounter with Dr. Fadia Faqeer: 'We Have Dignity but Haven't Got Humility'," *The Star* (15 July 1999), http://static.highbeam.com/t/thestarjordanmiddleeast/july151999/

[15] Faqir, "Stories from the House of Songs," 5.

[16] Achebe, "The Song of Ourselves," *New Statesman & Society* (9 February 1990): 32, quoted in Faqir, "Stories from the House of Songs," 5.

[17] Faqir, "Stories from the House of Songs," 5.

of Salt is that attempt at decolonization, of bringing the Arab self into English literature, of bringing the colours of Arabic into the white tapestry of the English language. English cannot be got rid of, but *it* can be colonized by Arabic and by a writer who attempts "to carve a small territory within the English language for [her]self."[18] Thus, it is not a 'pure' English in which Faqir writes. The English itself must be changed, fused with Arabic, so that *both* are organically transformed and resisted. Faqir agrees with Hechmi Trabelsi, whom she quotes, that this "'displacement urges transcultural writers to revisit their culture of origin by the essential questioning of their relationship with their body, faiths, rites, languages'."[19]

What Faqir's *Pillars of Salt* attempts can best be described by what Miriam Cooke has identified in the work of other Arab women writers as "multiple critique," in which authors critique simultaneously "the global system, their own political regimes, and religious and family contexts and the patriarchal vein that runs through them all and still remain wary of others' desires to coopt their struggle."[20] In developing this concept, Cooke looked in part at the Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatibi:

> [Khatibi] sets two tasks for the Arab intellectuals in order to truly decolonize Arab sociology. In what he calls double criticism, Arab intellectuals must deconstruct the Occident's logo-centrism and ethnocentrism, which affect the whole world, and they must equally deconstruct and critique the learned discourses that the Arab world has elaborated around and about itself.[21]

Given that what Arab/Muslim women intellectuals must do is complicated by their femaleness, an identity whose representation in all of these narratives must be deconstructed and critiqued, Cooke adds the dimension of gender. Thus, although Faqir's novel both implicitly and explicitly attacks Islam, the text's linguistic strategy of (dis)placement fights against a westernized cooptation of her struggle as a Muslim and Arab woman by conducting its own attack on the English reader and on orientalist and

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[18] Faqir, "Lost in Translation," 69

[19] Hechmi Trabelsi, "Transcultural Writing: Ahdaf Soueif's *Aisha* as a Case Study," *Jouvert* 7.2 (2003), online: para 45, quoted in Faqir, "Lost in Translation," 168.

[20] Miriam Cooke, "Multiple Critique: Islamic Feminist Rhetorical Strategies," *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1.1 (2000): 98.

[21] Samia Mehrez, "Subversive Poetics of Radical Bilingualism: Postcolonial Francophone North African Literature," in *The Bounds of Race: Perspectives on Hegemony and Resistance*, ed. Dominick LaCapra (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1991): 260, fn 9.

Western appropriations of the image and role of the Arab and Muslim woman. Faqir will have her critique of her own culture, but on her own terms, and not without simultaneously critiquing the West's representation of her. Faqir explicitly identifies this strategy when she describes, quoting Fred Halliday, her mission: to "'turn a critical face both ways, towards the country of origin and its traditions and the country of reception. The challenge, the alienation, the 'offence' are two sided'."[22] *Pillars of Salt* performs her "multiple critique" in the form of what John Erickson identifies in the work of various Muslim writers as "*écriture métissée*," a third narrative space created by the use of the colonizer's language and yet revising it so as to adhere neither to Islamic nor to European tradition. In this case, the author's individual national identity is reworked and transcends both European and Islamic dominant cultures in the form of a unique hybridity.[23]

> Hybridized individuals, caught in the discontinuous time of translation and negotiation, erasing any claims for inherent cultural purity, inhabit the rim of an 'in-between reality' marked by shifting psychic, cultural, and territorial [and, I would add, linguistic] boundaries."[24]

Pillars of Salt recounts the story of two women, Maha, a Bedouin from the Dead Sea area of the East Bank, and Um-Saad, a Syrian émigrée who has lived in Amman most of her life, during and after the British Mandate. Both women have been committed to a mental hospital by their respective families as an efficient way of disposing of them. There are three narrative voices. The Storyteller begins and ends the narrative; he is a wanderer who provides us with his version of the events that happen to Maha. Maha's narrative acts as a counterpoint to his, and her narrative in turn frames that of Um-Saad, who recounts her story to Maha during the long, lonely nights at the hospital. In its impulse, the novel is an example of revisionist mythmaking, an unearthing of women's experiences, hence a retelling of androcentric narratives, whether these be orientalist, colonial-

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[22] Fred Halliday, *Islam and the Myth of Confrontation: Religion and Politics in the Middle East* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1996): 109, quoted in Faqir, "Stories from the House of Songs," 3.

[23] John Erickson, *Islam and Postcolonial Narrative* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998).

[24] Shahnaz Khan, "Muslim Women: Negotiations in the Third Space," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 23.2 (1998): 464.

ist, mythological, historical, political or social. These masculinist and normative narrative strands are best represented, though they appear profusely elsewhere, in the figure of The Storyteller, who is constantly undermined and 'rewritten', as it were, by Maha's own voice and version of events. He is a Lawrence of Arabia, an historical figure to whom Fadia Faqir returns time and again in interviews and articles (the title of her book, as well as alluding to the desert patriarchalism of the biblical story of Lot's wife, is itself a clear reference to his autobiography, *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, hence can be seen as an Arabist and feminist response to it) as the epitome of Western and male misrepresentation of the Arab world. The Storyteller, Sami Al-Adjnabi, a "half-Arab with an endless hunger for stories" (3), is, like Lawrence of Arabia, really neither Arab nor English in his loyalties, and, much like Lawrence of Arabia ("the English of the Arabs"), his name signifies a dislocation in cultural identity, the-Arab-the-Foreigner, or Arab of the English. The fact that the novel begins with this intruder's narrative, which significantly starts "Tonight, the first night of Ramadan, the month of fasting and worship," wherein he will recount to us "an horrific story" (1), equates this foreigner's narrative with Qur'anic revelation, conveyed during the month of Ramadan to the Prophet Muhammad, thus implying that mutilating narratives are not simply national or orientalist, but also religious. We can choose to see Sami Al-Adjnabi as the voice of the Divine, or as the misinterpretation of Islamic texts – evidence for which we find in the fact that he does not even know how to pray and had instead to "imitate the Muslims when they bent their backs and bowed down" (28), something he considers "funny" (28). Either way, his character is an amalgam of any masculine voice that has mutilated, misrepresented or completely buried women's identities, existences, and narratives.[25]

One strategy by which the text effects its critique of mutilating narratives is through its linguistic interplay with its audience. This interplay sometimes completely alienates its readership for its own purposes. For

[25] Fadia Faqir states that she started writing *Pillars of Salt* after having seen the movie *Lawrence of Arabia* and noting that only two women appear in the epic, their backs turned to us, voiceless. "What if they turned around and told their version of the story?" she asks (Interview in *JO*, 84). *Pillars of Salt* is an attempt at that story which combats the marginalization and sequestration of Arab women. Hence, according to Faqir, *Pillars of Salt* is her "Jordanian novel," a "feminist version of orientalism" which overpowers the narrow and misguided narrative of the "white patriarch" (*JO*, 84).

example, while Arabic-speakers will grasp the thematic implications of Sami Al-Adjnabi's name, Sami the Foreigner, others will not, for Faqir never translates the name. In addition to such linguistic 'untranslations', there are cultural ones, which are sometimes apparent to no-one but Jordanians. Sami travels with a she-ass and monkey. The monkey, Maymoon, was originally a man, but was turned into a monkey by Allah "when he wiped his ass with a piece of bread" (2). This is a local Jordanian reference to the people of Lot, whose many indignities included wiping their behinds with bread. To an outsider, possibly even non-Levantine Arabs, this reference has no meaning and serves only to reinforce the ambiguous place the text occupies as one written in English but infused with an incomprehensible spirit. Throughout the text we find instances of literally translated phrases, Arabic song lyrics, poems, or expressions which sound odd to the ears of the non-Arabic-speaker but very familiar to one accustomed to Arab culture and proverbs, Islam, and regional history. Reference to the sun as "she" (7) and phrases such as "twin of my soul," "my Eyesight" (9), "I will drink your blood" (11), or "The sky had ears, but one made of mud and the other made of dough" (165) have limited or no meaning without such knowledge.

This alienation is one aspect of successful 'multiple critique' which, paradoxically, caters to the audience so as to seduce them and then educate or shock them. Hence, initially, the text seems to play up to the Western anglophone reader, its language exoticizing the text and the world it depicts. Although it unsettles or alienates, the intrusion of Arabic suggests an 'authentic' voice, an insider's perspective, thus conveying the sense that the Western reader is privy to the inner world and inner lives and experiences of stereotypically oppressed foreign women.[26] As Marnia Lazreg points out, the "more indigenous [and indigenous-*sounding*, I would

[26] Understandably, Faqir distances herself from such claims to 'authenticity', connoting as they do, in postcolonial studies, the treacherous native informant. When asked by an interviewer whether it is "difficult to preserve authenticity" when writing about "the persecuted woman," Faqir is quick to assert that "authenticity is the wrong word" and that she is not one of those Arab women writers who "cater to a certain audience and exploit being perceived as victims"; Maya Kesserwany, "Interview with Fadia Al-Faquir" (2003), http://www.animabeirut.com/archives/03/articles/7a.htm (accessed 14 June 2005).

add] a speaker appears, the better" and the more genuine.[27] This strategy works; one reviewer calls the language of the book "colorful and quaint" and a "novelty." Significantly, this reviewer also feels that "the historical context [of the novel] is not of great consequence and the events described might as well be timeless."[28]This "authenticating" strategy caters to what the West 'knows' about Arab women and men, for here we see how this reviewer, almost typically, believes that Arab and Muslim women and their status of oppression (indeed, Arabs and Muslims themselves) exist in a decontextualized, eternal, ahistorical vacuum. Additionally, much of the narrative description in the novel confirms this. The protagonist Maha, for example, makes sometimes unnecessary and forced or choreographed statements about how Arab women are oppressed and belong in "well-closed room[s]" (20). And there should be no reason, for example, for

[27] Marnia Lazreg, "The Triumphant Discourse of Global Feminism: Should Other Women Be Known?" *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, ed. Amal Amireh & Lisa Suhair Majaj (New York: Garland, 2000): 34. This novel, particularly in its dialogue, is at times reminiscent of the ubiquitous and somewhat cheesy Jordanian Bedouin soap opera. The same expressions of "honour" and "dignity" and emphasis on blood feuds and murder that one finds tedious, repetitive, campy and overly melodramatic in that context take on meaning when presented within another framework. Phrases like "Good morning, my beautiful mare" (9) cease to be empty in their hollow redundancy and become lyrical, lovely, honest, and other-worldly, and yes, even exotic. My students in Jordan share that reaction when I assign this novel. Interestingly, then, something which has been utterly normal, even banal, to its native audience becomes strange and exotic. That audience begins to see itself through the gaze of the Other, the Western orientalist tradition, and to be fascinated by the mantle we have worn unbeknownst to us. Interestingly, in an interview, Faqir admits that she has used what orientalists have written on the customs and traditions of the Bedouins of this region to describe accurately some of these in the novel: "we have much information from western orientalist travelers since they lived near local residents and were meticulous in documenting their information"; Nabila Suyuf, "Women's Issues Between Silence and Speech in Arab Women's Novels (Qadayya Al-Mar'a Bayn Al-Samt Wa Al-Kalam Fi Al-Riwaya Al-Nasawiyya Al-Arabiyya)" (M.A. thesis, University of Jordan, 2002): 167 (my tr. from the original Arabic). Perhaps it is this self-orienalization, which itself mimics Faqir's narrative effort, that can similarly begin to function as a potential strategy for dealing with that narrative, reflecting perhaps an "appropriation and subversion of the dominant European discourses" (Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* [London: Routledge, 1989]: 195).

[28] "Customer Reviews for *Pillars of Salt*," *Cheapshop* (15 September 2005): http://books.cheaps.us/1566562538.html

Maha to tell Harb, her future husband, that she cannot see him at night as he has asked because "for a girl to be out at night is a crime of honor. They will shoot me between the eyes" (10). Realistically, he should never have asked, knowing the answer himself; such explanation is obviously offered for the benefit of the foreign reader and serves to enhance the 'Otherness' of the characters and confirm their culture's backwardness and difference.[29] This 'difference' and exoticism of the characters are also emphasized through their seemingly bizarre and certainly different behaviour; in some places, the novel reads like an anthropological description

[29] The novel can be accused of this, in that its representation of men fulfils Western expectations about Arab men. The representation of Um-Saad's father is especially harsh. He is a type, body parts, an idea, not a whole human being or individual. When we are first introduced to him, he is a face "tired and stained" and covered in "soot and mud" (36), a familiar and terrifying image to Westerners in his "black baggy trousers," "leather ammunition belts," and "turban" on his head. In the next mention of him, he is a moustache, big, black and predatory – so big that "two eagles" could sit on it (79). Then he becomes more animalistic and sinister, with a "big hairy hand" and "fiery eyes." He becomes an eagle, a vicious carnivorous predator, preying on the meat of his weak daughter: "He stood like an eagle above my head" (100). His only humane aspect is perhaps his anticolonial stance. Maha's representation of the men during her father's funeral accomplishes the same effect: "Butter was dripping down their beards and their faces were stained with yogurt. They wanted more rice, more meat, more butter to fill their bellies" (182). The men become insatiable animals feeding off the body of her father. But the description is apt and could be revealing about the ways in which Muslims comprehend and deal with death in their religion. Thus it could function in different ways for different members of the audience. Another equation of men as animals comes when Faqir describes "a herd of men" (209). Even the young boys become a young herd which will undoubtedly grow up to be crueller than their little stone-throwing arms will now allow (216). These animals go after the kill, their prey, the blood and body of woman, their victim: "The running blood would leave a trace on the soil, would make it easy for the men of the tribe to find us" (212). When the men are not dignified enough to be mammals or birds of prey, they are insects: "Under the palm trees, a group of men were crowding like cockroaches" (216). Is Faqir in this way unkindly representing Arab men? Is she simply catering to Western representations of Arab men? On one level she might be. However, we must not forget that these male characters are balanced by others who are positive, such as Harb and Nimer, and by female characters who are negative; the text does its utmost to represent this community in all its contradictions and multifaceted nature, wherein women can be powerful and conscious of the masculinism around them (Maha works the field; Nasra is a shepherdess; Maha realizes Harb's desire for her as an unattainable prey) and wherein men can be fragile (Maha's father braids her hair, 21; Daffash is beaten by Maha's father, a father who is not anxious to marry off his daughter, 23).

of the 'strange and exotic' customs of the Bedouin, whose men wear kohl, who lay their dead on chicken dung, and who adorn their beards with the musk of a young gazelle's gland (20–23).[30]

Thus, on one basic, significant level, we can say that the text caters to its Western readership by exoticizing, orientalizing, and 'authenticating' the text.[31] This makes it more attractive and marketable to Western readers, especially if they are offered just what they want to hear about Arabs and Muslims. Marnia Lazreg, for example, sees the work of some Arab women writers as experienced by Western readers "vicariously as the symbolic daggers in the hearts of native men these readers essentially despise, and as the only beings who could undo a religion they perceive as beyond the pale."[32] Taking "their cues from titles and covers," readers and reviewers "unfailingly" read these texts as "sociological and anthropological texts"[33] and as "sociological treatises granting Western readers a glimpse into the 'oppression' of Third World Women,"[34] "welcomed for their 'authenticity'," their authors regarded as "authentic insiders."[35]

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[30] This last is thematically significant since Maha, the female protagonist's name, means young gazelle, a description that could foreshadow the way she will be 'slaughtered' and taken advantage of by these powerful men of the tribe who will use her musk, her sweet reputation, and twist it to their own political and economic advantage later on, in acquiring the land she inherits from her father.

[31] It is clear sometimes in the way certain things are explained, or over-explained, that the expected audience is primarily foreign. Elaborate wedding ceremonies, cooking methods, etc. make the text, the environment, and the reading experience seem more authentic and more exotic. Thus in some ways the book does sound like a fascinating trip into another culture, or a lyrically written anthropological guide. Tamam does not need to explain to Maha, for example, why Imam Rajab will call for prayer in Mubarak's ear ("'He will get used to the sound of Islam. He will grow up to become a good Muslim'," 146), for Maha would already know the rationale for this practice. On the one hand, the book capitalizes on the exotic-sounding nature of some Arab customs; on the other, it might somehow demystify the Arab world for the West by explaining it matter-of-factly, in a way that facilitates understanding between cultures.

[32] Marnia Lazreg, "The Triumphant Discourse of Global Feminism: Should Other Women Be Known?" 36.

[33] Amal Amireh, "Publishing in the West: Problems and Prospects for Arab Women Writers," *Al Jadid* 2.10 (1996): 3, http://www.aljadid.com/features/0210amireh.html

[34] Amal Amireh & Lisa Majaj, "Introduction" to *Going Global: The Transnational Reception of Third World Women Writers*, ed. Amireh & Majaj (New York: Garland, 2000): 7.

[35] Amireh & Majaj, *Going Global*, 9.

Pillars of Salt uses such perceptions to its own advantage, strategically exoticizing people, places, and ideas in order to lull, and then pull the rug from under, Western readers, to critique them and bring them face-to-face with oppressive orientalist or colonial discourses. One element of the text which plays up orientalist fantasies is its frequent references to jinns in bottles: "I cannot control the evil jinnee when he decides to leave his bulgy bottle" (103). Such a statement will catapult the already prepped reader back to his cultural memory of *A Thousand and One Nights*. And like the *Nights*, *Pillars* is a hybrid text whose essence is anti-normative.[36] Thus, on closer examination, we see how the transplanting or displacement of Arabic language and cultural moments into the English text creates a narrative that accomplishes much more than catering to a Western audience. In the above-mentioned example, we begin to see how the text, although orientalizing, also de-orientalizes by removing the exotic reference from its context, thus rewriting the representation of Arab or Muslim culture for others. There is no real djinn, and so, much of the mystery and exoticism of this image is removed when the statement is revealed to be nothing but a cultural myth or a mode of linguistic expression, not a sign of marked difference, as when Maha uses it again to describe her tears leaving the confines of her eyes: "Bitter cold tears, eager to escape their bulgy bottle" (163). We begin to see how the text plays up

[36] Both Persian and Arabic in origin, *The Nights* was translated into French, which edition then influenced later seminal Arabic translations (David Pinault, *Story Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights* [Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992]: 6). And, like this novel, it too is a "cultural amphibian" (Eva Sallis, *Sheherezade Through the Looking Glass: The Metamorphosis of the Thousand and One Nights* [Richmond, Surrey: Curzon, 1999]: 42), an organic, growing, metamorphic, "impure," "inauthentic," travelling entity, one of "cross cultural history and identity which impels it beyond the confines of any single representation of its identity and which makes it relevant as the only piece of literature which inhabits the nexus of Eastern history and Western being" (Sallis, *Sheherezade Through the Looking Glass*, 5). Even linguistically, *The Nights* is a hybrid; its wording "comprises a 'third language,' neither purely colloquial nor exclusively literary" (Pinault 15), thus representing the third space that *Pillars of Salt* inhabits. *Pillars of Salt* is also similar to *The Nights*' "oral performance background [undergoing] the transforming process of written composition" (Pinault, *Story Telling Techniques in the Arabian Nights*, 15), a third space wherein the presence of this colloquial, this oral "can [potentially] demolish, or at least make pretentious, any gestures at higher linguistic affiliations" (Sallis, *Sheherezade Through the Looking Glass*, 40) of written patriarchal texts.

to, only to frustrate, the Western reader. It simultaneously critiques the reader and orientalism by revealing the ordinariness of a thus-far mythologized culture. *Pillars of Salt* is riddled with examples of cultural displacement, wherein culturally 'strange' moments are inserted, only to reveal their inherent lack of strangeness.

In other instances, this technique also manages to confront the Western reader with traits shared with those he or she identifies as 'different' or inferior. By initially registering, as the text does, a sense of difference, the reader becomes complicit in orientalist narrative – only to find that narrative later exploded or, better, revealed as a self-identifying narrative. The reader becomes the 'Other' he or she derides or pities. For example, the text employs the linguistically and culturally specific relation of Arabic to the Qur'an to exoticize and belittle Islam and thus cater to Western audiences. To a non-Arabic-speaker and non-Muslim, the phrase "one of the Jinn soldiers, one of the goblins with strange powers" (1) will sound absurd and quite unfamiliar. Such a faithful English translation of such Qur'anic images renders the imagery, along with Islam and the Qur'an, ridiculous. The (most likely) Christian or agnostic English-speaking reader feels comfortable and superior as an outsider to this religion. However, the text immediately undercuts that comfort when reference is made to "our master Solomon the Great" (1), a figure familiar in Christianity, as the commander of these absurd soldiers. Thus, through this intricate use of language, and by playing on its resultant effects, the text is able to draw for its English reader the image of an absurd, inferior figure whom our reader discovers upon closer examination to be his or her own reflection. The Western reader *is* Sami Al-Adjnabi. Here, this narrative "transculturation" and "appropriation" can, as Françoise Lionnet explains of francophone Arab writers, become a "means of translating into the colonizer's language a different sensibility, a different vision of the world, a means, therefore, of transforming the dominant conceptions circulated by the more standard idiom."[37] The text rewrites orientalist narratives by confronting the Western reader with a similarity denied. Likewise, it is comfortable for the Western reader to feel that the oppression the novel's female characters endure comes from their own culture and the men who

[37] Françoise Lionnet, "'Logiques Métisses': Cultural Appropriation and Postcolonial Representations," in *Postcolonial Subjects: Francophone Women Writers*, ed. Mary Jean Green & Karen Gould (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996): 326.

control it. Less comfortable is the realization, if achieved, that this blatant misogyny comes equally from a man who is a foreigner and friend of the English.

The Storyteller's lack of knowledge of Arabic is in itself a larger, more complex comment on the nature and unreliability of translation, narrative, outside perspective, the attempt to capture the exotic for consumption, the identity of the 'Self', and the inability of language to accurately represent a culture or state of being. The text and Faqir tell the (Western) reader that total comprehension will be difficult or impossible, and so the text denies native informancy. The incident in which Sami Al-Adjnabi recounts his failure to apprehend Arabic phrases and expressions acts, then, as a confirmation of the text's rejection of the outsider's attempt at total comprehension, for such comprehension will always involve misunderstanding and mistranslation – both, in fact, deliberate, since the Self will mould the 'Other' into what it thinks it should be. For instance, the two phrases confused by The Storyteller as he listens in from a window on the Pasha's party (90) do not sound much alike except by orientalist association. When a woman uses the word "original" to describe Daffash's exotic dancing and strange Bedouin behaviour, The Storyteller mishears *Aba-al-Jimaal*, or "Father of Camels." His chosen interpretation of the syllables only cements and confirms the difference and nature of these Bedouins for him; they are indeed already, in his mind, the fathers of camels.

Faqir's pervasive linguistic dislocation might alienate the anglophone reader, who assumes beforehand that he or she can master a novel that is, after all, written in English by an author residing in England. But Faqir's strategy is also a strategy to un-exile the Arabic speakers in the English-speaking world, to empower them with a sort of representation, an insider position in the language, literature, and culture that excludes them, often harshly. If we consider who the ideal reader for this text might be, the apparent answer is a native of Arab culture and language who is also adept at English, for, truly, this is the only audience by whom all of Faqir's linguistic moves can be understood, or even perceived. The displacement I have so far described, which creates such ambiguity in the text, is a means of denying to the solely English-speaking reader native informancy and, indeed, full access to the text. This is strategically similar to other ethnically disadvantaged women writers. Gloria Anzaldúa, a Chicana writer, for example, makes a similar move when she infuses her English-language work (her autobiography, for example) liberally with Spanish;

the amalgamation of languages serves to exile and alienate the English-speaker, who has always alienated and exiled the author in her own predominantly Anglo culture. Zora Neale Hurston, likewise, in her story "Sweat" (1926), for example, writes skilfully in Standard English as the narrator while crafting dialogue in Southern black dialects that will be nearly incomprehensible to most whites. In her examination of the artistic output of Third-World women writers (one of these books being *Woman at Point Zero* by Nawal El Saadawi) that appear to act as "sleeping dictionaries" or "native informants," Rosemary Weatherston concludes that such works "are privileged as sites of difference [and] often also rigorous examinations and manipulations of the intersection of alterity and knowledge." They will frequently "formally and thematically frustrate expectations of accessibility, remaining, to varying degrees, illegible to readers immersed in the epistemes they interrogate."[38] Lionnet again identifies a similar impulse in the use of French by Arab writers where the 'appropriation' of the colonizer's language, in this case through arabization, is more than mere "acculturation" or "assimilation" and "implies active intervention rather than passive victimization." To write in this language is "to transform it" into "a language that becomes the writer's own [...] a vehicle for expressing a hybrid, heteroglot universe";[39] "the use of that language becomes itself a subversive practice, as it strips it of its exclusive membership rules, decentering and deterritorializing it."[40] Ultimately, then, though initially 'orientalizing', *Pillars of Salt* is not as 'orientalist' as it first appears. And like other women writers, Faqir negotiates a space which empowers and invites in the often marginalized cultural outsider while exiling the often centralized cultural insider. Although the text and its language address an English-speaking audience desiring to see difference confirmed, they unsettle those differences in their subversion of the English language itself, by infusing it with a level of 'insiderism' that the Western outsider can never hope to achieve.

Elsewhere, cultural and linguistic displacement which seemingly confirm difference serve not simply to critique orientalist and colonial narratives or to empower the Arabic outsider made insider, but to critique and

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[38] Rosemary Weatherston, "When Sleeping Dictionaries Awaken: The Re/Turn of the Native Woman Informant," *Post-Identity* 1.1 (1997): 113–44.

[39] Lionnet, "'Logiques Métisses'," 326.

[40] Nada Elia, "The Fourth Language," 186.

rewrite misogynistic narratives, whether Arab or Western, specifically those concerning women's weakness and lack of participation. When Maha describes how she mourned the death of her husband Harb at the hands of the British, Arab readers will identify the scene as an almost typical 'performance' of the peasant mourning ritual: the rending of the dress, pulling of hair, slapping of the face, the pouring of sand on the head as if in desire to bury oneself (112). This cultural displacement does play up to Western expectations, on the one hand, highlighting the extreme difference, if not barbarity, of the 'Other'; on the other, it reveals the hitherto unacknowledged power of women, wherein, with a display of extreme pain, Maha performs and confirms her connection to the earth in her grief. Both woman and land become an entity which is mourning a loss – the wife her husband and the land that of its sons who can no longer defend it. This connection between woman and land, a connection often used against women, is unwittingly made by The Storyteller in an act of linguistic displacement when he quotes from the Qur'an: "'When Earth is shaken with (final) earthquake, and Earth yieldeth up her burdens, and man saith: What aileth her? That day she will relate her chronicles'" (113). Here the text even rewrites the meaning of the Qur'an as if to say to the Muslim and Arab readership that the earth here is woman who will one day "relate her chronicles" of grief and oppression. At other times the text hints at the unsung participation in the political, economic, and domestic lives of their men, as when Maha, using a typical Bedouin phrase, offers her husband her help: "'Harb, I am your supporter'" (83).

Similarly, on more than one occasion Maha is referred to as the "black widow" by The Storyteller, but she is also called this by her brother Daffash (161). To an Arabic-speaker, however, as Daffash is, the phrase could not mean what English speakers know it to mean: the treacherous female spider that lures other spiders into its web and devours them. This is, then, a case of reverse displacement. In its Arabic usage, the reference connects Maha's actions and narratives with the thin and fragile web of the spiders, likened to stories, and condemned in the Qur'an in a verse which The Storyteller quotes: "The likeness of those who choose other patrons than Allah is as the likeness of the spider when she taketh unto herself a house, and lo! the frailest of all houses is the spider's house" (62). This multi-layered insult paints Maha as doubly evil; she is the femme fatale, as well as an apostate whose narrative should be swept away and destroyed like the dangerous house of the spider. "They whisper their songs in men's

ears," The Storyteller recounts, "they smile; they hiss their spells until they snatch men's souls. Maha, the black widow, [...] the black spider, the destroyer of high houses, was well rounded and radiant with pleasure" after sucking the Pasha's blood through an open vein (167, 170). Here women's sexuality is likened to a destructive vampiric force that can render even the most powerful men weak; women can bring down kingdoms, but only with their sexualities, their bodies, never with their work, their minds, their efforts, their anger or dedication, qualities which Maha evinces when she finds out she has been cooking for the British who killed her husband (161–63). But why does the text have Daffash use words whose meaning he could not have intended as a non-English speaker? Later, Maha subtly rewrites this narrative which casts women as black widows and spiders by referring to her own brother as one: "Was it true that [my father] gave birth to a poisonous spider?" (174). By displacing the English "black widow" into the Arabic of Daffash, a meaning it could not have otherwise had in Arabic is created, and thence connected to the spider of the Qur'an, the liar; the text reveals the shared misogyny of both Western and Arab cultural and religious narratives about women as well as the complicity of both cultures in demonizing women, not just Islam. According to Maha, then, it is the male who is such a creature, who causes pain and suffering to the father, not the female, the sister, the ploughwoman to whom he legally left his land. Maha also symbolically calls the colonizer a spider; when Um-Saad's hair is being cut by the English Doctor, Maha turns her "head to face the wall. In the uneven white paint I saw a black poisonous spider, a wide-open mouth" (208) about to kill and devour the women. In another similar case, the text takes advantage of difference in phrasal meaning to effect a feminist rewriting of cultural stereotypes of women, in this case for Arabic-speakers. When Daffash describes his sister as an "owl face" (203), readers familiar with Arabic idioms will know that this suggests bad luck and ugliness, not wisdom as it does in the West. Given the Western connotation of the owl, however, its appearance here, in English, rewrites Arabic, and the image of Maha is transformed to reveal her true essence as a wise and powerful woman who receives little or no credit for her political, economic, and domestic roles.

Thus, although the text empowers the Arabic reader, it does not mean at all to sugar-coat Arab women's oppression. While the West is already certain that such oppression exists and exults in seeing it displayed,

Faqir's text is clever in playing to the Arab and Muslim audience with regard to the subject. In the example above of the spider, the English-speaking reader finds it predictable and even gratifying that Daffash and The Storyteller echo one another in referring to Maha as a succubus, a vampire, a man-killer, a femme fatale, and a liar; it creates an expected network of masculine hatred around her. The Arabic-speaker, however, knows that this meaning could not have been intended by Daffash and thus fails to find the author guilty of pandering to a foreign audience. Faqir has satisfied the Western reader and played his game, but allayed the Arab reader with the cultural specificity of the phrase in question. This strategy is important, considering how often Arab women writers are attacked by Arab and Muslim critics for betraying their culture, their nation, and their religion, as Amal Amireh explains in "Publishing in the West." Faqir's successful double agency plays up to a stereotypical, orientalist reading of her text, yet complicates that reading for the Arabic-speaker at the expense of Western ignorance of the 'Other'. Both audiences are catered to, with neither being the wiser. This success requires a level of affected innocence on the part of the text which allows a defence against charges of selling out or being an agent of the West.[41] In terms of content, the novel satisfies Western expectations about Arab women; however, it does so carefully, by literally translating words, expressions, phrases, proverbs and songs without embellishment or analysis. These are not the author's words or opinions, then, but authentic and unaltered elements of language and culture. For instance, Daffash calls Maha "'Daughter of the dog'" (66, 217), quite a common insult in Arabic, but a locution that serves to show the non-Arabic-speaker the level of Daffash's irrational evil; he insults at one stroke not only his sister, but his father and mother as well. Even criticism of the text's anti-religious impetus can be brushed aside in this way. By opposing The Storyteller's arguably Qur'anic narrative with Maha's, the text takes on the attractive Western packaging of an anti-Islamic text. The Arab and Muslim audience, meanwhile, knowing the meaning of The Storyteller's name, can view his Qur'anic mantle in-

[41] Faqir is very much aware of this danger. She quotes Ibrahim Zaid Al-Kilani, then Jordanian Minister of Religious Affairs, in his attack on Jordanian women writers: "'These women writers, these fallen creatures, they creep up newspaper columns, I know them very well. They are daughters of Zion whose objective is to destroy Islam. They are the western agents among us'" (Faqir, "Unveiling Paradise," 12–13).

stead as an example of Western misinterpretation and misappropriation of Islam. Thus does the text dupe its unsuspecting multiple audiences into different, even opposite, perceptions. In this sense, *Pillars of Salt* both claims and unclaims Islam. By performing such narratological trickery, the text develops a strategy by which both audiences are kept happy and Faqir is able to reconcile her 'feminism' with her 'nationalism', her "feminist longing" with her "postcolonial condition."

Perhaps the most effective and pervasive function of this linguistic displacement, which still allays the fears of the Arab and Muslim audience with feigned innocence, is to reveal Arab culture's oppression of women to itself. Serving this function, unrealistic fairy-tales and myths involving women are exposed to reveal to Arab speakers the ironies of the language and, by extension, culture. Um-Saad, the Syrian émigrée who shares Maha's room in the mental asylum and whose life is narrated within the frame of Maha's, used to live in a prison in her father's house, looking out through star-shaped holes in her shutters and listening to the Father of Light, awaiting her prince to defeat the guardian Ogre, her father, and take her into the world where real stars shine. This is where the usual fairy-tale fare ends, however; there will be no happy endings, for this novel rewrites fairy-tales as it does religious narratives. Um-Saad's prince is not really a prince; he is, appropriately, a butcher, for he will abuse her body, butchering and devouring it the way he does animals. His body and house stink of animal blood, dung, and intestines, only fitting for a woman who saw herself as a goat being sold off and slaughtered. Try as she might, Um-Saad (whose name, ironically, means 'the mother of happiness' and whose given name, Haniyyeh, means 'blissfully contented') cannot get rid of the stink, for it is the stink of her life, her fate, and her existence. Her romantic castle, where she should have lived, in the fairy-tale, with her Prince Charming, is Castle Mountain. Romantic as the name sounds, all romance is dispelled by knowledge of the region, for Amman's Castle Mountain (Jabal Al-Qal'a) is a poverty-stricken, congested, and conservative district. Here, as in her father's home, her view of the world is still obstructed. Instead of "peeping at the world" through star-shaped holes, she now does so "through the vine leaves surrounding the veranda at the Castle Mountain" (169). The displaced romanticism of this lyrical description suggests a fairy-tale happiness that belies its context, which is imprisonment in a dark, ugly, fetid house in a slum. Eventually Um-Saad will move to another prison, as the reader knows from the start, and look out

another window, this one barred, that of the insane asylum in which she spends her last days.

Here, not only does Faqir simply elude the 'agent of the West' stigma, she becomes a successful double agent, pleasing both audiences through affected 'innocence'. Thus she not only reveals or confirms to the West what they 'know' about Arab men and women, and packages herself that way; in the same move, she also opens the door of self-criticism from an Arab and Muslim readership – for these readers, in criticizing *literal translations*, must necessarily criticize themselves, and things they have lived with all their lives without noticing in terms of their subtextual or insidious meaning, in order to avoid hypocrisy. It is in this way that Faqir hopes to reveal the sexism of the Arabic language and culture to its own members, and educate them without providing fertile ground from which they might launch attacks on her.

Other similar examples occur when Tamam plans her escape with Maha: "If you see evil in the men's eyes, say that your throat is dry and that you need to get a glass of water" (204). In English, the phrase emphasizes the beastly nature of the men, a recurrent theme in the text. The corresponding phrase in Arabic, however, is more understated, and does not imply that the men themselves are evil or that they have been possessed; rather, it means they are angry, upset, bound to do something which could be harmful. There is a big difference of motive, but each readership perceives only one or the other. Thus Faqir plays up to Western expectations without a clear betrayal; however, she also rewrites Arabic language and culture in exposing the way men could and should be viewed and treated. Another example along similar lines is Nasra's cry when she sees Maha after Hajjeh Hulala has cauterized Maha to make her fertile: "Curse their religion" (97). On one level, it plays up to the desire of the Western reader to see a wronged Arab woman identify the source of her misery as Islam, something the West has 'known' all along and tried to convey to the poor brown woman, who must reject her oppressive culture and name it as evil or backward in order to free herself and join the ranks of the civilized. It is for this reason that Western media are saturated with stories about women who take off the veil, fleeing to America with their Western fiancés or fighting female genital mutilation (hence the warm reception of the Jordanian-born author Norma Khouri and her "autobiographical" book *Forbidden Love* – before it was revealed to be a fictional

fraud[42]). And although these might really be positive things in the cause of feminism, the Western obsession with them is, in fact, racism disguised as feminism, a wholly negative thing. Very rarely are readers interested in these stories because they genuinely care about women; far more interest lies in the fact that it represents a blow to Islam and its associated political entities. Women have stabbed their own culture in the back and rejected it, confirming what the West has said about it all along. At the same time, however, this phrase "Curse his/her/their religion" is surprisingly common in Arabic, and does not always refer to Islam, though many take it to be blasphemous. Thus does a common household phrase take on epic and very different proportions when displaced in such a way and uttered by a woman. It becomes invested with a history of orientalism and colonialism and Western views of and narratives about Islam and the Arab world and the positions of women therein. But could this statement, displaced or dislocated in this way, be revelatory to the Arabic-speaker who has heard the phrase often and never stopped to really think about it? Does this displacement alert the Arabic-reader to Islam's subjugation of women? Does the displacement raise awareness about Arab women's consciousness and feminisms, expressed here strongly in Nasra's rejection of religion? On one level, it participates in the creation of a feminist subjectivity which rejects the prescribed religion for what it has done to women, particularly Maha in this case. On another level, the Arab and Muslim reader is allowed a different view, for within the context of the novel Nasra can actually be seen as cursing the hedonistic religion of Hulala and Aunt Tamam, which is an aberration of Islam. Thus an innocent phrase, translated literally from Arabic, becomes an avenue of successful double agency. Like Sami-Aldjnabi and his use of the Qur'an, the phrase can have two wholly distinct meanings for different audiences: for the West it is an attack on Islam, for the East, an attack on departures from Islam.

The sexism of the Arabic language and culture, then, are brought to light through English. Fascinatingly, one culture is exposed when seen in a new light, the lens of another language and another culture. The sexism of the gendered Arabic language, for example, is used by Faqir to highlight Maha's economic participation and the way in which that participation is overlooked: "'My brother the peasant, good morning'," a radio

[42] "An Imaginary Life," *Sydney Morning Herald* (30 July 2004), http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2004/07/30/1091080434339.html

announcer says (133), and then again, "'My brother, the peasant, the season of picking'" (144). While the effect is jarring in the context of an English-language novel, to Arabs this kind of phrasing is quite normal. Words and nouns are all gendered. Arabic does not have, for instance, the equivalent of 'my dear reader/listener' in which the addressee is gender-neutral; rather, the equivalent must be 'my dear (male) reader' or 'my dear (male) listener', unless the text is directed strictly at a female audience, in which case the gender could be feminine. Speakers of Arabic tend to become oblivious to this gendering of their language, which circumscribes and proscribes gender-roles and enshrines men and women in certain participatory or non-participatory stances. Here the fact that Maha is the one working on the farm day and night, the fact that she is indeed the only peasant we see in the act of farming, explodes this myth of the exclusively male peasant and explodes the gendering of the Arabic language, revealing its inherent chauvinism and sexism. In fact, Maha, in her consciousness, refuses the gendered outlook and begins to think very differently from this speaker on the radio and those who write his programme. When she looks across the Dead Sea to the West Bank of the river Jordan, she notices much greenery. Her thought is that there must be "a strong peasant woman [...] working in their fields day and night," for Maha realizes something which men don't acknowledge and city people do not know: that women, the women of Qasim in her particular experience, work "all their lives [...] sweat and dig the soil to build nests for their men and children and at the end they die and are forgotten. Ants without names, past or future" (145). The pride of the Arabs in protecting their women and keeping them 'honoured' and safe is nothing but myth: women break their backs, whether in the fields or in their houses as Um-Saad did, hence Maha's instinctive desire to acknowledge women's work and view the greenery as its product. The reaction hints at Maha's feminist consciousness, an instinct to acknowledge and celebrate these women's participation in the survival of their households and farms. But even this, Maha's contribution on the farm, is denigrated and cast as evil. According to The Storyteller, her sole motivation is greed, and her caring for her father in fact disguises cunning by which she hopes to take over his household (140).

Other moves by Faqir show the inherent sexism of the Arabic language in sexualizing women's identities and actions. When The Storyteller describes Maha's powers over Harb, he uses a literal translation of an Arabic expression referring to brainwashing: "licked away his brain" (59). The

word "licked" emphasizes Maha's sexual power, for, according to his version of events, she has been able to dominate both Harb and the Pasha by her sexuality and nothing else. In other examples, the text translates profusely from songs or expressions in which women are represented as slaves and servants: "'Hey Saideh, listen to your master. / I am having a bath. / Obey your master. / I am cooking. / Go to your master. / I am…'" (95); "'Girl, do you have a protector with a sword and shield? / No, I don't have one, but to you I will yield'" (56); or in expressions such as when Haniyyeh, later Um-Saad, pleads with her father not to marry her off: "'I will be your slave girl for the rest of my life'" (108). These words are particularly significant, since the phrases in Arabic imply the slavery of women or their roles as containers of consumable matter. In describing the bloodthirsty jubilation the tribe experiences at her confirmed virginity on her wedding night, Maha coldly professes: "The honey in its jar was safe; I was pure" (46). Um-Saad likewise describes how, whenever she made almond juice for her mother's guests and would "see a brownish flake floating in a glass, I used to think that it was my skin they were drinking" (95). This representation of woman as consumable object and vessel to be filled or emptied at will is echoed in countless Arabic songs and expressions: "'Hey, you carrying the jar, / Hey, you carrying the secrets, / Give me some water, O girl'" (64), "'Dark-haired beauty. / Oh dark-haired beauty. / You are the glass / And your lips are wine'" (79).

The text, then, does not play the game of hiding Arab women's miseries or excusing them for the sake of nationalist concerns in an increasingly anti-Islamic Western world; it is a text which acknowledges that Arab women are indeed oppressed and that this must be revealed to Arabs and Muslims. Its project can be described as the "production of a new discourse" that

> defies the constraints and taboos of the culture of origin (such as the 'sacredness' of the Arabic language or the subaltern status of women) by putting it in dialogue with a different culture. The purpose is neither soft-edged amalgamation nor slavish mimicry.[43]

Thus, when the text says, "Maha my Eyesight drink some milk please" (22), the Arabic-speaker can better see the hidden messages in translation,

[43] Hechmi Trabelsi, "Transcultural Writing: Ahdaf Soueif's *Aisha* as a Case Study," *Jouvert* 7.2 (2003), online: para 43.

meanings almost certainly not intended in the spoken Arabic. Maliha's statement to her daughter then becomes filled with symbolic meaning. When a mother who cannot blink because of a stroke dies with her eyes open, facing her life and destiny and misery, as it were (causes of her stroke, perhaps), we see the image of a strong woman who wants to pass this same vision on to her daughter and continue the chain of sight, courage, and strength. Maha then inherits from her mother this strength to become the incarnation of her mother's eyes, the active gaze in a place where women are supposed to have a mild and downcast mien. This is again symbolically and thematically juxtaposed with another literally translated proverb which Harb's uncle, the representative of the family into which Maha will marry, utters to indicate their taking on the protection (and taking possession) of Maha: "We will hold her in our eyes" (42). Here the power of the gaze in the service of patriarchy is emphasized. Held fast, Maha will be under constant supervision and surveillance by a new group of men. This thematic connection between patriarchal power and visual power is reiterated in another translated Arabic expression, when Maha states that lately she "had not lined [her] eyes with the sight of horsemen" (154). A similar example not only reveals the irony of the original Arabic, but perhaps also its ridiculousness and thus cultural and religious danger. To allay Maha's fear about her future once she refuses to marry Sheikh Talib and to convince her that life is fated, Tamam tells Maha, "What is written on the forehead, the eye must see" (205). A literal translation from Arabic, this means that our life story is written and that one day we will live it out, unable to change it. This is the culturally shared notion of *naseeb*, or fate; although Islam suggests that our fate is written, it also suggests that we can affect the course of our lives by our actions. Not only is the depressing helplessness of Maha highlighted, more so, perhaps, is the absurdity of this belief, made apparent by its simple translation into English, describing a task which is impossible. Only others can see (or imagine) such writing and determine the fate of one so marked. The implication is that women are especially powerless to choose their fates; others do it for them. The fact that the text rejects predestination is signified by Maha, who in times of anxiety constantly rubs her forehead and declares: "'I will get married to nobody, I will not

sign any deeds, and will never cook for the English'" (217). By rubbing her forehead, Maha attempts to rewrite her fate, the narrative of her life.[44]

In order to combat powerlessness, women will try to use the patriarchal structural power of Arabic culture and infuse it into Arabic language. For example, when Maha feels alienated by the cook in the Pasha's house ("His big rounded eyes told me that he disliked me and objected to my presence in his spotless kitchen"), Maha responds with a typical Arab greeting, "Hello, uncle" (155). The usage will seem strange to the non-Arabic-speaker, since the man is no relation of hers. Women, and younger men, in Arab culture use this form of relation-creation in addressing those in some position of power, however small. It is like an invocation imploring the addressee to see himself as an older blood relation, creating a kinship and thus encouraging him to behave in a protective or non-sexual manner. In this sense, the narrative rewrites the Arabic and shows its native speakers new uses for it.

Similarly, literally translated Bedouin customs and songs become invested with new meaning, and are especially a revelation for the Arabic-speaker, for whom such customs and songs usually mean little outside of their cultural and emotional context. However, when displaced within the confines of this English-language novel, they begin to take on a symbolic meaning in keeping with the theme of the novel. The slaughtering of the sheep, for example ("They forced the sheep to lie on their backs, tied their hind legs together, and cried, 'In the name of Allah'," 32), suggests the slaughtering of and violence against women. Songs about swords and love ("'Hey, you, leaning on your sword, / Your sword has wounded me. / Among the creatures and the people, / Your love has disgraced me'," 32) become songs about phallic violence and male hegemony. Cotton candy, popular with Arab children, is called "Girls-curls," and we are meant to see how, like the candy, the lives of girls will also "melt away," "leaving nothing behind"; sucked dry, women's lives are as forgotten and as ephe-

[44] Another connected displacement is the following: "My eyesight [in referring to Harb] was as hot as smoldering cinder" (83). This is a literal translation of a typical Arabic expression. While it might refer to Harb as her "eyesight," it could actually refer to her own gaze which is now smouldering with rage at the pain this "twin of her soul" is enduring. More interestingly, the displacement reveals and reflects the lack of gaze and thus lack of agency of women, and how they subsequently come to 'see' through other people, mostly husbands and sons who are to literally guide them and lead them through life as if they were legal minors or blind camels.

meral as their sweetness and importance in this culture – "a fluffy lie," "full from the outside" and "empty [...] from the inside" (19). Similarly, Haniyyeh is called by her mother "broken-neck," a typical phrase in Syrian Arabic, used for both men and women. But again we are meant to see beneath the ordinariness of the phrase into its latent meaning: "She said she had always wanted my neck to be broken because I, the first-born, was a girl and not the boy she had longed for" (95).

Yet another clear instance of deliberate displacement comes in Um-Saad's singing of a particular song during her miserable life in Abu Saad's house. The song is a very famous and commonly heard one in the Arab world, and is considered to be romantic and descriptive of a way a woman can love a man: "The dark man made me mad, / He stole my brain from me, / I will not fall for anyone but him" (150). In the context of this novel, however, it takes on another meaning, an ironic one, considering that Um-Saad will be accused by her husband of being mad; and, of course, it can be argued that she in fact lost her sanity because of what her husband has done to her. The focus becomes, then, not the enrapturing effects of male–female relationships but the way in which women become victims of those relationships with "dark men" – itself a play on orientalist representation.

The exposure of women's oppression in the Arabic language is further revealed in another fascinating example of displacement wherein Um-Saad describes how she was beaten by her father when he discovered she was seeing a man she was in love with: "I ate about a hundred lashes" (100). This is, of course, a literal translation from Arabic, in which the verb "ate" has the sense of 'took' or 'received'. The phrase can be uttered by either males or females, but its use here by a woman, especially coming after the description of Maha's own physical pain and torture by her brother Daffash, echoes the cultural inscription and marking of women's bodies. This simple phrase, placed in close narrative proximity (approaching juxtaposition) to Maha's story, echoes and emphasizes that other story, not unlike the way that stories in *The Nights* echo and reinforce one another. After Maha is tortured because of societal norms and expectations, her body becomes the template upon which women's emotional and psychological pain is written. Her body tells the story of the apocalypse, in its release of blood and pus that women have to live under. Here, Um-Saad's body undergoes a similar fate; like Maha's body, it digests the torture of the outside world, which thereafter becomes in-

ternalized. Maha is penetrated by a pain which passes through the vagina and settles in her womb and uterus; Um-Saad *eats* and ingests the pain of a hundred lashes that settles in her stomach. The effect is augmented when, two lines later, Um-Saad describes her body as being composed of "treacherous limbs." The female body can betray its owner; it is often outside the control of the woman herself, who must abide by society's rules or else see her body turn against her in pain and misery. The female body is a liability, treacherous despite the pleasures that it must bring. Maha, because she has experienced this treachery herself, understands the hatred of the marked and inscribed body that Um-Saad expresses completely; this is where she begins to understand the concept of identity, female identity, and how it has brought her nothing but grief:

> I collapsed and started calling al-Shater Hasan at the top of my voice. Roll into oblivion. Roll into another identity. Depart this body. I could not stop the flooding tears; I could not move my arms or legs, I could not stop shouting [...]. I rubbed my eyes. I began understanding what Um-Saad meant when she spoke of 'identity'. (101)

Women, and their bodies, marked and inscribed by make-up, by beating, by pregnancy or abortion, by plastic surgery or whatever it may be that women do to their bodies or have done to them, become no more than clowns, as Um-Saad herself astutely comments: "Shushu the clown with his everlasting white tear sprang out of the mirror" (102); like him, women are creatures who are there for the amusement, the pleasure, and the entertainment of others, but who hide beneath their physical appearance a wealth of pain, sadness, and misery. And because this phrase ("I ate about a hundred lashes") has been typically used by men and women, Faqir's narrative technique of feminizing it thus rewrites the proverb and the Arabic language, investing it with a meaning revelatory of the female experience.

These and myriad other examples of Faqir's linguistic displacement allow her to rewrite Arabic within an English context in order to bring to light aspects of the culture and language too long embedded, largely unnoticed, in tradition, ritual, and repetition, and to bring out an alternative and subversive meaning. A proverb, a song, a phrase, an expression are so internalized and normalized in the native culture that both its original meaning

and any possible alternative meaning are all but impossible to see. However, when such an expression is translated literally into another language and placed in the jarring context of a tale told in that language, its meaning begins to become demystified or, rather, disinvested of all the comfort and familiarity it enjoyed in its homegrown context – allowing multiple and various meanings to emerge.

Simultaneously, Faqir's narrative and linguistic choices not only rewrite Arabic and unsettle the Arabic-speaker, they also unsettle the English-speaker and the way he or she perceives the use of this language. For while the reader views such examples of displacement as those mentioned above as metaphorical and significant and as reaffirming the status of Arab women, and feels that a secret has been unlocked, a trick has really been played on him or her. Little does he or she know that these phrases in Arabic really mean 'nothing' – they are, seemingly, innocuous. The phrases' juxtaposition with other important thematic events trick the English-speaking reader into investing words with a Western consciousness – words that have a separate and unrelated cultural and linguistic history. A proverb, a song, a word, an expression or a cultural moment can take on different meanings simply because the culture and context into which the phrase has been transplanted, those of the outsider, are already anchored to a specific understanding. Thus do these things, though they may reveal layers of meaning forgotten, acquire layers of unintended meaning. In instances of untranslated or unexplained displacements, the anglophone reader is placed at a disadvantage, alienated from English, only then to be critiqued even while catered to. For the English reader, then, the novel defamiliarizes English, mystifies it – for, as an anticolonial gesture, it must; for the Arab reader, meanwhile, it defamiliarizes Arabic and thus helps demystify it – for, as a feminist gesture, it must.

The final question remains: does this strategy work? The text's meaning might reach the most perceptive readers while eluding others, an inevitable outcome of the fact that writing in English suggests Faqir's surrender to the 'Other', as Abdelwahab Meddeb suggests that writing in French does for North African writers. So Faqir, like other anglophone or francophone Arab writers who resist co-optation of their struggle,

> will defend [themselves] with arabesque, subversion, labyrinthine constructions, the incessant decentering of the sentence and of language so that the other will lose the way just as in the narrow streets of the *casbah*.[45]

This is an admirable postcolonial gesture of resistance, particularly, here, for a woman. But as the text's aim is to de-centre and educate, it does not want entirely to alienate. Faqir's gesture, if too extreme, might alienate without educating or, worse still, fall on deaf ears. Such "subversive poetics" can turn into "risky opportunities," which are "risky precisely because 'the other,' unfamiliar with the *casbah* [or the paradigms of the multiple narratives, the struggle and their history and discourses], might lose the way in the elaborate maze, might fail at decoding the text."[46] Although in some ways Faqir's strategies are successful, English-speaking readers do not feel subjected to critical scrutiny. Often what they see in the text is what orientalist tradition and the media have trained them to see – "Arabian Nights fabulism and social concern regarding the repression of Arab women," a book whose basic concern is "anti-traditional feminist themes."[47] Sometimes, even the effect of the language is lost. One reviewer feels that the heavy translation "from colloquial expressions and vernacular idioms and also from the Koran" will cause, for the Arabic-speaking reader, a "certain detraction from the original elegant qualities of translated expressions or verses."[48] *Kirkus Reviews* even completely misses the thematic significance of The Storyteller's narrative, believing it to echo and frame, thus lending support to the histories of Maha and Um-Saad, "which *typify* Jordanian experience during the British Mandate"; the same reviewer sees it as a "dazzling" and "very moving display of narrative art."[49] Successful or not, Arab women writers must continue "to interpret, manipulate, and modify language [so as] to transgress its rigidity, in order to secure [them]selves a forum of expression, of representation."[50]

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[45] Mehrez, "Subversive Poetics," 269, fn 28.

[46] Mehrez, "Subversive Poetics," 270.

[47] Sybil Steinberg, "*Pillars of Salt*," *Publishers Weekly* (28 April 1997): 51.

[48] "Customer Reviews for *Pillars of Salt*."

[49] Interlink books.

[50] Nada Elia, "The Fourth Language: Subaltern Expression in Djebar's *Fantasia*," in *Intersections: Gender, Nation, and Community in Arab Women's Novels*, ed. Lisa Suhair Majaj & Paula W. Sunderman (Syracuse NY: Syracuse UP, 2002): 192.

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Women in Exile

The 'Unhomely' in Fadia Faqir's *Pillars of Salt*

FADIA SUYOUFIE & LAMIA HAMMAD

THE MAJOR ARGUMENT of this essay is informed with the concept of 'unhomeliness' as expounded by Homi Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. In talking about the experience of an Anglo-Arab writer like Fadia Faqir,[1] the issue of identity and the theme of exile surface strongly where 'unhomeliness' is conceived as having a direct bearing on identity awareness and its reconstruction amidst the overwhelming external forces of dislocation and depersonalization. The article will address several issues, chief among which is questioning the forces that drive Arab female writers into 'diaspora' and the predicaments they face in the homeland that compel them to desert their *terre natale* and head Westward. What does it mean to seek refuge in the language of the 'Other' and how does this reflect on exilic experience and identity? It will further look into the representation of native culture and, more importantly, into the manner in which Faqir's writing accentuates the 'unhomeliness' not only of her fictive characters but also of her text. Through analysis of Faqir's personal testimony as an Anglo-Arab writer in *In the House of Silence*, and by a close reading of her novel *Pillars of Salt*,

[1] The offspring of a Bedouin father and a Circassian mother, Fadia Faqir was born to a well-known Jordanian tribe near Amman. She graduated with a B.A. in English language and literature from the University of Jordan in 1983, and obtained her M.A. from Lancaster University in 1985. In 1990, she earned "the first Ph.D. in creative writing in Britain" from the University of East Anglia. *Pillars of Salt* (New York: Interlink, 1996) is considered a part of this doctoral project.

which boldly exposes the grievances of Arab women, answers to these questions will be sought.

I The Arab Woman Writer in Exile: Faqir's Testimony

Faqir's seeking of education and work in England meant the beginning of what Homi Bhabha calls "presencing," which "captures something of the estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world – the unhomeliness – that is the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations."[2] Approaching the experience of Faqir as an Anglo-Arab writer from this perspective, one may argue that her life and work in a foreign country become the ordeal of initiation into the tribe of nomad writers, who left their countries of origin seeking distant harbours where they might find anchor. She, however, displays one major difference: namely, that she does not sentimentalize her sense of 'unbelonging', since she has already foreseen her state of living in England as that of living in 'exile'.

Faqir's autobiographical testimony "Stories from the House of Songs"[3] provides an important profile of the Arab woman writer in exile. In it, she maintains that forging a new hybrid identity and accepting cultural 'in-betweenness' and 'double consciousness' can perhaps alleviate the pangs of 'unhomeliness' and assist in transcending it. One of the major preoccupations of Faqir in this testimony is the plight of the female writer in the Arab world. Faqir identifies herself as the storyteller Scheherazade, who "entered into a conflict with the religious and political orders." For Scheherazade, "becoming a woman writer in Baghdad was to face a double challenge as there was a consensus in that land that denied woman a voice."[4] Like Scheherazade, whose tales become the means of survival by circumventing restrictions against women's speech, Faqir perceives her writing as a means of self-assertion through confronting the strict norms that demarcate the proper posture of women as silent, inert, and obedient. As Faqir puts it, in the Arab world women's writing "was not a respec-

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[2] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994): 9.

[3] In *In the House of Silence: Autobiographical Essays by Arab Women Writers*, tr. Shirley Eber & Fadia Faqir (Reading: Garnet, 1998): 49–62. Originally published in *New Statesman and Society* 11 (October 1991): 3–5.

[4] Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, 52. Further page references are in the main text.

table profession and was considered by the men of religion to be an act of subversion" (52). Many of them were to write under the gaze of censorship and lack of freedoms, and were forbidden to "cross the defined border [or] encroach on traditionally male space" (52). Any transgression of such red lines would have meant shame and disgrace. Prohibited from any discussions of the taboo subjects of sex, religion, and politics, Arab female writers were no more than 'writers in bondage.'

In Faqir's view, the greatest frustration was that women's writing was read as autobiography inviting 'slander', 'prohibition', and even 'imprisonment.'[5] Despite her recognition that "the house of writing" is the most inhospitable and 'unhomely' of habitations, Faqir ushers herself willingly into this "fragile" yet "strong" house; the house that uncannily offers her, despite the torments of exile, great empowerment. She candidly admits: "The truth is that there is no house apart from the fragile, strong house of writing, the house of song" (61). It is the prison-like atmosphere that makes the country of origin literally 'unhomely'. It is this very stifling atmosphere of censorship and "bondage" that drives Scheherazade to seek refuge in another country:

> Scheherazade wanted to safeguard her integrity, and the purity of her tales [...] she wanted freedom to teach her children songs of peace, so she left Baghdad. She refused to let her song be silenced or distorted [...] and so she crossed from one language into another, committing herself to a life of exile. (53)

In seeking exile, she hoped to escape "dictatorship, fundamentalism and the mutilation of the mind" (54). To her restless mind, the self-imposed exile presents itself as the site of 'unhomeliness': "Exile is a sad country. In [it] the rift between the rural image of the homeland and the western city cannot be healed. It is a severing from home, Eden, childhood; it is a sense of loss, displacement, uprootedness" (53).

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[5] Faqir names some Arab women writers who were "held legally responsible for their creation," such as Layla Ba'lbaki, Zabia Khamis, Suhair el-Tal, and Nawal El Saadawi (*In the House of Silence*, 52). For further discussion of the sham democracy in the Arab world, see Faqir's essay published in Arabic in *Al-Mustaqbal al-Arabi* 271.9 (2001): 28–54.

Through her testimony, Faqir recounts the development of a "double vision" whereby residual images of the homeland blend with the vivid spaces of exile:

> In Exile, you quickly develop a double vision, where images of the streets of Basra merge with those of Kentish town. You begin looking forward at the country of adoption while always looking back at the country of origin. You check your position at every junction. You adjust your mirrors, your sense of belonging, and drive on exploring a new map. You keep examining and re-examining your loyalties to both the still picture in the mind and the present living landscape. You no longer take things at face value. Doubt, dissent, and questioning become part of your life. You become a hybrid forever assessing, evaluating, accommodating. (53)

At this point, Faqir's embracement of a 'hybrid' identity carries the same welcome overtones that Bhabha attaches to the term. The phase of restless anxiety about exploring "a new map" is soon followed by the phase of cultural shock. This happens when "you fail to recognize the truth of your experience in the Western perception of it" (53). At first, the encounter with Western culture proves to be intimidating:

> you feel out-numbered and out-organized by a culture which validates and enforces the supremacy of everything that is Christian, Western, white, written. At the least provocation, distaste for immigrant culture comes to the surface. (53)

In exile, Scheherazade is considered "untouchable"; she feels lost and begins to ask questions about her identity: "Who am I? Where do I belong? Where is my fatherland? To whom should I tell my tales?" (54). In this phase, Faqir is often visited by moments of what Bhabha calls the "unhomely." Such a moment "creeps up on you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself [...] taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of 'incredulous terror'."[6] To her great disappointment, "the house of obedience, which Scheherazade had left behind, rose again as the house of confinement" (54). Exile, as the new space sought willingly by the Anglo-Arab writer, is now demarcated as "confinement." The confines of the new "adoption house," as Faqir describes them, poignantly close upon her. Faqir employs a chain of signifiers in which she refers to

[6] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 9.

exile as "wound" (55), "ghetto," "sentence of solitary confinement" (58), a "mental hospital," and "the country of coconuts and slavery" (59).

It is this pattern of dislocation and estrangement that applies to the experience of Faqir's female characters in *Pillars of Salt*. In this novel, "the mad house," which is administered by the English doctor, becomes the new 'home', where Maha and Um-Saad free their tongues, at the risk of severe punishment and under the most alienating conditions. As Faqir puts it, "You begin shrinking in order not to occupy more space than you should. You embrace your inferior position wholeheartedly and bowing becomes part of your life" (59). "Bowing" to the dictations of authority becomes a strategy for survival. The challenge here is to recover from the shock of disillusionment and to transcend suffering by sublimating it into one form or other of self-expression. In this sense, the alienating, shadowy experience of 'unhomeliness' and atrophied existence must be lived before one can become a viable hybrid.

At this point, Faqir has no hope of feeling 'at home', as forces of the 'unhomely' invade her creative as well as domestic spaces. As Bhabha explains,

> The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. In that displacement, the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (9)

Bhabha, further, reminds us that unhomeliness is not merely associated with place/space but is also a mood, or a state of mind: "To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the 'unhomely' be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres" (9).

With the onslaught of the Gulf War and its arrogant display of war machinery and inauthentic news coverage, the experience of 'unhomeliness' is further complicated when Scheherazade experiences guilt at her use of the colonizer's tongue. Her immediate decision is

> to decolonize the mind and the tongue. She had vowed not to utter another word in English. The house of confinement became a ghetto where you shut your ears, eyes, mouth and heart to the host society, like the three wise monkeys. (57)

Looking with a critical eye at the political agenda of the West. its "quest for oil" and "territorial expansionism," Scheherazade finds herself full of

resentment, especially of the Western media: "Baghdad became 'Arabia', an extension of the desert so romantically and faithfully portrayed by Lawrence of Arabia and his predecessors" (57). After the war, she tried to speak, but no one could hear: "Exile became a sentence of solitary confinement" (58).

The walls of the "house of confinement" continue to rise around Scheherazade as she cannot support the "war machine." At this point, "Exile stops being a rift and becomes a wound" (55). This wound marks the inscription of pain on the body and, most keenly, on the tongue as a site of struggle. She vows not to "utter another word in English, the language of her colonizer and invader" (59). The English language, her first love, now sounds "contaminated, corrupt, full of 'neutralising', 'terminating', 'taking apart', 'knocking out' and 'cleansing' hostile targets" (56). She becomes disillusioned with English as a language when "freedom of expression began receding. Censorship, the corruption of language and the compromise of some journalists, academics, and commentators brought back bad memories" (58). Her dreams of freedom and justice are "shattered" and the adoption house becomes a "mental hospital." The feelings of estrangement envelop her as she realizes that she is "still dark, incomprehensible, untouchable, and completely surrounded by high white walls." In this embittered state of mind, 'unhomeliness' defeats all hopes and opens old wounds.

Living through the Western media's (mis)presentation of Arabs brings back to Scheherazade's mind the agonies of the colonial encounter. Facing the television screen becomes a painful ritual of descent into the abandoned recesses of the self:

> You become so embittered and anguished over seeing yourself mutilated everyday on screen that you build a castle around your immigrant heart and refuse to have anything to do with the host society. Like a mole, you live underground, in the darkness. You decide that your native Urdu, Swahili or Arabic is better than their snobbish English [...]. (59)

This image of building or construction of space to resist the hostility of the adoption home is highly indicative of the sense of 'unhomeliness' at this moment of crisis. One marked response to such a moment is that of withdrawal, as when Scheherazade feels ostracized as a "re-colonized" subject through the media: "The only self-defense open to you is to shrivel, wrap yourself in black, and hide in the mosque" (59). Ironically,

the mosque, once conceived of as an 'unhomely' space in the native territory, now offers a temporary refuge.

As her disappointment over English as the acquired tongue of freedom persists during the war, Faqir aligns her position with that of Ngũgĩ in his resolution to view "the question of language" as "'clearly inseparable from the question of to which tradition [he] would reconnect [him]self'" (56). Later on, however, she decides to join the camp of Chinua Achebe, who believed that deserting the English language is tantamount to defeatism:

> "To throw out the English language in order to restore linguistic justice and self-respect to ourselves is a historical fantasy [...]. We need [the English] language to transact our business, including the business of overthrowing colonialism itself in the fullness of time." (60)[7]

In reconciling herself to the English language, Faqir allows Scheherazade the option to "celebrate her uniqueness in English, and describe her new world in order to understand it. She should write her colors back into the predominantly white tapestry." In this positive frame of thought, Scheherazade celebrates "differences and similarities, rejecting absolute truths about herself and others, welcoming disruptions and linear narratives, embracing debate, uncertainty, and dissent [...]. She sings for bridges, those destroyed and those to be built" (60–61). These are the bridges that Martin Heidegger describes, and which Bhabha invokes: "Always and ever differently the bridge escorts the lingering and hastening ways of men to and fro, so they may get to the other banks. [...] The bridge gathers as a passage that crosses."[8] For her, writing is considered as a reviving impulse and a strong edifice that allows her to reconstruct the shattered self. Writing is the only option left as resistance to correct misrepresentations. Rising from the dust, "she begins to talk herself into being, to paint her image into existence, to write herself into their literature."[9]

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[7] Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, 60, quoting Chinua Achebe, "The Song of Ourselves," *New Statesman & Society* (9 February 1990): 32. See also Faqir, "Stories from the House of Songs," *New Statesman and Society* (11 October 1991): 5, which also quotes this passage.

[8] Quoted in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 5.

[9] Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, 60.

The metamorphosis of Scheherazade, the oriental storyteller, into "a phoenix, a beautiful, colorful bird of survival, forever flying beyond the last sky" (61), is a sign of strength, adaptation, and resilience. Faqir's words echo Bhabha's description of Will, the narrator of Nadine Gordimer's *My Son's Story*, whose writing of the narrative "charts the phoenix rising in his home, while the words must turn to ashes in his mouth" (13), thus bringing the recognition that "each 'unhomely' house marks a deeper historical displacement" (13). An optimistic note presents itself here in Bhabha's notion of the shadowy area of 'unhomeliness' as an antechamber to the enfranchising space of hybridity:

> To live in the unhomely world, to find its ambivalences and ambiguities enacted in the house of fiction, or its sundering and splitting performed in the work of art, is also to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity.[10]

The state of hybridity allows Faqir the chance to assert her 'unhomely' identity through creativity. This optimistic note is occasionally countered in Faqir's testimony in *In the House of Silence,* where she deliberately distances herself by the use of "she," referring to Scheherazade, to describe her own experience. During the Gulf-War crisis, she identifies herself with other marginalized groups by the use of "you" (59). This is not surprising, since the sense of 'unhomeliness' is informed with many stances of self-division or contradictory reactions to the pressures exerted on her by the alienating forces of the media. However, the final posture is illuminating and empowering, granting Scheherazade the exhilaration of surviving on edge; on the borderlines between two worlds. Thus, Janus-like, the Arab woman writer stands looking both ways at once – to the shadowy terrains of her past, and to the limitless enticements of a 'hybrid' identity in the present moment, which is imbibed with all its contradictory nuances. One may recall here the words of Edward Said in his *Out of Place*, where the condition of 'unhomeliness' has enabled him to transcend the narrow definitions of the 'home' and the familiar associations of identity:

> Now it doesn't seem important or even desirable to be 'right' and in place (right at home, for instance). Better to wander out of place, not to own a

[10] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 18.

> house, and not ever to feel too much at home anywhere, especially in a city like New York, where I shall be until I die.[11]

In this state of nomadism,[12] the self, now richer than ever, will finally find its new 'home', as Said asserts:

> I occasionally experience myself as a cluster of flowing currents. I prefer this to the idea of a solid self, the identity to which so many attach so much significance. These currents, like the themes of one's life, flow along during the waking hours, and at their best, they require no reconciling, no harmonizing. They are 'off' and may be out of place, but at least they are always in motion, in time, in place, in the form of all kinds of strange combinations moving about, not necessarily forward, sometimes against each other, contrapuntally yet without one central theme. A form of freedom.[13]

Painful as it is, this condition of 'unhomeliness' becomes a form of self-indulgence which the writer deliberately seeks. Again, as Said puts it:

> To me, nothing more painful and paradoxically sought after characterizes my life than the many displacements from countries, cities, abodes, languages, environments that have kept me in motion all these years.[14]

In this state of ambivalence, migrant writers become nomads, experiencing the 'unhomely' as a mood separated from familiar place and identity. Faqir's experience conforms to Bhabha's view that the experience of 'unhomeliness' becomes the locus of innovation by providing "hybrid sites" where "newness" enters the world.[15] In this state of rebirth, 'unhomeliness' yields to an uncertain 'state of emergency', which may explain why a writer like Faqir undertakes the agency of writing. In his *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays*, Said confirms this notion: "In his

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[11] Edward Said, *Out of Place* (New York: Vintage, 1999): 294.

[12] For a discussion of the self-indulgence implied in the art of wandering away from home, see John Zilcosky, "The Writer as Nomad? The Art of Getting Lost," *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies* 6.2 (2004):229–41. See also, in the same issue, John Noyes' editorial "Nomadism, Nomadology, Postcolonialism," 159–67.

[13] Said, *Out of Place*, 295.

[14] *Out of Place*, 217.

[15] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 227.

text, the writer sets up house [...] For a man who no longer has a homeland, writing becomes a place to live."[16]

One may observe that Faqir, in writing *Pillars of Salt*, is probably motivated by nostalgia, which she describes in her testimony as "a form of loyalty to the house [...], to the garden with its tall palm tree, to the mother's head scarf, to the past, the village; all are images held still in a medium which beautifies."[17] However, the territories which are mapped in *Pillars of Salt* are infused with 'unhomely' spaces. The ambivalence of juxtaposing a nostalgic, 'beautifying' view of home with these unsettling and disturbing spaces is significant. The text becomes the site of several tensions and contradictions which oscillate between the familiar and friendly, the repressed and the feared. In this sense, Faqir's text represents an "in-between" space, which provides, as Bhabha suggests, "the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood – singular or communal – that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself."[18] Here, *Pillars of Salt* will be approached as the outcome of Faqir's "articulation of displacement and dislocation" (114). As Faqir's "hybridity text," this novel may thus be considered, in Bhabha's view, as "the place from which something begins its presencing in a movement not dissimilar to the ambulant, ambivalent articulation of the beyond" (5). Here,

> Beyond signifies spatial distance, marks progress, promises the future; but our intimations of exceeding the barrier or boundary – the very act of going beyond – are unknowable, unrepresentable, without a return to the 'present' which, in the process of repetition, becomes disjunct and displaced. (4)

In this context, Faqir's text becomes the site of various tensions which mark disjunction and displacement not only in the critique of the native culture, but also in the very act of voicing this critique as it influences the construction of a new identity.

Moreover, if Faqir's text is approached in a wider context, not only as a postcolonial, feminist text but also as a postmodern one, then what Bhabha says of such texts may be insightful:

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[16] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2002): 568.

[17] Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, 53.

[18] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 1–2.

> The wider significance of the postmodern condition lies in the awareness that the epistemological 'limits' of ethnocentric ideas are also the enunciative boundaries of a range of other dissonant, even dissident histories and voices – women, the colonized, minority groups. (4–5)

True to this register, Faqir's text becomes the site where women's voices are re-inscribed in a defiant subversion of a long history of silence within a native and not a hosting culture. This is effected in the traumatic narrative of Maha and her re-voicing of Um-Saad's story, which are foregrounded against the historical and political backdrop of the British colonization of Jordan. The novel provides for Faqir a "liminal space," which allows her to "come to speech" in the reinscription of history by offering her the middle ground from which she can look back at her country's past in an attempt to 'restage' it.

Faqir's text thus traverses different spaces which, as Bhabha argues, are required for the achievement of "aesthetic distance":

> Private and public, past and present, the psyche and the social, which develop an interstitial intimacy. It is an intimacy that questions binary divisions through which such spheres of social experience are often spatially opposed. These spheres of life are linked through an 'in-between' temporality that takes the measures of dwelling at home, while producing an image of the world of history. This is the moment of aesthetic distance that provides the narrative with a double edge, which [...] represents a hybridity; a difference 'within', a subject that inhabits the rim of an 'in-between' reality.[19]

This echoes Edward Said's observation that

> Liberation as an intellectual mission, born in the resistance and opposition to the confinements and ravages of imperialism, has now shifted from the settled, established, and domesticated dynamics of culture to its unhoused, decentered, and exilic energies, energies whose incarnation today is the migrant, and whose consciousness is that of the intellectual and artist in exile, the political figure between domains, between forms, between homes, and between languages.[20]

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[19] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 13.

[20] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1993): 332.

Such is the position of Faqir, situated on the borderline between East and West; inside and outside; both gazer and the subject of the gaze; the teller and the tale.

II The 'Unhomely' House of Fiction: *Pillars of Salt*

As an Arab woman who writes in English, Faqir displays the intricacies of postcolonial discourse by writing the novel as a counter-discourse to T.E. Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom*. The text itself stands between East and West, and combines Arabic traditional storytelling with post-modern narrative modes. Further, Faqir participates in the discourse of contemporary Arab feminist writers such as Ghada Samman, Nawal Sadawi, and Sahar Khalifeh, whose fiction is a forum for women's voices. However, unlike Nawal Saadawi, for example, Faqir's discourse is not militant or directly confrontational. Amin Malak observes:

> The works of almost all Arab and Muslim women writers in English reveal an unequivocal sense of affiliation with their Islamic culture, while at the same time condemning and combating the abusive excesses of patriarchy when it appropriates and exploits the religious argument to preserve its own spiritual and material hegemony.[21]

In Faqir's case, however, there is no sentimental affiliation with religion or native culture, but rather a self-investigating critique of this culture. And as the two women, Maha and Um-Saad, exchange their stories, the various forms of patriarchal oppression are revealed. Malak further suggests that "the discourse of these writers strives, with varying degrees of militancy, for an agenda that is quite distinct from Euro-American feminism."[22] Again, in the case of Faqir, the appropriation of Western feminist poetics in foregrounding the grievances of her female characters marks a position akin to that of Western feminism in its early stages, when women demanded such basic rights as full suffrage and social participation. Western feminist poetics may be detected throughout Faqir's text, such as presenting madness as a pre-text for narrative, as we find in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper." Another stance is the utilizing

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[21] Amin Malak, "Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity: The Fiction of Ahdaf Soueif," *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 20 (2000): 144.

[22] Amin Malak, "Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity," 144.

of the motif of 'quilting' or weaving tapestry in Afro-American women's writing to suggest female solidarity and self-fulfilment. Moreover, overtones of the Philomela myth are found in the association between women's suffering and the sublimation of that suffering in the creative act of weaving a 'narrative'. In addition to feminist poetics, the kaleidoscopic world of *Pillars of Salt* participates in the playful metafictional games of postmodernism, particularly as revealed in the utterances of the storyteller. And, still more relevantly, the text provides a pretext for the encounter between colonial/postcolonial culture and its counterpart, the native Arab (Jordanian) culture.

A close reading of *Pillars of Salt* locates different sites of 'unhomeliness', beginning with the unsettling biblical connotations of the title itself. The title evokes the punishment meted out to women who dared to 'look back'. In this sense, the women of Faqir's text are 'looking back' at the 'unhomely' sites of their domestic lives through their recycling of memories. A passage in the text reads:

> If you dive in the sea you find figures made of salt; pillars of salt, with absolute horror on their faces. Wide-open mouths, crying for help and forgiveness. Yes, the people of Lot in this most contaminated of lands, and the most evil of nations.[23]

The reference is to the Dead Sea, the dark "sea" of nightmarish recollections in which these women "dive." It is not only these females who are punished at the end of the novel, but the whole nation is implicated and punished. Who is there, then, to dole out help and forgiveness to these women?

Throughout the text, the forces of the 'unhomely' occupy different spaces and appear in several guises. These include, first and foremost, the menacing stronghold of patriarchal authority; the banal desert, which charts the great expanse of the setting; the unfriendly "blind" mud houses in the villages, which stick like "leeches" to the mountainside; the

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[23] *Pillars*, 85. In Genesis 19:17 and 19:24–26, we find the following account of the punishment of Lot's people: "Escape for thy life," the Angel said, "look not behind thee, neither stay thou in the plain; escape to the mountain, lest thou be consumed […] Then the lord rained upon Sodom and upon Gomorrah brimstones and fire from the Lord out of heaven; and he overthrew those cities, and all the plain, and all the inhabitants of cities, and that which grew upon the ground. But his [Lot's] wife looked back from behind him, and she became a pillar of salt."

'unhomely' interiors of those houses, where the domestic sphere is constantly threatened by external invasion and depersonalization; and, more importantly, the presentation of the female body itself as a site for the most 'unhomely' encounters. To reveal the density and pervasiveness of the 'unhomely' in Faqir's novel, textual analysis of the utterances of her female characters will now follow.

Maha's experience of her limited boundaries reveals to us an 'unhomely' world for women, who are constantly relegated to the backyard of their society. Maha sadly tells Um-Saad: "I realized how high were the mud walls imprisoning us."[24] However, these women manage, through the harrowing ordeal of 'madness', to transform the experience of the 'unhomely' into a new awareness of identity. As 'unhomed' subjects, both Maha and Um-Saad are aesthetically represented by what Emanuel Levinas calls "a descent into night, an invasion of the shadow."[25] Thus their descent into madness should not be only read as a sign of their being 'unhomed' but also as a necessary rite of passage in their reconstruction of the self as an entity. At the madhouse, Faqir's characters are dislocated physically and psychologically. This is why their speech, grounded in memory, functions as an attempt to relocate the self, to re-member the fragmented 'unhomed' self. Expectedly, 'unhomeliness' finds its expression in *Pillars of Salt* through the various forms of oppression which the two female protagonists, Maha and Um-Saad, experience as 'unhomed' subjects. Both feel displaced from home, from their familiar surroundings, and deprived of the right to 'speak'. However, each one's experience of 'unhomeliness' is controlled by the specific conditions of her social habitat and her personality. Yet both suffer the invasion of their bodies and their domestic space as manifestations of the 'unhomely'. In the following discussion of the novel, we will focus on the estranging sense of the 'relocation' of the home and illustrate the presence of the 'unhomely' in the novel's haunting spaces. Whether it be the cave, the desert, the madhouse, or the country/nation at large, the spaces which 'enclose' these women have the alienating effect of 'unhomeliness'. Whether knowingly, like Maha, or unwittingly, like Um-Saad, these women find themselves helpless victims of the patriarchal codes of their society.

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[24] Faqir, *Pillars*, 13.

[25] Quoted in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 15.

As they finally are 'homed' in the madhouse, these two women encounter, in Bhabha's words, the "estranging sense of the relocation of the home and the world" (9). As women suffering in the precincts of their local culture, they do not experience 'extraterritorial' or 'cross-cultural' initiation. Although they come to speech in the madhouse, this new 'home' is hardly the ideal realm of freedom since it marks, with its high white walls, an extension of the "high walls" that have always enclosed them. In producing madness as the pre-text of narrative, Faqir conforms to Bhabha's view of the 'unhomely' as that which allows the juxtaposition of the private with the public: "The unhomely moment relates the traumatic ambivalence of a personal, psychic history to the wider disjunctions of political existence" (11). Bhabha rephrases this concept soon enough: "each 'unhomely' house marks a deeper historical displacement" (13). In such a context, the narrative enframes the psychic trauma of Maha and Um-Saad within Jordanian political history during and after the British Mandate. Thus the subjection of women to patriarchal authority runs in parallel with the colonization of the nation by foreign hegemony. This doubling of perspectives is mirrored in the fact that Maha's story describes events from the inside which are countered by the storyteller, who reports distortedly from the outside, approximating colonial discourse as well as the local discourses of authority (religious and social). Contrarily, the utterances of Maha as a simple peasant woman, and Um-Saad, as an obscure immigrant's daughter, represent the voices of the marginalized and the voiceless.

In the banal spaces that surround both Maha and Um-Saad, there is no hope of re-mapping the domestic space. Instead, we have a punitively apocalyptic space of destruction that recalls the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. As Bhabha observes, it is "precisely in these banalities that the unhomely stirs" (15). Bhabha further reminds us:

> the 'unhomely does provide a 'non-continuist' problematic that dramatizes – in the figure of woman – the ambivalent structure of the civil state as it draws its rather paradoxical boundary between the private and the public spheres. (10)

The presence of Maha and Um-Saad as women in the text signifies the ambivalence of their problematic space in society, which is maintained by the encroachment of the public sphere on the private. Faqir shows the

drastic socio-political impact of the public sphere on the private lives of these women. Bhabha describes such an impact:

> In that displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused; and uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting. (9)

The domestic space, as experienced by these women, blurs the boundary between that which is personal, interior, and psychological, and that which is public, external, and political.

In Faqir's novel, the growing sense of displacement becomes a trope. The ambivalence and ambiguity that permeate *Pillars of Salt* evoke feelings of 'unhomeliness'. Before their entrapment in the madhouse, both Maha and Um-Saad have experienced the 'home' as 'unhomely'. Behind the suffering of both women stands a deeply entrenched tradition that alienates women. In *In the House of Silence*, Scheherazade says:

> In that country, which I shall call Baghdad for the purpose of this narrative, [.... to] contain women's power, a system of segregation and confinement was superimposed on the many and diverse societies in Baghdad. The unchecked rights of men, polygamy and divorce, were all strategies to subjugate women.[26]

To a large extent, these women have been existing conditionally, provided that they adhere to the traditional injunctions to be silent and obedient, and to remain immobile.[27] It is the charge of madness that makes articulation possible and allows these women an outlet to unravel the threads of their lives. Faqir's sense of estrangement in exile, which has become "a mad house," is mirrored here in the plight of Maha and Um-Saad, who become colonized subjects to the blue-eyed English doctor and the team of local nurses. They are constantly ordered to "shut up" and, when they do not comply with these commands, they are given tranquil-

[26] Faqir, *In the House of Silence*, 51.

[27] See Fatima Mernissi's *Woman in the Muslim Unconscious*, published under the pseudonym "Fatna Sabbah" (New York: Pergamon, 1984): 3, where Mernissi opens her study by asking: "Why are silence, immobility, and obedience the key criteria of female beauty in the Muslim society where I live and work?" Throughout her study, she closely examines the erotics and the socio-religious politics which encode the subjugation of women.

lizers and are punished by having their hair cropped. However, despite the pain, the two women manage to retrieve their 'unhomely' memories of loss and achieve a brief encounter with the self. In women's speech, the wandering of the tongue is considered an aberration recalling the physical wandering of woman away from her 'right' place, and the mobility of these women leads to their consignment to the madhouse. As a peasant woman, Maha has the freedom to work in her orange orchard but not the freedom to "talk," which in itself is conceived as a form of transgression. Um-Saad, more typically, is considered to be mad the moment she wanders away from her home – ironically, to the mosque. As women are consistently relegated to the boundaries of the home, there are social, cultural, and political forces that conspire to transform the home into 'unhomely'.

III Constricted Spaces

Although *Pillars of Salt* is a polyphonic novel, the major consciousness in the narrative is that of Maha. Faqir's presentation of the suffering of both Maha and Um-Saad is rooted deeply in social realism in Jordan during the early decades of the twentieth century. Although illiterate, Maha is endowed with an instinctive capacity to understand her plight as a woman in a male-dominated society. She appears closely bound to her orange orchard, which she cultivates with extra care. She is more like a pagan who doesn't know how to pray.[28] She is apprehensive of the sound of the minaret of the shrine as it cries "frenziedly" (119). The "blind village, [which] was […] clinging to the mountainside like a leech" (219), disturbs her natural sense of harmony. At the madhouse, Maha often misses the perfumes of her orange trees, but not her village, Hamia. Maha suffers often at the hands of her brother, Daffash, whose name literally means 'the bully'. Although she enjoys cultivating her land, she is aware of the restrictions that bind her movement: "a woman's place was in a well-closed room" (20), she says bitterly. Moreover, she is aware of the paradoxical views/images associated with women by the men of her tribe as they sing the praises of an imaginary woman (Umayma), who "only existed in their own heads" as "a fairy spirit" (24). She cynically remarks that, in reality, women must accept the "divine verdict" in placing men "a step higher" than them (33). As has been suggested earlier, the ordeal of both Maha

[28] Faqir, *Pillars*, 181.

and Um-Saad stems from their violation of the social and religious codes that systematically silence them and assign them a limited space. The tradition of silencing women is subverted in the very form of Faqir's text, which provides a space for the voiceless women to speak about their lives. As women's speech is deemed a great violation of the native norms, the fact that these two women use speech to come to terms with their identities as women in an oppressive society marks a challenging move against these norms. As mentioned earlier, Faqir employs Western gender dynamics to mobilize the plot in this direction.

Only within the confines of the madhouse does the process of unfolding identity through speech become possible for these women. And even there, the repressive authority of the "blue-eyed" English doctor functions as censor of and deterrent to this process. However, although they are frequently inhibited by sedating medications and warnings of different kinds of punishments, the two women find themselves encouraged by the bonding of "sisterhood" and the mutual understanding of their personal traumas to continue the process of self-recovery and self-understanding. It is in the madhouse that Maha becomes aware of "identity" as a vital concept. She bitterly wonders: "Identity? What is identity? I think I have none" (80). Through the verbal utterances of these two women, the text provides a comprehensive look at women's grievances, and at the limited options available for self-realization and self-fulfilment. In speaking about their lives, both Maha and Um-Saad wish to resist memory. Um-Saad wonders: "The past? Who wants to remember the past?" (122). Maha equally wishes that the English doctor would "wipe out all [her] memories with a piece of white cotton" (131). Ironically, the English doctor has told Um-Saad that she suffers from an "acute memory loss." Um-Saad sarcastically denies this: "memory loss? Empty talk. I remember everything, even the things I don't want to remember. Forgetfulness is a blessing" (130).

Through her recollection of past memories, Maha reveals significant details about her life. Before her entrapment in the madhouse, she goes through several ordeals which she sometimes manages to overcome. For instance, she smartly rescues the "manliness" of her husband when he fails to consummate their marriage on the night of their wedding, by cutting her finger and presenting the blood as a proof of her virginity. The consummation of their love takes place later, when Maha plays an active

role in the act of love-making, which is not so typical of the sexually subdued female.

On her wedding night, Maha experiences the uncanny moment of being uprooted and displaced when she enters her husband's house:

> Harb's well-lit house looked unfamiliar in the darkness – our own roof was dome-shaped and low, Harb's was flat and high. When my father built our house he patted the doors into arch-shapes. Harb's house had straight lines which met to form sharp angles. The lines in our house were circular and stooping. My body would not fit through the rectangular door. It was my new home. I must loosen up. I repeated that several times, until the minaret of the shrine caught the echo and repeated, "loosen up. Turn into a rectangle. Allah-u Akbar." (43)

What we find here is Maha's 'deterritorialization' from the 'circular' territory of the Mother to the 'rectangular' territory of the Father. The ironic juxtaposition of "loosening up" and "rectangle" are indicative of an 'unhomely' experience, which painfully rehearses Maha's obligation to feel at home in strict frames/patterns.

It is ironic that Maha should feel at home only in the salty waters of the Dead Sea, where she "loosens up," discovers and befriends her body, and enjoys the consummation of her marriage. In doing this, Faqir allows her to subvert the socio-religious significance of the Dead Sea as an accursed place which is a constant reminder of God's wrath. By transforming the 'unhomely' cursed place into a homely site of desire and fulfilment, Faqir also grants Maha a temporary sense of oneness with her body and of harmony with her sexuality. Such moments of harmony do not last long. The alienating effect of the menstrual flow, which Maha interprets after her marriage as a sign of her "infertility," is significant:

> My body preferred to have its own way and give me a sign of my barrenness every month, letting loose the merciless tongues. Our lazy village stuck to the mountainside like a leech. I saw myself in every dry tree trunk, in sacks of dry hay, in stretches of arid sand dunes which extended across the horizon. (68)

The 'unhomely' extends beyond Maha's body to include the arid, discomforting natural scene around her. The "merciless tongues" of her womb remind us of those of the members of her community who begin to gossip about her failure to get pregnant.

Another encounter with the 'unhomely' is that of Maha's journey to Hajjeh Hulala to seek a cure for her "infertility." Only six months after marriage, Maha is made to feel useless and insignificant; she renders, in a great agony of recollection, the dehumanizing treatment of the female as a "uterus" or a "vessel." Neither Maha nor Um-Saad can defend herself against the invasion of her body and domestic space. Maha's body, as boundary marker, with the uterus as its chief signifier, is penetrated, investigated, cauterized, and invaded by Hajjeh Hulala, who represents patriarchal perception of women as vessels for procreation. Maha's journey to encounter this shamanism is perceived by her as a descent into hell, the most unhomely of places. As Maha walks between the stone slabs which mark the entry to the cave, she feels the "cold" inside: "The decaying dolmen was surrounded with bitter Zaqqum trees to ward off the young devils" (73). Maha feels 'unhomed' as her privacy is invaded by the manipulating hands of Hajjeh Hulala, taming her uterus into "obedience" to the demands of child-bearing. This episode reflects the picture of the body as an unhomely prison-house. Surprisingly, as the fingers of Hajjeh Hulala stroke her body, Maha feels momentarily "set free" like "an imprisoned pigeon." However, the pain that follows after a "small bundle" is stuck inside her makes her think that she has "exploded." Maha recounts to Um-Saad the painful journey back home:

> while limping back to my house, I felt that the sun was playing games with me […]. I lay on the cold floor and placed my cheeks on the cool surface. No use. I buried my head under the pillows and tried to think of our cool farm. No use. Roaring flames dashed to my head which caught fire like dry palm leaves. (75)

Maha's description of her infernal journey is couched in feelings of remorse and guilt. Self-esteem has drained from her, and she looks at her body as that of a stranger. Actually, throughout the novel, Maha avoids looking at herself in mirrors. She neglects her toilet even on her wedding night. As a woman who is raised in a society that demonizes her femaleness, she attempts to subdue the feminine contours of her body by developing the habit of bending her back to hide her breasts, which results in her having a hunchback.

Maha finds a means of overcoming her "pain" and disappointments through hard work. She appears closely bound to her land: "It was always the same serenity which filtered into my soul as I set to work […] I dug

the ground and dug to find the roots of my pain and uproot it with my hands" (15). As she recovers from her illness, Maha seeks the spinning-wheel, not only as a reassurance of recuperation but also in a maternal gesture toward her country, whose territory is invaded by foreigners:

> I held the spinning-wheel and fingered the tired wool. My hands missed the roves, the oiled wood, and the rough carpet. I leaned forward and hit the fine wheel to produce thin threads. My threads spread over the valley to protect it from aggressive assaulters, from the forgetful sun and the raids of enemies. (104)

She finds herself driven by a creative urge to "transform the dirty fleece." Exhuming the "rust-brown spinning wheel" from her mother's trunk, Maha starts spinning:

> Fine threads in my lap, threads across the horizon, a net which landed on top of the Jordan valley, the Dead Sea, and the mineral springs. The threads spread far out, reached Mukawir, where the English hang their prisoners. (15)

At this point, the weaving of Maha's carpet approximates Faqir's spinning of her tale. This spinning transcends private space and extends to the national space, encompassing its struggle against foreign invasion.

Faqir does not allow her characters to romanticize their past or their surroundings too often. However, Maha experiences a few moments of consolation in the task of completing the weaving of her mother's carpet, which has been handed down from her grandmother. This act embodies the value of maternal legacy, which inspires women to seek a space of their own. While weaving is deemed as an ordinary task for women in the tribal code, Faqir invests it with more specific feminist overtones. Here, she is akin to the two Afro-American women writers, Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, who used 'quilting' as a trope to represent the solidarity of women and their pride in ancestral heritage (e.g., *Beloved* and "Everyday Use"). Maha's yearning for the "rounded edges" of the carpet (63) and the "circular" mirror of her grandmother (77) is indicative of her sense of attachment to a matriarchal rather than a patriarchal realm. The invasion of the maternal domestic sphere of Maha is ruthlessly carried out by her own brother, Daffash, who moves the furniture of their house to Samir Pasha's house. Maha is shocked at the sight of the "bare" walls and she laments the loss of her mother's possessions: "Say goodbye to the pure wool mattresses, sewed by my mother." As Maha walks out, the house

appears in utter decay: "The only living creatures in our yard were a few hens which […] strolled in and out of the empty storage room" (78). With a sense of utter abandonment and dispossession, Maha laments: "I cried over my mother and my unfinished carpet, over my dying father, and over my barren womb which saw terrible days of festering and fire" (99). She tries hard to "catch a stitch or two" but her weaving is always spitefully interrupted by those around her, even by her loving father. Maha never manages to finish weaving the carpet. At the madhouse, she bitterly remembers her unfinished task and cynically comments: "interruptions were saved for spinning" (15). Those around her do not appreciate her weaving, especially her mother-in-law, Tamam, who does not understand her "need" for weaving, and she describes the carpet as "rags." Maha bitterly retorts: "This carpet is not the rags of my mother. Her life, her fingers, her skin were spun into this magnificent carpet" (107). This deliberate invasion of her partly domestic, partly creative space bothers her tremendously. On her wedding night she experiences feelings of guilt and inadequacy at not being able to complete her mother's carpet. In a fleeting vision, she sees her mother's hands "holding the spinning-wheel in the dark […] In the dim light, she sat gazing at the patterns of her half-finished carpet" (43). It is after the death of her father that Maha deserts weaving to take care of the orange orchard. As she closes the lid of her mother's trunk over the spinning-wheel, the loom and the shuttle, Maha is burying forever her aborted dreams, and those of her mother and her grandmother before her, of ever finding a free 'space' of their own.

Like the mythical Philomela, Maha faces the fate of all women who dare to speak as she stands in defiance of her brother, Daffash, after he tricks her by having her cook for Samir Pasha and his English guests. As Patricia Klindienst reminds us, "the story of Philomela's emergence from silence is filled with the tension of feminist poetic."[29] She further observes that: "behind the woman's silence is the incomplete plot of male dominance, which fails no matter how extreme it becomes […]. Dominance can only contain, but never successfully destroy, the woman's voice."[30] It is in this context that Faqir's narrative may be read as a counter-discourse to the systematic silencing of women in the patriarchal order, whether it is

[29] Patricia Klindienst, "The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours" (1984), in *Literary Theory: An Anthology*, ed. Julie Rivkin & Michael Ryan (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998): 614.

[30] Klindienst, "The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours," 615.

that of the native culture or the colonizer. The pouring out of "speech" in Maha's and Um-Saad's utterances represents the flow of torrents of passion which resist and defy the silencing traditions. Moreover, Klindienst observes:

> That the bonding of men requires the silencing of women points to an unstated male dread: for women to define themselves as a group would mean the unraveling of established and recognized cultural bonds.[31]

It is may be for this reason that the English doctor seems to be in a secret alliance with Daffash and other native patriarchs. This is why Um-Saad's and Maha's utterances are seen as a threat to the established order and they receive punishments that outweigh their so-called "transgressions" and harmless exchange of memories.

After losing her husband to "the metal eagles" of the British colonizers, Maha returns to her father's house. There she assumes responsibility, working like a man, while her brother spends his day either sleeping or running at the heels of the Pasha in the city. Meanwhile, Maha digs her father's grave and carries heavy sacks. However, far from being appreciated, her energy is viewed as demonic and dehumanizing. The storyteller describes her as a "she-ass" (167). Later on, the tribal concept of women as chattel is emphasized when Maha's brother plans to give her in marriage to Sheikh Talib. It is her refusal to obey her brother that is denounced by the members of the tribe. When Maha takes to the mountains and spends a night hiding in a cave to avoid this forced marriage, she is considered to have compromised her honour, and this, according to the tribal codes, counts as the first step in her deterioration into "madness."[32] The imam orders her to be stoned and her brother kicks her with his boots. When Maha loses her front teeth after her brother hits her, the men only laugh (117), and her brother, in his fury, tells her: "'you're only a woman. Lick my boots, lick the general's boots. Obey your master'" (173). In the wink of an eye, she finds herself in the madhouse for having dared to

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[31] Klindienst, "The Voice of the Shuttle is Ours," 617.

[32] Fadia Faqir, "Intrafamily Femicide in Defence of Honour: the Case of Jordan." *Third World Quarterly* 22.1 (2001): 65–82. See especially, for emphasis on confinement and how a girl should remain 'mastura': "Girls or women can sully their family's honour and destroy their reputation until they get married and become the responsibility of their husbands" (69).

violate the three basic injunctions of silence, immobility, and obedience. As a consequence of these "transgressions," she becomes an outcast. Moreover, she will be dispossessed of her right to inherit the orchard. Although some women of the tribe indirectly express their resentment at her treatment in such a manner, they are outnumbered and their protest is rendered ineffective.

To Maha, the women of Hamia appear marginalized and dehumanized, "running around busily" as "black spots which looked like active ants, no more, no less. All their lives they sweat and dig the soil to build nests for their men and children and at the end they die and are forgotten. Ants without names, past or future" (145). The men, meanwhile, idle in the sun, "counting cockroaches" (216). A rare exception appears in the figure of Sheikh Nimer, Maha's father, who is portrayed as a loving husband and father. Yet his gentility is overshadowed by the brutality of his son. Maha often laments the fact that her life is "like scattered flour in a thornfield" (81). These words reverberate as a refrain, lending a heavy accent to her feelings of loss and insignificance. Although she has dared to challenge, she cannot overcome the barriers that essentially alienate her as a woman.

At the madhouse, Maha comes to realize the full implications of her being an insignificant female in a social system that degrades her:

> When the coldness of the chattering winged tool eating up my hair has seeped through my skull, I realize that I am besieged by mirages flickering in the distance. Must stop thinking, remembering, chasing. Electric shock? [...] Suddenly you discover that what you have been eating all these years is dust and what you have been drinking is just thin air. (223)

The ghostly connotations of this discovery are obvious. In such recognition there are echoes of Bhabha's 'unhomely' moment, when the familiar and the ordinary become terrifying and estranging. Maha's grip on reality is challenged and she feels alienated from herself and her surroundings:

> Everything around me was getting loose: my skin, my clothes, my world. A creature inside me kept shrinking and shrinking, tired of life and its treasury, it sought peace and quiet... I spun and spun like a silkworm; I dug and dug the earth like an earthworm; and at night I curled my spine like hedgehog and went to sleep under the solitary sky. (194)

Such an existential view of herself and the vast desert around her confirm her gnawing sense of estrangement.[33] Maha realizes that her journey through life will not take her 'home' but will trap her in a maze of wandering: "Life is a long dream of arrivals and departures" (223), as she sadly puts it.

The closing scenes in Mahas's reflections represent for the reader, in surrealistic images, her descent into the most 'unhomely' region of the mind. In utter confusion, she finds herself in the hands of "men in white [who] pulled, punched, handcuffed [her]" (218).[34] As her consciousness closes down, Maha observes that "the house and the orchard fell prostrate, praying for a force under the ground" (218). This is the unhomely moment which transforms the homely into its demonic other. It echoes the biblical image of Lot's wife looking back at the destruction behind her. Maha has become a pillar of salt; a reminder of God's wrath. It is ironic that Maha's descent into madness, as observed externally by others, is accompanied by her inner vision of "slipping down a bright lit tunnel" (218). In this vague area of consciousness, madness ushers in the light of self-revelation. It is at the madhouse that Maha will discover the meaning of 'identity' through the medium of speech; the only means at her disposal to undermine patriarchal and colonial power.

As we have seen in Maha's broken vista, the madhouse becomes the peripheral 'unhomely' space where these women negotiate their identities. Like Maha, Um-Saad has transgressed against the social codes of obedience, mobility, and silence. Looking back on her life, Um-Saad perceives it as "a girl's life. A fluffy lie for half a piaster" (19). With a childhood spent in the Immigrants Quarter in Amman, Um-Saad has become used to

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[33] David Punter, in *Postcolonial Imaginings: Fictions of a New World Order* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2000), observes: "Home ground (in a colonial/colonised space ?) is foreign territory" (30). This book explores the theme of exile in postcolonial narratives, especially chapter 6, "Haunting the Secret Site," 79–94.

[34] As Maha is led away to the madhouse, the village children sing in unison: "Wizz, wiz – wizz, wiz. / The bee has flown away" (218). It is interesting to notice the use of the buzzing of bees to represent madness and the outburst of true feelings which have long been suppressed by women. One may recall Ghada Samman's short story "Thirty Years of Bees," in *The Square Moon*, tr. Issa Boullata (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, l998), where the female protagonist approximates madness when her contribution to her husband's successful career is completely ignored. The narrator observes: "A woman is like a bee. For her giving is a secretion she is never thanked for" (143).

living in a house with "barred windows" under the eyes of her despotic father, whom she hates. The fact of being a city woman gave Um-Saad less mobility than her peasant "sister Maha." Deprived of education, except for a brief episode of learning how to read the Qur'an, Um-Saad finds no pretext to leave her house. She experiences her father's home as a prison and continues to be confined within the boundaries of her husband's house for most of her life. Actually, the reason she was sent to the madhouse by her husband was that she has dared to defy familiar boundaries and spend a night at the mosque. Um-Saad's long marital life is characterized by the effacement of her private sphere and the manipulation of her domestic sphere by crushing domestic responsibilities.

A virtual prisoner at home, Um-Saad also experiences constriction even in her few ventures beyond the house. While Maha did not have to cover her face as a peasant woman, Um-Saad had to wear the veil at a very early age: "My mother made me wear a long black skirt, a black cape, covered my head and my face with a black veil. Hot, masked and unable to breathe, I walked to the Kutab…" (38). Here, the mother does not appear as a source of inspiration or comfort for her daughter as is the case with Maha. Instead, Um-Saad's mother appears as an accomplice, especially in marrying her off at an early age. Like Maha, Um-Saad feels that her body is "a trap" and associates her growing up with her fear of her "father's wrath." Like Maha, she develops a hunchback from her constant attempts at hiding her breasts. Um-Saad remains stranded in her father's home, where she would watch the moon through "the holes in the wooden shutter. Eh, years had passed by and I was still peeping at life striding by" (71). One day she receives a severe thrashing by her father for peeping through the holes of the shutter. Um-Saad is otherwise subjected to severe punishment by her father, who often reduced her to "a heap of flayed meat" (100). It is then that Um-Saad begins to wish that she might become "invisible" or to slip into another identity. She recognizes the deterministic confines of identity – as she asks Maha, "'Can you cast off your identity like a dirty underwear? Can you?'" (80)

Early marriage to an older man, a butcher in the city, becomes another trap for Um-Saad. Unlike Maha, Um-Saad feels no love for her husband. Primal violation is indicated here by the brutal penetration of her body by her husband prior to her puberty. She is further repelled by the stench of his filthy body as she kneels to wash his feet every night after he comes from work: "his long black rubber boots were always covered with the

blood and dung of sheep and goats […] a damp stink which reminded me of death and sewage" (121). Um-Saad feels estranged not only from her husband's body but also from her own, especially during pregnancy: "I hated my body, my sticking out navel and the baby which was sucking my insides" (122). Um-Saad realizes, with great pain, that her life has been spent in washing, cleaning, and cooking. At the end of the day, she finds herself too busy "to look out of the window" of the prison of her house, and remains blindly devoted to her domestic duties.

As she contemplates herself in the mirror one day, Um-Saad encounters an uncanny moment of estrangement from her aging body. She realizes that she is only a "container" in which Abu Saad could "get rid of his frustration" (151). It is at this moment that the 'unhomely' stealthily infiltrates Um-Saad's consciousness. Finding no companionship in house or husband, she bitterly realizes that "My days were just a series of jokes, very funny and trivial. My heart fidgeted in my chest and yearned to roll out of my body, roll into another beautiful body and another identity" (151).

The most terrible invasion of Um-Saad's domestic space is when her husband walks into the house one day with a new wife while she is immersed in the daily rituals of house-cleaning. She recollects this uncanny, traumatic moment:

> "Yusra, my new wife." He said she was his new wife […]. I […] tipped the murky water out of the bucket on the shining floor. Stupid thing to do because I had to dry it myself later on. She was a young artificially blonde woman in high heels. The silk green dress clung to her body like smooth skin. (178)

That night, Um-Saad finds herself carrying a knife and standing at the door of her own bedroom; but the knife drops to the floor.

From that time on, Um-Saad becomes literally 'unhomed', since she is thrown out of her own bedroom to give her place to the new wife. As she recollects,

> That night, I slept with my kids on the floor. Did I say slept? I could not shut my eyes. The minaret of the Big Mosque was crying 'Allahu-Akbar' when I found my belongings flung on the floor of the sitting room. (178–79)

Faqir, at such points, implicates the religious authority, which permits polygamy. It is ironic that Um-Saad's private space is invaded by another 'fellow' woman. Assia Djebar aptly describes the invasion of the domestic

sphere of women through polygamy in *A Sister to Scheherazade*, where "the second wife stands on the threshold, devouring the space" (159).[35] Um-Saad feels dislocated; she starts spending her sleepless nights on the kitchen floor, while often distracted by the laughter and the grunts of her husband, who is rejuvenated by his young bride. As her husband enters the kitchen in the morning to demand breakfast, Um-Saad feels that she is losing her self-control. It is this invasion of her last domestic space/refuge that drives her into "madness." She bitterly recollects that morning: "an invisible cord in my head snapped and I started slapping my face, wailing and kicking his fat legs" (179). Soon she develops insomnia. Like Maha, she visits the cave of a certain sheikh to retrieve her domestic space through some magic charm that may dispose of the second wife. But the second wife feels perfectly at home in her new space; she even befriends Um-Saad's own children, since she is herself almost their age. Um-Saad's insomnia is accompanied by feverish pacing about the house, where she is no longer at home: "The pacing became marching and the marching turned into running" (187) – an almost surrealistic suggestion of the need to break out of the reality around her.

In a most 'unhomely' moment, Um-Saad is visited by men who tie her into a straitjacket: "When they tied the sleeves, I could neither talk nor walk, I could not do anything. I was like a hooded falcon, unable to fly" (206). Forgetting her injured pride for a moment, Um-Saad pleads with her husband:

> "I'll cook for you, sweep for you, feed your new bride honey and almonds. Please, please don't send me there. I will kiss the toes of your second wife, wash her underwear, even prostrate myself before her." (206)

Not surprisingly, her husband remains adamantly deaf to her entreaties. Um-Saad describes her feelings of loss and disorientation at that moment:

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[35] Assia Djebar, in *A Sister to Scheherazade*, tr. Dorothy Blair (London: Quartet, 1987), has the narrator comment on the link between mobility and identity: "I can tell every woman's history by the way she walks down the street […] I have the presumption to claim that I can tell at first glance, at the very first glance, just because it is the first, where that woman is going; from shadow to sunshine, from silence to speech, from night to truth stripped bare. The first step reveals both the silhouette and the hope" (157).

> they [...] pushed me through the thick, high door. I looked behind me [as Lot's wife] and saw the haze of the hot Jordanian sun turning everything yellow [...]. If I cross the threshold of the big buildings, I said to myself, I will never be able to get out again. I am not a character from the *One Thousand and One Nights*. I will never be able to roll into another identity, another body, travel to better times and greener places. (17–18)

One may wonder here whether Um-Saad is capable of such sophisticated reflections or if this is intended by Faqir to underscore the solidarity between the writer and the fictional character. The Arab hero of adventure narratives, al-Shater Hassan, whom Um-Saad is wont to invoke as a saviour, does not come to her rescue; once more, the Arab woman is abandoned to her fate. As she is driven away in a "German" car towards the madhouse, the world outside seems indifferent: "From outside I could hear the tinkling cymbals of liquorice-juice peddlers" (207). At the madhouse, the world will not be any different. As Maha recounts, the winged tool of the English doctor clips Um-Saad's hair, leaving her like a slaughtered goat. Maha, too, loses her hair to the sharp scissors. The "pruning" of women's tongues is mirrored in the way these women are stripped of the beauty of their long hair as a reinforcement of the fact that they have become "unwomanly" the moment they "transgress" against patriarchal law. Meanwhile, the two women remain in the madhouse, stranded in their room, through whose window a "millipede scurries away through the metal bars to freedom" (222), in ironic mockery of their own yearning to be free.

IV Storyteller

"Who am I? Your slave Sami al-Adjnabi" (87), the storyteller retorts in response to his own question. As his name suggests, he is literally Sami the Foreigner, standing on the periphery of society. He is always on the borderline; a foreigner, yet at the same time a familiar face to the locals. Faqir harnesses the ancient Arab tradition of storytelling in presenting the utterances of the storyteller. He provides information about the colonization of Jordan by English soldiers in 1921: "Mandate or, or no mandate, I did not care. I was half-Arab with an endless hunger for stories" (3). The storyteller's position reminds us of T.E. Lawrence's anxiety over his double posture as an active participant in an imperial narrative and a passive observer of national events. Thus *Pillars of Salt* can be read as a

dialogue with Lawrence's *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* – a counter-discourse to his colonial one. According to Faqir, the thesis of the novel is based on the concept that orientalism and patriarchy run in parallel lines. The orientalist often misrepresents Oriental (Arab) women and, for him, they are often non-existent or not seen, just as she is for most Arab men. As Faqir puts it, "I started with politics but ended in women's issues."[36]

Through the storyteller's utterances, which pander to the popular fantasies of the orientalist–colonizer, Faqir targets three major issues. First, she envelops his utterances in mythical, legendary, and orientalist stereotypical representations of Arab women. Second, she assigns to the storyteller, albeit not exclusively, some of the historical information relating to the British colonization of Jordan and the negative presentations of Arab culture in the novel. And finally, she presents a metafictional issue, in which her novel appears as a haunted house and a spider's web that will "soon perish." Actually, these three issues form the unifying tissue of Faqir's fragmentary text. As mentioned earlier, these issues are channeled through the discourses of feminism, (post)colonialism, and postmodernism.[37]

The storyteller poses as an orientalist, who cannot penetrate the heart of culture and language, so he constructs a narrative with scant regard for reality. In this discourse, according to Faqir, the Arab woman is either non-existent or demonized.[38] Indeed, Sami al-Adjnabi's rehearsal of the

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[36] In an interview with a local Jordanian newspaper, *Al-Rai* (5 April 2002), Faqir said the following about the genesis of her novel: "as an expression of nostalgia and yearning for Jordan, I write *Pillars of Salt*." She speaks of her wish to document the semi-nomadic Bedouin life-style and life in Amman of her childhood, and to capture the beauty of Amman on paper, since it is beginning to fade.

[37] The implications of bringing the discourses of postcolonialism and feminism together are validated in *The Empire Writes Back* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989) where Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin observe: "Feminist perspectives are of increasing importance in post-colonial criticism and indeed the strategies of recent feminist and recent post-colonial theory overlap and inform each other. [Women writers] have all drawn an analogy between the relationships of men and women and those of the imperial power and the colony" (31–32). See especially the chapter entitled "Re-placing Language: Textual Strategies in Post-Colonial Writing" (38–77).

[38] One may disagree with Faqir's observation about the non-existence of women for the orientalist. See, for example, Rana Kabbani's Europe's *Myths of the Orient: Devise and Rule* (London: Macmillan, l986), to find examples of the Western obsession with Oriental women.

patriarchal demonization of women becomes an obsession. He describes Maha as a "ghoul" (30), "a vampire," "a hyena" (86), a "she-demon" (27), a fork-tongued "serpent" (141), a "bitter colocynth" (168), etc. At the same time, he associates her with Eve, the primeval woman (2). He presents a paradoxical (yet all-too-familiar) image of Maha, who appears as both Madonna and whore, angel and demon:

> some say [she] was pious and pure as Rabia al-Adawiyya [...] I say that Maha was a shrew who used to chew the shredded flesh of mortals from sun birth to sun death. (2)

He conceives of her as a witch, who even attempts to poison her father. Even when Maha is weaving her carpet, he suspects that she is "casting spells" (58). To his ears, she is always "shrieking" and "howling." He utilizes the Qur'anic verses as an intertext to speak of the "cunning of women" against which Allah warned "his loyal worshippers" (167). He observes: "When there is no man to hold the reign, to mount them and drown them in the sea of cooking and children, women start laying snares" (16). The storyteller describes the birth of Mubarak, Maha's son, as a satanic ritual in which he contrasts Maha with the Virgin Mary: "Mary was chaste and pure, but Maha of Qasim was foul and evil" (139). Paradoxically, Maha is conceived of as Earth, resistant to all colonizers: "A sharp sword stuck in the sides of the Arab's enemies: the Tartars, the Crusaders, and the Romans" (2). With feigned sympathy, he views her as a "charming woman who challenged and surrendered" (2). At times, his voice reflects that of Faqir, projecting the character of Maha as the archetypal victimized woman in the Arabian Peninsula: "Maha was born when the first female child was buried alive by the tribe of Bani-Quraish" (3).

As a voyeur, who always observes Maha from a distance, the storyteller presents the aberrations of his imagination as a version of the truth, simultaneously casting doubt on the credibility of his tale. He declares: "To put the pieces together and give you a perfect moon, I went astray in every valley" (57). He allows his male fantasies to overrule such credibility. His voyeurism recalls some of the tales in *One Thousand and One Nights*, such as when his monkey gazes lecherously at the closed door of Maha's room the night of her wedding (60). He himself experiences sexual arousal as he spies on the scene of consummation between Maha and her husband in the Dead Sea: "I placed my hot belly on the cold rock [...] every part of my body was uncomfortably wet" (60–61). Later, he finds

himself peeping, "through of the opening between the large flat stones" of the dolmen, at Maha's "naked white figure" as she is being examined by Hajjeh Hulala (88). Similarly, spying on Samir Pasha's villa, he watches the "semi nude women" dancing at the party (89). As he informs his listeners (readers), he deliberately shrouds his narrative in "mirages, light, and shadows" (4). Such ambiguity is countered by the meticulously detailed and highly credible utterances of Maha and Um-Saad, whose narratives form a feminist counter-discourse to that constructed by the storyteller.

When the novel is approached in metafictional terms, Sami al-Adjnabi appears as the writer, who wanders alone spinning tales about others' lives by means of hearsay and aesthetic 'voyeurism'. Moreover, he poses as a trickster whose narrative is prompted by demons or the Jinn of the prophet Solomon. The kingdom of the imagination that he constructs is so brittle and fragile that it is compared (inaccurately) to a spider's web which collapses at the merest contact with reality. The storyteller's narrative runs parallel to the sacred text of the Qur'an, which functions as a major intertext for the whole novel. We understand that the storyteller "studied the Quran when [he] was young but never prayed to Allah" (28). The tale begins to unfold on the first day of Ramadan and maintains its unhallowed revelations throughout the month, thus parodying the revelation of the Qur'an during this holy period. This is an obvious act of subversion which partakes of the mode of descralizing the sacred in postmodern fictions. As one critic observes, "texts were linked in the Muslim mind with *The Text*, that is the sacred book of the Koran, and thus works of fiction are seen as something blasphemous, as well as unwelcome imports from the West."[39] The storyteller's tale is replete with instances of blasphemy, which are soon retracted by his asking for God's forgiveness.

The playful, postmodern juxtaposition of the sacred and the profane undercuts the authority of the Muslim religious discourse, yet the effect of this subversion is often mitigated by questions about writing as a perilous enterprise and the difficulties that face the writer. The storyteller humorously addresses his she-ass, Azziza:

[39] Quoted in Armitage, "The Debate Over Literary Writing in a Foreign Language," 61.

> "What do you think, Azziza? Will you speak to these people so that one of the jinn soldiers, one of the goblins with strange powers, whom it is said our master Solomon the Great did command, will decode your braying and show us how you are misinterpreted by mortal ears: ears attuned only to jabbering?" (1–2)

Yet Azziza wisely refrains from committing herself to the task of storytelling. These words reveal Faqir's anxiety over being misunderstood by an audience that is not used to facing the truth. In anticipating misinterpretations of her writing, Faqir allows the storyteller to twist the facts so that ultimate truth is always questioned. Other metafictional concerns abound in the storyteller's utterances. Standing simultaneously outside and inside the sacred tradition, the storyteller embellishes almost all of his utterances with an intertext from the Qur'an. For example, as he "creates" his tale, he invokes the Sura of Creation, through which he establishes himself as a builder of "magical kingdoms" who "gives life to the dead" (25). Yet he laments the fact that his kingdom, unlike God's, will "dissolve in the sea of forgetfulness." He lacks reverence for the way Muslims conduct their prayer, which he describes as a "funny," "exhausting ritual" (28). He also mocks their "superstitious" belief in the "angel of good deeds" and the "angel of bad deeds." Ironically, though, he reads some Qur'anic verses over his monkey's head to calm him.

The 'hybrid' text of *Pillars of Salt* juxtaposes different, even contradictory, viewpoints. It embodies all aspects of the postmodern text with its mixture of genres, such as mimicking folktales, proverbial knowledge, and popular songs, and by employing the sacred scripture as an intertextual backdrop. The fragmented form of the text itself partakes of the poetic of estrangement or 'unhomeliness' that dominates the novel, whose final scenes are steeped in unsettling, apocalyptic imaginings. As time passes, the storyteller visits the village of Hamia once more to report the devastation that has swept the land. He finds the village deserted, with neither river nor plantation:

> The poisonous plants had conquered the sweet fruit, outlived the edible vegetation and inherited the land. Life had retreated under the ground, leaving heaps of rubble and sand behind. (224)

Swarms of locusts had invaded the land and there was such famine that people even ate cats, dogs, and cockroaches. The natives are described by

the storyteller, in Qur'anic terms, as moths biting dust: "if you had blown on these mothlike human beings you would have scattered them like carded wool" (225); the whole tribe has vanished. Under the impact of the earthquake, the earth labours "like a blister which keeps growing and festering, growing and festering, then bursts open, gushing pus and sickness over the face of the universe" (226). The resonance of the Biblical and Qur'anic punishment visited upon Lot's people is obvious here: "Allah […] had destroyed the disobedient village" (226).[40]

Through surrealistic images and magical realism, Faqir restages the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah by fire and brimstone. The apocalyptic scene, which marks the utter destruction of the native land, paves the way for an approximation of a sense of closure in its juxtaposition with the fantastic "jade-green castle"; the kingdom of the imagination, which, according to the religious discourse, only "the erring" will enter. The storyteller asserts that "No human being with any sense in his head would dare go near the jade-green castle" (226). As such, the castle represents the territory of writing. This is the house of fiction, where we see Maha in harmony with the invader, the "mighty king." Maha has survived the catastrophe with the help "of the soldiers of our master Solomon," and has fallen in love with "the majestic crusader":

> The strong white king fell a victim to the arrows of the eyelashes of the black widow when he saw her weaving in the glowing light of sunset. Another casualty of the pagan, Bedouin eyes. (226)

In this colonizer/colonized encounter, the reader may recall the scenes in which Byronic minstrels fall in love with the damsels of the Turkish harem. Yet instead of liberating Maha from the shackles of the harem as the Byronic hero used to do, the crusader proposes to her and settles contentedly in her magic castle; he has become a "casualty." This is reminiscent of the use of the word "casualty" to suggest "reader" in Ishmael Reed's poem "beware: do not read this poem." In this sense, all readers of fiction are conceived of as casualties, trapped by the snares of the text.

Maha, at this point, is the alter ego of Faqir, enjoying an enriching encounter with her former colonizer. Maha is now living with her husband

[40] Lot's people are mentioned several times in the Qur'an – for example, the Sura of The Heights (verse 80), the Sura of Hud (verse 77), the Sura of The Poets (verse 160), and the Sura of The Ants (verse 54).

in the great, sumptuously furnished castle at the top of Sheikh Mountain.[41] The storyteller confirms the fantastic nature of this castle as a kingdom of the imagination representing the novel itself:

> The sound of Maha and the sight of the pinnacles are as frail as the spider's web. A puff of air or tiny drops of rain could kill the spider and destroy his thready shelter [...]. Frail, fine, fluttering shelter. Soon, we shall all perish [...]. (227)

The resistance to complete closure in Faqir's text and the notion of the perishability of the magic web of tales echo those of Gabriel García Márquez in *One Hundred Years of Solitude.* The preoccupation with the fact that we all "perish" is also an omen for the reader, who will be considered 'dead' once s/he turns the last page of the text. It might be significant here to consider the nine utterances of the storyteller as symbolizing the nine-month period of pregnancy, which leads to the final 'delivery' of Faqir's text.

Both writer and fictional characters appear closely intertwined in kaleidoscopic images. The castle on Sheikh Mountain may be viewed as a parody of Um-Saad's house "at the top of the castle Mountain" and as a reminder of the madhouse, the "prison built on a profane land" (17). The magical castle in which Maha dwells at the end represents a world different from that at which Um-Saad glances for the last time before she is ushered through "the thick, high door" of the madhouse. This doubling and merging of female identities recalls the common cause of writer and fictional character. The paths of the two converge in the very space of the text, where the writer's quest for freedom comes to fruition in the writing of the text, and her characters experience the short-lived satisfaction of the torrents of speech granted in the space of the text. Yet such moments of fulfilment are achieved only after undergoing the ordeals of being in exile and in the madhouse.

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[41] The construction of the "castle" at the end of the novel may be interpreted as "a metonymic force," as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin put it. "For example, the construction or demolition of houses or buildings in post-colonial locations is a recurring and evocative figure for the problematic of post-colonial identity in works from very different societies" (28). Maha's new "palace" thus becomes the locus of a new encounter: "The post-colonial world is one in which destructive cultural encounter is changing to an acceptance of difference on equal terms" (36).

The cold-eyed colonial English doctor of the 'spoken' utterances metamorphoses into the "majestic crusader" and "mighty king" of the postcolonial 'written' encounter, which appears as liberating (226). In this encounter, Maha hums her demonic songs to the enchanted ears of her foreign lover as she combs his hair. Unlike Um-Saad, she has been recognized and befriended by a Perseus-like hero, the Western version of al-Shater Hasan. He is the English reader reading Faqir's book as she attempts to write herself and her characters into another identity. The site of the novel has become a space for the articulation of displacement and the desire to find a home. Only, this desire is deferred, as Maha/Faqir remains captivated by the charming presence of her invader, feeling at home in the precincts of the house of fiction. However, this 'uncanny' contentment is tinged with the anxiety which Faqir voices through Maha: "I am sure in Allah's everlasting records I do not exist; my name is not even scribbled in the well-kept book of fortune" (5). In the same context, the following words of the storyteller may betray Faqir's apprehension that her efforts might be in vain:

> At that sin-fringed moment, something really strange happened to me. Total exhaustion overtook my body and part of me became detached and watched me from above. I realized how futile my efforts were and how useless it was conversing with the self in the dark. (60)

It follows, then, that the act of writing itself is laden with feelings of 'unhomeliness' which 'creep up on' the writer's consciousness, driving him to 'dwell' in terror.

V The Presentation of Native Culture

Unlike postcolonial women writers who sought "to overrule pre-conceptions of Third World Women's experience as uniformly degraded, passively oppressed, and lacking in powers of self-determination,"[42] Faqir perpetuates the image of native women as oppressed. At the same time, Faqir's novel might be seen as an exemplar of the 'empire writing back', yet we have no practical alternative project to that of the colonizer. The encounter between the colonizer and the colonized in the novel is far from

[42] Elleke Boehmer, *Colonial and Post-Colonial Literature* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995): 226.

being the enchanting encounter between Maha and the "mighty king." Faqir dwells heavily on the shortcomings of her native culture through the voices of the storyteller, Maha, and Um-Saad. Approached from this angle, the novel is hardly complimentary to the autochthonous Arab culture. Arab men crowd like "cockroaches" (216); they have "no dignity." The Arab male is ruthless when it comes to women, but sheepishly obsequious before the colonizers. Arabs are presented as followers:

> They went to extremes to please foreigners before they even asked them their names […]. The Arabs of Hamia, who had no dignity themselves, were born in that salty land, caught between the Dead Sea and the Jordan River. They lived there, counting winged cockroaches, then died there and were thus consigned to oblivion. (4)

The Arabs are also motivated by "vanity" in their military encounter with the British. Moreover, Arabs lack loyalty and solidarity among themselves, as when an Arab informer betrays the small band of Arab freedom fighters to the British. The presentation of Hamia as a "dull" village, with houses made of mud and straw, and naked children playing in its "stable-like lanes" (4), is hardly "nostalgic," and it stresses the 'unhomeliness' of the native country. Unlike Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, where both positive and negative aspects of the native culture are displayed, Faqir does not depart for a moment from her intention to indict the native culture of the Arab setting and to present the experience of women there as 'unhomely'. Also, unlike Ahadaf Soueif in her *Map of Love*, Faqir does not romanticize the landscape, the local people, or native customs. For instance, while Soueif romanticizes the veil, which she views through an orientalist lens, Faqir speaks of its oppressive effect. What Malak observes about Arab women writers in the West does not apply to Faqir in this context: "Their works reveal an acute awareness of their own distinct and delicate exploration of a troubling terrain; their critique and/or combat of patriarchy is conjoined with a loyalty to abstract, at times over-romanticized, ideals of either Islam or national identity, or both."[43]

In *Pillars of Salt*, the political programme of colonization remains vague; we hardly find any examples of commitment to change or development in the colonized country. One exception, though, is when Maha is enabled to save her orange orchard by applying the necessary insecticides,

[43] Amin Malak, "Arab-Muslim Feminism and the Narrative of Hybridity," 160.

which are provided by Samir Pasha. She has heard about these by chance in a programme on the radio Daffash has brought from the city. The postcolonial impact on native culture is often traced in the utterances of Um-Saad. She speaks fondly of the cinema, through which she was initiated into an awareness of 'love' and British consumer goods. She tells Maha: "'Advertisements for Lifebuoy soap, Marie biscuits, and Kiwi shoe polish. All made in England. It lasted longer than our rubbish. Excellent quality and high standards'" (49). The characters feel no pride in their native culture, especially Um-Saad, who at first loved Amman but then felt estranged from that cold-hearted city. Um-Saad provides a synoptic view of the changes that took place in Amman during and after colonization. Electricity is introduced, cars replace carts, women take off the veil, and now, as Um-Saad laments, "a devil" resides in Amman (157). With the exception of Maha's encounter with the "mighty king" at the end of the novel, there is no crossing or negotiation of boundaries that separate colonizer and colonized. The colonizers' view of the native culture is condescending. For example, when Daffash danced "Dhiyya," the English "shrieked with laughter" (90).

The ignorance of the natives with regard to their history is overwhelming. The Pasha loots archaeological sites with the help of Daffash and the Bedouins: "They excavated the land and handed the old bowls, pots, and jars to the Pasha, grinning" (176). As Um-Saad puts it, "no Jordanian would pay ten piasters to see rotting bones [...]. We hated looking backward, seeing the past, learning" (167). The Arab natives used to laugh at the old Englishwomen who visited the museum near Um-Saad's house. To them, the Englishmen looked equally ridiculous chasing "a brainless tiny [golf] ball for hours." What seems to matter is the fact that the British "don't wash themselves with water after going to the toilet [... they] just wipe themselves with paper" and they love dogs like their children (177). It may be observed that Faqir's inclusion of such details in the utterances of Um-Saad does not completely fit this character, at times, but appears contrived to fit the agenda of postcolonial writing.

VI Language

True to the resolution in her testimony, Faqir writes her novel in the English language. It is necessary to have a look at the implications of such a decision. If seen in postmodern terms, then the writer's use of English

seems to transcend boundaries by allowing a global understanding and opening up to multiculturalism, which is at once diverse and enriching. It is here that the issue of hybridity surfaces with such urgency as a medium for reconstructing identity, whereby a writer like Faqir revisits familiar territory and attempts to restage its past. In his *Black Skin, White Masks*, Frantz Fanon stresses the fact that "To speak [a language] means to be in a position to use syntax, to grasp the morphology of this or that language, but it means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilization."[44] Faqir's stand is based on 'assuming' a foreign culture that – it is assumed – is superior to her native one. Her attitude to the natives is condescending and the fleeting moments in which Maha yearns for her orange orchard or Um-Saad speaks fondly of her jasmine tree do not alleviate the impact of Faqir's distance from her 'home' country.

In choosing English as her medium of expression, Faqir enfranchises her text, freeing it from the grasp of censorship. The refrain used by the aphasiac Nasra, the young woman whom Daffash rapes, in which she curses religion, would certainly have been censored had Faqir published her text in Jordan. As Malak observes, using hybridized English allows

> the conscious feminist narrative voice to infiltrate taboo terrains, both sexual and political, that might be inaccessible when handled in Arabic. Removed emotionally and culturally from the local scene, the English language accords a liberating medium to the author to broach and delve into issues such as feminine sexuality, politics of power and gender […]. English here accords a liberating lexical storehouse and semantic sanctuary.[45]

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[44] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove, 1967): 17–18.

[45] Amin Malak, "Arab-Muslim Feminism," 161. The Lebanese writer Etel Adnan spoke of English as the language which made her "ride horses" to freedom. Adnan acknowledges the fact of feeling alienated but she blames herself for not taking enough time to elaborate and perfect her Arabic. See her essay "To Write in a Foreign Language," tr. Dalia Mustafa, *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics* 20 (2000): 133–43. The essay describes her complex connections to various languages which affected her own poetry and prose. Adnan describes Arabic language as a forbidden paradise which she yearns to enter, though she is committed to the obligations of the present (i.e. writing in the foreign tongues). The Moroccan writer, Leila Abouzeid has one of her major characters in *The Last Chapter* comment on her use of English: "'The words came out easily in the foreign language.' It had not occurred to me before that a foreign language could be liberating" (49).

Writing in English, however, may not be so easy a task – the Arab woman writer might face some unexpected hurdles. Speaking of the difficulties facing Arab women writers, who may remain 'unhomed' in their newly sought territories, Mary Armitage observes:

> The francophone writer, therefore, appears as a tragic figure, always waiting for a gatekeeper to grant him or her a writing space, even then their created masterpieces require the gloss of another's tongue to bring them to full fruition through translation in one direction or another. [46]

Moreover, the issue of audience remains problematic. To whom is Faqir addressing her text? If it is intended for Arabs, how many readers of native Arabic can read novels written in English? If a Western readership is being targeted, what about the absence of translated cultural idioms?[47] Local Bedouin expressions, such as "raven of parting," and other items related to the domestic life of Bedouins, for instance, are not glossed. Perhaps Faqir intentionally left the text without any interpretative elements; this inadvertently creates a cultural vacuum where the Western reader is kept elusively distant from the site of the work. This, in itself, would mark a detour from the site of "bridges" that she spoke of in her testimony. One may wonder also at such discrepancies in the text as when David is mentioned instead of Job in the contexts of patience and suffering (98). Is this confusion deliberately intended, and, if so, for what purpose? Answering these questions, among many others that may be raised about Faqir's use of language, requires the space of an independent study. One fact, however, must reach 'home' for Faqir's readers – it is the recognition that the

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[46] Armitage, "The Debate Over Literary Writing in a Foreign Language," 63. See Amal Amireh, "Problems and Prospects for Publishing in the West: Arab Women Writers Today," http://www.igc/solidarity/amal67.txt (the essay first appeared in *Al-Jadid* 2.10 [1996]). See also Faqir's "Lost in Translation." *Index on Censorship* 2 (2004): 166–70.

[47] For a discussion of the use of language in postcolonial fiction, see Ashcroft, Griffiths & Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, 38, 53, 61, and 66. Faqir does not systematically introduce Arabic words in her text. Ashcroft comments on the benefit of such interpellations: "the use of untranslated words as interface signs seems a successful way to foreground cultural distinctions, so it would appear even more profitable to attempt to generate an 'interculture' by the fusion of the linguistic structures of two languages." (66) Faqir's use of English language falls under the category of "appropriation;" "the process by which the language is taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience" (38).

virtue of any writing lies in the raising of questions, in the constant provocation of thought, and the restless wandering in search for meaning. As it turns out, there is no ultimate 'coming back' or return to a sort of 'home' in the text. The colonized subject has been deterritorialized, and she has struck root, like a rhizome, somewhere else.

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Bodies Across

Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Diana Abu Jaber

MARTA CARIELLO

THIS ESSAY focuses on representations of the human body in the writing of Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, and Diana Abu Jaber. Following the different paths of cultural translation that the writers inscribe on the mobile ground of the contemporary postcolonial world, the body itself becomes a site of cultural translation, identity negotiation, and testimony to the trauma of dislocation.

The perspective I would like to adopt in reading these three authors is one suggested by Assia Djebar in her opening essay in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*. In "Sitting on the curb, in the dust," Djebar observes the world around her, the people who pass her by, and the stillness and violence of 'her' Algeria. She watches this world, at the beginning of her career as a filmmaker and in the middle of her growth as a writer, in a manner learned from the women of Mont Chenua. Crouching down on the ground, sitting and waiting, offers both a physical and a metaphorical positioning for listening to the voices of the three writers that I shall be analyzing here.

Djebar's physical position – the actual act of sitting, the movement that involves the body that sits, and the feeling of the clothes brushing the ground and skin, with arms and face uncovered – exposes her to the eyes of the peasant women she speaks to and casts her onto a threshold 'inside' and 'outside' those women, along with their clothes and skin, on the edge of Algeria itself. Sitting on the curb is, at the same time, a metaphor for a perspective not only from down below but also from the edge, where one can watch bodies and listen to their sounds. The edge of the nation, where

these women are sitting, is a space for the dislocated subjects of the post-colonial world.

The written bodies that I analyze are rooted in three different dislocations. Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* (1992) moves incessantly from England to Egypt, through Italy and other sites, obliging the body of the main character, Asya, to engage constantly in acts of translation and self-translation – what Teresa de Lauretis would call the double perspective of the semiotic subject's representation and self-representation.[1] In Fadia Faqir's *Nisanit* (1987), by contrast, bodies are fleshed out almost without movement, locked in a small, contested strip of land and in the constricted space of a prison cell. In this case, however, land itself moves underfoot, constituting an actual 'ground-in-translation', where identities explode in the simultaneous disintegration of bodies. Finally, Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* (2003) inscribes an entire relationship between two bodies inside a landscape that is substituted for by the senses: the space where these bodies move is not a material ground, but a scent, a taste, and a sound. This absence of a material land – and of a material body, as I shall explain – is closely linked to the displacement of the second-generation immigrant Sirine and of her exiled lover Han.

Movement across borders and identities, uncertain, stolen and disillusioning ground, the subtraction of a homeland and its material sites – these are the tropes of a literature of dislocations, where the trauma of separation, of interrupted memory, of colonization and decolonization calls for a deeply inscribed anatomy of the body.

In other words, the written body comes to perform a 'sign of history',[2] proposes irreducible difference, and produces narrating complexities that undermine the ubiquitous, unilateral Western discourse on female Arab bodies and their relation to sexuality and sexual politics.

Desire and Petrification in Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun*

> She remembers Tante Mohga the day he died and they took him away. She was – distraught. Not screaming, but sort of gasping – and tearing her hair and slapping her face and being sick all over the place, and they'd given her

[1] Teresa de Lauretis, *Technologies of Gender: Essays on Theory, Film, and Fiction* (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1987): 9.

[2] Homi K. Bhabha, "Frontlines/Borderposts," in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. Bammer Angelika (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994): 269.

> some injection and put her to bed and Daddy had said sit with her: sit with her and touch her. Keep touching her. […] And later she'd asked her father why he'd said to keep touching Tante Mohga, and he'd said that it was only through touch that we really knew things, that it was only by other people's touching us that we knew we were here at all – and Tante Mohga had to remember, had to know that she was still here or she'd be lost.[3]

Ahdaf Soueif's *In the Eye of the Sun* recounts the coming of age of a young Egyptian woman in the 1960s and 1970s in both Egypt and England. Soueif locates Asya, the main character, within the intellectual elite of Egypt at that time, building around the young woman a scenario in which all of the main political events of those years are openly discussed, and thus somehow reconstructed through personal narration and conversation. Open and highly conscious generational and cultural clashes are produced in what comes to be a clear – though complex – articulation of sexual politics in the Arab and British worlds in the 1960s and 1970s as traced in Asya's physical and emotional movements across the borders of Egypt and Europe.

Territory itself is fleshed out in Asya's moving body, which draws the outline and the map of European modernity and of its synchrony with close and distant Middle-Eastern political events; it is also the territory of Asya's own dis-synchrony with herself, of that specific projection of oneself *for* the other that informs the very condition of migration. Finally, what we see outlined is also a territory of home and belonging to Egypt and to the family, which is often romanticized and desired.

Asya's body does not properly move upon this territory; rather, it constitutes it, piece by piece. Much in the same manner, History may be thought of not so much as a terrain upon which migrant individuals move as in the way migrants themselves, their very skin, bodies, humours, and expressions, constitute a history that is not so much narrated as assembled, possibly suspended, present, not representable, and non-authoritative. For Soueif, in *In the Eye of the Sun*, the body that negotiates its presence inside a History written in English is a highly sensuous and sexual one. From the first time Asya meets Saif, the man who will disastrously become her husband later on, the physicality of the encounter is quite clear. The meeting is immediately juxtaposed with the italics of a betrayal to come, which is the evidence of her vital sensuality:

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[3] Ahdaf Soueif, *In the Eye of the Sun* (London: Bloomsbury, 1992): 428.

> … he had a great handshake. And his hands were warm in winter and cool in summer. He was proud of this inbuilt thermostat. Just as he was proud of his perfect feet and his smooth, muscled brown back. *'So what the hell did you feel when you touched the bastard? Did you run your hands over his pimply white back while he screwed you?'* His clothes were always terrific and he was thinning a bit on top but wasn't bothered. What she will remember most vividly later is the schoolboy grin breaking through all the grown-upness. (99)

The dialectic articulating the whole novel is already fully tangible in this first meeting/vision. The epidermic contact between Asya and Saif is palpable: "his hands were warm" and he was proud of "his smooth, brown back"; so is Saif's self-definition, as differentiated from *the other* 'Englishman' who has a "pimply white back" and who will become Asya's lover. On this account, Soueif's Arab critics have accused her of 'double treason', both ethnic and linguistic, for the novel was, after all, written in English and was projecting an Egyptian woman cheating on her 'Egyptian' husband with an Englishman. Furthermore, the temporal juxtaposition of episodes is audible, as if the writer were declaring the break-up of narrative linearity, for narration becomes carnality: a body moving across its emotional borders.

Asya's bursting and self-conscious sensuality will later be frozen inside an ice-cold asexual marriage. The spouses are unable to make love, and this leads to a spiral of betrayals and self-punishment on Asya's part. Here, Saif's role becomes fundamental: his insistent, irremovable request to Asya is that of "not feeling." He designs the contours of the relationship into actually desiring an asexual woman. Asya, for her part, shows the signs of the relational impasse through a physical pain that appears every time the two try to have sexual intercourse; Saif, at this point, locks himself up in the complete absence of sexuality:

> Now she watches him. I know you love me. But you don't want me. You did once, but you don't any more. […] When watching his hands across the table as he lit a Rothmans she would imagine them on her breasts and grow weak with desire. But to be repulsed, turned away so many times – but that's what he thinks *you* did to *him* – at first. But she *wants* to want him. She badly wants to want him. She wants him to *make* her want him; make her want him like she used to. But he won't. He will have nothing to do with it at all. (392–93)

Saif's request becomes a demand for Asya's petrification, finding its key in an episode that Saif recounts to Asya, which she significantly recollects in a moment of pre-matrimonial intimacy:

> Lying in his arms, smelling his Rothmans and his Monsieur de Givenchy, she remembers a story he had told her last year when he was staying at the Omar Khayyam. A group of them had got pissed, he'd said, and very late at night they had pushed over one of the marble statues in the garden. […] Saif and his friends had pulled and dragged at the statue until they got her to the bungalow of one of the instructors: Peter, who was drunk and asleep. They had lifted her into his bed and under the covers next to him. He had laughed as he described Peter, rolling over in his sleep and cuddling up to her .And he had laughed as he described Peter, hung over, next morning, refusing to let her go: 'He just kept hold of her, stroking her face and saying sadly over and over, "She's so perfect".' Asya can see the marble lady lying in the disordered bed. Her eyes are open but sightless. Her sharp stone nipples point up at the ceiling. Her arms are cut off above the elbow. Over her, the man laments. (162)

The figure of the petrified woman will reappear only in the last paragraph of the novel, though it remains constantly implicit in the imperative Asya receives: she must 'turn into stone'. In the humorous episode cited above, the man keeps repeating: "she's so perfect," and it is no small detail, for this, in fact, is the message Asya understands she must (but cannot bring herself to) interiorize. Her body must turn into marble in order not to cause irritation, embarrassment, chaos. The representation of the petrified female body echoes Elisabeth Bronfen's discussion of the dead female body and its representation. The corpse replaces – in a process of fetishization – the fear of death, and, in Freudian terms, becomes at the same time the representation of the 'absence' that the female body bears.[4] The anxiety over absence – over castration – is associated with the loss of vision. Triumphing over this anxiety, Bronfen goes on, is always connected to making things visible. Within this theoretical framework, the marble statue/woman is a beautiful dead body, offered for contemplation. Stripped of its sexuality, the statue of the woman "is perfect," as the man in the episode sadly exclaims. This will be the echo ringing in Asya's ears throughout the rest of the novel.

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[4] Elisabeth Bronfen, *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1992): 97.

What appears as an important element for a body crossing borders, such as Asya's, is the fact that the imperative 'to become petrified' is confirmed in a wider social context than that of her relationship with Saif. The evidence is patent when Asya undergoes all the preparations for her wedding. The intimate and, in this context, also highly symbolic practice of preparing the bride to be 'offered' to the groom is epitomized in the scene of the *halawa*, the waxing of her entire body. Such an intimate detail becomes a signifier of male–female carnalities and for the concomitant sensual and sexual politics. The advice which the scene reflects is particularly important:

> At the second pull Asya sits up and draws her knees to her chest and breathes hard. Her eyes are full of tears. […] 'Like this quickly it's better. Like this you'll go numb and not feel anything.…' (249-50)

Although the description reflects a specific cultural practice, the fact that Soueif chooses to narrate it is revealing, especially that the act contributes to the construction of the female body/image in the novel. The imperative to "go numb" appears in no way different from the request the male body (Saif) will make. Asya's body, however, does not go numb; rather, it bears the 'recording' of her personal tragedy through pain.

Pain becomes an extension of the female body – its externalization. Male body and male society demand a desensitization, a stone woman who will "go numb." The non-interiorization of this demand, and thus the lack of discipline of the female body, constitutes the ground on which bodily translation and sexual poetics/politics are played out in the novel.

Asya's indocile body becomes a touching body as it desires other men and discovers its sexuality. She gets involved in a love affair with an Englishman during her stay in England, only to discover that this sexual relationship makes of her body a new locus or terrain for yet more identity negotiations and cultural confrontation. The Englishman looks at her as an exotic fetish; he 'orientalizes' her and strives to maintain the 'Egyptianness' in her. Such asymmetrical distance of what we may call a colonial relationship is inscribed on the skin of the two mutually foreign bodies, where insurmountable estrangement is tragically confirmed. The physical impenetrability that has characterized the relationship with Saif becomes now, with Gerald, a cultural, even linguistic, impenetrability. Soueif does not deny Asya the detached pleasure of sex with Gerald, but gives her the voice to hold up to the colonizer his own mirror-image:

> 'Gerald,' Asya says quietly, 'why have all your girl-friends been from "developing" countries?'
>
> 'What?'
>
> 'You've never had a white girl-friend, why?'
>
> 'I don't think that way, man.'
>
> 'Yes, you do – and the reason you've gone for Trinidad – Vietnam – Egypt – is so you can feel superior. You can be the big white boss – you are a sexual imperialist –.' (723)

Neither imperialism nor colonialism is a simple act of accumulation and acquisition. Both are supported and perhaps even prompted by impressive ideological formations which include notions that certain territories and people require – indeed, beseech – domination, as well as forms of knowledge affiliated with domination.[5] Here, Gerald embodies the white colonizer perfectly, particularly insofar as he exemplifies what Edward Said describes as the cultural imperialist or the "big white boss." Indeed, with Ahdaf Soueif, dialectical relations between cultures also become dialectical relations between sexed bodies.

In the overlapping of colonial politics and sexual interaction, the epithet just cited is particularly significant. Gerald's habit has been to address Asya with "man" as a (frankly, unimaginative, if ostensibly chic and 'non-sexist') alternative to "babe." In actual fact, for Gerald, Asya is either a man or a baby: as a woman she would once again be too irreducibly different. In the metonymy of narration, Egypt, the 'developing' country, is then named by the colonizer; it must take the nickname and the implicit order to *be other*, to *be for* the colonizer, be male or be a baby – the same or at least weak. She is not allowed to be different, a woman, because then she would be too uncontrollable. Here, England names its "babe," wants to adorn it, admire it, and domesticate it.

In an almost perfect symmetry, however, Saif, who nearly always uses the word "princess" when addressing Asya, also reflects this naming practice. Asya's name and identity seem to be defined and assigned time and again by male characters from different relational positions as well as by history, and by the geopolitics of domination. Asya's body filters the interpretations she receives. All the names she is given, whether 'princess', 'baby', or 'man', leave her a stranger to what she truly is, very

[5] Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London & New York: Vintage, 1993): 9.

much like the orders she is instructed to obey: to be a statue, or else to be exotically erotic.

Soueif's written body, then, finds itself touched by different languages and translated into multiple cultures. Despite this polyvocality, Asya moves incessantly and restlessly within one idiom, physical or mental. In this liminality between Egypt and England, even Asya's language becomes polyphonic, as is underlined by Edward Said himself in his review of the novel:

> Is *In the Eye of the Sun* an Arabic novel in English? Yes, and not just because the heroine, her family, friends, and background are Arab. Throughout its subtly illuminated portrait of Asya, Soueif accomplishes the feat of refining a style that is totally amphibious, that is, not felt as the dutiful translation of an Arabic original, but unmistakably authentic, stubborn, idiomatic, and, yes, Arab. By turns ornate, telegraphic, allusive, almost comically fluent, barbarous, painful, lyrical, awkward, and swift, this English is reducible only to Asya, who is decidedly not a symbol or allegory of the Arab woman, but a fully realized, if impossibly situated, Egyptian sensibility in, but not totally of, the West.[6]

This opening up of geography to the translation–transposition of individuals, bearing with it all that the cultural construction of their bodies implies, is a familiar trope in postcolonial delineations of migration, which, at the end of the novel, takes Asya back to Egypt, where she meets with another petrified woman lying on the site of an archaeological excavation. The woman dates back to the time of Ramses the Second, a princess perhaps, the King's sister, or just a dancing girl at court (784). It does not matter who she is; what matters is that "the composure" spotted on her face, "the serenity of her smile[,] tells of someone who had always known who she was" (785).

> this woman who had in some way belonged to [the pharaoh], and who now lies here in the sand – she has indeed found a gentle grave; for here she is, delivered back into the sunlight still in complete possession of herself – of her pride, and of her small, subtle smile. (784–85)

[6] Edward W. Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 2002): 409.

This woman, underground, has found her own place. She is not there for a pharaoh, not there for another man; she seems to be there for herself. She has crossed the map of time to stay there – a statue made of stone, yes, but in a space of her own. The geography of Asya's identity stays open and errant, finding a slant in the ground that shows her some kind of happy petrification.

Fadia Faqir's *Nisanit*, or, the Translation of Torture

> The soot and smoke filled the space and blackened the yellow desert. His tears ran down his face and his lungs were torn into pieces. Blood gushed into bubbles, choking him and blocking the air outside his writhing body. While struggling for air, a group of disfigured children in white kaftans appeared from nowhere and formed a ring around him. Each was carrying a piece of his deformed body in his hand, freshly slain and dripping. An ear lobe, a wrenched thigh, an arm, jungles of bones, arteries, brownish blood, weals, slashed skin, and chops of meat.[7]

The Jordanian-born Fadia Faqir's novel *Nisanit* weaves the intersecting stories of three anti-heroes: a Palestinian guerrilla fighter, an Arab woman, and an Israeli warder. The three casualties of history and of geography meet on the common ground of violence, during the time-span from 1969 to 1985. For each of the three characters, Faqir cuts out a fragment of narrative and throws it on to the page, in a superimposition of different times and places. Often, she uses different names for the same places, depending on the character, thus delivering to each of them their own toponym and geography. Nablus is, thus, located alternatively in the Democratic State of "Ishmael" or "Israel," depending on whether the subject of narration is Palestinian or Israeli. Space and time become non-linear, and violence is inscribed in this very fragmentation, constituting a structuring element of narrative syntax. The first words of the novel are: "Bang. Bang." Eman, the main female character, begins telling her own story as a child, in 1969, when her home is searched with blind fury by soldiers, who, with unexplainable cruelty, stab her only doll with their bayonets. The doll's is only the first torn body in the novel.

This first phase of the narrative is interrupted almost immediately by the next frame, in which, in 1984, Shadeed, the Palestinian guerrilla

[7] Fadia Faqir, *Nisanit* (Oxfordshire: Aidan Ellis, 1987): 117.

fighter (whom we will later find in love with grown-up Eman), is training before receiving instructions to participate in his first guerrilla action.

As described, the novel opens with violence. Faqir in no way introduces the narrative structure, nor does she explain the narrators' voices. She only provides the reader with a map of the "Occupied Palestine/the Democratic State of Israel" before beginning the narration, in a firm invitation to hold on to geography, to the land – a land that will be of paramount importance throughout the novel. *Nisanit* begins with a contested land, violence, and a tearing mode of narration. It literally "opens," just like the belly of Eman's doll. Likewise, the lives of the three main characters are opened up, torn, never to be sutured. Eman's doll, too, will not be sewn up.

Shadeed, as we learn from the succeeding flashes and fragments of the story, is arrested, incarcerated in the Gaza Strip, and tortured until he goes insane. His is the most mangled and annihilated body in the novel. His torturer is David, a Polish-Israeli Jew and Auschwitz survivor. The single reference to Nazism and concentration camps somehow finishes the round of slaughter in which the three characters are implicated.

In this context, Jon Stratton's analysis of the connection between the Holocaust and colonial violence appears pertinent. Faqir introduces the theme of the Holocaust to show the non-sense of violence through history and to point to its continuity and persistence;[8] hers is certainly not any kind of justification of Israeli violence against the Palestinians but, rather, a recording of the way in which violence is etched, layer after layer, on the skin of every individual taking part in it. Stratton offers, in his analysis, the link between colonialism and the Holocaust: the extermination of the Jewish people carried out by the Nazis is part of a colonialist and racializing practice common to all of Europe in the twentieth century. The Holocaust is therefore fully part of that centrality of violence within the modern nation-state and of the way in which the subject of modernity articulates itself in relation to the 'Other'. Partly in Zigmunt Bauman's footsteps, Stratton places the Holocaust within the long genealogy of genocides in the history of humanity, from the massacre of the Aztecs, to Cambodia, East Timor, Bosnia, and Rwanda, concluding that

[8] Jon Stratton, "'It almost needn't have been the Germans': The State, Colonial Violence and the Holocaust," *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 6.4 (2003): 507–27.

> Thus, […] the violence and terror which is naturalised as the basis for the order of the modern state […] is expressed in its full force on the borders of modernity, beyond the edges of the European state system.

We can argue, then, for a genealogy of the Holocaust which places it in a history going back as far as Cortes' massacre of the Aztecs so as to understand the Nazi extermination of the Jews as being part of a genocidal history that is as central to modernity as the humanism for which the 'West' likes to be known. Such observations appear particularly pertinent in the discussion of the dramatic picture of the consequences of colonialism's epistemic violence that *Nisanit* gives. The Palestinian question is, in fact, a problematic knot that speaks to the West from that margin of the European state system Stratton writes of – and Faqir insists, in the novel, on the denomination "*Democratic* State of Israel,"[9] thus problematizing the very notion of democracy.

The Palestinian question is an intimate part of Jordanian national history, deeply inscribing itself also in the writing of Fadia Faqir. However, the decision to write in the English language pushes Faqir into a further interstitial position. Homi Bhabha speaks of interstice as a site of identity negotiation:

> What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the necessity of thinking beyond initial categories and initiatory subjects and focusing on those interstitial moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of "differences." These spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood and communal representations that generate new signs of cultural difference and innovative sites of collaboration and contestation.[10]

The "new signs" of cultural difference Bhabha writes of, I would add, may become ambassadors of a lacerating suffering. In the specific interstice where Faqir's writing dwells, laceration marks the means of communication itself. Here, a representational strategy of the tragedy of a group of 'landless' people is certainly present: the English language takes no pleasure in its own existence, it is an English that 'writes against itself'. In the plot of *Nisanit*, the anglophone world appears just once, when a childhood friend of Eman's comes back from the USA and offers to marry her and take her away to America. Eman refuses and declares ever

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[9] My emphasis.

[10] Homi Bhabha, "Frontlines/Borderposts," 269.

more strongly her attachment to her land. It is not, however, in this brief episode that the colonialist presence figures most in the novel; rather, it is in the choice of language itself. The fabric and matter of writing are suffused with the promise of violence, similar in many ways to that violence Frantz Fanon speaks of with respect to the colonial encounter:

> Decolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature, which in fact owe their originality to that sort of substantification which results from and is nourished by the situation in the colonies. Their first encounter was marked by violence and their existence together – that is to say the exploitation of the native by the settler was carried on by dint of a great array of bayonets and cannons.[11]

For Fanon, violence is necessary in the process of de-colonization:

> In decolonization there is therefore the need of a complete calling in question of the colonial situation. [...] You do not turn any society, however primitive [sic!] it may be, up side down with such a program if you have not decided from the very beginning, that is to say from the actual formulation of that program, to overcome all the obstacles that you will come across in doing so. The native who decides to put the program into practice, and to become its moving force, is ready for violence at all times. From birth it is clear to him that this narrow world, strewn with prohibitions, can only be called in question by absolute violence.[12]

I make this reference to Fanon because Fadia Faqir's writing operates a type of necessary violence on the stories she tells, like an explosion in which bodies and remains of bodies are transported, fallen in the fire of a tongue that violates itself. Along an eternal borderline (refugee camps, the Gaza Strip, the jail; all interstices of 'normality'), the bodies in *Nisanit* are translated by violence, until they explode and are erased. The first torn human bodies are those of Shadeed's guerrilla comrades, killed inside a cave where they are hiding after having carried out an attack against a Settlers' Committee in Hebron:

> Adnan was splashed with a liquid of some sort. 'Hell, what's this stuff?' Seconds later the liquid exploded, tearing him into pieces. The earth objected by

[11] Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, tr. Constance Farrington, intro. Jean–Paul Sartre (*Les damnés de la terre*, 1961; New York: Grove, 1965): 36.

[12] Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 37.

> quivering violently. He couldn't see properly because of the smoke and soot. Better not to see. The same stink as that morning. Human flesh and hair being burnt. Adnan's charred skin melted, leaving a thin coating on the whitish bones. The kneecaps, skull and teeth gleamed in the blazing flames. The drawn lips uttered a gasp, then the corpse quivered. […] Another blast: Samir was hit. 'I want to go alone,' he whispered and lurched to the other end of the cave. They had blown tough Samir into shreds of stained rags. (39–40)

With Shadeed's surrender and arrest, the annihilation of his body begins; the body starts estranging itself with pain and torture on the mount. His arrival in jail marks the beginning of his journey towards insanity, during which journey Faqir builds the macroscopic vision of a violated body. David, who here makes his first appearance, as a "manual laborer" of torture, immediately questions Shadeed:

> "What's your name? I said, what's your name? David, give him a treat," said the voice wearily. David started beating him with his cudgel. When he got his first blow he didn't feel anything, but seconds later a flash of fire burnt his body. He flinched, winced, then began shivering. (47)

A few pages later, the same scene is narrated from David' point of view. David is yet another protagonist of dislocation, in a land that for him has proved to be arid and hostile:

> The first glimpse David had of the terrorist he had read so much about in the papers was when a soldier threw him handcuffed out of the jeep that chilly morning. He was a dark, average man. A typical Arab. His eyes were close to each other like a fox's. The bastard looked exhausted and frightened, which would definitely make his job easier. He would drag a confession out of these dry lips in three days. Might as well teach him something about life and people. He rubbed his arm. So bloody cold. He would never get used to that weather. In the Agency's leaflets, Beer Sheva had seemed sunny and warm. (51)

The mirror-narration carried out by Shadeed and David is interpolated by Eman's voice. Her father is arrested and imprisoned in 1969 for attempting an anti-government revolt, consequently bringing the family into a state of misery and hunger. Eman's younger sister dies of malnutrition, while her mother seems to actually fade and disappear due to the pain. We learn of Eman's body, its thinness, frailty, and alienation; added to this is

the fact that when, still a young child, she had to witness her father's public execution:

> Daddy was reciting verses from the Qur'an in a loud, clear voice while the hangman was fixing the rope around his neck.
>
> […]
>
> I lost my balance and fell to the ground. 'Mummy, Mummy,' I cried. The crowd was motionless as if struck collectively on the skull with a huge hammer.
>
> […]
>
> I stood on the pavement gasping for air. 'Victory Public Bath' was written on an iron gate. I pushed it open and entered.
>
> 'Hey, where do you think you're going?' a man wrapped in a towel said. 'This place is for men only.'
>
> 'I want to have a bath,' I said. (133–34)

Eman wants to wash her body, but the layer of pain she tries to scrub off will stick like a thin film on her skin throughout the novel, a tattoo of unexplainable suffering, just like the number etched into David's skin in the death camp. All of these bodies come to us clad in a skin etched with testimony. The tortured, Shadeed, drags the narration to the margins of what is conceivable – the same margin, indeed, where the atrocities of the Holocaust lay, as do the physical and psychological violence suffered by a child born and raised in a refugee camp. In jail, Shadeed begins to realize what state his body is in when he touches himself, experiencing in that very moment the first stage in the alienation preceding insanity:

> Like a blind man trying to see his surroundings through the tips of his fingers, Shadeed touched his disheveled hair. The curls stuck together, which made them easier to yank. On the top of his skull his hair was exposed. The widest alley in the camp. His lips were crushed and drawn back. Two teeth were missing. He put his tongue in the gap and licked the bare gum. One of his eye-sockets has swelled up with blood. Was that the reason for his blurred vision? At the back of his neck he could feel a cut like a net. (95)

Descriptions continue along the same, crude lines, becoming even hard to read at times. Shadeed's body leaves him progressively in his hallucinations, which culminate in his kafkaesque metamorphosis into an ant.

In "Sheltering Battered Bodies in Language," Karen Remmler discusses a fundamental and problematic distinction within the narration of torture and the tortured body: Remmler asks whether it is actually possible to

recover the tortured body through remembrance and the metaphor of language, or if, in such a process, the body is not reduced to mere "discourse," in the Foucauldian sense of the term. Although Fadia Faqir's narrative is not, strictly speaking, autobiographical, the torture undergone by her bodies in *Nisanit* is, to all intents and purposes, a personal and collective testimony. The construction of the body as discourse, in this case, does not erase the body in its materiality; on the contrary, the written word becomes, in Remmlerian terms, voice to a body whose vocal chords have been excised. For Remmler, contextualization of the linguistic metaphors used in the memoirs of tortured people (in her specific case, Remmler refers to Nazi death-camp survivors) allows for a re-membering of the body through words: "In the act of reading, we are confronted with the contradiction that pain – itself unspeakable – becomes the most powerful expression of a historical event that seems to defy words."[13]

Drawing on Elaine Scarry's analysis in *The Body in Pain*, according to which torture disintegrates the perception of the body as social space of orientation, desire, and communication, thus exposing the illusory authority of bodily borders and the autonomy of one's own body, Remmler speaks of an actual translation of torture:

> Whereas the destruction of the body in pain transforms it into the most immediate site of identity – the tortured body becomes excruciatingly present – the voice is made absent as the tortured are reduced to screaming, moaning, and finally, in death, silent flesh. The displaced voice of the tortured becomes the property of the torturer as the powerfulness of the tortured body becomes the powerfulness of the torturer. Thus, "it is in part the obsessive display of agency that permits one person's body to be translated into another person's voice that allows real human pain to be converted into a regime's fiction of power". At the same moment the torturer commands the tortured to speak, he or she destroys the physical capabilities of speech.[14]

Perhaps the key to *Nisanit* is to be found precisely in the translation of the tortured bodies that have been rendered aphonous. They are translated into the voice of the torturer, who converts the act of violence into a narrative of power. Fadia Faqir, then, simply could only write in English; the lost

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[13] Karen Remmler, "Sheltering Battered Bodies in Language," in *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question*, ed. Angelika Bammer (Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1994): 217.

[14] Karen Remmler, "Sheltering Battered Bodies in Language," 220.

voice of the tortured becomes audible through words that are translated against themselves, in a perceptibly unwanted English.

Crescent, a Landscape of Memory with an Arab Moon

> "He is filled with invisible writing."[15]

Crescent, Diana Abu Jaber's second novel, takes place in the Los Angeles of migrants, a section of the city named "Teherangeles" in the book, and inspired by the existing area commonly called Tarantula. Teherangeles, populated mainly by Iranian immigrants, houses Nadia's Café, the main theatre of the novel, where the melancholy and nostalgia of immigration are staged and consumed, as is the tension of the news coming off the television screens from the Middle East. And here, too, is where love germinates: the love story between an Iraqi man and an Iraqi-American woman.

In 2003, at the same time *Crescent* was being published, the second Gulf War erupted. This coincidence created a certain degree of expectation for a book which had obviously been written before the outbreak of the war and which did not intend to speak 'in the name of' the Iraqi or Arab people. However, the novel builds a narrative of oblivion and exile that takes the Arab-American theme into the wider discourse of the post-colonial condition. The wars waged in Iraq by the USA and its allies, as well as the years of embargo marked by regular and silenced bombings, have gouged a deep wound in the history of Arab peoples, the more profound consequences of which may only surface years from now. Meanwhile, Diana Abu Jaber's voice, along with that of other writers, is beginning to build, word by word, a narrative edifice of this trauma – a trauma which itself carries the living echo of preceding wars. *Crescent* opens with the sound of Iranian missiles raining on a timeless Baghdad:

> The sky is white.
>
> The sky shouldn't be white because it's after midnight and the moon has not yet appeared and nothing is as black and as ancient as the night in Baghdad. It is dark and fragrant as the hanging gardens in the extinct city of Chaldea, as dark and still as the night in the uppermost chamber of the spiraling Tower of Babel.

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[15] Diana Abu Jaber, *Crescent* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2003): 34.

> But it's white because white is the color of an exploding rocket. The ones that come from over the river, across the fields, from the other side of an invisible border, from another ancient country called Iran.[16]

This is a still from the childhood of Hanif, the Iraqi exile who will be the co-protagonist of the story. However, this opening into the world of *Crescent*, right in the midst of exploding missiles that render Baghdad's ancient sky unrecognizable, takes the reader into a place where war has become an aching bodily organ of those who suffer, and the sad, familiar mental association of Baghdad with missiles and war is disorienting for the reader, who sees that this land, too, has been carrying around its sick organ of war for too long.

Nadia's Café is a microcosm populated mainly by students and professors from the nearby university. The Café is a little realm in itself, where all the food is prepared and cooked by Sirine's tireless hands. Sirine is the daughter of an American mother and an Iraqi father, who both died during an international humanitarian mission when Sirine was a child. Now thirty-nine years old, the woman has been brought up by her paternal uncle, and basically has no other close relative. Sirine, then, has grown up in the void left by her parents' death and also inside her uncle's stories of migration; a double interruption that delivers her into a sort of exile from herself, where her identity is not defined; nor does she seek its definition. Things change when she meets Hanif, an Iraqi university professor, who is exiled from his land. Hanif and Sirine weave a relationship threaded through with passion, jealousy, and, once again, separation.

The love story takes shape against the alchemical background of the Middle-Eastern recipes Sirine works on incessantly. Sirine's cuisine pervades the novel in precisely the same way the smells form the grill stay in her hair even when she's not working; beneath the rhythms of the incidents, conversations, places, and personal interactions runs the ground-pulse of the act of cooking. Queen of the restaurant, Um-Nadia herself – owner of the café – calls her Cleopatra and defines her as having a "magnetism of the cells," deeper than any beauty of seduction. Sirine is,

[16] Diana Abu Jaber, *Crescent*, 3.

as Silvana Carotenuto notes, a woman warrior, a character in one of her uncle's stories:[17]

> These women conquer palaces and armies, break spells of silence and paralysis, confound sphinxes and jinns, know the seven types of smile, and in the end, just after solving the riddle, they drop their masks, their husband's clothing, their weapons, their pens, and they are simply themselves again.[18]

The narrative voice of Sirine's uncle introduces each chapter and sometimes irrupts into the narration with a story that flows parallel to the Arab-Californian events of Teherangeles. His stories follow the Nubian Camille, who, in quest of her son, traverses fantastic worlds and has incredible adventures, ultimately arriving at the source of the Nile. During her journey, the woman has herself bought as a slave by Sir Richard Burton, so that she may capture him with her charms; in exchange for freeing Burton from her spell, she obtains from Burton's wife some African guides to lead her to the headwaters. This parallel story offers a bridge to an Arabic tradition of oral fabulation, which, in fact, played a large role in Diana Abu Jaber's upbringing, and which, at the same time, suggests an asymmetrical interweaving of interests between the Anglo-Saxon and the Arab worlds, with roots much deeper than the certain horrors and agony of the wars. Camille's story, Sirine's uncle declares, is a "love story in disguise" (98), by which he means the complicated narration of Western cultural imperialism. The reference becomes clear when the narrative gets round to Sir Richard Burton and his "passions":

> Sir Richard Burton wandered the Arab world like a speckled wraith. He dressed in native garb, spent hours gazing into Arab eyes. Arabic, in turn, went into his heart like a piercing seed, growing tendrils of beliefs and attitudes. But his tongue was flat and slate. He spoke so many languages that he had no native music left in him. He did, however, like so many Victorians, have an aptitude for ownership, an attachment to things material and personal, like colonies and slaves – he especially enjoyed owning slaves while living in someone else's house. (98)

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[17] Silvana Carotenuto, "Il 'velo toccante' di Cleopatra: figurazioni etniche," *La nuova Shahrazad: Donne e multiculturalismo*, ed. Lidia Curti et al. (Naples: Liguori, 2004): 342.

[18] Abu Jaber, *Crescent*, 81.

Furthermore, since he cannot master Camille, the slave who has come from afar, Burton, and with him the entire West, writes his own version of the Arab world:

> [He] was a slaver, an explorer, and a translator, yet he could not quite translate Camille's white Nile of skin and blue Nile of hair into the right sort of words. She made him ache in seven different places and she taught him seven different kinds of smiles; she filled his sleep with smoke and made his mouth taste of cherries. And one day, after thumbing through some old notebooks, random tales from ancient Persia, Phoenicia, Hindustan, Burton found himself writing the thunderstruck phrase: "And afterwards." He had begun his famous, criminal, suggestive, imperial version of Victorian madness dissolved in the sky over the Middle East – his translation of *The Thousand and One Nights*. (100)

In her mission, her struggle as woman warrior around the world, Camille uses the magic spells and the bodily intelligence of Scheherazade. In another place and another time, Sirine's incessant work takes shape in the magic of food, "perhaps the strongest memory of the 'epicurean cooks,' of music as melancholic food, of the Egyptian meals of the Shakespearean tragedy [of *Othello*]," as Silvana Carotenuto writes.[19] Carotenuto notes, also, how the Shakespearean subtext becomes an actual creative influence in the articulation of the love story between Sirine and Han. At times, indeed, *Othello* is explicitly echoed in the story.[20] There is actually a drama of jealousy, enacted around a scarf that Han gives to Sirine, which she later loses. The scarf used to belong to Han's sister, killed by Saddam Hussein's secret services. A student of Han's who, years earlier in Iraq, had met and fallen in love with Hanif's sister, takes the headscarf from Sirine. Another headscarf causes more jealousy, on Sirine's part, this time; she tears the scarf off the head of a Muslim student in Han's class, thinking that this, too, had been a gift from Hanif. Around these small misunderstandings and faux pas is the subtle intrigue spun by a poet, a

[19] Silvana Carotenuto, "Il 'velo toccante' di Cleopatra," 343.

[20] Abu Jaber tells of how *Crescent* had been originally conceived of as a rewriting of *Othello*. This original project proved inadequate mainly because of the ambiguity of the characters, which did not allow a clear distinction between categories of 'good' and 'evil'. See Andrea Shalala–Esa, "An Interview with Diana Abu Jaber," *Al Jadid* 8.39 (Spring 2002).

friend of Han and Sirine's uncle's, who stages a kind of superficial *divertissement* by frustrating the relationship between the two lovers.

Although the similarities with the tragedy of Othello are so clearly traceable in the episodes linked with the symbolic object (the scarf/handkerchief), the relation between the two texts is to be detected more in the actual substance directing Sirine and Han's actions: it is not the poet's intrigue or the stolen scarf that prompts the gestures and feelings of the two so much as diffidence and mutual indecipherability. Sirine cannot obtain full knowledge of Hanif's past, and this makes her distrustful. In the Shakespearean tragedy, Iago himself triggers a process that is based wholly on a feeling Othello already has: diffidence, which breeds jealousy; if it were not so, Iago's machinations would not work. If we consider *Othello* to be the tragedy of diffidence as the basis for jealousy, the substance of the drama becomes the very same as that of *Crescent*. However, in Abu Jaber's novel, roles change – more than this, they become confused: Han is not necessarily the stranger, although he arrives from far away and is fascinating and "dark" (Sirine observes "the brown colors of his skin"); he is, rather, a stranger among other strangers. Paradoxically, Sirine now becomes the foreigner; despite her Iraqi descent, she takes completely after her American mother. After waking from a dream of Han leading a double life, she looks at herself in the mirror: "All she can see is white" (195). The woman, indeed, seems not to belong to the immigrant community she lives in: she becomes the guest, whereas, in Venice, it is Othello who is the guest. And, in fact, Sirine is the one who is most jealous and diffident – towards Han. Roles are somehow confused and doubled, not only in the unclear divide between villains and heroes, but also in the unstable distinction between hosts and guests. What seems to be inscribed in the story is that sequence of substitutions which, for Jacques Derrida, underlies the codes of hospitality; the guest/stranger arrives from outside and legislates, while the host is unable to legislate until the guest has entered his house:

> it's *as if* the master, *qua* master, were prisoner of his place and his power, of his ipseity, of his subjectivity (his subjectivity is hostage). So it is indeed the master, the one who invites, the inviting host, who becomes the hostage, becomes the one who invites the one who invites, the master of the host. The

> master becomes the host's host. The guest (hôte), becomes the host (hôte), of the host (hôte).[21]

The scarf/handkerchief itself is charged with additional meanings, being translated into the semantic mobility of postcolonial poetics: the headscarf Hanif gives to Sirine seals their bond, and generally assumes the meaning of a unifying object; the veiled student, after having been at the centre of the aforementioned misunderstanding, also gives her headscarf to Sirine, seeking her friendship. Sirine becomes suddenly confused, feeling pulled by the threads of the fabric towards her Arab identity.

Connecting element and symbol of conjunction with some part of one's identity, the scarf/handkerchief in *Crescent* takes up a journey in the wind of the fixed and crystallized meaning Western culture gives to the object of the veil, constantly associating it with religion and female oppression. This veil now travels, from hand to hand, telling different weavings of human feelings: love, jealousy, homesickness, and lost memory. The same fabric also carries the tradition of the Iraqi villages it comes from, each location having its own pattern, as Han explains:

> 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. (133)

Here, the theme of memory returns, along with that of the ties with the past and with one's unrecoverable origins (Sirine objects to the gift: "It's your only memento"). Memory-recall pervades *Crescent*, not only via the symbolic veil, but also – and mostly – in Sirine's cuisine. Her food is a continuous process of recall, precisely to that part of herself that seems to have been removed, and in food Sirine looks for that sense of 'origin' that, because missing, marks the deep distance she suffers from herself. It is her own, inward exile.

Food as a vehicle for memory and the kitchen as space of custody and at the same time of the passing on of family and ethnic traditions are frequent topoi in postcolonial literature. *Crescent*, however, goes a stage further. In "The Gender of Nostalgia," Carol Bardenstein analyzes that genre, defining "Cookbook Memoirs," at once recipe collections and col-

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[21] Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality*, tr. Rachel Bowlby (*De l'hospitalité*, 1997; Stanford CA: Stanford UP, 2000): 123–24.

lections of identity fragments, by (in the cases she studies) Middle-Eastern exiles. Bardenstien connects food with those fragments of identity – which may take the most diverse forms, from photographs to music, to, in this case, culinary tradition – through which the estranged belonging of exile is articulated. However, Bardenstein adds, food, its preparation and the ritualistic aspect of it, often constitute a form of articulation, of symbolic communication of the individual and collective memory of exile; memory is reshaped by exile itself, identity performed at the crossroads of new ethnic, class, and gender configurations.

For Sirine, who was born in a previous exile, not her own, food is the conduit for a lost memory but, even more, a search for origins: every ingredient tells of its descent. In food, Sirine performs her otherwise silenced identity. Like the stories of the *Thousand and One Nights*, arriving to us in the orientalized version of Sir Richard Burton, Sirine, too, arrives to herself without an original, covered by translation. Abu Jaber speaks of the translations of Sirine and of Scheherazade in the same way. Sirine, however, does not speak through words, but through food. This is the reason why she never stops cooking: she is constantly performing her identity anew. And, in fact, until the moment she meets Han, Sirine has no body; she has never really given herself to anyone, except in the codification of food:

> Never, not for a single day since her second year in high school, has she been without a boyfriend or admirer of some sort, and she has never really, entirely given herself to any of them. She knows this – it doesn't seem a deliberate choice to her, it was simply something that never happened. She wonders sometimes if it's a sort of flaw or lack in her – the ability to lose herself in someone else. (26)

It is as if, living in this lack of memory, broken by the loss of her parents and never recovered in an environment of 'exiles' like the one she lives in, Sirine has lost her own body, cannot exchange it with other human beings. Food, then, becomes the code in which Sirine transcribes people; she translates them into scents and flavours, heavy molecules suspended in the air. And her falling in love with Han becomes a perfume, his voice chocolate, "the dark chocolate of Han's voice" (26).

Han, however, is the only one who trespasses against the code of food to speak directly to Sirine's body; he can do this because he bears within himself Sirine's interrupted memory: the Iraqi past she has never lived,

the unbridgeable nostalgia of the exile for her identity. In Hanif, Sirine sees part of herself: the first time she sees him, the "injured quality in his eyes" (18) stays with her. Later on, while listening to his distant memories, she almost recognizes herself in a nearly retraceable memory:

> "I can't go back," he says. "To Iraq? No." […] "But even so, it's like there's a part of me that can't quite grasp the thought of never returning. I have to keep reminding myself. It's so hard to imagine. So I just tell myself: not yet."
>
> "How terrible," she says. 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. (52)

By falling in love with Hanif, Sirine falls in love with exile, possesses it and is possessed by it; she makes love, a little, with the exiled part of herself.

In the end, Hanif leaves, goes back to his past, to the dangers of the Iraqi police regime. Sirine returns to cooking, but the food has lost its magic. But the tale of herself that Sirine has read in Han has sparked the narration of memory: it cannot be interrupted now. This is why, after such a painful separation, Hanif reappears, in an unpredictable and somewhat Hollywood-style happy ending: an Arabic newspaper publishes the photograph and story of an Iraqi political prisoner who has escaped from prison by following the migratory track of certain animals across the border into Jordan.

The transhumance of identity has been set in motion, and identity itself is no longer a heap of incoherent ruins but, rather, a horizon of completeness, which allows some sense of 'home'. Um-Nadia, herself a migrant, had told Sirine, at the beginning of the novel, giving her the key to nomadism, that home is not a faraway place, but is always inside oneself:

> "Men lose track of where they are. They miss their mother and father and sister. They don't know how to carry their homes inside themselves." She looks closely at Sirine. "You need to know how to do that. (73)

Conclusion: The Body as Testimony

Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, and Diana Abu Jaber were all born in times when, in their countries of birth or descent, direct colonization had ended,

or was ending. Also the other deep traumatic event that indelibly marked – and continues to prove fundamental to – the political and civic life in the Arab world in the past century: namely, the founding of the State of Israel, is an event that was a posthumous datum for this generation of writers, something handed down.[22] The actual processes of colonization and decolonization and the founding of the state of Israel are traumatic events incorporated by the cultures of the Arab world as a founding part of the narrative of their very identity and history. The generations of writers that Soueif, Faqir, and Abu Jaber belong to have acquired these traumatic events as 'already narrated', in the form of an 'induced memory', not deriving from actual, direct experience. In *Testimony*, Shoshana Felman analyzes the relation between memory and direct knowledge, with particular reference to Camus' *The Plague*:

> No more than the experience of having known plague and remembering it, of having known friendship and remembering it, of knowing affection and being destined one day to remember it. So all a man could win in the conflict between plague and life was knowledge and memories…[23]

Felman reads the plague as the holocaust-event without references, because it transcends the imaginable (in the novel, even the doctors deny the existence of the epidemic, for it appears scientifically inconceivable, having been overcome in the Western world). Between this event and a reality which can be narrated lay knowledge and memory: in a word, testimony. Felman analyzes the problem of direct testimony of events with no references: its victims cannot narrate the plague, metaphor for the holocaust, because, even for those who survived, the event is inconceivable. The only possible testimony is that of a 'third eye', neither victim nor executioner; the eye that watches from outside (provided watching is not itself, too, an act of participation, of being 'inside').

The collective traumas that Soueif, Faqir, and Abu Jaber report are indirect testimonies, told from acquired narratives; some kind of a 'third

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[22] I am considering 1948 as the great divide in the twentieth century, obviously deeply linked with the following Arab–Israeli wars, partly experienced more closely by Soueif and Faqir.

[23] Camus, quoted in Shoshana Felman & Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (New York & London: Routledge, 1992): 110–11.

eye' or, better, a third ear for listening this time. At this point, the distinction between direct and indirect testimony becomes, also, articulation of difference between testimony of an event and testimony of the *discourse* built around the event, namely the cultural discourse of the postcolonial and that of the Palestinian question, in itself perhaps the most uncanny impasse for European Modernity. Narration of events deriving from acquired memory and from cultural discourse is in itself a form of testimony. What I propose is that the generation of writers such as Soueif, Faqir and Abu Jaber testify to an induced trauma, and, possibly because it is induced, it is a trauma that cannot be overcome. It has been interiorized already as narration, already structured, and thus may only be re-narrated, not overcome. Felman proceeds, on the concept of testimony:

> Bearing witness to the way in which "this history concerns us all," *The Plague* partakes of an *apprenticeship in history* through an apprenticeship in witnessing. […] The historical apprenticeship takes place only through a crisis in, and a consequent *transformation* of the witness.[24]

In the process of testimony, in elaborating the postcolonial discourse into a text – "the apprenticeship in history and in witnessing"[25] –Soueif, Faqir, and Abu Jaber, each in her own way and language, expose the witness to the crisis of their own deposition: their witness is the body. Theirs is not a narration (or renarration) of History; rather, it is the body itself that carries memory, and becomes the text. The translation that is harboured within this text may be read as the scar of a trauma, for, like a scar, it sutures the wound, but recalls the pain.

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[24] Felman & Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, 109–10.

[25] *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing*, 110.

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Searching for Room to Move

Producing and Negotiating Space in Leila Aboulela's *Minaret*[*]

MARTA CARIELLO

Regent's Park Mosque and the Production of Space

"I'VE COME DOWN IN THE WORLD. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move."[1] Leila Aboulela's novel *Minaret* (2005) opens with these words, spoken by Najwa, the young woman narrator: Already, the first two lines conjure up two of the fundamental themes articulated in the novel by the anglophone Sudanese writer: *movement* ("I've come down"), and *space* ("a place where the ceiling is low"). It is precisely the articulation of movement and space – movement *producing* space – that grounds

[*] Previous version of this article was delivered as a paper at the XXIII AIA Conference 2007 "Migration of Forms / Forms of Migration," held on 20–22 September 2007 at Università degli Studi di Bari and is now included in the Conference Proceedings.

[1] Leila Aboulela was born in Cairo in 1964, brought up in Khartoum, moved to England in her mid-twenties, and has since spent long periods of time living also in Scotland, Indonesia, and Dubai. Her first novel, *The Translator* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1999), tells of the difficult and at times estranging love story between a young Sudanese widow working as a translator at a Scottish university and her local supervisor, a scholar of Middle East Studies and Third World politics. In 2001 Aboulela published a collection of short stories titled *Coloured Lights* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2001), focusing on the Muslim immigrant experience in Britain; the short story "The Museum" made Aboulela the first winner of the Caine Prize for African Writing.

the negotiation of selfhood and identity fleshed out by Aboulela in her novel.

Minaret tells the story of the forced migration of Najwa and her dismembered family from a wealthy life in Khartoum to a difficult and humble existence in London, following the military coup of 1985 in Sudan. Within this context, Aboulela's narrative marks the traumatic interruption of time – one life literally stops, replaced by a completely different one – and a physical and spatial dislocation – Sudan replaced by England. Najwa will, in the end, and in an autobiographical echo of the writer's own experience, find her own 'place' in a renewed spiritual identity.

The final place of religion is itself inscribed in a topography of migration and of unexpected maps; it is announced in the very first paragraph, in what constitutes a sort of prologue to the story and the flashbacks:

> I've come down in the world. I've slid to a place where the ceiling is low and there isn't much room to move. Most of the time, I'm used to it. Most of the time, I'm good. I accept my sentence and do not brood or look back. But sometimes a shift makes me remember. Routine is ruffled and a new start makes me suddenly conscious of what I've become, standing in a street covered with autumn leaves. The trees in the park across the road are scrubbed silver and brass. I look up and see the minaret of Regent's Park mosque visible above the trees. I have never seen it so early in the morning in this vulnerable light. London is at its most beautiful in autumn.[2]

The London autumn, beautiful and potent with its falling leaves, offers an architecture that tells of movement, of newness, of different rhythms and temporalities: the minaret, clear and visible and reassuring as the ceiling of a house of sense and self that Leila Aboulela has chosen to declare in the very title of her book. Najwa looks up at the minaret that will host her survival.

Religion as the place for identity formation is a very interesting and undoubtedly fundamental theme in *Minaret*; when Najwa decides to wear a headscarf, she gives material substantiation to her desire to settle into "another version of herself,"[3] one that attracts her, she ponders, because she is "regal like [her] mother, mysterious. [With] the skill of concealing

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[2] Leila Aboulela, *Minaret* (London: Bloomsbury, 2005): 1.

[3] Aboulela, *Minaret*, 246.

rather than emphasizing, to restrain rather than to offer" (246). This other, religious version of herself also brings about a new corporeal schema, with newly constructed spatial coordinates of her (migrant) presence in the "British" space.[4]

Religion thus becomes a 'place' in the sense that, following David Harvey, places are constructed and experienced as material artifacts. Specifically, religion is – where possible – a non-fixed, 'displaced' place: in a world progressively pervaded by a sense of global interconnectedness between economic, political, social, and cultural formations, the notion of

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[4] "Corporeal schema" is borrowed from Fanon's "train passage" in *Black Skin, White Masks*: "'Look, a Negro!' It was an external stimulus that flicked over me as I passed by. I made a tight smile. [...] Then, assailed at various points, the corporeal schema crumbled, its place taken by a racial epidermal schema"; Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. C. Lam Markmann (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952; tr. 1967; London: Pluto, 1986): 111–12. Fanon refers to an "epidermic racialization" in which the evidence of a darker skin is immediately signified, in the eyes of the European hegemonic subject, as 'Other'. Najwa's decision to wear a headscarf is actually a liberating gesture, in that she openly declares she is no longer going to be signified by the intruding, sexualizing gaze of male, Western hegemony – she will now take agency in her own, personal corporeal schema. Of course, signification and cultural construction always go at least two ways: the headscarf is, indeed, a topical example of a sliding signifier in contemporary cultural constructions of the Self/Other binary. In an interesting discussion of metropolitan space and the concepts of targeting and being targeted, Salwa Ghaly refers to Fanon's text:

> What if the 'negro' [...] were replaced by an immigrant 'Meghrebine' wearing a head-scarf in a French metropolis? Or a Dutch woman walking up and down Albert Cuyp Market in loose-fitting clothes donning a tight veil? We can speak to our heart's desire of Levinasian gestures towards the Other and about finding ourselves through intersubjectivity, but the naked truth remains that the veil is likely to invite looks of disapprobation targeting, even unlocking, the subjects wearing it. When this veil is brandished as a sign of rejection of a certain core of Western values in the face of a society that identifies itself, I think, erroneously, as secular, it becomes a target of legislation as well as other forms of "resistance" from the street. But are these women not targeting that street, in addition to being targeted by it? To reverse this and speak from experience, when I walk into a classroom where all women, except me, are veiled, I sense myself at once targeted by and targeting a particular culture and set of values.

— Salwa Ghaly, contribution to Jordan Crandall, *Under Fire 2: The Organization and Representation of Violence*, tr. Witte de With (Center for Contemporary Art, Rotterdam, 2005): 32.

'place' is, somewhat surprisingly, becoming more important. Religion is, in this sense, dispersed, transnational, interconnected, and global, and yet constitutes a local, always rooted and specifically – if not individually – constructed and experienced place.[5] While carrying such specific and ultimately individual spatiality, religion, as written out in the words chosen by Aboulela, equally produces a *space* of mobility, an "indication of mobility," as de Certeau would have it.

De Certeau, moreover, offers the key for the tracing of unstable (social) borders that build the space in *Minaret*, indicating how material perspectives propose that cultural battles create explicit inequalities in the way space is occupied and used by members of different groups. Space, in other words, is produced, performed, and experienced by members of different groups within society, through diversified cultural discourses; in Leila Aboulela's novel, 'her' space becomes religious space.

London: Including Exclusion

What responds to the crucial need, today, to attend to the power-relations and cultural encounters linked to contemporary migrations is the interval in which Aboulela's writing inscribes such a locus of (religious) identity; what Homi K. Bhabha calls the interstices of modernity. Here, the pedagogical temporality of linear – national – narration of Western modernity is interrupted by the performative temporality of the postcolonial. In "DissemiNation," Bhabha refers to "the ambivalent and chiasmatic intersections of time and place that constitute the problematic 'modern' experience of the western nation,"[6] in which the migrant or metropolitan (imagined) communities draw out a space that is no longer "horizontal", but carries with it what Iain Chambers calls "the widespread postcolonial insistence on a disjunctive temporality."[7] Bhabha develops this concept

[5] For a discussion of the articulation between 'space' and 'place' in relation to Harvey's theorizations, see Phil Hubbard, "Space/Place," in *Cultural Geography: A Critical Dictionary of Key Concepts*, ed. D. Atkinson et al. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005): 41–48.

[6] Homi K. Bhabha, "DissemiNation: time, narrative, and the margins of the modern nation," in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994): 293.

[7] Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham NC: Duke UP, 2008): 321.

with specific reference to the space of the modern Western nation, built as the over-arching, paradigmatic narrative that is expected to draw the lines of inclusion and exclusion, traced along the certainty of what is authorized as a universal, self-affirming present. The disruption of such lines of division opens the space for an emergent dissonance; the impasse of a universalized, "central" modernity:

> the subject of cultural discourse – the agency of a people – is split in the discursive ambivalence that emerges in the contestation of narrative authority between the pedagogical and the performative. This disjunctive temporality of the nation would provide the appropriate time-frame for representing those residual and emergent meanings and practices that Williams locates in the margins of the contemporary experience of society.[8]

Counter-narratives such as Leila Aboulela's construction of the migrating space of religion – or of migration performing a place for her religious self – are indeed residual and emergent practices and meanings, disturbing the ideological linearity of the Western nation, and thus insisting on the disjunctive temporality of modernity – its broken relationship with a space no longer traced in the present, but retraced, over and over, by a reiterated, uncanny performance of the (colonial) past.

Aboulela writes in this interstice or, rather, writes her own, personal interstice. Najwa, her family, their physical presence in England, and their place in the city, the words she uses to tell of her presence in London: the writer *performs a space* through the construction of London as the inclusive space of dislocation. At the beginning of the novel, Najwa observes the rich through a personal topography of unfulfilled desires and nagging memories of an insistent past:

> St. John's Wood High Street is busy. Men in suits and young women wearing the latest fashions get into new cars and drive off to good jobs. This is a posh area. Pink hues and the expanse that money blesses people with. The past tugs but it is not possessions that I miss. I do not want a new coat but wish I could dry-clean my old one more often. Wish that not so many doors have closed in on my face; the doors of taxis and education, beauty salons, travel agents to take me on Hajj.... (2)

[8] Bhabha is referring here to Raymond William's *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 299.

The city of London becomes, in *Minaret*, a space where the rhythm of migrants moving, working, searching for and reconstructing a home, heeding the call to prayer, leading a parallel social life, intrudes in the urban fabric of the city.

Najwa's arrival in London dates to 1985, a time when the Muslim presence in England was certainly less incisive, or less visible. Najwa sets herself to partake in what Aboulela more than once refers to as "the background" of British life, a space then invisible and dismissed in the Western urban humanscape. In London, Najwa is employed as a house cleaner and babysitter for an Egyptian family; this is how she describes her first day at work:

> Lamya, my new employer, stands holding open the door of her flat. There is a light above her head and she is more relaxed than when I saw her at Regent's Park mosque. [...] I keep my eyes and head lowered like I trained myself to do. This is not my first job; I know how deferential a maid should be. I take off my shoes and leave them near the door. I take off my coat, fold it and put it over my shoes – it wouldn't be polite to hang it over the family's coats on the coat-rack. I know I must be careful in everything I do; I mustn't slip. The first day is crucial, the first hours. I will be watched and tested but, once I win her trust, she will forget me, take me for granted. This is my aim, to become the background to her life. (65)

In this household, the migrant, working-class woman negotiates her sense of 'home', searching for her past ("the past tugs," she has said earlier), and finding a sliding space of substitution. As Lidia Curti writes,

> The workplace offers a space for nostalgia, for what [migrant women] have left behind, a sort of involuntary substitution: the other woman's child and home [...] become their own, they replace what was left behind. The new home becomes memory, in more than one sense, inscribing not only the past in the present and vice versa, but also that which is far away and that which is close by, the same and the different.
>
> [...] [Domestic workplaces] are also spaces of conflict between two women, the native and the alien; particularly, the kitchen, where deep differences emerge, not only in the interior design, but also in the food, the way it is cooked and served.[9]

[9] Lidia Curti, *La voce dell'altra* (Rome: Meltemi, 2006): 193–94. My tr.

The kitchen is, indeed, one of the privileged places, in *Minaret*, for the emergence of identity negotiations; a place where Najwa is sometimes not "the background," especially when her employer is not home. In her analysis of the domestic kitchen as both an intimate and a socially significant space, Janet Floyd notes that

> [the kitchen] remains the site of dirty work of transhistorical, transcultural symbolic meaning: the space where the raw, the unclean and the defiled are brought, and where the social rules attendant on civilized life are reiterated, where status is confirmed and exclusion practiced. [...] This is the space in which First and Third World inequalities are 'brought home', a recess repellent to middle-class woman and domestic worker alike.[10]

Floyd underlines how the domestic kitchen space is indeed "an arena for the weighty cultural work of reconfiguring gender behaviours, class relations and national identity."[11] Najwa's workplace, her employer's home, and, specifically, her kitchen, are constructed by Aboulela as a particularly interesting site for the articulation of class and cultural relations; Najwa's employer is herself a (wealthy) migrant, whose presence in the novel disrupts the apparently linear and reassuring separation between poor and rich. The edge of Empire tugs here at a crack in the centre: Najwa's own, personal empire constitutes that of a young Egyptian woman who refuses her religion and will not cook or tend to her home. Femininity is disrupted, perhaps even beyond the writer's will, and the reader is exposed to the possibility of juxtaposition, of confusion. Here, cultural and class relations are at least doubled; in the kitchen, exclusion is practiced, inclusion interrogated.

Throughout the novel, Najwa negotiates her own inclusion, developing, as depicted in the account of her first day at work, a strategy of resistance that actually relies on exclusion: she will mention again the sense of "being in the background," "unnoticed." Later in the novel, during a party she is serving at in the same household, she observes:

> They are talking as if I am not here. All their lives they've had servants, and my presence does not make them uncomfortable. [...] I know what it feels

[10] Janet Floyd, "Coming Out of the Kitchen: Texts, Contexts and Debates," *Cultural Geographies* 11 (2004): 62.

[11] Janet Floyd, "Coming out of the kitchen."

> like to have silent figures moving in the background, reassuring, always getting the work done. (219)

Najwa knows because she, in turn, has been wealthy and has belonged to the upper middle class, back in Khartoum. Najwa is aware that she, like everyone else, is caught up in a compulsive game of musical chairs, a random mechanism in which luck, ability, and perhaps fate decide who must "come down in the world," who must lose their home. Aboulela herself repeatedly refers to the apparently meaningless succession of coups in Sudan and to the consequent rearranging of people's lives and social positions as a great, unending game of musical chairs; Najwa repeats: "What was the point of it all? Coup after coup – one set of people after another – like musical chairs" (139). Again, when her ex-boyfriend tells her of his estrangement from Sudan, she repeats the formula:

> '… When this new government took over, I got kicked out. Everyone who was left wing was fired.'
>
> I wanted to say something sympathetic. But worse had happened to my father when Anwar's government came to power. Musical chairs. I took a sip of my coffee. It was strict and bitter without sugar. (317)

The Poetics of Ebb and Flow: Inconclusive Logic and Migrating Borderlines

There is a large, baroque, and irresistibly spectral building in my native Naples, named Palazzo Donn'Anna. This building was never finished, and hangs at the very edge of the water on the shore of the city, guarding the ebb and flow of the sea in its inconclusive logic. I take this building as a metaphor for the unstable borderline between land and sea, between Europe and the Mediterranean. Its unsteady, rocking line of (in)division draws out the same geography that is traced in the footsteps of Aboulela's migrant writing, in her uprooted Najwa. She has known how it is to live with servants, to be "on the other side" of the game; now the undecided map of modernity draws her into a "place down under"; it is her turn to lose her home. Tomorrow, it will be someone else's.

Aboulela's writing stands on the shores of Europe, of England, of the Thames, like the unfinished building in Naples, as part of the same untidy map. On the metaphoric fertility of the seashore and its inner depths, for an unstable mapping of the contemporary, Iain Chambers writes:

> Rescued from the predictable confines of a narcissistic mapping in which the sea is merely an adjunct, an accessory, to the narration of a conceited modernity, the mobility of a marine view forces us to constantly change charts and take a measure of the shifting, interstitial crossings, encounters and incidents that sea travel involves. The world, viewed from the heaving deck of history, can appear to be a very different place: altogether more contingent in its forms, more transitory in its constructions, more modest in its pretensions, more dubious in its desire to claim the infinite as its own. What is deposited there, in the marine depths, is a solution: the traces and intertwining of different lives and histories, held in a suspension through which we ply our present day routes. [12]

The route that brings Najwa across the sea to a different continent and its insular adjunct traces something more than the – infinite and interesting – lines of human migrations; it contributes a verse to the possibility of theory emerging from narrative, from language itself, the chance, indeed, to read the ethics of poetics, as Chambers suggests:

> This is an argument about language, how it is accented and articulated. It is also an argument about aesthetics; that is, about realizing the possibility of elaborating a grammar able to hear the perpetual noise of the world while simultaneously registering its interrogative silence. Here, as aesthetics mutates into ethics, poetics transports us beyond the habitual, frequently leaving politics speechless. Here, for example, the history of the Mediterranean can be re-written following the formation of sounds that both precede and exceed the limits imposed by national cultures and histories.... [13]

The "space imposed by national cultures and histories" is redefined in what may be taken as a contribution to a multiple reconfiguration of modernity: the migrant's gesture of inhabiting this space plays with the deceptively self-assertive space of the modern nation.

If, as Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift write in their introduction to their interesting collection of essays titled *Thinking Space*, with the beginning of the (Western) modern age "the person is reshaped in time and space, defined as an individual through particular spatialities of existence,"[14] then certainly the house in which Najwa becomes the background, the

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[12] Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*, 317.

[13] Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*, 313.

[14] Mike Crang & Nigel Thrift, "Introduction" to *Thinking Space*, ed. Crang & Thrift (London & New York: Routledge, 2000): 8.

streets where the past tugs at her invisible present are spatialities that define her as an individual in the specific encounter of time and space of the contemporary Western world-view; the musical chairs of present-day globalization, where, in the simultaneous explosion and compression of *space*, ironically, again, *place* becomes more and more important.

However, if that untidy line constantly redesigning the edge between land and water is taken to be the outline of a migrating map, travelling with women who become house cleaners, or men who turn into manual labourers, whose lives change dramatically and completely, and more than once, then their own "spatialities of existence" become undone, disengaging the map of Western modernity from its neurotic tidiness of constantly breached borders. Again, Chambers maps out this fertile disturbance:

> To think along these oblique axes – from the eastern Mediterranean to north Africa, from the coast of Tunisia to Sicily, from the basin of the Senegal river to the walls of Valencia, is to deepen and disturb the cultural and historical mappings we have inherited. It is also to disrupt the usual chronologies of 'progress' and their linear accumulation of sense.[15]

This map would, then, be set in the continuous process of exchange and becoming of global circulation; in the constant negotiation of cultural translation.

In his essay "How Newness Enters the World," Homi Bhabha borrows an image from Jacques Derrida (who, in turn, derives his vision from Walter Benjamin): the image of translation as survival, as after-life:

> … the dream of translation as "survival" as Derrida translates the "time" of Benjamin's concept of the after-life of translation, as *sur-vivre*, the act of living on borderlines. Rushdie translates this into the migrant's dream of survival: an initiatory interstices; an empowering condition of hybridity; an iteration that is not belated, but ironic and insurgent. For the migrant's survival depends, as Rushdie puts it, on discovering "how newness enters the world."[16]

Bhabha describes how Chamcha, in *The Satanic Verses*, is plunged by Rushdie into the city of London, falling off an airplane and yet surviving.

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[15] Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings*, 304.

[16] Bhabha, "How newness enters the world," in Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 226–27.

It is patent: Chamcha survives because he is the migrant, the body of translation, producing a rewritten, unauthorized London.

In this unauthorized space lies the map of modernity, and in the same place Aboulela writes her translation of London – into a religious space. The minaret of Regent's Park mosque – the minaret of the title of her novel – plunges into the heart of London, surviving precisely as a "piece of newness" that marks the coordinates of an-Other, unclassified identity for the Western nation and its lines of separation: the translation of religion, of religious spaces and the consequent translation of corporeal relations, spatial perspectives, and metropolitan mappings.

If, as Anouar Majid maintains, postcolonial theory is yet to fully engage with such charged terms as its own (Western) secularism and (Other) religious communities,[17] the language of writers like Leila Aboulela exceeds such limits, building spaces that are possible heterotopias: the minaret fallen like Chamcha into the heart of London, the kitchen as scene of an intimate negotiation, the open but sheltering mosque, where female solidarity charges space and interrupts time. It is here that Najwa defies her impossible homecoming, her 'displaced place', located within interruption, time-lag, receded memory. Identity, however, always re-assembles, patches itself together anew, re-members and translates an indispensable sense of home: "In the mosque I feel like I'm in Khartoum again" (244), Najwa declares.

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From Harem to Harvard

Cross-Cultural Memoir in Leila Ahmed's *A Border Passage*

GEOFFREY P. NASH

SOME TIME AGO, feminist scholarship in the West fixed the terms of canonical male autobiographies. The subjectivities encountered in such tomes are constructed on the assumption that their subjects are each representatives of their age. Furthermore, the autobiographies of figures like Saint Augustine, Jean–Jacques Rousseau, and Henry Adams "rest upon the Western ideal of an essential and inviolable self." Women aspirants to the genre started out with the task of situating themselves in a new space, of writing themselves in after generations of "ghostly absence" from the traditional, male-dominated canon.[1] Autobiography has also been a flourishing form in Arabic literature, "but the Arabic autobiographical canon is predominantly a male one," too.[2] Here Arab women writers have had to seek out strategies by which to gain entry to the genre. Some women poets had recourse to mourning dead husbands/brothers in order to create a space from which to raise their own voices. The radical Arab feminist Nawal al-Sa'dawi went so far as to appropriate the foremost exponent of modern Arabic autobiography, the blind intellectual Taha Husayn, to inscribe in the form of autobiographical

[1] Bella Brodzki & Celeste Schenck, *Life/Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography*, ed. Brodzki & Schenck (Ithaca NY: Cornell UP, 1989): 5, 13.

[2] Fedwa Malti–Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word: Gender and Discourse in Arabo-Islamic Writing* (Princeton NJ: Princeton UP, 1991): 145.

fiction the limitation, negativity, and deformity of Arab women's lives.[3] As a facet of a larger tendency that increasingly sees writers from Arab backgrounds adopting English and forging new cross-cultural meanings in that language, this essay aims to examine the specificities of autobiographies by women of Arab origin writing in the English language. Particular focus will be placed on the autobiography by the Egyptian writer and academic, Leila Ahmed. *A Border Passage: From Cairo to Harvard – A Woman's Journey* is a text that especially reveals the distance privileged Arab women have travelled, partly as a result of their experience of acculturation.

Recent Arab Women's English Autobiography

When discussing texts written in English by writers whose native language is Arabic and who grew up in an Arabic-speaking society, we may start with the specific (narrow) language issue – why, in the first place, write in a second language? As far as content is concerned, we might expect socio-cultural-political matters to be treated differently in English than if written about in Arabic. Is the choice of English itself therefore a political/cultural statement? Or should we dismiss these points as mere quibbles and face up to the prevalence (if not yet the primacy?) of English as a tool of communication in today's globalized world? Is it any longer necessary to question why an intelligent individual from whatever society he/she comes from, who has been educated in/acquired a knowledge of English, should wish to write in that language?

Perhaps a more significant matter than choice of language is that of intertextuality. Given the decision to write in English, how important is the intertextuality of Arabic texts? That is, in discussing an autobiography written in English by an author of Arab origin, is it desirable or even profitable to compare the text with those of the Arabic autobiographical genre? Such a question is important for the following reasons. Use of English implies a Western education, but a native Arab/Islamic background cannot therefore be ruled out. On the contrary, it is still present, and it returns and intervenes. In the case of Leila Ahmed's autobiography *A Border Passage*, the text openly draws attention to cross-cultural issues. The title specifically juxtaposes cultural origin and destination. As far as

[3] Malti–Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, ch. 6, 7.

the language question is concerned, the author herself advertises her deficiency in standard Arabic. Also, the language issue, as we shall see, is linked from the beginning to a biculturality that derives from the author's Egyptian-Arab family upbringing and colonial British education. (This, of course, was not an unusual condition among Arab elites in the mid-twentieth century.) Again, socio-cultural and political issues are manifest and consciously articulated in *A Border Passage* (the title itself announces them).

Another approach could be to situate the text alongside similar exercises in self-exploration resulting from cultural transmigration. In an Arab context, that would mean starting with the English writings of earlier generations of Arab émigrés. The Arab-American Ameen Rihani's work of autobiographical fiction, *The Book of Khalid* (1911), Edward Atiyah's memoir, *An Arab Tells His Story* (1946), and Musa Alami's life story produced in collaboration with Geoffrey Furlonge, *Palestine Is My Country* (1969), are the most significant examples.[4] More recently, Leila Ahmed's generation has begun to publish autobiography/memoirs in English. Outstanding among these are Laila Abou Saif's *A Bridge Through Time* (1985), Edward Said's *Out of Place* (1999), Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima* (2002), and Jean Said Makdisi's *Teta, Mother and Me* (2005). In these autobiographies/memoirs, the choice of English is hardly an issue. Given the priority the authors have given to English in the shaping of their careers, it would have been strange if they had written in Arabic. But that does not mean the intertextuality of Arabic autobiography and autobiographical fiction does not retain significance. The genre of autobiography in Arabic is a valuable comparative tool for our scrutiny of the English autobiographies listed above, and I intend to make reference to it in my discussion of Leila Ahmed's work. First of all, it has relevance with regard to the specificities of Arab women's autobiography. The Arabic autobiographies of Hoda Sha'rawi, Fadwa Tuqan, Nawal al-Sa'dawi, and Leila Abouzeid, for example, are chiefly concerned with their subjects' experiences in a national-cultural setting, though they also treat their individual experience, as well as their country's interface with the Western colonizing powers. However, the issues

[4] On Rihani, Atiyah, and Alami, see Nash, *The Arab Writer in English: Arab Themes in a Metropolitan Language, 1908–1958* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1998).

they raise with respect to women's place in Arab societies, in the context of Arab national cultures, modernity, and struggles with Western colonizers, continue to bear on the autobiographies written in English. More extensive and implicated with the West though the latter are in their treatment of Western ideas and their exposition of their impact on their subjects' lives, they nevertheless cannot (and their authors probably would not wish to) elide the Arab contexts out of which they have grown. I therefore intend to begin my discussion of *A Border Passage* by setting it within a frame shared by both English and Arabic texts.

Commonalities: Arabic and English Language Memoirs

The following areas of comparison are thematic and constitute an expanded version of a list of themes common to Arabic autobiographies provided by Tetz Rooke.[5]

1) *Memoir*

If autobiography is primarily concerned with the individual, memoirs "concentrate on communal history."[6] Hoda Sha'rawi's memoirs, an important historical document, are a "mix of autobiography, memoirs and political pamphlet."[7]They double as a 'harem' memoir and a representation of aspects of national Egyptian society in its early-twentieth-century interface and struggle with British imperialism. *A Border Passage* makes explicit reference to the harem world portrayed in Sha'rawi's memoirs. In fact, Ahmed uses them as a specific point of reference for her own childhood memories of the sunset harem world surrounding her maternal grandfather's household. That harem world represents both a point of departure and modification in *A Border Passage*, which is suggested in the chapter headings (4) "Harem" and (8) "Harem Perfected?"[8]

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[5] Tetz Rooke, *In My Childhood: A Study of Arabic Autobiography* (Stockholm: Stockholm UP, 1997): 108.

[6] Rooke, *In My Childhood*, 27.

[7] Rooke, *In My Childhood*, 30. Sha'rawi's memoirs are available in an English translation by Margot Badran. *Harem Years: The Memoirs of an Egyptian Feminist* (London: Virago, 1986) is, however, a re-arranged and abridged version of the Arabic original.

[8] Another late-twentieth-century 'return' to the harem world through the medium of a European language is Fatima Mernissi, *Les Rêves des Femmes: Une Enfance au*

2) *Travel/Journey*

The titles of Arab women's autobiographies frequently indicate a journey that may be spatial or temporal or both.[9] Fadwa Tuqan's *Mountainous Journey*: *A Poet's Autobiography* (the original Arabic title translates as 'Mountainous Journey, Difficult Journey') is an obvious intertextual starting-point. Where Tuqan's foregrounds the obstacles to be surmounted (consisting of her restricted traditional upbringing), the full title of Ahmed's autobiography, *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America – A Woman's Journey* indicates, at least from a spatial point of view, a passage effected with greater facility. The title's first two words foreground the journey as an accomplished fact, while the next four emphasize the distance travelled. However, in gendering the traveller, the final segment ensures that Ahmed's narrative shall not be wholly devoid of the kind of obstacles found in Tuqan's *Mountainous Journey*. A notable feature of both is the attempted abortion of the subjects by their mothers, and their struggle to come to terms with this fact well into maturity.

3) *East Meets West*

This is almost a generic theme in modern Arabic literature, and usually implies the subject's receiving Western-style education and/or spending a period of time away from home (or even removing permanently) which results in close relationships being established with Westerners.[10] Visiting

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Harem; English version, *The Harem Within: Tales of a Moroccan Girldhood* (1994; earlier English title, *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* [New York: Bantam, 1994]). In her introduction to the Moroccan translation, Mernissi cautions against reading the text as her own autobiography, adding that her childhood was much more boring. The seven-year-old child's narrative should be taken as 'an imaginary autobiography'. Abdel-Moneim Ramadan, "'I Know What You Read This Summer'," *Al-Ahram Weekly On-line* (12–18 August 1999), http://weekly.ahram.org. eg/1999/442/bk5_442.htm

[9] Other titles are metaphorical, suggesting a journey over time, embracing recent history, and charting change – especially the cultural move from traditionalism to modernity, at the same time problematizing these categories. See, for example, Abu Saif, *A Bridge Through Time* (London: Quartet, 1985), and an earlier title of Makdisi's memoir, *Three Generations of Arab Women*.

[10] On the East–West encounter in Arabic literature, see Isa Boullata, "Encounter Between East and West: A Theme in Contemporary Arabic Novels," in *Critical Perspectives on Modern Arabic Literature*, ed. Issa Boullata (Washington DC: Lynne Rienner, 1980): 47–61, Nedal M. Mousa, "The Arabic Bildungsroman: A Generic

or living in the West for Tuqan begins as a "dream" and a distant goal; its accomplishment results in a crossing-point that brings greater knowledge, enfranchisement, and also disillusionment. The difference between the treatment of this theme in English and Arab autobiographies (as well as fiction) is crucial. Embedded within it is the intensity of the subject's assimilation to/identification with Western codes and practices, and later their critical reaction to them. The intensity of this relation with the West in English autobiography means that it is no longer conducted primarily from within the boundaries of national cultures; the subject goes beyond these and traverses cultural borders. In other words, the cross-cultural encounters that occur are constitutive: i.e. they lead to *transformed subjectivity* involving cultural disorientation, hybridity, and the problem of not knowing where one belongs. Intimate relationships (including marriage) are formed with Westerners that call into question self-identity, and often split along fault-lines of cultural difference.

4) *Quest*

The quest motif, in which the journey is either prosecuted in the cause, or incidentally entails the acquisition, of spiritual knowledge, is found in Classical and Medieval Arabic literature (as in the Sufi symbolism of Ibn Arabi). Also modern Arab writers, such as those of the Mahjar School, combine spiritual/mystical and autobiographical elements within a journey frame (see especially Rihani's *Book of Khalid*). Likewise, Naguib Mahfuz's *Journey of Ibn Fattouma* (1985) can be seen as a fictive spiritual autobiography that, by adopting Sufi 'stages' of soul-development, investigates the emergence of a transformed self, repositioning, in the process, traditional beliefs within a modern sociological framework. Recent autobiographies secularize and psychologize the quest-motif, linking it with the theme of elegy/loss, as in the search for a lost homeland/sense of belonging in Ghada Karmi's *In Search of Fatima*. Leila Ahmed reverts to a Sufi frame at the close of *A Border Passage* in an attempt to recuperate globalized rootlessness – metonymically expressed by her failed search

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Appraisal," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 25 (1993): 223–40, and Roger Allen, *The Arabic Novel: An Historical and Critical Introduction* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse UP, 2nd ed. 1995). It should be noted that the subject-matter invariably treats the Arab male's encounter with European women.

for the separated, untraceable graves of her parents – into traditional notions of wholeness and connectedness.

5) *Education*

As already observed, cross-cultural autobiographies written in English predicate a putting on record, and an analysis, of the effects of Western education on an Eastern/Arab subject. In the sense that there is invariably character building/development in the context of strange new foreign environments, these narratives could be considered as non-fictional equivalents of the *bildungsroman*. Along with awareness of alternative cultural narratives and the multiplicity of perspectives this brings goes a sense of personal enlargement. However, viewed in its total perspective, education is seen to have delivered the individual into isolation and "further exile."[11]

6) *Elegy/Loss*

Mourning is "especially crucial in Arab women's life-stories."[12] Given her exclusion from heterosexual love as a teenager, Fadwa Tuqan developed an "exogamic male–female" relationship with her brother.[13] *Mountainous Journey* transfers the woman's mourning of her dead husband/son to a sister's mourning of her brothers. In Ahmed's and Abou Saif's cases, personal sorrow stalks the launching of their careers in the form of mourning the death of fathers from afar (metonyms of lost patrimony/disconnection from the native culture). Later still, wounds acquired from failed relationships within East/West encounter incur a further sense of loss, while a prevailing awareness of exile, formative in *In Search of Fatima* but also found in Ahmed and Makdisi, promotes a search for a past but now superseded culture.

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[11] Ghada Karmi, *In Search of Fatima, A Palestinian Story* (London: Verso, 2002): 451.

[12] Rooke, *In My Childhood*, 108.

[13] Malti–Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, 171. Hoda Sha'rawi's autobiography also demonstrates mourning for her dead brother, Omar. Ahmed suggests that "the brother–sister relation was one the culture particularly valorized," where the only other cross-sexual relationship possible was in marriage, and "not generally contracted on an affection basis" (Ahmed, *Border Passage*, 160). It is interesting that in Ahmed's own autobiography, and in Abu Saif's, strong cross-sexual relationships existed between father and daughter.

Postcolonial and Post-Postcolonial Perspectives

We need to establish how relevant and useful postcolonial perspectives are for our analysis of Arab women's autobiography in English. While Edward Said's articulation of his early experience of the colonial encounter in his autobiography, *Out of Place*, is integral to the framing of his academic and political writings, his sister Jean's, and Leila Ahmed's, accounts of their upbringings and cultural formation are decidedly revisionary of what we might consider standard postcolonial theoretical norms. Makdisi's project of recovering the lives of her mother and grandmother involves problematizing notions of 'tradition', 'modernity', and westernization, by arguing that such terminology must be relativized and made more pliable.[14] The postcolonial narrative of struggle between the colonizer and the colonized over the issue of culture is faced head on by Ahmed in the early chapters of *A Border Passage*, particularly in her discussion of the Nasserite period in Egypt and her own ambivalence toward Classical Arabic culture and political Arabism. She is inclined to soften or even dissolve such axioms of postcolonial analysis as the frequently rehearsed temptation of the colonized to become absorbed into the colonizer's culture, with a resulting devaluation of his/her own culture.[15]

Ahmed's intuition, while not discounting the divisive realities of colonial education or the flawed 'project of Western civilization', is to reject the binary, confrontational, monolithic entities encoded in the signs of 'colonialism', 'imperialism', 'anti-imperialism', and 'liberation'.[16] In the Middle-Eastern context from which our Arab women writers emerge, religion, nationalism, and culture are often fused in the sign of resistance to colonialism and neocolonialism. Together with nationalism, religion functions as a sign of traditional culture threatened by the imperialist onslaught and denigration. The native/nationalist elite, it is often implied, are particularly prone to adopting the colonizer's *Kulturkampf* against

[14] Makdisi, *Teta, Mother and Me*, 397–400.

[15] Besides the writings of Fanon, an excellent articulation of this paradigm is to be found in Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, tr. Howard Greenfeld (London: Earthscan, 1993).

[16] Ahmed, *Border Passage*, 5, 152, 157.

Islamic notions of the role of women in society.[17] For Samar Attar, there is a 'love–hate' attitude on the part of writers like Ahmed and Mernissi, "who grew up under occupation [...]. The colonizer was despised, but also associated in their minds with modernity and progress."[18] For her part, Makdisi rejects the half-truths of the colonial narrative of 'saving' Middle-Eastern women, as well as the postcolonial dismissal *in toto* of the 'evil' effect of the missionaries on Arab peoples.[19] In so doing, she is clearly arguing for a revision of the binaries of Western and (what her brother Edward Said termed) 'nativist' positions in the struggle over culture.[20] Ahmed's position, as we shall see, is also revisionist with respect to postcolonial strictures, not in contradicting criticism of the actions of the colonizer (which she partially endorses) but as a riposte to both pan-Arab nationalism and Islamism.

According to postcolonial readings, choice of language is itself a crucial sign of textual resistance to the colonizer. Language is an ideological key: writing in English may mean a native writer has given up on his/her own language/culture and adopted the values of the colonizer. Strategies of subversion of metropolitan codes and appropriation of the colonizer's language for purposes of resistance, in the process renaming the land and reclaiming a colonized people's identity, are the path to such a writer's exoneration, according to postcolonial theory.[21] But how genuine would such a claim be coming from women writers who, like Ahmed or Mernissi, may have lived in a Western metropolis for nigh on two generations and by their own admission were not directly involved in resistance to the colonizer, but were more concerned with researching and debating ideas on the situation of women in their native societies, both from an historical perspective and from the point of view of the present?[22]

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[17] One of the metonyms for this unification of religious and national symbols is the veil; see Fanon, "Algeria Unveiled," in Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, tr. Haakon Chevalier (London: Writers & Readers, 1980).

[18] Attar, "A Discovery of Self and Other," 5.

[19] Makdisi, *Teta, Mother and Me*, 195–96.

[20] See Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 277.

[21] *Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, ch. 2.

[22] The same might be true of Ghada Karmi, except that, as she outlines in *In Search of Fatima* (London: Verso, 2002), she was an activist for the Palestinian struggle in the late 1960s and 1970s.

Clearly, there must be a space beyond exclusively postcolonial readings of the texts we are discussing, if only in order to credit the positions of the Arab women writers under scrutiny. Furthermore, new perspectives are being formed that treat globalization and deterritorialization as 'facts on the ground' insofar as the later-twentieth and earlier-twenty-first century are concerned. Take, for instance, the language question. Writing in English is no longer a statement in itself. As well as being a lingua franca, English has become a necessary tool for accomplishing new imaginings which are not in the least confined to endorsement of Western cultural and political assumptions. On the contrary, Olivier Roy, as a writer on contemporary Islam, Islamism, and neo-fundamentalism, has argued that English is now the most effective tool (even more so than Arabic) in which to embed conservative/radical-Islamist/post-Islamist discourses addressed to deterritorialized Muslim migrants in Europe and America.[23] Under the aegis of globalization, Western discourse provides the measure by which every issue (and this obviously includes postcolonial theory) is debated – be it secularism, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, the virtual Islamic *ummah* or whatever else seeks to promote itself in an increasingly deterritorialized, decultured global environment. If every act of resisting Western-led globalization operates within terms set out by the hegemonic discourse, why single out particular groups of writers for their implicit acknowledgement of that fact?

Women's Issues

Texts like *A Border Passage* and Fatima Mernissi's *The Harem Within* foreground the modern process of transformation undergone by women's social roles and destinies in Arab-Muslim societies. They chart a journey from traditional harem, through the limited enfranchisement of the bourgeois nationalist phase, to the later enjoyment (by some) of the freedoms proffered by westernization. It is in the context of Arab/Islamic women and the debate over 'Islamic culture' that Leila Ahmed's reputation as a scholar in the Western academy has been made. In particular, we can say without exaggeration that her study *Women and Gender in Islam* (1992) is now recognized as a seminal intervention in the field. *A Border Passage*

[23] Olivier Roy, *Globalised Islam: The Search for a New Ummah* (London: Hurst, 2004).

brings new insights into the process whereby Ahmed established herself as an Arab feminist. It delineates the way in which she came to employ the tools of Western academic culture and her own Arab/Egyptian background to excavate her own personal affiliations, and to recover and reconstruct positive aspects of Arab women's oral culture and practice. From one perspective, it might be argued that English has helped a writer and academic such as Ahmed (as French has for Fatima Mernissi) in the project of rehabilitating women's roles in Arab societies and calling for their liberation from patriarchy and masculine traditionalism. Ahmed's exposition of Arab/Muslim women's issues in the English language allows for such topics to be debated in a less charged medium than if this were done in Arabic. At the same time, naturally enough, English provides a forum for Ahmed to address the dangers of Western cultural stereotyping when discussing the topic of women in Arab/Islamic societies, on the part of both colonial and 'feminist colonial' discourse.[24] One strategy she adopts is to foreground those aspects of Arab/Muslim women's lives that indicated a more advantageous treatment than that received by their Western sisters, thus challenging the notion that 'Arab societies were innately and in all respects more restrictive for women than Western societies'. This is, for Ahmed, an important dialectical tool, enabling her to argue

> that in the matter of women's rights the rhetoric and some styles of demand and protest (in other words the couching of the matter in political terminology) were borrowed from the West, but some indigenous attitudes were potentially and actually less confining for women than contemporary Western ideas. Such indigenous attitudes may have engendered in women a strong sense of self-worth and the desire, though not perhaps the political tools, to resist the injustices of society (including those of their British overlords).[25]

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[24] Chapter eight of *Women and Gender in Islam: Historical Roots of a Modern Debate* (New Haven CT: Yale UP, 1992), "Colonial Discourse and the Veil," is perhaps the best example of Ahmed's work in this area.

[25] Ahmed, "Between Two Worlds: The Formation of a Turn-of-the-Century Egyptian Feminist," 157. Ahmed instances the more progressive attitude to women's education in the Egypt of Mohammed Ali and his grandson Ismail as compared with the record in that country of British colonialism (Ahmed, "Between Two Worlds," 157). Also, her essay "Cross-Cultural Inquiry: The Terms of Discourse In Islam" (1989) prepares the way for arguments adduced in *Women and Gender* and *Border Passage* in

It is to be expected that the nuanced positionings required in such a field of study will not be appreciated by all: Ahmed has her critics, particularly in the Arab world, be they secularist, nationalist, or religious by conviction,[26] *A Border Passage* is a text that personalizes Arab women's issues by elucidating the journey of one woman – its subject – beginning with her escape from the restrictions of her native culture via unconscious assimilation into colonial culture; then passing through later feelings of guilt (especially with respect to her relationship with family, friends, and former servants), and concluding with her desire to return/find roots in her homeland.[27] Like other similarly situated Arab writers in English of her generation, Ahmed inscribes her destination as one of isolation and even partial disillusionment, in which (at least for Muslims like herself and Ghada Karmi) neither westernization nor re-islamization presents complete or satisfactory options. However, as I shall argue below, this semi-alienation is represented differently by an Arab female intellectual in Western society than by an Arab male. Ghada Karmi sums up this state as "a different exile."[28]

A Border Passage: Colonial Formation and Native Inheritance

Early in *A Border Passage*, Leila Ahmed forthrightly states:

> I grew up in the last days of the British Empire. My childhood fell in that era when the words 'imperialism' and 'the West' had not yet acquired the connotations they have today – [...] mere synonyms for 'racism,' 'oppression,' and 'exploitation.'[29]

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which the anti-feminist discourse of 'official Islam' is countered by attempts to excavate women's activity, such as the poet and mystic Rabi'a's contribution to Sufism.

[26] See, for example, Samar Attar, "A Discovery of Self and Other: Fadwa Tuqan's Sojourn in England in the Early Sixties," *Arab Studies Quarterly* 25.3 (2003): 1–23, and Mai Ghoussoub, "Feminism – or the Eternal Masculine – in the Arab World," *New Left Review* 161 (1987): 112–31, who contest that Ahmed's advocacy of positive aspects of the harem world vis-à-vis women's history in the West was part of the 1980s retreat before Islamism.

[27] It is interesting to see the Egyptian novelist Ahdaf Soueif adopting a similar trajectory in her semi-autobiographical novel *In the Eye of the Sun* (1993; New York: Anchor/Random House, 2000), which treats a young woman's upbringing in Cairo, student career in England, and ultimate return to Egypt.

[28] Karmi, *In Search of Fatima*, 451.

[29] Karmi, *In Search of Fatima*, 5.

For the Ahmed family, as for the Saids and the Abou Saifs, identification with the West was constituted from a perception of a superior culture and the need to absorb its values in order to secure material and professional advancement. Ahmed's upper-middle-class, professional, and pro-Western parents were unaware of, or would have disavowed, any suggestion of having split themselves off from their own national culture. Indeed, conceiving of her family's relationship with the European colonial power, Ahmed employs the not infrequently invoked designation of their having belonged to a class that acted as 'brokers' between their native Eastern culture and that of the West.[30] Yet her account does not seek to gloss over which influence – Arab/Egyptian, or British/Western – seemed to her the more valuable while growing up. Again, the issue of language is a telling factor in this contest. Ahmed admits English was spoken at home among the children. Given that the adults did not know it or knew it only imperfectly, English became "from the start a language of subversion […] a way of […] baffling the adults" (23). In her mind at that point, "the Arabic language […] became implicitly marked as inferior (and presumably marked as *native* and inferior" (23–24). This judgement was, of course, supplied and confirmed by the Western-style education Ahmed's parents had chosen for their children and this determined the children's preference for English/American culture. The roots of colonialism were internalized in her childhood and only later did she realize this (25). A major concomitant of such an upbringing was Ahmed's deficiency in formal Arabic. Though "completely fluent in spoken Arabic," she lacked facility "in the written language" (23). The fact that she was unable to decipher her father's handwritten Arabic papers after his death stands as a sign of a loss of patrimony. The ultimate responsibility for Ahmed's not knowing formal Arabic lay with her father, for he had not assiduously fostered her knowledge of her own culture; he, too, had 'internalized' colonialism. Moreover, it would be the father – as it was in Abou Saif's case – who proved to be the chief supporter of his daughter's 'flight' to the West.[31]

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[30] Edward Atiyah's *An Arab Tells His Story* (London: John Murray, 1946) is the classic account of the consciousness of the pro-British educated middle-class Arab elite. See Nash (*The Arab Writer in English*, ch. 6 and 7) for a discussion of this uncomfortable hybridity.

[31] Abou Saif, *A Bridge Through Time*, 20–21.

Pioneers in their fields, both Ahmed's and Abu Saif's fathers die with their daughters away in the West, themselves broken by the nativist–colonizer struggle. But the great distance separating Fadwa Tuqan and Ahmed and the journeys each undertakes is in large measure accounted for by the respective roles of their fathers. Tuqan's is the embodiment of the principle of patriarchal oppression, exercising restrictive control over wives and daughters, and the source of authority for her confinement in the family home; her dream of escape from the family cage can only be realized by his removal from the scene. Ahmed's father, by contrast, sympathizes with and promotes his daughter's longing to escape (as did Abou Saif's) by facilitating (rather than, in Tuqan's case, forbidding) her education and eventual travel abroad. The involvement of both fathers in the world of politics has an impact on their daughter's 'escapes' in parallel ways. Tuqan's father encourages her to write political verse on behalf of the Palestinian cause, but she rejects this as a masculine space; she only graduates as a political poet after her father's death and the disasters of 1948 and 1967. In Ahmed's case, her father's quarrel with Gamal Abdel Nasser resulted in his daughter's prolonged confinement in Egypt and her distaste for the postcolonial politics of her country.

In spite of their education in the West, however, English-speaking Arabs of Ahmed's generation – all of whom passed through similar education and upbringings – invariably recount in their autobiographies the experience of being on the receiving end of the colonizer's snubs and affronts, particularly in the process of undergoing a Western education. (In fact, we could go further back, to the 1920s, to Edward Atiyah's painful awareness, while himself a teacher, of the superior attitude of the English masters at Gordon College, Khartoum.[32]) Episodes in which English/Anglo-Saxon teachers subtly denigrate Arab identities are instanced both in *A Border Passage* and Edward Said's *Out of Place*. What distinguishes these is the manner in which they are interpreted. Incidents such as the caning of Said by an English headmaster and his general rebellion against the authorities at Victoria College in Alexandria, an establishment set up on the model of a British public school, are interpreted in terms representative of the colonized's alienation and struggle against the colonizer. For instance, Said records his being part of a group at Victoria College that purposely contravened the rule that only English was to be spoken by

[32] Atiyah, *An Arab Tells His Story*, 170.

speaking Arabic[33] In her case, Ahmed does not deny a similar process being imposed on her during her schooling; what is different is the manner in which the colonizer–colonized polarity is complicated by crosscurrents within the native society. She rehearses in one section several incidents involving Mr Price, a South African headmaster, and Miss Nabiha, a Palestinian female teacher of Arabic. The former was sceptical of Ahmed's prowess in English – believing the work she turned in to be someone else's – then marked her lower than her friend, Jean Said, confiding in the latter that he was sorry to see Ahmed ahead of her in anything because "she was a Christian and I only a Muslim" (145). Nevertheless, Ahmed places Price's negative effect on herself below the lasting impression left on her by an action of her Arabic teacher when the latter struck her across the face for her poor performance in the language. Ahmed concludes:

> I have always thought that those moments between me and Miss Nabiha were in large part responsible for the feelings of confusion, anger, and guilt that I've felt all my life in connection with the issues of Arabness, identity, the Arabic language, and the like. (148)

Although she interprets this incident in the context of class and the historical situation, noting an ignoring of the plight of the Palestinians at a specific moment by a certain Egyptian mentality, the ambivalence resurfaces later in the book when Ahmed explains her attitude towards Edward Said's *Orientalism*: 'The book […] echoed, too closely to me, the overly simple binary view of Arab nationalism, which represented imperialism as uniformly and comprehensively negative" (240). Imperialism, after all, had made possible opportunities for some women – such as Ahmed herself – which her mother and aunt had patently lacked.

In Said's case, as expressed in *Out of Place*, isolation is conceived of in socio-political terms, and bound by modern ambiguities of being caught between East and West. The reader will find it very difficult to forget that this is the memoir of a great figure of his age: a postcolonial intellectual and exile, able to articulate the predicament of his people and arraign their status as dispossessed objects of colonial injustice. Said, it is true, did not inscribe his personal experience solely in terms of an Arab versus the West contest in this memoir of his early years. He was aware, for instance, that in Egypt he was as a youth always taken as 'foreign' despite

[33] Said, *Out of Place*, 184.

his Arab appearance (195). But the later burden he laid upon himself – of separating himself from Arab Christian 'tribal' loyalties and becoming a representative figure for the postcolonial age (and, of course, in many ways the primary exponent of the Palestinian cause in the West) – lifted the ambivalent youth who features in *Out of Place* on to the level of those representative figures that characterize Western male autobiography. Ahmed, however, in her refusal to sublimate her class and national formation into a larger constructed identity, and in her research into the buried historical lives of Muslim women, creates for herself a less monolithic, more dispersed subjectivity.

Rewriting the Harem

Arab women's autobiographies in both Arabic and English recount daughters' strained relationships with mothers, situations that might partly be explained as born of the constrained worlds in which these women moved. Hoda Sha'rawi's early painful experiences were linked to the harem. Her feelings of alienation from her mother which resulted from the latter's preference for her brother are categorized by Ahmed as "wounds of being female" (96). According to Ahmed, the harem continued to have a bearing on her own mother's generation. Both Ahmed's and Tuqan's mothers had wished to abort their pregnancies, and these revelations lead to problematic mother–daughter relationships in which the daughters' literary/public profiles and, especially in Tuqan's case, the writing of an autobiography helped retrieve their identity after the mothers' attempts to deny it.[34] While Tuqan's attitude toward her mother is conditioned by her perception of the woman's neglect of her daughter's well-being and personal feelings, Ahmed (like Abou Saif in *A Bridge Through Time*) dislikes her mother because she fears she might end up like her, limited and tied to tradition. It is through the encounter with the West and the Westerners' (including feminists') often simplistic reduction of Eastern women's predicament to the matter of the veil and the Islamic religion, that Leila Ahmed was able to reformulate her judgements of her mother and female forebears through reconstructing Arab/Muslim women's histories.

According to Fatima Mernissi, Muslim women's emergence from the harem world occurred in stages. The domestic harem – defined as "ex-

[34] Malti–Douglas, *Woman's Body, Woman's Word*, 167.

tended families [...] with no slaves and eunuchs, [...] often with monogamous couples, but who carried on the tradition of women's exclusion" – persisted after the dismantling of imperial harems associated with the fall of the Ottoman Sultan Abdul Hamid in 1909.[35] The domestic harem continued through the period of colonial struggle and ended with the departure of the colonizer and national independence. Mernissi remembers the establishment of independent Morocco in 1956 as bringing about a miraculous transformation in women's lives. When her mother returned from celebrating, "her hair was uncovered and her face was bare. From then on there was no more black *litham* [...] covering young women's faces in Fez Medina."[36] Fadwa Tuqan's extended family in Nablus dispersed after the departure of the British, the end of the Palestine mandate, and the Palestinian *nakba* of 1948. Her father died in that year and she was later able to visit Britain in the early 1960s. In Egypt, the opening-up of women's lives started earlier, in the 1920s, a decade which saw Hoda Sha'rawi's formal public unveiling. Leila Ahmed's mother came from the same Turco-Egyptian background as Sha'rawi, but she chooses as a touchstone for the process of change an incident in her father's earlier life when he refused a potential suitor because she had tried to glimpse him through a latticed window. The fact that her father – later instrumental in promoting his daughter's career – should have demonstrated so conservative a reaction at around the time of Sha'rawi's public activism demonstrated how quickly attitudes had changed (95). It also illustrates – despite her criticisms of her mother – Ahmed's preference for balance and even-handedness in delineating gender issues.

Without direct experience of harem life herself, Ahmed re-creates it from memories of her mother's family home ("Thinking about my mother's life, reading the memoirs of women of her era," 95). Already a celebrated scholar of women's position in Islamic societies through history, she constructs the separate worlds of men and women in her grandfather's house in Zatoun with both affection and detachment. Women, she argues, never thought of themselves as inferior to men, though the men probably did: "the two sexes inhabited different if sometimes overlapping cultures, a man's and a woman's, each sex seeing and understanding and represent-

[35] Fatima Mernissi, *The Harem Within: Tales of a Moroccan Girlhood* (New York: Bantam, 1994): 35.

[36] Mernissi, *The Harem Within*, 126.

ing the world to itself quite differently." It was a world in which she believes her mother was "completely at home," a "place palpably apart, imbued with some unnameably different order and way of being" (99–101). Although, as in Hoda Sha'rawi's paternal Turco-Circassian household, there was a connection with slavery, this was only present in Ahmed's grandfather's house "as distant facts […] instances of the strange things they did back in olden times" (100). Ahmed's rewriting of the harem world is controversial, attracting the ire of feminists of a Western stamp, as well as Eastern critics of both sexes who dislike the manner in which she carries her notion of separate male/female worlds into the dichotomy of an 'official' strict male religious culture of the text, and a softer, more interior, orally transmitted female Muslim faith.[37] Discerning evidence for this, both in the earlier past and from her own experience of Abu Dhabi in the 1970s, Ahmed deems the former oppressive, while the latter is praised for its humanity, although it was silent about the gender bias and injustices of the male-constructed system.

Conclusion

Ahmed's ideas on a feminized Islam clearly benefit from their being inscribed in English. (The corollary is that there would have been much less scope for their expression in Arabic.) However, alongside her rather strange views on the "western harem" of Oxbridge ("Harem perfected"), they can easily be sidelined as just another 'niche' compartment of Western discourse of the type normally inhabited by dissident oriental feminists, at best allowed a patronized hearing in the West, at worst incorporated into the *Kulturkampf* against Muslims.[38] Ahmed's own criticisms of white feminism, in particular what she considers its denigration of blacks and Arabs, though conceived of as "a refusal of our invisibility" (237), might just as easily be dismissed by some as no more than a peevish aberration of an otherwise well-established Harvard academic of 'Third-World' origin. But that would surely be unfair. *A Border Passage* is an excellent example (as, indeed, are the works by Karmi and Makdisi)

[37] Samar Attar is clearly upset by Ahmed's "assert[ion] that classical Arabic/or Modern Standard Arabic is colonialism." She presumably has Ahmed's celebration of a woman's Islam in mind when she dismisses her as "the newly born Muslim Egyptian" (Attar, "A Discovery of Self and Other," 22).

[38] Of the same kind as Irshad Manji (England) or Hirsi Ali (Holland).

of an English autobiography written by an author nurtured in the Middle East and schooled in the West. To its encapsulation of many of the issues concerning Arab women's lives already included in Arabic autobiography, it adds an enlarged scope commensurate with the period of late-twentieth-century globalization. This generally concerns the subject's interface with Western people on Western territory – transformative, but at the same time troubling, with respect to self and identity. The result is not at all an announcement or even a mere chronicling of the 'victory' of Western culture, but a celebration of the resourcefulness and potential of Eastern women through reconstruction of their lives and histories. At the same time, it displays characteristics of the best models of educated women's autobiography in general: less stabilized than the male, more diffuse and less inclined to endorse monolithic positions and polarizations.

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(Trans)Planting Cedars

Seeking Identity, Nationality, and Culture in the Lebanese Diaspora

VICTORIA M. ABBOUD

Transplant: *v.t.* 1. To remove and plant in another place. 2. To transfer (an organ or tissue) from one part of the body or from one individual to another. 3. To bring from one region to another for settlement.

I believe in you, and I believe in your destiny.
I believe that you are contributors to this new civilization.
I believe that you have inherited from your forefathers an ancient dream, a song,
a prophecy, which you can proudly lay as a gift of gratitude upon the lap of America.
I believe that you can say to the founders of this great nation: "Here I am, a youth,
a young tree whose roots were plucked from the hills of Lebanon, yet I am deeply
rooted here, and I would be fruitful."[1]

MY FATHER ARRIVED IN CANADA on 26 August 1965. Days before his twentieth birthday he had packed up some belongings, lugged the spices and dry goods that my grandmother sent with him, and made his way to Beirut so that he could even-

[1] Khalil Gibran, "To Young Americans of Syrian [-Lebanese] Origin" (1926). From an Arabic poem addressed to Gibran's fellow immigrants of Lebanese and Syrian origin, quoted in *A Poet and His Country: Gibran's Lebanon*, ed. Bushrui et al. (Beirut, Middle East Press Inc, 1970): 2.

tually meet his father, brother, and sister in Calgary, Alberta. Canada was known to him only on a globe. It was not a destination about which he had dreamed his entire life. He did not, like Marlow in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, "put [his] finger on [the many blank spaces on the map] and say: When I grow up I will go there." As he tells me, he only thought of moving there when he learned of his father's success and thought he would join him so that he could "be rich in three years."[2] The reasons for emigrating to a different country, and the experiences one has once s/he arrives in the new place, vary from individual to individual, but the senses, the challenges, and the spirit of immigration are similar. There is a collective experience – a collective spirit, as it were – of immigration that is shared among displaced individuals. The focus for this essay is a personal experience of immigration – not one of forced displacement – that has helped to shape the identity of my own father and myself as a first-generation Canadian born of a Lebanese immigrant father and a French-Canadian mother. Though I was never displaced, the experiences my father talks about with me are culturally, emotionally, and historically part of my own identity, an identity that has been shaped by the tugging of several worlds. This text is a pastiche, an exercise in interdisciplinary study – ethnography, cultural studies, creative writing, and memoir – for to write such a text with only analyses or distinct theoretical boundaries would be to ignore the richness of personal narrative and to disconnect the necessary component of individual experience from the larger scope of immigration studies.

Despite one's first-, second-, or subsequent generation status as an immigrant or citizen of a country, Khalil Gibran's words provide a strong reminder of the *plantedness* of any person. As part of the immigrant spirit, "I am [...] a young tree whose roots were plucked from the hills of Lebanon, yet I am deeply / rooted here, and I would be fruitful." Gibran offers a sentiment, a belief, that though people leave their homes in search of better lives, that they are "plucked" from their home soil, they can and do root deeply in new soil. They are transported and transplanted but are "fruitful" and provide future immigrants with a sense of hope, of belief, of promise, that their new lives can be enjoyable and that they need not forsake or forget their homes, traditions, or original roots. This sentiment,

[2] All narratives about my father's experiences come from a personal interview I conducted with him. Names have been given anglicized spellings wherever possible.

though romanticized in some texts, becomes a challenge in practice, a difficult experience that the immigrant must survive. The 'trans' part of 'transplant', I argue, is a continuous process, a difficult and arduous task that requires immigrants continuously to negotiate their identities through their pasts and their current situations. The children of immigrants, too, must negotiate this identity and determine the level at which they will acknowledge or own their cultural history and current life's narrative. Through his discussion of J. Hector St. John de Crèvecoeur's *Letters from an American Farmer*, Ali Behdad expounds the analogy of an immigrant as a plant and provides a useful discussion of the "organically connected" nature of displaced peoples:

> [Crèvecoeur's] narrator often uses natural elements as metaphors to describe the situation of the immigrant: he is like a 'plant,' a 'seed,' or a 'sprout growing at the foot of a great tree.' [...] The closer the immigrant is to his environment and the more he learns about it, the more he will prosper. In this romantically apolitical vision of America, cultural identity is articulated as an organic and benevolent phenomenon, the product of a natural link between the humble farmer and the soil.[3]

In this same sense, the idealistic vision of immigrant experience permits Gibran, as mentioned above, to posit that the children born of immigrants can indeed become "fruitful" in their new soil. The transplantation of one generation becomes the planting of another, all the while enriching the culture of the new place and remembering the culture of the past.

At this point, a pause is perhaps necessary to reveal the link between immigrants and travellers. Ali Behdad's description is useful here:

> Every immigrant tale is also a narrative of voyage. Immigration, like travel, is the encounter between at least two cultures. Although immigrating, unlike travel, is a permanent move, like traveling it demands an adventurous soul and entails the desire to encounter another reality, another culture, and often another language. And the immigrant, like a traveler who seeks renewal and enrichment by seeing other places and experiencing other cultures, leaves home to improve and enhance his or her situation in and through another place. The connection between traveling and immigration has become even more apparent in the age of globalization, as the immigrant experience is

[3] Ali Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation: On Immigration and Cultural Identity in the United States* (Durham NC & London: Duke UP, 2005): 41.

> increasingly marked by a lifetime of traveling back and forth between old and new 'homes.'[4]

Over the last thirty years, my father has been one example of the Lebanese diaspora, as both immigrant and traveller. Spending most of his time in Windsor, Ontario (on the Canada–USA border opposite Detroit) but visiting Lebanon often, he exemplifies the modern-day binational individual. While Mary Louise Pratt has offered the term "contact zone" to refer to the movement, meeting, and mixing of whole cultures, my father has become an individual contact zone: one person who represents two nations, cultures, and homelands. It is this notion of the individual as contact zone that I trace in this essay.

Thanks in great part to advances in telecommunications and globalization in the last three decades or so, the term 'disapora' has taken on a more prolific and integral role in global politics, economics, and the place of the individual in the global system. No longer are immigrants expected to leave their homelands and begin the process of assimilation or forgetting; instead, new definitions of nationality have emerged, encouraging individuals to embrace their heritage and to incorporate their 'past' lives with those of their current and future lives. This ability to maintain roots simultaneously in two places is analogous to Thomas L. Friedman's concept of the flattening of the world in *The World is Flat: A Brief History of the Twenty-First Century* (2006). Although he argues that this flattening is a boon to global commerce and the individual's ability to become part of the global economy, I would add that an individual is a significant stakeholder in cultural import/export and therefore a fine example of a commodity that can be transplanted – the opportunity for which has been afforded by the 'flattened' world. While a collective memory of emigration/immigration is important and useful for academic inquiry, the individual memory is necessarily more detailed and therefore can possibly elicit a more accurate analysis of the disaporic experience. Through this analysis, I trace the personal journey that began in Jeb Jannine, El Beqaa, Lebanon and continues today through my father's narratives about cultural mixing and our collective experiences with culture, identity, and personal history.

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[4] Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation*, x.

Recent developments in communication make it easier for individuals to stay connected with those residing in their birth countries. Nowadays, my father can communicate with my grandmother and aunt while he remains in Canada and, conversely, when he is in Lebanon my mother and I are able to speak with him anytime we like. The surge in global communication options in the last few years has dramatically increased the opportunity for individuals to become part of a culture without entirely leaving behind/forsaking his/her birth culture. There has been great discussion about the role of technology in transforming the political identities and activities of immigrants. A common contention is that, while previous generations of migrants were cut off from their homeland by massive distances and had no choice but to assimilate, today's migrants are able to maintain political, economic, and emotional linkages through new and relatively inexpensive modes of communication and transport.[5]

In the late-1950s, when my grandfather first arrived in Canada, his only option for sending information to his family in Lebanon was through letters. There was only one telephone in Jeb Jannine (located at "*Centrale*," the community's switchboard) and trans-global communication systems were in poor condition. Often, he would send money or goods with people he trusted who were going back to Lebanon for a visit. To this day, when a member of Windsor's Lebanese community plans a trip to Lebanon, many people learn about it and try to send items to their families/friends with the travellers. The same occurs when anyone travels from Lebanon to Canada (and, I imagine, other countries). While the postal system has begun to grow more productive in Lebanon, there are still difficulties with sending information by mail. For example, when I sent some photos to my father in Lebanon last year, the envelope arrived in Jeb Jannine but the post office attendant did not understand the writing (it was in English because writing it in Arabic would not be effective when I sent it through Canada Post as international mail). A friend of the attendant's was visiting one afternoon and was able to decipher the English writing – this visitor passed the envelope to a friend of his who knew my father and where he lived. Finally, after about fourteen days, this letter was able to reach its destination.

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[5] Caroline R. Nagel & Lynn A. Staeheli, "Citizenship, Identity, and Transnational Migration: Arab Immigrants to the United States," working paper (April 2002), http://www.colorado.edu/IBS/PEC/gadconf/papers/nagel.html (accessed 2 March 2004): 3–4.

The Internet has permitted much more communication between Canada and Lebanon and has even been used as a space where individuals anywhere in the world who are interested in tracing their Lebanese ancestry can do so by registering on "The Lebanese White Pages." This site was established in 1996 by Nagib S. Hobeica of France and Hani Raad of Lebanon. Their goal "is to bring Lebanese people together in an environment which is free from politics and religion." As they say, "Leb.org is your free virtual nation." Being able to communicate with others of Lebanese descent makes for a tighter global community. Where my grandfather had to rely on letter-writing and the kindness of transatlantic travellers, his descendants, like myself, can access the site and learn about heritage, communities, or even purchase the latest in "leb.org" fashion. The possibilities generated by such a creative and valuable endeavour is best explained by the founders themselves:

> For more than a century, the people of Lebanon have been exploring the world and *exporting their culture*. As a result, millions of Lebanese are scattered around the globe. Over the years, our countrymen have achieved brilliant careers and attained exceptional levels of education under different skies. Many of them have lost contact with old friends and family. Under such conditions, it is of the utmost importance to preserve, beyond the borders of our motherland, the characteristics of the Lebanese identity, one of which is the strong sense of community that we used to share back home. Thus came up the opportunity to bridge the gap and form a global Lebanese community.[6]

The determination to recall and maintain a feeling of *Lebanese-ness* is part of a larger global condition. The world has expanded, and with it the number of places in which immigrants from any given region of the world can be found has exploded over the last couple of generations. Internet sites like leb.org allow cultural connections to remain stronger than they have hitherto been. It permits the (re-)localized space of a (new) homeland to be redefined: perhaps a homeland is not necessarily a place of birth; it is, rather, a place with which one can associate in order to remain connected with one's Cliffordian roots/routes.[7] All told, the Lebanese

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[6] Nagib S. Hobeica & Hani Raad, "The Lebanese White Pages," Beryte Corporation 1996–2004 (2 March 2004): http://www.leb.org/v3/whyregister (my emphasis).

[7] James Clifford uses the 'roots/routes' pun in *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1997).

White Pages boast a remarkable 51,788 registrants (including myself) as of 6 May 2009. While Claude Lévi–Strauss was working "to reach bedrock, to grasp only the purest underlying material" of culture,[8] average citizens like Hobeica and Raad – not scholars invested in ethnographic studies – try to unite people, to remind younger generations that there is an intense, colourful, and astounding history that exists and that it should be (re-)discovered, enjoyed, and celebrated.

The New Ethnographers, James Clifford included, look at culture through a lens of juxtaposition and, quite often, surrealism. They relish the complexities and impurities that emerge when cultures collide. In *Predicament of Culture* (1988), Clifford pleads for "the relations of power whereby one portion of humanity can select, value, and collect the pure products of others [to be] criticized and transformed."[9] He urges ethnographers and critics alike to recognize that culture does not exist in a vacuum. It must be (re-)examined and displayed as the *mish-mosh* of experience that it is so that its hybridities can be studied. While Clifford refers specifically to art exhibits, his statement is crucial when considering the influence of a secondary culture on someone young. When imagining my father as the young man embarking on his trans-global journey, I think of him as an already formed, intelligent, and socially aware individual, not a *tabula rasa*. However, placing that individual in a completely different context where he must arrive in Calgary, for example, can lead to problems when he lacks linguistic and cultural fluency. His plane landed in Regina, Saskatchewan, and, assuming that it landed where he was destined, he disembarked, only to find out that his imperfect language skills and unfamiliarity with airplane travel had left him in a completely different place. It took an entire day, some kind airport employees, and a willing hotel concierge to help him continue his journey and make sure he arrived in Calgary. My father's experience is not uncommon. Alixa Naff's *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (1985), for example, provides a stark history of immigrant experience by offering a collection of personal experiences mingled with historical studies and statistical analyses.

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[8] James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge MA: Harvard UP, 1988): 128.

[9] Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 213.

The difficulty in using traditional ethnography for my study is that it has historically been interested in collective memory, in providing a generalized overview of a group's experience. James Clifford notes this in *Routes* when he says, "ethnography has primarily served the interests of community memory and mobilization and only secondarily the needs of comparative knowledge or science."[10] As a field, then, it may not be suited to a study with which I try to reveal the complexities of individual identity as it relates to immigrant experience and the immigrant spirit. In this light, then, I invoke once again the work of Mary Louise Pratt, whose notion of cultural "contact zones" is especially relevant:

> The notion of a contact zone [...] can be extended to include cultural relations within the same state, region, or city – in the centers rather than the frontiers of nations and empires. The distances at issue here are more social than geographic. [...] In many cities, moreover, contact zones result from a different kind of 'travel': the arrival of new immigrant populations.[11]

At the moment of initial contact with a new place, the immigrant is immediately placed into the "guest-foreigner" dichotomy[12] and must determine in which capacity s/he will be permitted into a given country's collective understanding of its own nationality. And within that community, the individual him/herself is a contact zone, continuously negotiating a personal understanding of identity and belonging. Behdad provides an explanation of "the notion of hospitality," which

> assumes a different relation between the citizen as host-native and the immigrant as guest-foreigner. For the guest to be offered hospitality, he or she must first be treated as an outsider, a stranger who does not fully belong

– and, in being placed thus, the notion of a homogeneous nation permits the immigrant to enter into the nation without being fully accepted – they are "aliens who must abide by our [collective national] rules and adopt our social norms."[13] This is one of the most prominent challenges facing any new immigrant: to 'fit in' with the new country and its established citizens. One way to do this is to anglicize one's name so as to appear

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[10] Clifford, *Routes*, 82–83.
[11] *Routes*, 204.
[12] See Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation*.
[13] *A Forgetful Nation*, 16.

more similar to the nation's citizens. My father, for example, was sometimes referred to as "Maurice" and is more often than not now known as "Moe" because the Arabic name "Mounib" was often too challenging or too 'foreign' to be accepted openly by the Canadians he encountered.

A similar issue is discussed in H.S. (Sam) Hamod's "Dying with the Wrong Name," where he uses name-changing at Ellis Island as an example of defining an individual in American terms. The assimilation of one's name into words that are literally and figuratively more palatable for the American/Canadian host denies one's identity, perhaps the most base signification of 'who' one is and how s/he exists in the world. Hamod says of name-changing that "There is something lost in the blood, / something lost down to the bone / in these small changes."[14] The adjustment of nomenclature becomes a visceral adjustment; something that is so deeply connected with and rooted in one's identity is pulled away, changed, and reassigned for the comfort of the host country and its people. While the likes of Ferdinand de Saussure might scoff at the importance assigned to one's name because of the suggested arbitrariness of language (it *is* only a series of signs, Saussure might argue), the emotional connection to a name is inexplicable and inextricably bound to one's understanding of him/herself. That name is stripped away "as cleanly / as the air" and "cuts away some other part, / something unspeakable is lost." A name is wholly one's own; I am Victoria, named after my paternal grandmother, and my identity, my life's history, is completely entwined with hers. To take that connection away is to deny the beginnings of my identity.

The deceased subjects of Hamod's poem "live / now on the edge of myth – each other under / a stone carved in English,"[15] such that their legacy is lost to historians, family, and seekers unfamiliar with the English version of their names. While the re-naming could be considered a baptism, a renaissance, in honour of the new country and new life, it represents the denying, denouncing, and destroying of a past life. The more modern version of the immigrant seeks not to destroy his/her history; rather, the new life is supposed to add on and further one's complex iden-

[14] Sam Hamod, "Dying with the Wrong Name," in *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry*, ed. Gregory Orfalea & Sharif Elmusa (New York: Interlink, 2000): 169–72.

[15] Hamod, "Dying with the Wrong Name," 170.

tity, to incorporate more factors into what makes a person who s/he is at the moment.

The linguistic competence of an individual can be an indicator of the level of assimilation s/he has undergone. Additionally, however, it can provide a sense of community with the host country. The *plantedness* of the individual in new soil, for example, can be determined partly by the level of linguistic fluency achieved. In his discussion of nationalism, Benedict Anderson suggests that a "nation" or "community" is a cultural artifact;[16]

> it is imagined as a *community* because, regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail, [...] the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.[17]

It is this "comradeship" that can help an immigrant feel as though s/he has become a legitimate part of the new home, as having been effectively transplanted into the new soil. My father's efforts to integrate into Canadian culture linguistically, emotionally, and physically are part of this community-building notion. Julia H. Steward suggests that modern societies are affected deeply by several of these integrative components:

> A modern society is extremely heterogeneous, and even the common denominator of shared behavior is a composite, a machine of wheels within wheels, some turning faster than others and each geared to some different aspect of national institutions. A broad definition of national culture, therefore, must include many different kinds of features. The distinctions between the different aspects of national culture clearly imply that a great many different methods must be used to study any national culture in its totality.[18]

If a "national culture" is defined through several variables, then an immigrant's ability to achieve fluency in that culture requires his/her awareness, and understanding, of the several variables that make up a culture. Linguistic competence is certainly one facet of a culture that an immigrant must understand in order to be a member of a given society. According to

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[16] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991): 13.

[17] Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 16.

[18] Julian H. Steward, "Levels of Socio-Cultural Integration," in *Readings in Anthropology*, ed. Morton H. Fried (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1959): 2, 339.

Clifford, "dwelling implies real communicative competence: one no longer relies on translators, but speaks and listens for oneself."[19] My father, therefore, could not become part of Canadian national culture until his linguistic abilities allowed him to exist in society without becoming lost or misunderstanding local systems that are mediated and understood via language. Aside from his initial inability to disembark from the airplane in the proper city (as mentioned above), linguistic inefficiency often hindered his daily travels. Although Canada has been lauded as a cultural mosaic, encouraging individuals to celebrate their cultural heritage, practicality has required some form of assimilation, or at least a partial "dissolution of difference" that urges immigrants to integrate as seamlessly as possible in order "to be accepted"[20] by the citizenry. Learning English with some competence was one of the first obstacles my father had to overcome when he arrived in Canada.

As with many cultural communities, word travels quickly. My own father left Lebanon because his father had found work and was making a good living. Although he had never thought of coming to Canada, his father's encouragement made the decision a little easier. When my father arrived and, years later, when he decided to move to Windsor, Ontario, he learned that there were communities of Lebanese immigrants with which he could associate. One of the most important issues when dealing with diaspora is the sense of belonging that is attributed to various communities. As Clifford notes,

> decentered, partially overlapping networks of communication, travel, trade, and kinship connect the several communities of a transnational 'people.' The centering of diasporas around an axis of origin and return overrides the specific local interactions (identifications and ruptures, both constructive and defensive) necessary for the maintenance of diasporic social forms. The empowering paradox of diaspora is that dwelling *here* assumes a solidarity and connection *there*. But *there* is not necessarily a single place or an exclusivist nation.[21]

While my father was nervous about leaving his mother and sister in Lebanon and venturing into a new, unknown space, he was comforted by

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[19] Clifford, *Routes*, 22.
[20] Behdad, *A Forgetful Nation*, 12.
[21] Clifford, *Routes*, 269.

the friends – the community – with which his father, sister, and brother had become acquainted in Calgary. Homi Bhabha, drawing on the work of Walter Benjamin, argues for an "element of resistance" in the migrant experience. He suggests that as beings in-between two (or more) cultures/communities/nations, migrants work to create a transition for the cultural differences that cannot be translated.[22] Communing with 'like' people emerges from feelings of fear or homesickness, not dislike of a new country. While trying to transition into his new culture, the desire *not* to assimilate completely, to maintain his selfhood, fuelled my father's resistance. I would argue that this is certainly a major factor for all diasporic communities. There was a small network of Lebanese people with whom my father could speak in his own language and talk about experiences in Canada. He remembers the names of the three young men with whom he "hung around" in Calgary and together they frequented a coffee shop near their neighbourhood ("17th Avenue and 2nd Street South West") that offered fresh coffee and grilled cheese sandwiches for twenty-five cents. The 'social space' used by my father and his friends – their ability to create a social community in their new world – is never *given* by the host country; instead, as Michael Humphrey argues, it is

> a social product which is experienced, translated and transformed. Immigrants' location in social space involves a recreation of social arrangements and a positioning of them in an unfamiliar world.[23]

Having the sense of community – of belonging – was crucial to my father's success in his new home. When he left for Windsor, for example, his brother and sister had already moved there and were familiar with the Lebanese community in the area. In later years, grocery stores and restaurants were established to cater to the Lebanese palate. There is now a strong community of Lebanese (and other Arab) people in certain areas of Windsor. When visiting Lebanon, it is difficult to convince my grandmother not to stuff my suitcases with *authentic* Lebanese dry goods and jams – she still does not believe that we have the same products in Canada thanks to global commerce. The existence of the Lebanese community in Windsor (and in Calgary, or in other cities) shows clearly the importance

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[22] Bhabha, *A Forgetful Nation*, 224.

[23] Michael Humphrey, *Islam, Multiculturalism, and Transnationalism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998): 19.

of the shared social experience to which Humphrey refers. As Liz Hamui-Halabe suggests,

> The loss of status and culture in exchange for the acquisition of new roles (including those desired) brings with it crises of belonging and identity. In the process of re-identification in a distinct ecological and sociocultural setting, the forms in which relations are structured, both inside and outside the group, lay the foundations for future community development.[24]

Immigrants, like my father, enter a country and begin to learn about its social expectations over time. Once fluency in social awareness occurs, the 'newcomers' begin to blend in a little more and forge their own 'old-country' communities so that they do not feel completely lost and isolated in their new social space. This temporally mediated integration can mean the difference between foods being readily available at the local Middle-Eastern food store and needing all of the extra dry goods that my grandmother insists on packing into my luggage.

In the above section cited from Clifford's *Routes*, he argues that "there" may not be an actual place or country.[25] Importantly, Clifford reminds readers that having a sense of belonging is not necessarily limited to a specific place. For my father, being able to commune with others 'like him' (who had left their homes and families/friends to seek a better life in a different place) was all that mattered. That he could communicate with them was of the utmost importance but, in later years, when he could understand English more proficiently (as he does now), he finds comfort in speaking with people from other regions – Italy, for example – because even though those people may not have had exactly the same experience that my father has had, they at least have a feeling of *immigrancy*; they know what it means to be away from their birth places.

Since my father was required to learn about and accept various parts of Canadian society, he became the type of traveller discussed by Claude Lévi–Strauss in *Tristes Tropiques*. My father, like Lévi–Strauss, had a choice when he arrived in Canada, a choice that required him to decide which type of traveller he would be:

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[24] Liz Hamui–Halabe, "Re-Creating Community: Christians from Lebanon and Jews from Syria in Mexico, 1900–1938," in *Arab and Jewish Immigrants in Latin America: Images and Realities* (London: Frank Cass, 1998): 125.

[25] Clifford, *Routes*, 269.

> either I can be like some traveller of the olden days, who was faced with a stupendous spectacle, all, or almost all, of which eluded him, or worse still, filled him with scorn and disgust; or I can be a modern traveller, chasing after the vestiges of a vanished reality.[26]

Lévi–Strauss uses the traveller types as a basis for his position as ethnographer. My father, as a novice ethnographer, had to make a decision for his own success/failure in the new country. At one and the same time he was the 'olden' type of traveller, admiring the new place, customs, and potential that it afforded him, and the 'modern' type of traveller who was seeking a romanticized ideal of the place known as 'Canada'. It is the romanticization of the new world and new life that sometimes caused difficulty for my father. Stories that he had been told in Lebanon of a place where one can become rich and find a good life, and where possibilities are endless, became less glamorous and more challenging when faced firsthand. In this way, he was chasing a Lévi–Straussian 'vanished reality': i.e. the idea of the place rather than its reality. The difficulties he encountered and his tendency to romanticize his past are paralleled in the narrator's experience in Ameen Rihani's "I Dreamt I Was a Donkey Boy Again." In this poem, Rihani provides an interesting and emotional perspective on immigrant longing. His narrator struggles with his memories of home, brought on by his encountering familiar flowers in a New York park. The challenge for this narrator is that he is unable to derive the same comfort from the plants in New York that he could back home in Baalbek, Lebanon. In the new "groves" of New York, "the cyclamens, the anemones, the daisies, I saw them, but I / could not speak to them."[27] In this new place, the flowers are ostensibly the same but he cannot effectively communicate with them, because he is displaced. A plant, when taken from its original soil, Rihani's narrator suggests, can take root in a new area but can never be as it once was. It changes. There is a sorrow evident in the narrator's words; a sorrow that acknowledges the shift of identity that occurs when one emigrates. Just as Hamod's re-named characters lose some component of their identities, here Rihani's character feels the same loss, the same shift in how he knows himself. What, then, of the importance of naming? Shakespeare claimed that "a rose by any other

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[26] Claude Lévi–Strauss, *Tristes Tropiques*, tr. John Weightman & Doreen Weightman (1955; New York: Penguin, 1973): 43.

[27] Ameen Rihani, "I Dreamt I Was a Donkey Boy Again," in *Grape Leaves*, l. 25.

name would smell as sweet," yet, here, Rihani's narrator cannot find a connection with the American cyclamens and anemones; he is "alone among them, but [he] could not speak"[28] to them, he cannot communicate effectively because he lacks fluency. That the narrator longs to "be a burro-boy again" to "sleep among the cyclamens / Of [his] own land" (39–40) is monumental in immigrant experiences. To long for that previous life, the memories of what was, creates a yearning for the past, a loss of part of one's life no longer attainable in the new place.

The reminiscing done by Rihani's narrator is all too familiar. The memories of a lost homeland are what formed my understanding of my cultural history for the greater part of my life. My father and his friends would tell me stories of their younger days in Lebanon, the smells emanating from my grandmother's kitchen, the fun of playing in my grandfather's vineyards. Unfortunately, the reality of that life was gone; my father – at that time – had not been back to Lebanon for about twenty years, so his memory of that place was decades away. The Lebanon that we faced when he brought me in 1996 was a great deal different from what he remembered. The 1975–1991 civil war had destroyed much of the country he remembered so fondly and my grandfather's land had been sold long ago. During that visit, my father had to become reacquainted with his homeland and with the sometimes distorted memory of the country and its people. This time of reacquainting oneself with the idealized memory is a challenge to one's understanding of personal identity. And my father's experience in the new Lebanon with his daughter and my experience with my dismayed father forced each of us to find some type of conglomerated identity. Was my father Lebanese based on the Lebanon that existed before he left? Could he still be considered Lebanese after two decades of change that he (and the country) had undergone?

The challenge of negotiating that discrepant identity is difficult to parse out, especially when I was once so certain of what it meant to be "Lebanese-Canadian." Homi Bhabha offers an exemplary discussion of the "in-betweenness" required of immigrants working through their identities:

> What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities: the regulation and negotiation of those spaces that are continually, *contingently*,

[28] Rihani, "I Dreamt I Was a Donkey Boy Again," l. 29.

> 'opening out,' remaking the boundaries, exposing the limits of any claim to a singular or autonomous sign of difference – be it class, gender or race.[29]

For that month in 1996, my father was an immigrant in his own homeland having to learn about the cultural shifts that had taken place and relearning the topography of the country he thought he knew so well. His identity at that time was teetering on some unseen boundary, the boundary between his past and the new life he had been making for over twenty years. He was pulled towards each country, connected to the differing cultures in several ways, "*in-between* the claims of the past and the needs of the present" or future.[30] His pull to his homeland emanated from the past he left behind and the Lebanese present with which he was having difficulty connecting. With an admitted inclination towards idealism, I try to imagine my father as having experienced a fusion of cultures. The global nature of the world nowadays allows that combined cultural experience. Individuals are not usually forced to choose either place A or place B; they can choose place C, which is not a combination of A and B, but a third, separate place that permits the mingling and interconnectedness of the two previous distinct places. This is common to all diasporic communities. The building of cultural centres and areas of cities where people of the same culture/region tend to congregate are popular and the Windsor–Detroit area has a large (and growing) Middle Eastern population that has been lauded as the largest Arab community outside of the Middle East.

The connection my father has with Canada could never 'erase' the memories of, or affinity and appreciation for, Lebanon that he maintains. In fact, he manages to revive his enjoyment for each country and its people by spending time in both – in the last few years, he has spent upwards of one year in Canada and then in Lebanon, where he spends time with his mother and younger sister. That he is able to maintain a home life in both places positions my father in a more fortunate category than those immigrants who fled their homelands for fear of persecution or political unrest. His travels necessarily classify him in the category, as mentioned by Janet Wolff, of "nomadologies."[31] He has established places of residence in both countries – in Canada, with my mother and me, and in Lebanon with

[29] Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994): 219.

[30] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 219.

[31] Quoted in Clifford, *Routes*, 259.

his mother and sister – so he can be part of both places almost simultaneously and live that Bhabhaian 'in-betweenness' with little difficulty. This type of travelling life-style can be examined more closely with more of Clifford's explanation of "diasporic forms of longing":

> dispersed peoples, once separated from homelands by vast oceans and political barriers, increasingly find themselves in border relations with the old country thanks to a to-and-fro made possible by modern technologies of transport, communication, and labor migration.[32]

He travels in order to work through his own sense of citizenship, identity, and belonging, as explained by Michael Humphrey:

> Counterpoised to the process of national incorporation is the persistent belief in the possibilities of return, the choice to resume past lives migrants commonly feel they have merely suspended.[33]

While I understand my father's need to return to Lebanon now and again, I do not think he returns to "resume" his past life; when he first went back to Lebanon with me in 1996, he had not been there since 1975. The man who had returned to his native homeland in 1975 and left again for Canada is hardly the man who brought his daughter back twenty-one years later. His purpose was to show his daughter the life and country he left so long ago and, he hoped, to encourage her to seek her own roots/routes through travelling to the land of her ancestors – he could not, as Humphrey suggests, "resume" his past life. He continuously leads a life of liminality, moving between national spaces in order to reconnect with the parts of his life that he leaves momentarily.[34]

There is an interesting distinction between immigration and diaspora. This distinction is what can label my father as part of the Lebanese diaspora instead of being an immigrant. Clifford argues that "diasporic populations do not come from elsewhere in the same way that 'immigrants' do. In assimilationist national ideologies such as those of the USA, immigrants may experience loss and nostalgia, but only en route to a whole

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[32] Clifford, *Routes*, 249.

[33] Michael Humphrey, *Islam, Multiculturalism, and Transnationalism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1998): 15.

[34] For a discussion of the role of 'in-between' spaces in national culture, see *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London & New York: Routledge, 1990) specifically, Bhabha's introduction, "Narrating the Nation."

new home in a new place."[35] I would argue that the 'cultural mosaic' existing in Canada works, by definition, against the 'assimilationist' attitudes of the USA. Of course, any time a cultural group is introduced to another cultural group: i.e. when immigrants arrive to a new country, the perceived national citizenry must either accept or reject the influx of 'others'. Canada is no exception, as Howard Palmer suggests:

> The immigration of significant numbers of non-British and non-French people raised fundamental questions about the type of society which would emerge in English-speaking Canada.[36]

The 'assimilationist' attitudes that abounded in the pre-World War II period became, by the 1950s,

> the breakdown of the vicious circles of discrimination which had developed prior to the war. Economic, social, and political mobility of non-Anglo-Saxons and [...] growing assimilation worked together to break down traditional stereotypes and undermine previous rationalizations for discrimination.[37]

While my father did not become a Canadian citizen until 1975, approximately ten years after his arrival, he has never been urged to forsake his Middle-Eastern heritage, as might be implied by Palmer's statements. In fact, he is permitted to hold citizenship in both Canada and Lebanon, and I myself have dual citizenship. Our dual citizenship is due to the fact that, after Lebanon gained independence from France (1946), the Lebanese government encouraged

> emigrants not only to pay annual visits to the 'old country' but to invest part of their capital in it as well. Moreover, in the effort to consolidate emigrant Lebanon with resident Lebanon, the [...] government has made Lebanese citizenship readily available to the emigrants (who actually never lose their Lebanese citizenship) and to their offspring. They can hold property, public office, and even vote in elections.[38]

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[35] Clifford, *Routes*, 250.

[36] Howard Palmer, "Reluctant Hosts: Anglo-Canadian Views of Multiculturalism in the Twentieth Century," in *Immigration in Canada: Historical Perspectives* (Toronto: Copp Clark Longman, 1994): 297.

[37] Palmer, "Reluctant Hosts," 316.

[38] Sameer Y. Abraham & Nabeel Abraham, *Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities* (Detroit MI: Wayne State University Center for Urban Studies, 1983): 198.

Maintaining Lebanese citizenship, with all of its political and national permissions, is perhaps a way to ensure that citizens who venture to other countries will remain, in reality and in spirit, Lebanese citizens. Given their draw to Lebanon, emigrants with the opportunity to maintain legal Lebanese ties would likely continue their commitment to the nation's growth and well-being. As members of a diasporic community, they always look back, remember, and are connected to their homeland.

Immigrants who eventually become part of a diasporic community make up a significant part of a host country's population. Although there are limited resources that indicate the number of Lebanese immigrants in Canada, the following statistics are useful:

> Between 1911 and 1951, the rate of growth of the Arab-Canadian community was very slow, based largely on natural increase, that is, surplus of births over deaths.[39]

By the time my grandfather had established himself in Canada (1958), "the change in the size of the Arab-Canadian community [had] been influenced more by immigration than natural increase."[40] A new immigration policy set forth in 1947 was possibly a determining factor in this increase. Prime Minister Mackenzie King had declared:

> the policy of the [Canadian] government [at that time] was to foster the growth of Canada's population through immigration. Emphasizing that Canada had the right to discriminate in the selection of its immigrants, King nevertheless stated that Canada had a moral obligation to help refugees and displaced persons.[41]

It is estimated that by 1971, the Arab[42] population in Canada was 28,550 strong.[43] The Immigration Act of Canada, by 1978, no longer stipulated

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[39] Albert Hourani & Nadim Shehadi, *The Lebanese in the World: A Century of Emigration* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1992): 229.

[40] Hourani and Shehadi, *The Lebanese in the World*, 229.

[41] Theresa Wallace, *The Role of Transportation in Canadian Immigration, 1900–2000* (Ottawa: Ministry of Public Works and Government Services Canada, 2001): 55.

[42] The term 'Arab' refers to those people "belonging" to regions from "the Arabian Gulf in the east through North Africa to the shores of the Atlantic Ocean in the west"; Baha Abu-Laban, *An Olive Branch on the Family Tree: The Arabs in Canada* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1980): 8.

[43] Abu Laban, *An Olive Branch on the Family Tree*, 230.

that immigrants from certain regions could be refused entry to the country; however, the racial profiling (as it is currently called) "had been removed from immigration regulations [by 1967]."[44] Fortunately for my grandfather and father, the regulations did not stop Lebanese citizens from entering the country.

The number of Lebanese-born people in Canada has seen dramatic increases. By 1991, "there were 54,605 people born in Lebanon living in Canada, 1% of all immigrants."[45] Four percent of these immigrants live in Calgary, while another four percent currently reside in Windsor. The fact that the Arab population increased so dramatically in a matter of about twenty years prompts an important question: why were people leaving their homes to come to Canada? The economy of Lebanon in the late-nineteenth-century relied heavily on agriculture. Owing to its low percentage of arable land, the country "was unable to produce enough to feed its population."[46] The economic situation of later generations did not greatly improve, so by 1957, when my grandfather, Najib Shehady Abboud, decided to leave for another country, his goal was to find work – manual labour – and do his best to send money home for his family.[47] A mere generation later, his son, my father, was ready to leave his country in search of riches. He had left school at the age of twelve, and his employment experience tended towards manual work as well: gas station attendant, bus boy, bartender, welder. When I imagine my grandfather leaving his family to travel across the world in search of a reasonable living, I can see how my father began to think that moving to another country – especially if his father was finding success – might be a good idea. My grandfather, it seems, sought to become a strong example for his children – he sacrificed living close to his wife and his younger children in order to provide for them. As noted by Suad Joseph,

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[44] Valerie Knowles, *Strangers at Our Gates: Canadian Immigration and Immigration Policy, 1540–1990* (Toronto: Dundurn, 1992): 80.

[45] "Golden Who's Who," np.

[46] Alixa Naff, *Becoming American: The Early Arab Immigrant Experience* (Carbondale & Edwardsville: Southern Illinois UP, 1985): 38.

[47] My grandfather first travelled to São Paulo, Brazil in hopes of working there. After staying for a few months, he decided to return to Lebanon – Brazil did not satisfy him. He later determined to leave for Canada, having heard good things about the country.

> the 'kin contract' in Lebanon has been about the ideal of family love organized within a patriarchal structure of rights and responsibilities. The kin contract has romanticized the ideals of family love, mothers' and fathers' sacrifices for their children, children's respect for their parents, the love and care of brothers, grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins many steps removed.[48]

While I recognize that this "kin contract" exists, I hardly believe that it is romanticized. My own family is proof of its proven success. Having left his wife and two youngest children (my father and my aunt) in Lebanon, my grandfather sponsored his two eldest children to come to Canada in the hope that, as a collective group, they could generate enough money to send some home to Lebanon. That my grandfather was the one to initiate the move is significant, as it parallels Joseph's discussion of the patrilinearity of Lebanese society. Furthermore, he brought his eldest son with him in the expectation that he could also be a wage-earner, while he brought his eldest daughter because her husband could be a potential wage-earner for their own family.[49]

The search for a sense of belonging, a feeling of comfort, in a new home is a primary challenge for anyone who is displaced. The immigrant experience, I have argued, is filled with complex issues of identity-formation, the sense of longing for a former life, and the difficulty of attaining cultural and linguistic fluency in the new location. I would not suggest that my father's experiences, or those of his family and friends, metonymically represent the experiences of all immigrants. However, it is clear that there are parallel elements of concern, similar feelings of sadness and loss, and, often, the urge to regain whatever has been given up. My father's adjustment to Canadian culture began the moment he learned that there existed a place, a border, a space beyond Jeb Jannine. The moment he dreamed of becoming prosperous in a different part of the world, he was no longer wholly Lebanese. His father's encouragement to work hard for what he wanted and to strive for excellence in everything he attempted has stayed with my father to this day. My grandmother's fig jam, and her

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[48] Suad Joseph, "Among Brothers: Patriarchal Connective Mirroring and Brotherly Deference in Lebanon," *Cairo Papers in Social Science* 24.1 (2001): 171.

[49] It would be interesting to trace the complexities of specifically female immigrants' experiences in diasporic communities; however, that is not the focus of this project, so I will just recommend that readers obtain information on women in diaspora from Clifford's *Routes*.

sweaters with bottomless pockets that contain endless supplies of tissue, remained with him while he walked his way through Calgary during those cold winters.

This project has been a challenge in many ways. Learning about my father's experiences has reminded me that I was not born in an historical vacuum. I, like him, had to make my way in Canadian culture and learn to become an individual amidst the cultural confusion and challenges of growing up. I had to become my own contact/conflicted/conflated space and learn about culture as I went along. To say that I recognize any specific homeland, even though I was born in Canada, is to ignore the significant influences that my Lebanese heritage and the local Lebanese community have had on my growth (not to mention my mother's French-Canadian heritage). My father's homeland – and mine, it would seem – is more than a specific place. It is the fragrance of the valley on a cool Jeb Jannine night as well as the sight of his garden in Canada. His homeland is a liminal territory where he can combine the comforts of his Lebanese life with the enjoyment of the Canadian one. He lives the Bhabha-ian lifestyle of in-betweenness, and is grateful for it.

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Tomorrow They Write their Story

Chaldeans in America and the Transforming Narrative of Identities

YASMEEN HANOOSH

please don't ask me, America
I don't remember
on which street
with whom
or under which star
Don't ask me
I don't remember
the colours of the people
or their signatures
I don't remember if they had
our faces
and our dreams
if they were singing
or not
writing from the left or right
or not writing at all[1]

Introduction

IRRESPECTIVE OF ITS GENRE and intended purpose, hardly any study of Chaldean-Americans falls short of advancing the following information about the group: 1) they are Catholic, 2) they have their origins in the northern region of present day Iraq, mainly in a village

[1] Dunya Mikhail, "America," in *Iraqi Poetry Today*, ed. Saadi A. Simawe & Daniel Weissbort, tr. Salaam Yousif & Liz Winslow (Modern Poetry in Translation 19, New Series; London: King's College, U of London, 2003): 132.

called Telkaif, 3) they speak a subset of Aramaic, and 4) they have taken Detroit and its suburbs as a central site for their relocation.[2] Whether marketed for academic, popular or community consumption, literatures on ethnic minorities in the USA are often prefaced with a section that tacitly assumes the readership's ignorance about the ethnic group and which tries to fill these gaps of knowledge with constant, if not fixed, *facts*. This essay, for instance, could have begun by explaining who and where the Chaldeans are, thus:

> The Chaldeans[3] are an Aramaic-speaking[4] Catholic[5] minority from the ancient land of Mesopotamia.[6] The first Chaldean immigrant, Zia Attalla,

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[2] See, for various examples, Gary C. David, "Behind the Bulletproof Glass: Iraqi Chaldean Store Ownership in Metropolitan Detroit," in *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream*, ed. Nabeel Abraham & Andrew Shryock (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2000): 151–78, Natalie Y. Moore, "Chaldean Group Wants Library, Exhibits to Educate Next Generation," *Detroit News* (5 May 2003), Mary C. Sengstock, *Chaldeans in Michigan* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2005), "Detroit's Iraqi-Chaldeans: A Conflicting Conception of Identity," in *Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities*, ed. Sammery Abraham & Nabeel Abraham (Detroit MI: Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, 1983): 136–46, *The Chaldean Americans: Changing Conceptions of Ethnic Identity* (New York: Center for Migration Studies, 1982), *Kinship in a Roman Catholic Ethnic Group* (Detroit MI: Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, 1977), Korie Wilkins, "Center to Preserve Chaldean Heritage," Oakland Press (12 May 2003): 14–15, "100 Questions and Answers about Arab Americans: A Journalist's Guide," *Detroit Free Press* (2004), http://www.freep.com/jobspage/arabs/index.htm

[3] The term 'Chaldean' was recognized in 1445 by Pope Eugenius IV. It seems to have been used earlier with other, interchangeable terms to refer to the Christians of Mesopotamia. The original 'Chaldeans' were Aramaeans (though some now question this) who settled in southern Iraq, forming the basis of the Neo-Babylonian revival of the last Dynasty of Babylon. The Chaldean (Babylonian) Empire fell in 539 BC. Other names are also sometimes used to refer to the Chaldeans of today. These include Assyrian, Syriac, Chaldo-Assyrian, Aramaic, Christian-Iraqi, and Christian Kurd.

[4] They speak a few varieties of neo-Aramaic, and most cannot read and write it. For the greater part of today's Chaldeans, Arabic or English are the main languages.

[5] Initially Christians of the 'Church of the East,' and a little later 'Nestorians'. Their split with the Catholic Church began to take form possibly as early as 325 AD with the first Ecumenical Council of Nicaea. The dispute with the Catholic Church was essentially over the definition of Christ's human and divine natures.

[6] This location, the fertile land between and around the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, has not existed under a single name for centuries. Historical Mesopotamia comprises parts of present day Syria, Iran, Armenia, and Iraq.

> arrived to the United States in 1889[7] but it was not until World War I and the massacres of the Syriac[8] peoples in northern Iraq and southeast Turkey during the first third of the twentieth century [9] that the Chaldeans were impelled to seek asylum outside of the Middle East. From the 1910's to the 1960's, political and economic turmoil – the offshoot of falling out of favor with Arab and Kurdish[10] powers in the region – prompted a number of male members of this Iraqi Catholic minority to seek refuge in the Americas. A majority of Chaldeans, who first immigrated to multiple United States destinations, were soon to congregate in Detroit by the 1920's, drawn to the stable wages and the low-skill jobs made available by Ford's automobile assembly line. A deteriorating political and economic scene in the homeland continued to prompt later waves of Chaldean migration from Iraq to Detroit. Added to this 'push' was the 'pull' of favorable modifications to the US immigration laws facilitating family-based chain immigrations, which began to reunite male immigrants with their other family members in the mid 1960's – a classical migration model observed as early as 1885 by Ernest Ravenstein and embellished later by E.S. Lee's migration theory in 1966.[11]

Without the footnotes with which I have attempted to reference the disputable statements, it is evident that the information a text of this nature provides is fixed and selective. And even when the categories are not completely fixed, and the overall tenor of the ethnic text suggests a previous encounter between reader and data of the text, these textual expositions advance from the premise of a certain dearth or lapse of knowledge in a putative readership which licenses the author to reconstruct a timetable, an historical context, a profile outline, a background sketch – ingredients the compounding of which lends itself to distinct types of reductive and predictable literary formats.

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[7] Mary C. Sengstock, "Detroit's Iraqi-Chaldeans: A Conflicting Conception of Identity," in *Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities*, ed. Sammery Abraham & Nabeel Abraham (Detroit MI: Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, 1983): 137, and *Chaldeans in Michigan* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2005): 3.

[8] Also known as Assyrians, Tiaris, Assyro-Chaldeans, Chaldeans, and Christian Kurds.

[9] Yakup Hidirsah, "Massacre of Christians, Syriacs, Nestorians, Chaldeans, Armenians, in Mesopotamia and Kurds: A Documentary Study" (Hannover 1997), http://chaldeansonline.net/Banipal/English/massacres.html

[10] And with Turkish and Persian powers, too.

[11] Mary C. Sengstock, *Chaldeans in Michigan*, 6, and "Detroit's Iraqi-Chaldeans," 41.

Textual articulation of Chaldean-Americans' religion, language, and place of origin and relocation sets the groundwork for later options of amplification that suggest themselves at once as gaps in knowledge and tools for filling these gaps, prescribing the 'accurate' ID for this ethnic minority. Certain texts proceed to tell how, in addition to speaking Aramaic, many Chaldeans also speak Arabic; other texts choose to evade or suppress this socio-linguistic fact. Some texts choose to dwell on the unfavourable conditions for Chaldeans in Iraq; others ignore the role of the homeland scene in the community's life altogether. Thus, discrete narratives begin to emerge, which is not unusual. While all representations are selective, it remains to be seen *why* representations of ethnic minorities in the USA – both from within and beyond the targeted minority – are predominantly concerned with questions of religion, language, and place or origin, and *how* these issues lend themselves to formulaic types of literary expositions when they are examined under the rubric of identity.

This essay samples and probes the ethnic discourse of a few literary sources written by contemporary authors who claim, or have been claimed, to belong to the Chaldean-American community. My approach to the study of ethnic literary formatting that is occurring in the particular case of the self- and media-selected category of 'Chaldean-American' is both synchronic and diachronic, taking into account Benedict Anderson's trope of "homogenous, empty time," by the positing of which it becomes possible for the 'old' and the 'new' to coexist in the collective representations of imaginary communities.[12] I look at a cross-section of present-day rhetoric in and around the Chaldean-American community, which encompasses accounts that stabilize the dominant narrative of identity and others that work their way into widening its fabric. Then, through an historicizing process, I seek to trace diachronically the origins of the current cultural composition and of those alternative discourses that disrupt its equilibrium and transform identity representations from monolithic, monological delineations into dynamic processes of participation.

[12] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, rev. ed. 1995): 187.

Individual and Collective: Memory Inside Out

> If individual memory presupposes a social framework for its functions, it is also true that social networks presuppose the presence of a unified base of discrete memories. When individual memory shifts its alliances from one context of collective memory to another, it is often assumed that the individual memory would make the necessary adjustments to fit into the new medium. Recent first-generation Chaldean immigrants, especially ones who resided in metropolitan areas such as Baghdad, Mosul and Basra prior to immigrating to the United States, identified interchangeably as Arab, Iraqi, Christian-Arab or Christian-Iraqis in the homeland. Upon arriving to join the established Chaldean community in Detroit, they abruptly experience a collective pressure to alter the accustomed identity to what accentuates their religious affiliation and ethnic descent, namely, to identifying as Chaldeans.[13]

This coercive collective pressure is not always something that the assimilating individual or group is aware of in their memory processes. It was not when they were residing in Iraq, in their native villages, and in their extended families, that Chaldeans – who were only permitted to mark 'Arab"' or 'Kurdish' on the Iraqi census forms – could protest against the pressures of assimilation; only decades later, after they had left Iraq, did they begin to assert the coercive identity pressures the Ba'ath regime had subjected them to. By contrast, participation in ethnic labeling in the USA is performed willingly by members of this group. According to Abraham and Shryock's study of Arab Detroit and the assimilation of Arabs to American mainstream culture, collective and individual memories negotiate each other within a network in which the opinion an entity has of itself depends on the opinion other entities have of it.[14] The shift from Iraqi or Arab rhetoric to a Chaldean one is first and foremost the product of a desire for approval, implemented through conformity. Collective coercion within the Chaldean-American community is also evaded because the memory of the Chaldean who has just emigrated from Iraq is often treated as an extension of another collective narrative – or a certain mode of "*belief* on the part of people that they are descended from a common ancestor and that they are part of a larger grouping," sociologically speak-

[13] Sengstock, *The Chaldean Americans*, 64–65.

[14] Nabeel Abraham & Andrew Shryock, "On Margins and Mainstreams," in *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream* (Detroit MI: Wayne State UP, 2000): 30.

ing[15] – that has just reached its closure upon emigration. In order to sustain individual memory, Chaldean immigrants need to subscribe to a new narrative.

The description of this process of transition from one collective memory to another has been linear so far. The interesting shift occurs when the new collective narrative begins to rewrite the old one. The village of Telkaif, one of the sites of the community's earliest migrations to the USA, is a suitable example. When the early Chaldean immigrants left home and began to reestablish a Chaldean community in Detroit during the 1920s, only those elements of each individual's memories that were relevant to, and shared and felt as desirable by, the majority within the new community became incorporated into the collective image of Telkaif. The rest remained confined to the realm of individual memory and were eventually forgotten. To this group of immigrants, this imagined Telkaif was a replica of the original village: it was conjured up with a desire to represent the past accurately; shared and approved by all, it served the functional purpose of tracing the asserted ethnicity to a veridical place, and it was temporally contiguous to the original.

When there are no 'environments' of memory, there are 'sites' for it, explains the French historian Pierre Nora.[16] The latter are what he terms *les lieux de mémoire*, or 'sites of memory'. These *lieux de mémoire* are collective sites where memory remembers memory, rather than an actual event or thing.[17] The rewriting of the Telkaif narrative, based on the original narrative, is the output of a collective memory whose ambience resembles, to a great extent, Nora's *lieux de mémoire*. Locating suitable *lieux de mémoire* begins with 'interior decolonization', whereby a group with reserves of memory but little historical capital is abruptly displaced.[18]

When successive waves of Chaldean immigrants arrived in the USA and began to commix with the old immigrants whose Telkaif narrative had become a static one, and when the community began proliferating into second generations of Chaldeans who were becoming increasingly

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[15] Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1999): 17.

[16] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (Spring 1989): 7.

[17] Nora, "Between Memory and History," 16.

[18] "Between Memory and History," 208.

removed from the spacio-temporal reality of Telkaif, a distinct narrative began to take form in the midst of a host of competing narratives. As *lieux de mémoire* have the capacity to metamorphose and ramify,[19] successive narratives of Telkaif continued to be consolidated, standardized, and reformatted until the size of the community became large enough to stabilize the narrative. At that point Telkaif was rewritten. A stabilized image of Telkaif became threefold: the original village, its replica in the USA, and the replica of that replica – the original from the replica's perspective, or the *lieu de mémoire*.

Today's newcomer to the Chaldean community in the USA does not venture upon an alternative narrative of Telkaif that is compatible with his own in volume and stability. The encounter now is between a given individual memory and a much larger collective memory. Immediately the new immigrant's options become twofold: to appropriate or to oppose the Chaldean-American narrative of Telkaif.

Again, so far the description of the immigrant group's memory has been reductive, suggesting that all members of the community share a homogeneous representation of the past.[20] Although this simple version is too *simple* to be sufficient, it nonetheless lays the groundwork for collective memory before the disruption that occurs when opposition, forgetting, and amplification are also taken into account.

The following four cases will show how, through literary expression, individual memory may transform this reductive, stable version of collective past into a 'complementary version' whereby members of the community conceive of themselves as holders of different fragments of a common past that converge to form a single narrative of what it means to be Chaldean, as in case 1. Case 2 samples alternative literary expressions that present different versions in which distribution of past memories take place within a system of oppositions and result in contestable narratives. In case 3, mechanisms and values at work in forging second-generation Chaldean-American identities are looked at. Finally, case 4 examines a feature that has been steadily growing within community literature and which indicates symptomatically that the nascent ethnic literature is

[19] Nora, "Between Memory and History," 19.

[20] James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002): 23, 24.

beginning to enter one of the early stages of maturation, that of collective auto-criticism and self-representation to non-Chaldean readers.

Case 1: Sharkey Haddad's Journey to Detroit[21]

Michigan, 1976. Detroit is home to a large body of Chaldean-Americans, many of whom are second- or third-generation immigrants – people who speak little or no Aramaic and have never been to Telkaif. But the Telkaif narrative has ascended to the symbolic stage. Collective identification with the homeland, the heritage, and conventional morality is stronger than ever. The village replica has gained an iconic value far removed from the physical reality of the place.[22] The term 'Telkaif' is now an avatar of a whole rhetoric of ethnicity.

Haddad's autobiographical fifteen-year-old narrator immigrates to the scene and confronts his two options: to appropriate or to oppose the new Telkaif narrative, a Telkaif that is exclusively Christian, devoutly Catholic, speaks or at least attempts to speak Aramaic, is constantly vigilant about its Babylonian and Chaldean heritage, proud of its non-Arab forefathers, and, at the same time, very proud to be … American. At first, the narrator intimates a certain sense of disillusionment with the Chaldean-American scene, characterized by depictions of the community's racism, lack of interest in education, and preoccupation with material gain.[23] The father of the narrator is first depicted as a Chaldean who opposed the new narrative of Telkaif and chose to distance himself and his family from the Chaldean community scene – both literally, by residing in a distant neighbourhood, and ideologically, through encouraging his children to "become as Americanized as possible" (207). Toward the middle of the story, the coercive power of the new environment's collective narrative destabilizes the protagonist's sense of identity:

> Another challenge I faced when I came to the USA was accepting my identity as a Chaldean. Since I had lived in the capital city of Baghdad and in

[21] Sharkey Haddad, "The American Journey of a Chaldean from Iraq," in *Arab Detroit: From Margin to Mainstream*, ed. Nabeel Abraham & Andrew Shryock (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 2001): 205–17.

[22] Mary C. Waters, *Ethnic Options: Choosing Identities in America* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1990): 14.

[23] Sharkey Haddad, "The American Journey of a Chaldean from Iraq," 207. Further page references are in the main text.

> Saudi Arabia, and most Chaldeans lived in the northern village of Iraq, the schools that I attended taught neither Chaldean history nor Christianity. In fact, I had to read and interpret the Quran instead of the Bible. In Iraq, I was taught that everyone was Arab, no matter what dialect they spoke or what religion they were. […] I still wasn't sure if I should think of myself as a Chaldean or an Arab or an American. […] It wasn't until I was eighteen and attended a social event held in the basement of the Southfield Mother of God Chaldean Church that I began to be curious about my heritage. Father Sarhad Jammo came up and put his arm around my shoulder and asked, "Do you speak Chaldean?" When I told him that I did not, he asked, "Why not? What language did your grandfather speak?" (210)

Just as the narrator develops more interest in his Chaldean heritage, his father becomes more assimilated to the Chaldean economic scene in Detroit. When the son begins attending college, he advises him to quit his studies and join the family business instead (211). The narrator perseveres with his education and becomes an educator himself, working mainly with Chaldean immigrants from various generations. Later, the protagonist's education becomes the story's main message: Chaldean-Americans have good and bad values. As good members of the community, our task is to partake of the good that it offers and work to change the less desirable rather than conforming to its standards. Change, moreover, arises from within the community rather than beyond its confines. Not only do we have to educate Chaldeans about their lives in the USA, but we must also educate Americans about how to relate to Chaldeans (214). The protagonist is to be perceived as an exceptional Chaldean (213, 215) because he has challenged the community's rigidity, has pursued an education, and has got involved in politics – but as a Chaldean nonetheless.

This story is a model in which a unified version of Chaldean collective memory is posited as existing. It is the version of the community, or Telkaif, narrative that the narrator encountered upon his arrival in Detroit. Yet it is in need of alteration by means of complementary accounts of who the Chaldeans were and what potential they possess for becoming something else in the future. Haddad reminds his reader that, "while Chaldeans as a group are considered highly educated in Iraq, they have acquired a stereotype in America of caring very little about education" (21). What turns the fact of the Chaldeans' neglect of education[24] into a "stereotype"

[24] Sengstock, *The Chaldean Americans*, 140.

in the mind of the narrator is the way in which he perceives this fact as extending across a homogeneous collective memory to universalize the condition and necessitate its appropriation by all the members of the community.

In analyzing the process of ethnic labelling, Mary Waters stresses the political motivation behind choosing or shifting identity.[25] Although it is vehemently stressed by Chaldean nationalists today that being Chaldean does not only refer to matters religious, the religious denotations of 'Chaldeans' are inseparable from the label. It is a contradiction in terms to have a Chaldean who also identifies as Muslim, or a Muslim who identifies as Chaldean. 'Chaldean' and 'Muslim' are mutually exclusive labels, just as 'Christian' and 'Muslim' are. To stress one's Chaldean ethnicity is, then, to stress one's Christianity, at least as a social framework if not as a religious dogma, which in turn is to imply that one is *not* Muslim, even if otherwise Iraqi. This is being increasingly perceived as essential to the maintenance of a positive self-image, both on the individual and on the collective level, in the wake of the events of September 11, 2001.

Curious as it may seem at first, more often than not subscribing to a Chaldean identity goes hand in hand with acceding to mainstream American values. Chaldean Churches in the USA have either modified their layout in a Roman Catholic fashion (whereas it used to resemble that of the Eastern Orthodox churches in the original homeland) or have included design elements that evoke associations between present-day Chaldeans and the ancient cities of the Babylonian Empire.[26] The cover of the first issue of the monthly English newspaper *The Chaldean News* features a collage of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the current Chaldean Patriarch, the Chaldean flag, and the American flag.[27] And nearly every issue of this periodical to date has included an advertisement for FBI careers.[28]

In their assessment of patterns of cultural inclusion and exclusion in American society, Abraham and Shryock suggest that growth in ethnic consciousness is in most cases a mainstreaming phenomenon.[29] It should come as no surprise, then, that Haddad's narrator, who attains a prominent

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[25] Waters, *Ethnic Options*, 85.

[26] Sengstock, *The Chaldean Americans*, 27.

[27] *The Chaldean News* (Detroit) 1.1 (2004).

[28] See, for example, *The Chaldean News* 1.11: 6; 2.2: 38; 2.5: 27; 2.6: 35.

[29] Nabeel Abraham & Andrew Shryock, "On Margins and Mainstreams," 30.

position within the Chaldean community, should also turn out to be an exponent of popular American values and national policies. His narrative concludes thus:

> Sometimes I think about what would have happened to me if my father hadn't decided to come to America … if I would have been killed in one of the two Iraqi wars. I don't know what would have become of me, but I do know that I am very lucky to have been able to come here, become an American citizen, and experience the American dream…. God bless America![30]

Haddad's narrative undergoes transformation, reshaping itself to become consistent with, in dialogue with, and part of the new collective narrative of the 'true Chaldeans', on the one hand, and mainstream American values fostering the 'American dream' of immigrant success, on the other.

Case 2: Sinan Antoon and Dunya Mikhail

Unlike Haddad, Antoon and Mikhail did not get to 'wonder' what it would have been like to grow up in Iraq; they lived it. Although they share a similar cultural Iraqi/Chaldean background as Haddad, Antoon and Mikhail's protagonists make different choices when confronting the binary option of appropriating or opposing the simple collective narrative of the Chaldean community in the USA. By so doing, they suggest the existence of a contested model of collective memory within the diasporic presence of Chaldeans in the USA. One of the obvious features of contesting the common narrative, a feature through which they also affirm their Arab cultural identity, is that both authors have continued writing their narratives and poetry predominantly in Arabic, rather than adopting English or Aramaic. For this reason also, the present essay, which is concerned with Chaldean literatures of English expression, will not discuss their works in depth, but merely refer the interested reader to them.

Although published in 2004, over a decade after the author's emigration to the USA, the events of Antoon's autobiographical novel *Iʿjām* (Diacritics), are set and revolve around the city of Baghdad, with no mention of the migrant experience. The only instance in which the question of ethnicity is handled explicitly in *Iʿjām* is when the protagonist protests against his grandmother's nominal assertion of their Chaldean heritage. He reminds her that culturally they are more "Arab or

[30] Haddad, "The American Journey of a Chaldean from Iraq," 217.

Arabized."[31] Moreover, there is not a single instance in which the biographical sketches accompanying the author's articles, fiction, film or poetry – all produced or published in the USA – identify Antoon as Chaldean.

The more frequent identification for both Antoon and Mikhail is 'Iraqi', in line with what Haddad perceived as his identity before coming to the USA. It should also be noted that the three writers were raised and educated in urban cosmopolitan environments in Iraq, a fact that naturally set them apart, in a state of cultural and geographical detachment from Telkaif and the other Northern Chaldean villages of their forefathers. This fact also supports the suggestion that the later affiliation or refusal to affiliate with Chaldean rubrics of identity is motivated by external influences and pressures that have more to do with the new environment in the USA than with a Chaldean environment, such as the projected Telkaif, in Iraq.

In the writings of Mikhail, a poet who has established her reputation in Iraq and the USA as both an Arab and a Chaldean/Assyrian writer,[32] the Chaldean rubric does appear, but only tangentially, as if the narrator can only relate to it in a detached manner, from a point external to its content:

> I filled the tank with the gasoline of fear and memories and went to Talkef [Telkaif] Village. I saw the Chaldeans looking after their sheep even in the time of war. In a room with no ceiling I sat watching the cocks fighting for no apparent reason. "Man has no favor over animal … both of them go to the same place…" says the Preacher. The village was smaller than a graveyard

[31] Sinan Antoon, *Iʿjām* [Diacritics] (Beirut: Dār al-Ādāb, 2004): 78.

[32] Dunya Mikhail had participated in Iraqi poetry festivals and published in many Iraqi journals during the 1980s and 1990s, including "al-Katib al-Siryani" (The Assyrian Writer). More recently, after her emigration to the USA, Mikhail's poems began to appear in anthologies of Iraqi, Arab, and Arab-American poetry, such as *Le Poème Arabe Moderne*, ed. Abdul-Kader El Janabi (Paris: Maisonneuve & Larose, 1999); *Iraqi Poetry Today*, ed. Saadi Simawi & Daniel Weissbort (Modern Poetry in Translation, 2002); *Post-Gibran: Anthology of New Arab-American Writing*, ed. Khalid Mattawa & Munir Akkash (Syracuse NY: Syracuse UP, 1999); *A Crack in the Wall: New Arab Poetry*, ed. Margaret Obank & Samuel Shimon (London: Saqi Books, 2000); and *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*, ed. Nathalie Handal (2000; New York: Interlink, 2001). She gradually began to gain a reputation as a "dissident and subversive poet," an appellation that would not have been viable when she was writing under the censorship of the Baa'thist regime in Iraq. Currently she also directs the Iraqi American Center in Michigan.

> and bigger than the planet Venus which fell into the tanour [kiln] of my aunt so her bread had a flavor of roses.[33]

By expressly opposing or remaining indifferent to the overarching Chaldean narrative, such members run the risk of being marginalized by the community. Why should certain individuals be able to endure the risk of marginalization while others are not? No doubt subjective factors play a role in determining the choices of each of the authors in exile concerning appropriating or opposing the collective version of the past dominant in the diasporic community. Nonetheless, common roots of this pattern of opposition are also traceable to socio-political factors that managed to order the priorities of the latter two authors differently. Unlike Haddad, who left Iraq before the Iraqi–Iran War of the 1980s and the Gulf War and its devastating aftermath of the 1990s, Antoon and Mikhail, albeit to different extents, underwent these hardships at first hand. It is this unmediated experience of the traumatic that sets the tone of their fiction and poetry.

In addition to dwelling on the traumatic, writings by Chaldeans who left Iraq as adults after having initiated their literary careers are apt to depict the authors' exilic conditions and impressions. One of the basic ingredients of this condition is a perpetual sense of marginalization. After encountering multiple collective narratives of the homeland, the Iraqi exile becomes susceptible to a loss of that very sense of loss.[34] Marginalization becomes a conceptual leitmotif superimposed on all modes of remembering, particularly those appearing in literary form: the postwar Chaldean exiles conceive of themselves as marginalized by Iraqi society, by Chaldean society. and by American society. Detachment and alienation become universal conditions rather than situational ones, rendering the individual a "perpetual Other."[35] As such, in their writings these exiles turn to universal themes of trauma – mainly war trauma – and adopt a

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[33] Dunya Mikhail, *Diary of a Wave Outside the Sea*, 1995; tr. Elizabeth Ann Wilson (*Yawmiyyāt Maujah Khārij al-Bahr*; Cairo: Dar 'Ashtār li al-Nashr al-Mahdudah, 2nd ed. 1999): 12.

[34] Eva Hoffman, "The New Nomads," in *Letters of Transit: Reflections on Exile Identity, Language, and Loss,* ed. André Aciman (New York: New York Public Library, 1999): 46.

[35] Hoffman, "The New Nomads," 55.

general tone of cynicism and opposition. Consider this section from Antoon's "Wars I", for example:

> When I was torn by war I took a brush immersed in death and drew a window on war's wall I opened it searching for something But I saw another war and a mother weaving a shroud for the dead man still in her womb.[36]

And from Mikhail's "The Chaldean Ruins":

> Ascetic he emerges from its belly to the grave. His days are not entered on the calendar and he does not gather the things that are scattered. Earthquakes do not shake him nor wink at death without him. […] He is the unsettled Chaldean and it was no tree but the elongated roots of his village. Dried out. […] Homeless exile squeezes him and discards his rind to the skyscrapers. Waiting he lights a candle before the Virgin perhaps she will shift the borders to him Hallelujah […] Hallelujah. […] Bewildered he turns the mountains between his hands searching for a speck of homeland. Far from his tent he tightens the ropes and accumulates like sand in distant countries. Preserved in a can, he writes on his forehead MADE IN RUINS and feels that the word "ruins" is enough to refer to what has happened or what remains.[37]

Before the second Gulf War, around the time when the periodical *Chaldean Nation* published an advertisement with the portraits of six Chaldean-American US-Army personnel under the heading "join the Chaldean-American Ladies of Charity Tribute to honor all the brave Chaldean Americans who proudly served in the U.S. Armed Forces,"[38] Sinan Antoon launched a literary campaign against the foreign policies of the US government in Iraq.[39] In April of 2003, when members of the Chaldean community in Detroit were cited by the American press for their support of the American troops in Iraq, Antoon published his article "(De)liberation" in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly*, in which he wrote that "the future paradise [promised in Iraq] has already been lost" and

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[36] Sinan Antoon, *Mawshūr Muballal bil-Hurūb* [A Prism, Wet with Wars] (Cairo: Dar Meret, 2003): 11

[37] Dunya Mikhail, *Al-Harb Taᶜmal bi-Jadd* (The War Works Hard), 131.

[38] *Chaldean Nation* 1 (2002): 14.

[39] Sinan Antoon, "No More Victims Speaking Tour," http://www.afsc.org/newengland/pesp/antoon.html

sardonically thanked "the US which had bombed Iraq back to the pre-industrial age, but left Saddam in place."[40]

The divergence of the literary preoccupations of these recent individual exiles from the preoccupations of earlier Chaldean immigrants to some extent parallels a divergence between the preoccupations of the Chaldean community in the USA and those of the one remaining in Iraq. A widespread trend in current Chaldean-American nationalist discourse is speaking on behalf of the Chaldeans in Iraq. The common rhetoric among these long-established diasporic nationalists is that Chaldeans in Iraq have been silenced by the prolonged oppression of the regime of the Baa'th Party:

> … if Mar Raphael BeDaweed and the Chaldean Church attempted to fight back against forcing our children to learn the Quran as strongly as he's now fighting for the lifting of the sanctions, what would have been the reaction of Saddam Hussein? Most probably one of the following two scenarios; Mar BeDaweed would either have been forced into exile. […] The second scenario would be, Saddam Hussein issuing a decree installing a new Patriarch for the Chaldean Church.…[41]

These misgivings about the Baa'th Party articulated by Ghassan Shathaya, General Secretary of the Chaldean National Congress, are probably legitimate. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that an earlier article by him appearing that same year attributes this lack of initiative on the part of the Chaldeans remaining in Iraq to their "ethnic confusion" instead.[42] An additional, related justification issuing from this foremost Chaldean nationalist is that, by virtue of residing in the USA and becoming affluent, the Chaldean-American community has now gained access to lobbying in a major political power that has the initiative for implementing changes in other parts of the world, including Iraq.[43] It is also this image of power projection on the part of the diasporic Chaldean community that the Chaldean

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[40] Sinan Antoon, "(De)liberation," *Al-Ahram Weekly* 633 (2003), Sec. 17: 10–16; http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/633/sc17.html

[41] Ghassan Hanna Shathaya, "The Chaldeans/Assyrians Under the Arab Baath Regime of Iraq" (1999), http://www.chaldeansonline.net/Banipal/English/ghassan3.html (originally published in *al-Muntada* magazine, December 1998).

[42] "For Assyrian/Chaldean National Rights In Beth Nahrain," http://www.chaldeansonline.net/Banipal/English/ghassan2html (originally published in *al-Muntada* magazine, October 1998: 3).

[43] "The Chaldeans/Assyrians Under the Arab Baath Regime of Iraq," 4.

writers face and respond to in a variety of ways as they relocate from Iraq to the USA.

Case 3: Deborah Najor and Dahlia Petrus

The preoccupation of second-generation Chaldean writers with themes of marriage, family life, heritage, customs, and societal restraints do prompt us to question, like the title of Dahlia Petrus' emblematic one-page story, "Is That All There Is?"[44]

Based on the nature of the utility of the collective narrative, James V. Wertsch allocates collective memory participants to one of two communities, imagined and implicit.[45] The latter implements the collective narrative as an instrument, without acknowledging its unifying effect, while the former applies the narrative in a cyclical process that constructs and maintains the identity of that community. An example of implicit community would be the Chaldeans in Telkaif, who assert their Chaldean identity by squarely using what is at hand in terms of language, daily customs, and physical location. They assume a Chaldean narrative by 'implicitly' being such, rather than by 'imagining' themselves to be so.

By contrast, for a second-generation Chaldean born and raised in the USA, this implicit community in Telkaif instigates a further imaginary construction of a Telkaifi community from within the USA. This latter is imagined because it applies the narrative of Telkaif in order to construct and maintain the replicated narrative. Thus, in addition to sharing a narrative, members of the Chaldean-American community now must recognize (imagine), create, and reproduce a narrative. Like members of a networking group, they must internally generate the effects of their own reality by constantly reflecting on themselves.[46]

This constantly posited responsibility for maintaining an identity that has in many ways become symbolic eventually culminates in expressions of anxiety such as those permeating the fictional works of Petrus and Najor. Petrus' female Chaldean protagonists often conclude with an expression of rebellion against the conservative expectations of their society:

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[44] Dahlia Petrus, "Is That All There Is?" *Mizna: Prose, Poetry & Art Exploring Arab America* 3.1 (2001): http://www.mizna.org/vol3issue1/is_that_all.html

[45] James V. Wertsch, *Voices of Collective Remembering* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002): 63, 64.

[46] Annelise Riles, *The Network Inside Out* (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 2001): 3.

> I am so busy dreaming [...] about running through the screen door to the field and getting on the back of a yellow dirtbike with a green-eyed American boy, riding away from it all, screw that scene man, have babies and make rice all day long....[47]

In another story, the narrator depicts a similarly young Chaldean female protagonist who seems slightly more defiant and sarcastic as she dares to violate the proscriptions of her community by kissing an American boy on the beach then boasting about it to her cousin.

> [Her mother] yells at her that kissing a boy was like sitting on the toilet seat of a public bathroom. Or something like that. Now her daughter will never get married, she loudly laments. The niece doesn't give her cousin the Sly and Family Stone 8-track tape for his birthday because of that.[48]

Deborah Najor's story "Selma's Weddings" portrays female protagonists who handle similar problems of identity and ethnicity but through a binary approach in which two oppositional models present the duality of the choice: appropriating vs. opposing Chaldean traditions. The narrator, Lenna, is the docile, reticent, compliant antithesis of her sister Selma, a mutinous and argumentative young woman whose rebellion against tradition puts not only her own life in disarray but also that of her entire family.

The short story, that revolves around themes of marriage, spouse selection, and family approval within a typical Chaldean-American household, concludes with an unresolvable conflict between the two sisters as Selma makes an inappropriate appearance in Lenna's wedding. The latter comments on this in the closing paragraph:

> Selma would hate me if she knew I pitied her at that moment: I almost could not stand to look at her. I did not belly dance at my wedding, and I knew I would never dance at Selma's wedding either.[49]

It remains uncertain, from reading the story without the benefit of extratextual knowledge, whether the author wanted to promote one of the two perspectives on tradition more than the other. However, when Najor's

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[47] Petrus, "Is that All There Is?"

[48] Petrus, "The Red Maverick," *Ripe Guava: Voices of Women of Color at Brooklyn College* 3 (2000): 12.

[49] Deborah Najor, "Selma's Weddings," *Michigan Quarterly Review* (Fall 1992): 616.

American readership began to identify more with Selma's rebellious stance and construe it as the message of the story, Najor elaborated thus:

> Have you seen "My Big, Fat Greek Wedding"? The narrator/protagonist portrays the Greek traditions as absurd but lovable. I think if I had to rethink my own story, I would portray a more complex view of traditional culture. I actually had more sympathy for Lenna than I did for Selma. I was trying to portray Selma as self-centered and disrespectful not only to her culture but to herself… rebelling, for the sake of rebelling, isn't always smart or the right choice.[50]

Not just to Najor, but to many Chaldean men and women growing up in similar times and locations, a Chaldean woman such as Salma, born and raised in the suburbs of Detroit in the last quarter of the twentieth century, refusing to marry a Chaldean man who thinks that women should not see R-rated movies[51] or arguing "about the state of Palestine,"[52] might carry, depending on the social context, the implications of "rebelling, for the sake of rebelling."

I pointed out earlier that the Chaldean identity was becoming more and more symbolic by virtue of the spatio-temporal distance of its constituents, a fact that should make it more optional among second-generation immigrants who can only relate to Telkaif, Aramaic, and Chaldean traditions through the mediation of the collective memory of their community. But in discussing identity for mobile suburban populations, Waters points out that the increasing optionality of identification does not indicate that the ethnic label is losing its significance or that becoming more voluntary is helping it disappear more quickly.[53] In fact, the anachronism that is the 'Chaldean narrative' in the USA suggests that a reverse process is at work. Rather than making themselves felt among recent arrivals, quintessential Chaldean values are concentrated among second- and third-generation immigrants. Rather than constraint alone, it is now both choice and constraint that play a role in the choice of identity.[54] It is among members of these groups and through their literature and other cultural and political

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[50] Deborah Najor, email exchange with one of her students (2004).

[51] Deborah Najor, "Selma's Weddings," 610.

[52] Najor, "Selma's Weddings," 607.

[53] Mary Waters, *Ethnic Options*, 90.

[54] *Ethnic Options*, 19.

expressions that the Chaldean identity is being most essentialized. It is not surprising, then, that the sociologist Mary Sengstock should note instances in which second-generation immigrants encounter extended family members who have recently emigrated from Iraq and realize that their own understanding of Chaldean mores is stricter than what is practised in the homeland nowadays.

By the same token, we observe a greater aspiration to mainstream conformity among members of the more established community, which confirms the soundness of the aforementioned phenomenon of mainstreaming a minority group through promoting their ethnic consciousness,[55] and it has also been pointed out how often "patterns of inclusion and exclusion are hard to distinguish."[56] The non-profit organization C.A.R.E. – Chaldean American Reaching and Encouraging – is a case in point of the fluid mixture of mainstreaming conformity and ethnicity assertion. Founded in 1997 by a group of young Chaldean-Americans and community church clerics, C.A.R.E. claims to be aimed at preserving culture, helping school students improve their performance, and establishing curricula for teaching modern Aramaic, for "once we assimilate completely, we can no longer call ourselves 'Chaldeans'." Although the organization appears to have been founded by members of the Chaldean community who are most grounded in mainstream American culture (by virtue of being born and raised in the USA, speaking only English, etc.), the frequency with which they desire to reclaim their heritage is also pronounced. Ethnicity and language of heritage are at the top of their list of symbolic values, and the self-referentiality of the Chaldean label is now on a par with the self-referentiality of its collective memory site.[57]

In fact, all of the recently evolved public displays of 'Chaldeanness' in a Metropolitan Detroit community that is becoming more and more affluent and politically connected – such as the National Chaldean Museum of Babylonia, the Chaldean Educational Center of America, the Mesopotamia Learning Studio and Art Gallery, the Shenandoah Country Club with its Cultural Center and Museum, organizations such as the Chaldean Federation of America (CFA), C.A.R.E., and the Chaldean American Ladies of Charity (CALC), as well as media publications such as the

[55] Abraham & Shryock, "On Margins and Mainstreams," 30.

[56] "On Margins and Mainstreams," 9.

[57] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History," 23.

Chaldean Detroit Times and *Chaldean News* – suggest a transformational model of the Chaldean community in the USA in which the quality of discourse coupled with the quantity of participation in public affairs come together to forge the community's official place within the public sphere.[58]

Case 4: Weam Namou

"The first novelist in America to touch the heart of the Chaldean community," Namou was so described by Salam Romaya of *The Harp*, one of the popular local Chaldean periodicals in Metropolitan Detroit. Running her private family publishing house in Troy, Michigan, Namou not only published and promoted her novel *The Feminine Art* in an enterprising and lavish language, but also promised her reader five upcoming novels. All of Namou's novels, including this, the only one that has been published to date, consciously involve some interpersonal connection between the USA and Iraq. Either Iraqi and American protagonists intermingle in some Middle-Eastern locale, or the narrative itself shifts between Iraqi and American locales or both.

I chose to conclude with a discussion of Namou's work because of the ways in which this ambitious "Neo-Babylonian" writer, as she calls herself, has managed to consolidate all the ethnic identity-shaping currents discussed in the previous three cases. Her protagonist, like that of Haddad, is transformed into the good Chaldean-American as she emigrates to the USA from Iraq. Like Haddad, Namou herself was born and raised in Iraq and moved to the USA before adulthood, and like many Chaldeans she worked in the family business, a video store, for the twelve years following her arrival in Michigan. Likewise, the semi-autobiographical protagonist of *The Feminine Art*, Suham, operates within a culture of family businesses, where her husband and daughter's husband manage their own grocery stores.[59] Later on in the novel, when Suham embarks on a trip to Jordan with her nephew Michael in search of an Iraqi wife for the latter, Suham begins to see herself mirrored in a third protagonist, Rita, Michael's chosen future bride. Interpersonal communications between the americanized Chaldeans and the Iraqi Chaldeans who have just left Iraq because

[58] Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, tr. Thomas Burger (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1991): 18.

[59] Weam Namou, *The Feminine Art* (Troy MI: Hermiz, 2004): 48.

the daughter was selected for marriage begin to unfold in a manner that reminds Suham of the circumstances of her own marriage many years earlier. Namou's plot creates a genuine transnational context in which Chaldean-Americans communicate with and exert financial and social influence on Chaldean-Iraqis.[60] Meanwhile, Namou submits to subtle scrutiny the politics of politeness and the institution of marriage in the Chaldean-American community. By providing two contrasting models of Chaldean males through Salma's caring husband, George, and her irresponsible, selfish, profligate, and immature nephew, Michael (244), Namou crafts a much-needed critique of Chaldean male culture, which has not been explicitly acknowledged in writing before *The Feminine Art*.

Like Antoon and Mikhail, Namou has not lost the Arab sensibilities with which she grew up as a child in Iraq. In her website introduction it becomes evident that she equates her novel with those of other Arab-American authors, and her identity with theirs:

> It's estimated that three million Arabs live in the US, the fastest growing group of immigrants. Yet there are only two-dozen or so Middle Eastern authors who have written novels in English or whose work has been translated from Arabic. *The Feminine Art* is the first in a series of novels that will dispel many myths about Iraq, Middle Eastern women, and Islam.[61]

In fact, the novel does not touch upon Islam, neither from near nor from far, and elsewhere the novel is marketed as a Chaldean, Mesopotamian or Babylonian work, as we shall see shortly. Yet, despite the inflated descriptions promoted by the author and others who have sought to publicize the work, the identity-claims did not seem problematic, but were even fluid and interchangeable. And stylistically, the overall tenor of the work suggests that Namou has been influenced by ethnic literatures, particularly Arab-American fiction such as Diana Abu Jaber's *Crescent* and *The Language of Baklava*, in which ethnic foods are also elaborately featured as a means of making a tactile and popular facet of ethnic identity accessible to a large body of outside readers. By the same token, Namou's metaphors and similes readily bring to mind the literary style of Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, another novel that could fit into the rubric of ethnic literature, with its focus on a Muslim Bengali community in London.

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[60] Weam Namou, *The Feminine Art*, 241.

[61] Weam Namou, http://www.hermizpublishing.com

Finally, in line with the semi-autobiographical fiction of Najor and Petrus, a preoccupation with family values, gender roles, and social mores is clearly at work in shaping Namou's narrative. The disapproval of and rebellion against stagnant values that appear in small or ambiguous doses in Najor and Petrus' short stories are amplified and accentuated through Namou's realism, almost to the point of turning her novel into a caustic critique of the modern Chaldean-American mind-set.

Moreover, Namou has laboured to craft a novel that, in her estimation, would reach the Chaldean-American community and gain acclaim beyond the confines of that community, in the wider Muslim- and Arab-American world as in the Christian-American world. What she has ultimately striven to achieve is the *universalization* of a popular yet credible version of ethnicity, not of a single Chaldean or a group of Chaldean individuals, but a modern Chaldean Community as a whole – or of 'ethnicity' itself. The back cover of *The Feminine Art* reads thus:

> For the first time in literary history, a Chaldean American novelist emerges to portray the descendants of ancient Mesopotamia, now called Iraq, where literature, school, law, a map of the world, and the idea of dividing time and space in multiples of 60 was first found. The forgotten people who invented writing, science and astronomy, the ancestors of modern day Iraq are presented here by Weam Namou through a deeply personal story based on true events.
>
> Set in America and the Middle East in the early 1990's, *The Feminine Art* is the story of Suham, a married woman who distracts herself from boredom by trying to find her nephew, Michael, a wife. The perfect bride happens to be in Baghdad. As the arranged wedding takes a shape of its own, Suham and Michael are challenged to face the truths within themselves that had been kept hidden behind tradition and illusion.

Namou does deliver what she promises: her novel is a thoroughly realistic depiction of a modern community that believes, or would like to believe, that it is the uninterrupted descendant of ancient Mesopotamia, a community that cherishes praise of ancient Chaldean astronomy, translation, science, and mathematics, even if these domains have little or no relevance to the lives of its contemporary members. The community that Namou's novel captures through meticulous realism, longwinded similes, humorous depictions of women's boredom, preoccupation with food preparation and gossip, male absorption in the grocery business and male

emotional immaturity – this community, with its countless pitfalls for unwary players, is put on a par with a glorious ancient civilization. For the first time, a writer has stepped up so assertively to attempt the reconciliation of the two, rather discrepant, images of Chaldeanness. Even if the likely outcome of such an attempt is to prompt the outside reader to register the relative pettiness of modern Chaldean-American culture, at least Namou has taken the first step toward integrating the dichotomized self-identities of modern Chaldeans without dismissing one half of the dichotomy.

Namou's work stands as a singular example of the interplay between assertions of the universal and of the unique. To forge viable ethnic-American identities today, the dynamic presence of these two ingredients is proving to be a requisite.

Implications

The particular narrative format an ethnic text selects tor impart information depends heavily on the projected image of its readership's collective memory vis-à-vis that ethnic group. As collective memory is selective, so is collective amnesia. It is the idiosyncrasies of each collective configuration of memory and amnesia, assumed to be the property of the targeted readership, that give rise to the specific format of the text. A text about the Chaldean community in Detroit written with a mainstream American readership in mind tends to be formatted differently from a text targeting members of the Chaldean-American community itself, which in turn is different from a third text aiming to convey the same body of knowledge to the Chaldean community in Iraq.

Added to the role of readers in setting the format of its own texts – both the text that they read and the one through which they are displayed for reading – is the role of authorship. The discourse of the active formatters, by relating to previous ethnic texts via conformity or opposition, deliberately or unwittingly begets the standardization of the literary format. The normative standards of a text produced by a sociologist studying Chaldean-Americans in Detroit are likely to differ from those espoused by an exponent of Chaldean nationalism, which in turn are apt to diverge from the normative standards of a Chaldean bishop. While it might be conducive to Sengstock's sociological assessment for her to describe kinship patterns in the Chaldean-American community, the role of the

Church, and the liquor store and grocery businesses in Detroit,[62] it is more conducive to Rev. Jammo's religious purposes to dilate upon the legacy of the Chaldean civilization in Babylonian times and the compliance of the Chaldean rite with the Roman Catholic Church since the sixteenth century.[63] By the same token, it is of greater utility than all of the above for nationalists such as Hidirsah, Phares, and Shathaya to espouse a discourse of victimology by way of channelling the injustice the Chaldeans undergo while subjects of an Arab, Kurdish or Islamic state.[64]

To state the obvious by way of conclusion: the 'ethnic text' – and I deliberately choose this ambiguous designation to simultaneously signal the written discourse of an ethnic group and the discourse that revolves around the latter – stands in a symbiotic relation to its producer and consumer. Each of the binary forces adumbrates the format for the other's narrative. Each is therefore a posited force, deploying for its implementation the vectors of the other. An ethnic text does not reach a particular readership unless it takes into account the latter's conceptual framework, the span of its collective memory, and the trajectory of its identifications. Likewise, an ethnic theme is not taken up for textual exposition unless it can be appropriated in the service of its author's chosen literary genre and agenda – along with or in opposition to the agendas of his or her socio-political context.

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[62] Sengstock, *The Chaldean Americans: Changing Conceptions of Ethnic Identity*; "Detroit's Iraqi-Chaldeans: A Conflicting Conception of Identity," in *Arabs in the New World: Studies on Arab-American Communities*, ed. Sammery Abraham & Nabeel Abraham (Detroit MI: Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, 1983): 136–46; *Kinship in a Roman Catholic Ethnic Group* (Detroit MI: Center for Urban Studies, Wayne State University, 1977); *Chaldeans in Michigan* (East Lansing: Michigan State UP, 2005).

[63] Sarhad Jammo, "Contemporary Chaldeans and Assyrians One Primordial Nation One Original Church" (2000), http://chaldeansonline.net/chald.html

[64] Yakup Hidirsah, "Massacre of Christians (Syriacs, Nestorians, Chaldeans, Armenians) in Mesopotamia and Kurds: A Documentary Study" (Hannover 1997), http://www.geocities.com/CapitolHill/Senate/6143/mez.htm

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From Romantic Mystics to Hyphenated Ethnics
Arab-American Writers Negotiating/Shifting Identities

LAYLA AL MALEH

> No one "can predict when the ethnic difference will surface, and where, and why, and how."[1]
>
> ethnicity can be an option in a way that race never can.[2]
>
> i am an arab,
> alienated from american,
> sitting on the other side of that hyphen,
> alienated from language.[3]

THE TERM 'ARAB-AMERICAN' has not been around for long. Only recently has it been fashioned to match similar appellations which suggest negotiated identities such as African-American, Native-American, Asian-American, and many others, the hyphen implying a degree of balance or even tension between the two halves of the term. In a way, hyphenation somehow defies the old metaphor of the 'melting pot', suggesting instead identities that seem resistant to 'melting' or dissolving in mainstream America. With multiculturalism, ethnic awareness, and ethnic pride on the rise, the hyphenated word accommodates

[1] William Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987): 31.

[2] Laura Browder, *Slippery Characters: Ethnic Impersonators and American Identities* (Chapel Hill & London: U of North Carolina P, 2000): 75.

[3] Laila Shereen, "On Becoming Arab," *Mizna* 6.1 (August 2001): online.

itself comfortably to contemporary discourse, proudly proclaiming hybridity, gently claiming space. Nor have Americans of Arab origin been referred to as an ethnic group or minority for long, either. They seem to have somehow dropped out of most scholarly accounts of America's ethnic groups, excluded from literary anthologies with ethnic themes or wholly ignored. Their invisibility seems to have worried no one in the past; only recently, when the word 'Arab' began to trigger a host of associations, mostly unfavourable, did they become visible and 'merit' attention.

The purpose of this essay is to trace, by surveying a span of nearly a century of Arab-American writings, the changing views Americans of Arab descent have of themselves regarding their ethnicity. It will endeavour to show that, surprisingly enough, their ethnic awareness seemed less pronounced a hundred years ago than it is now. For this purpose, it will make use of Werner Sollors' differentiation between ethnicity by "consent" and ethnicity by "descent,"[4] and will consequently show that Arab-American 'ethnicity' is quite recent and did not spring from the ethnic gaze upon the racially, linguistically or socially different but was mostly invoked in self-defence against political labelling and indictment. In other words, Arab-Americans' growing awareness of their ethnic identity does not correlate with racial issues but is the outcome of 'coalition' and 'solidarity' in the face of increasing discrimination and abuse, particularly in the wake of the abominable events of September 11. Arab-Americans have since been 'manufactured' as subaltern ethnic subjects mostly by force of political circumstance. Their ethnicity, indeed, seems to be that of 'consent' rather than of 'descent'.

In a way, Americans of Arab origin are not mindful of their hyphenated appellation, which somehow positions them on an equal par with fellow hyphenated citizens in the minds of others, for the word itself does not imply social status so much as it refers to cultural lineage or heritage. Perhaps what they actually mind, especially second- or third-generation Arab-Americans born on US soil, is any reference to them as an ethnic minority group, since this status places them in an inferior social position.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the first Arabs who emigrated to the USA were simply called 'Syrians', as they actually came from Greater Syria (then made up of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine). Although

[4] See Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986).

they met with all kinds of hardships through their immigration experience, they were little different from other immigrants such as the Irish before them and many other groups after them. They must have undergone the same "xenophobia and suffered prejudice, discrimination, negative stereotyping and ethnic slurs."[5] Yet they managed to assimilate and blend into the larger white society, not barred by colour or faith (the majority being Christian). Having left their homeland to escape Ottoman persecution, want, and poverty, they saw America's golden shores as promising a refuge and a haven; their 'ethnicity' or national identity was but a small price to pay in return for freedom and prosperity.[6] America was a saviour and liberator which could grant them a space that would procure them respect and recognition. To that end, they remained nostalgic for the Old Country, yet aspired to integrate into the land that hosted them. Trying to assimilate, they accepted the notion that they had their own 'subcultural' differences, yet felt that such differences should not set them against the grain of the nation.

Furthermore, when the first Arab immigrants settled in the New Country they did not much occupy a specific geographical site that could set them off from mainstream locations. They did not have their ghettoes, a neighbourhood, a Chinatown, or a Little Italy. True, many settled in Brooklyn, Boston, and later in the Detroit/Dearborn conurbation; nevertheless, since the majority of them were engaged in peddling and lived away from fixed abodes, their relation to place remained mobile, open, and fluid. Space as physical reality did not therefore confer 'identity' on them. This is not to ignore the fact that their strong desire to assimilate to American society matched their resistance to setting up an ethnic enclave of their own. As Gregory Orfalea, one of the most prominent critics of Arab-American literature and thought, describes them, "they were too involved with dissolving into America, disappearing, sinking like old coffee

[5] Eva Veronika Huseby–Darvas, "Coming to America: Dilemmas of Ethnic Group Since the 1880s," in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994): 9.

[6] As Roger Sanjek puts it, immigrants pay the price of "linguistic extinction and cultural loss for the privilege of white racial status," gaining "the prize of race awarded upon the surrender of ethnicity"; "The Enduring Inequalities of Race," in *Race*, ed. Steven Gregory & Roger Sanjek (New Brunswick NJ: Rutgers UP, 1994): 19.

into the new soil. The Arabs are connectors of people, bridges, but they are also great hiders, vanishers."[7]

The shift from a desire to "dissolve"[8] in white America to a desire to stand out as representatives of a now conspicuously ethnic community will be traced in the literary works of two groups of writers. The first is that of early Arab immigrants: namely Gibran Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931), Mikhail Naimy (1889–1988), and Ameen Rihani (1876–1941), who saw themselves as 'global' citizens crossing national boundaries and traversing cultural divides. The other is a group of second- or third-generation Arab-Americans who timidly approach the American literary scene seeking admission and recognition, articulating their 'ethnic' experience, and pronouncing the double consciousness of their hybrid identity.

The three most prominent early Arab-Americans writers in English are, as listed above, Gibran, Naimy, and Rihani. All of them had their English works published in the USA and received considerable acclaim from readers and reviewers. All three wrote verse and prose that echoed Biblical narratives and Islamic Sufism, blended with British Romanticism, American Transcendentalism, Nietzschean philosophy, and Brahman thought.[9] Gibran and his contemporaries did not write about the Arab/Syrian/Lebanese component in them so much as about the global citizen who refused national labelling. In fact, they cared less for the fact-laden narratives of their own realistic particularities, old or new, and opted for the more nebulous world of philosophical abstraction. Grafting their esoteric mysticism on the thought and philosophy of American transcendentalism (which shares much with Islamic Sufism, particularly the concept of Pantheism and the Emersonian notion of the Over-Soul), they represented paradigms of transnationalism and cultural border-crossing.

While each of these writers had his own literary style, they seem to have developed common traits. The three authors knew each other very well, exchanged literary advice, and acted as one another's critics. Both

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[7] Gregory Orfalea, *Before the Flames: A Quest for the History of Arab Americans* (Austin: U of Texas P, 1988): 3.

[8] Orfalea, *Before the Flames*, 3.

[9] For more information, see Joseph P. Ghoughassian, *Kahlil Gibran: Wings of Thought* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1973), and Khalil Hawi, *Kahlil Gibran: His Background, Character and Works* (Beirut: American U of Beirut, 1963).

Gibran and Naimy were founding members of Al Rabita (The Pen Bond), a literary society which sponsored the creative works of Arab writers in the USA. They all came from lower-middle-class Christian families in the Lebanon, and had more or less similar educational backgrounds. Above all, they wanted to synthesize worthy elements from their hybrid cultures and to transcend their ethnic identity, immersing themselves in the "waters of the American dream."[10]

In a way, early Arab-American writers suffered no cultural restrictions or political repression. The Fanonian delineation of the intricate relationship of colonizer to colonized would not have applied here; America was not a colonizer; they were not the colonized.[11] It was a relatively unproblematic, un-inhibiting association of free people in search of the same American vistas. In mitigatation of any suggestion of a cultural divide, Gibran and Rihani rhapsodized the 'global' citizen:

> We are not of the East or the West;
> No boundaries exist in our breast:
> We are free.
> Nor Crescent nor Cross we adore;
> Nor Buddha nor Christ we implore;
> Nor Muslem nor Jew we abhor;
> We are free.[12]

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[10] Curiously enough, they wrote very little about their immigration experience and the hardships they and their families must have suffered. There is hardly any mention in Gibran's works, for example, of the wretched living conditions of Oliver Place, Boston, where he and his family lived. "He rarely spoke of it […]. Instead, he denied the hardships and hurts […] in so thorough a way that a clear understanding of the social forces and the early influences that molded him becomes nearly impossible." Probably because the "truth of the indignities which were the daily fare of his family was too much for his fragile ego to bear, he overlaid the filth and stench of Oliver Place with a veneer of imaginary stories of a privileged childhood suitable to the son of noble parents." Jean & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World* (New York: New York Graphic Society, 1974): 29.

[11] It is interesting to see this idea reiterated in the poetry of Sam Hamod, particularly his poem "Dying with the Wrong Name," where he says: "We are the real thing – no one ever conquered / us, no one ever bought us, and we come to our religion / and culture not by governance but by choice"; *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry*, ed. Hayan Charara (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 2008): 129.

[12] Rihani, *A Chant of Mystics and Other Poems* (1921; Beirut: Rihani House, 1970):

This is indeed a precursor *par excellence* of the global village: a frontierless world that eases dialectical cultural tensions, subsuming them under an ontologically unified identity– doubtless an idealistic situation which challenges and disavows the most insistent of Hegelian controversies.

In his *Prophet* (1923) as well as in his other works, Gibran addressed the people of Orphalese (New York) with the sure voice of a redeemer, not that of the timid immigrant. From a level of parity or even an occasional superiority, he preached to them about life, love, marriage, children, and about their inner selves; he praised them, criticized them, reproached them, and instructed them with the confidence of the all-knowing, the omnipotent:

> My friends and my neighbors and you who daily pass my gate,
> I would speak to you in your sleep, and in the valley of your
> dreams I would walk naked and unrestrained; far heedless are
> your waking hours and deaf are your sound-burdened ears.
> [...]
> Like moths that seek destruction in the flame, you gather daily
> in my garden; and with faces uplifted and eye enchanted, you
> watch me tear the fabric of your days. And in whispers you say,
> the one to the other, 'He sees with the light of God. He unveils
> our souls and unlocks our hearts.[13]

Similarly, Gibran's *The Madman: His Parables and Poems* (1918), *The Forerunner* (1920), *Jesus, Son of Man* (1928), and other works were aphoristic explorations directed at a global reader unconfined by geographical borders. Here again, Gibran shifts from the narrative to the meditative. Not infrequently, he steps aside from the sequence of events to engage in boundless moral and philosophical speculations in which the speaker is immediately elevated from his position as narrator to the higher position of seer. In the words of the German orientalist Karl Bröckelmann, Gibran's work in a sense is reflective of the "Psalms of David, the Song of Solomon, of the Book of Job, of the lamentations of Jeremiah, of the

106; http://www.alhewar.com/Bushrui_Rihani.html

[13] Gibran, *The Forerunner*, 57.

vision of Isaiah, as well as the exhortation of the Galilean."[14] Gibran's voice was not that of the subaltern; his was the utterances of a Messiah.[15]

The messianic voice did not emerge from a vacuum. Gibran had little schooling in Lebanon before arriving in the USA. The Bible was the book he knew best, a book that must have shaped his early style and literary tastes. The prophetic voice must have equally come from a long-standing artistic and literary heritage of Arab tradition and culture which could not be erased, a culture that raised poets to the level of prophets and declared them the recorders of history and the custodians of collective memory. It was within this spirit of trust and confidence invested in him by his Arab cultural legacy and conferred on him by the enthusiastic reception and recognition accorded him in the New World that Gibran rhapsodized with the voice of the universal sage.

Indeed, what is remarkable here is the amazing confidence, whether assumed or genuine, with which the early Arab immigrant writers related to mainstream American letters. The fact that Gibran, in the words of his namesake Kahlil Gibran, grew from "a provincial Arabic writer, speaking of problems limited to a particular geographical area, to an American writer of commanding English, expressing universal ideas and concerns"[16] is compelling.

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[14] Cited by Jean Lecerf, "Djabran Khalil Djabran et les origins de la prose poétique," *Orient* 3 (1957): 11.

[15] One is tempted to see in this a reflection of Gibran's tendency to exoticize himself in response to pressures from stereotypes. Such exoticism could perhaps grant him a sense of mission and project him, in the eyes of others, not as a subaltern but as a master of spirituality. A relocation of identity and an assertion of importance were equally echoed in the writings of Gibran's contemporary critics, who described the poet as "the gift of the East to the West" (Farid Antun, *Al Khalid Al Rahil: Gibran Hayyan*, 35). The West was said to be wanting in spirituality and Gibran was its saviour. "Although the Lebanese and the Arabs were suffering the humiliation of dominance by the Western powers," wrote Khalil Hawi, "the West, for all its material power, or perhaps because of it was in need of a spiritual message which it could not create for itself, and for which it turned gratefully to a Lebanese and an Arab" (*Kahlil Gibran*, 72). In this sense, the messianic association becomes an act of defence against any possible denigration in the host country.

[16] Jean & Kahlil Gibran, *Kahlil Gibran: His Life and World*.

Like Gibran, Mikhail Naimy[17] had a cosmic conception of his role as author, and felt that he had a universal message to convey. His Russian education, supplemented by American schooling, shaped his literary talents and gave him access to an international readership, particularly when writing in English. "I do not think as an Arab only," he says, "nor do I address myself solely to the Arabs. My thoughts are universal and I write for all people, of all races and ages."[18]

Like Gibran's *Prophet*, Naimy's *Book of Mirdad*: *A Lighthouse and a Haven* introduces a hero who is also a kind of Messiah reincarnate. In the vein of Al Mustafa, he instructs an assembly of monks who, emulating the Disciples of Christ, go out into the world to spread the Gospel. The work has equally strong echoes of Biblical style, and of Zarathustra's preaching to his people. It, too, is concerned with divinity, striving through doubt to reach God, and with the hero's inner quest for mystical unity rather than concern with externally mediated observation and interpretation of real life.

In writing *The Book of Mirdad*, Naimy produced an allegory not much different from Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*. Mirdad's journey to the summit, the characters he meets during his ascent, the appellations in the entire work – these are all allegorical. What sets him apart from Bunyan, however, is his extraordinary skill in imbuing his preaching with episodes that prove their author to be a most engaging storyteller. Yet, although Naimy controls the telling, he cannot manipulate the action for long, because he is soon tempted to yield to his psycho-philosophical fancies and mount the preacher's pulpit again.[19]

In his attempt to address the mind and the heart, reason and emotion, Naimy's tone is cool and reserved, unlike Gibran's impassioned ductus. Yet, while Gibran's naivety of expression is so incongruously great that it

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[17] Naimy was the most educated of the three. He was educated by Russian missionaries and attended university in Russia. In the USA, he obtained a degree in law from Washington University. Naimy wrote some eighty stories, of which only four were written in English or rendered into that language. His works include *The Book of Mirdad: A Lighthouse and a Haven*, *Memoirs of a Vagrant Soul*, *The Pitted Face*; *Till We Meet*, and *Gibran Kahlil Gibran*.

[18] *Sabun: Hikayat Umr* (Seventy: A Life Story) (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1968): 216. (my tr.).

[19] For further information, see Nadim Naimy, *Mikhail Naimy: An Introduction* (Beirut: American University of Beirut, 1967).

is captivating, Naimy's taciturnity occasionally irritates. But one should not forget that his chief mission, as he frequently proclaimed, was to instruct, not to entertain, to educate, not to amuse, which explains many of his polemical undertones. In the words of Kenneth Walker, the *Aryan Path* reviewer, Mirdad's message "is the message that comes from the depths of all the great religions, and his instructions for moving about unfettered by the small 'self' of everyday life are instructions similar to those given for the discovery of the Atman or Greater Self of the Hindus."[20]

The Book of Khalid by Ameen Rihani is one more example of how the early Arab-Americans viewed their mission as writers. Seen in relation to the works of Gibran and Naimy, the *Book* seems similarly preoccupied with philosophical and moral quests, although it reflects a much greater degree of truthfulness to life, and a more realistic presentation of man in relation to society. Although characters, events, and narratives here appear to enjoy a certain vitality, reality, and energy, these are often tied together with a string of abstract philosophical lucubrations that shrink them into a dwarfish world. The *Book*, too, has its 'genesis' in the works of Emerson, Thoreau, and Whitman, on the one hand, and Rousseau and Carlyle, on the other. Although largely based on Rihani's autobiography, it is not only a narrative but a philosophical dissertation and a work of moral indoctrination, mystical imagination, and satirical and political understatement.

Of all the works written by early Arab-Americans, Rihani's *The Book of Khalid* is the one that most conspicuously raises the identitarian question of being torn between the attractions of the West and those of the East. The contrasts between the two are established and the mental nebulosity of the protagonist finally resolves itself into a desire to "build his World Temple […] on the Borderline of the Orient and Occident […] on the mountain heights overlooking both," where "no false Gods are worshipped."[21] Rihani sets his observations of the West and his impressions of the East side by side, to conclude that "the dawn of a better, purer, healthier, higher spiritual kingdom" could only emerge when one grafts "the strenuosity of Europe and America upon the ease of the Orient."

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[20] *The Aryan Path* (March 1963): 13.

[21] *The Book of Khalid* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1911): 23.

> Of the Orient and Occident, the male and female of the spirit, the two great streams in which the body and soul of man are refreshed, invigorated, purified – of both I sing, in both I glory, to both I consecrate my life, for both I shall work suffer and die. The most highly developed being is neither European nor Oriental; but rather he who partakes of the finer qualities of both the European genius and the Asiatic Prophet.[22]

Rihani authored some twenty-five works in English and about twenty in Arabic – travel books, political pamphlets, and works on social doctrine.[23] In almost all of them, he assumed the position of philosopher, truth-seeker, and dreamer. Confident in his intellectual and spiritual quest, he debated with American politicians and, roaming the coasts of Arabia, met with kings and emirs, always giving advice and offering counsel.[24] Like his early Arab-American contemporaries, Rihani was the romantic 'unbound' citizen of a borderless world.

The second generation of Arab-Americans somehow lost this cosmic view of themselves and of their mission as writers. Furthermore, they were less able or less desirous to maintain the cultural balance which their predecessors sustained. The 'universal' voice was slowly to dissolve into a more pronounced American one in the 1950s and 1960s, giving way to writing that gradually drew away from Arab concerns. Thus, Vance Bourjaily (1922–), for one, who was described by Gregory Orphalea as "one of the only serious American novelists of Lebanese heritage to make a name for himself in fiction,"[25] identified almost totally as an American. Born in Cleveland, he received little encouragement from his parents to nurture an Arab identity. As novelist, Bourjaily, was quite prolific; nonetheless, he had only one work with an Arab-American character. Quincey, the protagonist of his semi-autobiographical novel *Confessions of a Spent*

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[22] *The Book of Khalid*, 266–67.

[23] For example, *Around the Coasts of Arabia* (London: Constable, 1930 & New York: Houghton Miffin, 1931); *Ibn Saud of Arabia* (Boston MA: Houghton Miffin, 1928); *Arabian Peak and Desert* (London: Constable, 1930); *The Descent of Bolshevism* (Boston MA: Stratford, 1920); "Turkey and Islam in the War" (unpublished pamphlet).

[24] Cf. King Faysal al Awal, *Around the Coasts of Arabia, Arabian Peak and Desert* (Beirut: Dar Sader, 1934).

[25] Gregory Orfalea, *The Arab Americans: A History* (Northampton MA: Interlink, 2006): 143.

Youth, was brought up not so much to conceal his origin as to ignore it.[26] Questioned about the absence of the Arab theme or sentiment in his novels and the reason why he did not make use of his Arab heritage the way Saroyan, Mailer or Bellow (his best literary associates) did with their Armenian and Jewish legacy respectively, Bourjaily explained that a narrative of this nature ought to be written by an author who must have been

> … a kid who was brought up in an Arabic-speaking ghetto, or working-class neighborhood, who is really confined in folk ways, in customs. These have to be the tensions of his boyhood and adolescence.

Those tensions were "certainly not for [him].[27] Such narratives, he added, emerge where "the ethnic community is seen as confining, restricting, but perhaps if you get wounded, you go back to it to get bandaged."[28]

Tensions multiplied in the three decades which followed, and with them came wounds that needed to be bandaged. In the Arab homeland three wars with Israel were waged, a civil war in Lebanon, the invasion of Kuwait, then the Iraq debacle, resulting in an influx of new immigrants (this time more diverse in loyalties and inclinations). In the USA, September 11 shook the nation and split the rest of the world into 'us' and 'them', into axes of evil, coalitions and alliances. The Arab-Americans who were 'vanishing' became at once visible, needing to defend themselves, seeking to assert an identity and express solidarity. Their ethnicity began to witness the pangs of birth.

A cursory look at Arab-American literature which thrived around that period would reveal a curious strain of collective pain, of personal and communal trauma. One could not, perhaps, spot this feeling in the individual poem or story published separately here and there. But, once anthologized, these works immediately prompt the reader to realize that the collective experience of Arab-Americans, as reflected in their writing, has none of the celebratory nature of a Gibran or a Rihani. Even Diana Abu Jaber's novels, full of clever humour and wit, seem to at times to betray pangs of some hidden grief.

Perhaps Arab-American writers had nothing much to celebrate. It all started with the 1967 war in the Middle East, which Gregory Orfalea de-

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[26] Cited by Orfalea, *The Arab Americans*, 148.

[27] Orfalea, *The Arab Americans*, 148.

[28] Orfalea, *The Arab Americans*, 148.

scribed in *Before the Flames* as an epiphany in his own life, a turning-point in his concept of his own identity. This feeling is further supported by someone like Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, who equally subscribes to the idea that it is wars and crises that forge identity:

> it was the June war of 1967 that first awakened most Arab-Americans to their new identity [...]. Before that event, most of them were unaware of or unconcerned about their Arab origins [...] the term 'Arab-American' had not yet come into general usage.[29]

That same war became an epiphany for many of Gregory's contemporaries, whose works were conspicuously becoming more and more politicized. The image of the Arabs was slowly being distorted and denigrated, their very position in American society coming under suspicion. All of a sudden, catching them unawares, political events they never solicited or condoned were thrusting them out of the mainstream, marginalizing, minoritizing, and ethnicizing them. The pain of discrimination could not be concealed.

Dima Hilal aptly describes this distrust in Arab-Americans in her poem "America":

> we cross from Andalusia to these pacific shores
> we carry memories in a single suitcase
> abandon brothers, skyscrapers and tight alleyways
> villages framed with grape leaves and fig trees
> the land of Jesus and Abraham
> [...]
> we fade into the fabric of these united states
> pay our taxes, pledge our allegiance
> lose ourselves in its thick folds
> success finds us and we find success
> intoxicating

The "epicenter" shifts; all of a sudden, she says, "we know the endless sorrow / of life snatched without warning or reason," when the two planes

[29] Nabeel Abraham, "Anti-Arab Racism and Violence in the United States," in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. Ernest McCarus (Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1994): 159. See also Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, "Maintaining the Faith of the Fathers: Dilemmas of Religious Identity in the Christian and Muslim Arab-American Communities," in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. McCarus, 61–84.

hit the Twin Towers on September 11, shifting with them the identity locus of all Arab-Americans:

> *wait, isn't that where you're from?*
> let's bomb them back to the stone age
> those arabs
> never should have let them into our country
> those arabs

Hilal enumerates the slurs she had often heard directed against her people: "turban-wearing, towel-headed, dirty, motherfucking, camel loving terrorists." In repudiation, she reminds her abusers of her origin: "born by the Mediterranean / our mothers bathe us in orange blossom water / olive tress and cedars strain to give us shade."[30]

Her final words are those of sorrow as she sees the irony of her American dream:

> we cross from Andalusia to these Pacific shores
> we flee fighter jets and darkening skies
> escape shrapnel scenes,
> for the American dream
> the American dream.[31]

Jean–Paul Sartre once said that "Jews are made by the existence of anti-semitism." By the same token, Arab-Americans were beginning to develop a kind of ethnicity binding them in the face of external abuse. While they had considered themselves perfect or at least potential assimilates, the valency of the hyphen shifted, tilting towards the Arab. Apart from the various associations, societies, and journals that have flourished in the past couple of decades with the aim of protecting the Arab community from possible violations,[32] Arab-American writers were displaying solidarity with that community and with the Old Country. The Arab inside them was stirring more and more strongly.

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[30] Dima Hilal, "America," in *The Poetry of Arab Women: A Contemporary Anthology*, ed. Nathalie Handal (New York: Interlink, 2001): 119–20.

[31] Susan Muaddi Darraj, *Scheherazade's Legacy*, 105, 106.

[32] For example, the American-Arab Anti Discrimination Committee (ADC) was founded in 1980 by James Abourezk; the National Association of Arab Americans (NAAA); the Arab American Institute (AAI) founded by James Zoghby.

Ever more writers were addressing issues pertaining to their experiences of hybridity or acculturation. Memoirs, novels, and poems began to pour out, bearing titles that invoked the Arab world in manifold ways: Laila Halabi's *West of the Jordan*, Yasmin Zahran's *A Beggar at Damascus Gate*, Evelyn Shakir's *Bint Arab*; Diana Abu Jaber's *Arabian Jazz*, *Crescent* (which has Islamic bearings), and *The Language of Baklava*; Samia Serageldine's *Cairo House*, Naomi Shihab Nye's *Habibi* – these are just a few examples of writings with strong Arab connections.

Titles of more recent anthologies suggested an outgrowth of earlier works or established continuity with Arab heritage. Thus, *Post Gibran: Anthology of New Arab American Writing* (1999) has Gibran as a starting-point, whereas the two anthologies that followed in 2004 had Scheherazade and Dinarzad as their points of reference, suggesting deeper connectiveness and cultural affinity.[33] This is not to forget the countless titles invoking Arab culinary practices. The title of the very recent anthology of Arab-American poets by Hayan Charara, *Inclined to Speak* (2008), equally suggests a desire to break the silence, establish connections, and speak out on behalf of three million people living in the USA who are at once Arab and American.

In a way, this simply reflects the sense of double consciousness and in-betweenness that characterize the present age, which Michel Foucault described as "the epoch of simultaneity [...] the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and the far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed."[34] Writers found in Edward Said the epitome of what Foucault meant. To Salma Khadra Al Jayyusi,

> the most outstanding Arab American writer was Edward Said. He wrote in the very heart of the Western tradition without losing sight of his relation with, and responsibility for, his native language and culture.

She further found it incumbent on Arab-Americans

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[33] *Scheherazade's Legacy: Arab and Arab-American Women on Writing*, ed. Susan Muaddi Darraj (Westport CT & London: Praeger/Greenwood, 2004); *Dinarzad's Children: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab Fiction*, ed. Pauline Kaldas & Khaled Mattawa (Fayetteville: U of Arkansas P, 2004).

[34] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces," tr. Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics* 16.1 (Spring 1986): 22–27; cited by Wesley A. Kort, *Place and Space in Modern Fiction* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2004): 3.

> 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.[35]

Several writers translated this connectedness into political activism, both in their personal lives and in their works, without losing sight of their American identity. The Palestinian theme, in particular, received growing attention, especially the fact that most post-1967 immigrants came from a 'Palestinian diasporic' background. Ibrahim Fawal's *On the Hills of God*, Diana Abu Jaber's unpublished novel "Memories of Birth," and Shaw Dallal's *Scattered Like Seeds* (1998) are examples of attempts to write an Arab 'Exodus' or raise awareness of the plight of the Palestinians. In *Scattered Like Seeds*, the main character expresses the plight of hybridity in words to his American wife:

> "I'm [...] surprised and alarmed by my own feeling. I just hadn't realized that after living so many years in the United States, married to you and with your Yankee children, I would still have these passionate feelings about my homeland and my people."[36]

Indeed, much current Arab-American writing is passionately, politically charged, whether explicitly or implicitly. In proportion to their numbers or size of community, and in view of the greater freedom of expression they enjoy, Arab-American writers seem to be more engaged in political discourse than their counterparts in the Old Country. An ocean away from their fellow Arabs, they do not seem to be hampered by distance. Located in a technically advanced world where means of electronic communication are within everybody's reach, they are not cut off from the rest of the world. Arab satellite channels like Al Jazeera and Al Arabiyah have contributed to their mounting political consciousness, kindling memories, arousing sympathetic views towards fellow Arabs world-wide, and engendering connectedness and a sense of cohesion. All in all, these channels have, to a large extent, helped Arab-Americans maintain an ongoing relation with their ancestral home and create a 'transnational space' that 're-territorializes' them.

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[35] http://www.saudiaramcoworld.com/issue/200502/stories/bio11.html

[36] Shaw Dalal, *Scattered Like Seeds* (Syracuse NY: Syracuse UP, 1998): 11.

This growing political engagement, coupled with concurrent humiliation of their people within the USA, has fostered a strong inclination to express resentment and offence. "I cannot remember the last time I saw a newspaper headline," says Joanna Kadi, "that did not link Palestinians and terrorism, Islam and fanaticism."[37]

A telling story of identity negotiation is that of Mojahid Daoud's journey between two names, the Arabic name given to him at birth and the American 'Mark David'. Daoud (1962–), in his "Growing Up Arab in America,"[38] describes how, as a child, his family preferred to change his name into one with a more American resonance. Daoud explains how he welcomed the chance to blend into an American identity. Yet, while growing up, he began to be more conscious of the injustices committed in the Middle East, and gradually felt he was drifting away from his 'Americanness', since the media were discrediting and denigrating the culture and integrity of his people. Mark David decided to be Mojahid Daoud once again. Similarly, Sam Hamod (1936-), one of Arab America's most established poets, provides in "Dying with the Wrong Name" a painful, even heartbreaking, image of Arabs whose names were corrupted or twisted at Ellis Island:

a man
    In a dark blue uniform
    At Ellis Island says, with
    Tiredness and authority,
    "You only need two
    Names in America," and suddenly
    Cleanly as air
You've lost
    Your name:
    At first, it's hardly
    Even noticeable – it's easier, you can move about
    As an American – but looking back
The loss of your name
Cuts away some other part,
Something unspeakable

[37] Joanna Kadi, *Food for Our Grandmothers: Writing by Arab-American and Arab-Canadian Feminist* (Boston MA: South End, 1994): xvi.

[38] Loretta Hall, *Arab American Voices* (Arab American Reference Library; Detroit MI: UXL, 1999): 85.

Is lost.[39]

Equally striking is Sara Nadia Rashad's passage to identity. Born in Honolulu, raised in Hawai'i and Alaska, an ambitious actress and graduate of Cornish College of the Arts, Seattle, resident of California, Rashad still dreams "of the Pyramids of Egypt." Her greatest fantasy has always been to become "Princess of the Entire Arab World." She plans a trip to Egypt but her arrival at Cairo airport threatens to be a disaster. Airport officials shove her around, her luggage, the physical link between the world she left behind and the one she was about to step into, is lost; the place is shockingly filthy, full of smoke and of flies that "weren't even dizzy." Three months spent in the country awaken in her heart a new reality. "Egypt was painful," she said, "and yet, I now realize, it was my home."[40]

Arab-American writers, in search of their identity, have been studying their very own faces to trace their histories. Khaled Muttawa, in his poem "History of My Face," finds diverse cultures claiming his features – lips from African slaves, eyebrows from the Greeks, his nose shaped by Turkish ancestors, his hair traced to Septemus Severus, and his eyelashes to Muslim conquerors. Nothing more 'multicultural' than that! Others, however, become more conscious of the danger their features elicit – they "bear the face of the enemy," like the Japanese before them, who "had a similar 'facial' trauma":[41] "the face of terror / mostly /looks / like / me."[42]

Elmaz Abinader studies a photo of her mother: "Her face is open, her gray eyes bright, even in black and white; her nose is long and slightly hooked, and her cheeks are wide."

> That is my face, the one I grew into. The one that causes all the trouble.
> They caution, when you travel, try not to look so [...]
> Arab?
> Yes, Arab.[43]

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[39] Sam Hamod, "Dying with the Wrong Name," in *Inclined to Speak: An Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Poetry*, ed. Charara, 121.

[40] Sara Nadia Rashad, "Walking like an Egyptian," in *Ear to the Ground*, 319.

[41] Richard Montoya, "Anthems." Cited by Maha Said in "The Face of the Enemy."

[42] Richard Montoya, "Anthems."

[43] Elmaz Abinader, "Profile of an Arab Daughter," *Al Jadid: A Review & Record of Arab Culture and Arts* 7/37 (Fall 2001): 8–10, http://66.249.93.104/search?q=cache

An Arab face poses a threat to Abinader. "My dark eyes would be revealed and my life would be uncovered." Sketching a profile at school is cleverly connected to racial profiling later on in her life. That face would be targeted, suspected, and scrutinized. Her memories of being searched at airports clearly push her out of the American mainstream into racial difference.

> I read about security guards being trained in what a terrorist is likely to *look like* as they pass through security. But not any kind of terrorists: ones with dark hair, aquiline features, deep eyes. By the end of the article, my entire family was indicted.[44]

Following the September 11 events, most Americans thought that Americans of Arab origin should carry identification cards with photos of their faces:

> They think that capturing our faces, pasting them flat on a card with our names and addresses, will somehow lessen the dangers […] suddenly we are all suspects and apart from everyone else, people who need to be feared and named.

In "Sixty Minutes: a poem and a journal,"[45] Abinader defends her face against erroneous identification with suicide bombers appearing on TV screens "talking to the camera," with "the m-16, strapped / like a quiver to their shoulders packed with ammo / instead of feathers that can end your life / or mine." The threat of death here aligns her with all Americans and positions her against all acts of killing or violence. She reminds her readers of her Americanism, that she "was born in Pennsylvania with fertile blue grass, and uncharred / trees."[46] Her birthplace does not, however, exempt her from indictment:

> You looked for me in this landscape, wondered if I
> had a suicide pact with someone, a battle plan, wondered
> if the dark eyes you have stared into were an illusion,

:wvw5YOwyNsgJ:www.aljadid .com/features/0737abinader.html+elmaz+abinader&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=21

[44] Reference can also be accessed on: http://66.249.93.104/search?q=cache :wvw5YOwyNsgJ:www.aljadid.com/features/0737abinader.html+elmaz+abinader&hl=en&ct=clnk&cd=21

[45] Mattawa & Akash, *Post Gibran*, 19.

[46] Mattawa & Akash, *Post Gibran*, 21.

> if I had something behind my back, hidden beneath my clothes.
> Or if I were a widow weeping into my apron, a mother holding
> out the bloody child to the camera shouting, *show the world*
> *What they have done*

The pain of denial is severe. Abinader has been constantly keeping a perfect balance in her life and works between the two hyphenated words/worlds, Arab and American. She, like many, is part and parcel of American society.

> The flight attendant on your last trip was Lebanese,
> your accountant, a Jordanian. You notice the woman
> taking your clothes at the dry cleaner has a name tag
> that reads Samira.

Yet

> You go to the middle east grocer,
> not to buy food but to look at faces you superimpose
> onto mine onto theirs
> […]
> Your eyes searching the crowds
> For me. […]
> […] You have forgotten
> my small hands can grip nothing bigger than a pen
> or a needle, that my eyes wander, do not focus and aim

Recent writings by Arab-Americans abound with 'airport' stories. Naomi Shihab Nye hides the book with the Arabic words in it so that she does not scare the passenger sitting next to her.

> I wonder whether this is making him nervous since we're on a plane. I feel very concerned about the sensitivities of cultural identity now whenever I'm on a plane. One would not just toss it around.[47]

Similarly, Nabeel Abraham tells of the ordeal of an American lady of Arab origin who was questioned and asked to leave the plane because "a passenger had expressed concern about the book" she was reading ("Palestine Is, but Not in Jordan") while waiting for her flight "This is a sensitive subject at airports," the airline employee informed her.[48]

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[47] Susan Muaddi Darraj, *Scheherazade's Legacy*, 94.

[48] Nabeel Abraham, "Anti-Arab Racism and Violence in the United States," in *The Development of Arab-American Identity*, ed. McCarus, 172.

To humanize the Arabs, Arab-American writers had to be their own spokespersons. They realized the need to dedicate their voices to subverting the calcified terms of signification which tied them to a string of insults. To that end, they discovered affinities with other marginalized groups in the USA who had similar experiences of social and political exigencies and angst. Barbara Nimri Aziz, a critic and anthropologist, called for a closer knowledge of African-American experiences, as those could help Arab-American writers in their "struggle for empowerment and recognition." The Arabs, Aziz asserted, could "follow the example of other Asian and Indian writers like Maxine Hong Kingston, Amy Tan, Jampa Lahiri and Bharati Mukerjee, who have made a whole people visible and passionate."[49] Similarly, Elmaz Abinader, upon reading *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston, discovered a common "community" where "American writers and artists of color often travel the same terrain" as herself, "living with dual sensitivities, negotiating where one culture […] conflicts with […] other culture, looking for a place that is home."[50]

Increasing solidarity with other hyphenated identities is also reflected in Nathalie Handal's choice of books. Reading African-American authors such as June Jordan, Alice Walker, and Langston Hughes makes her realize that "they wrote about experiences of marginalization, discrimination, and injustice, about issues [she] related to." It is from them that she learned the significance of 'roots'. "We long to belong," she says, "we need to know that the trees of our country are growing inside of us."[51]

A new space, then, needed to be carved out for the Arab-American writer, one that could be shared with other ethnic groups. The margin was becoming wide enough to incorporate them all. This is the realization Joanna Kadi came to: "the image of the Arabs, *like other people of color* in this […] society […], is simultaneously emphasized and ignored":

> During crises, Arabs can be reassured we exist as a *distinct racial group*. We will remember it, in the dark of night and the light of day. We will feel the effects of the social construction of "the Arabs" that has cast us as enemy, other, fanatical terrorist, crazy Muslim.

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[49] Susan Muaddi Darraj, *Scheherazade's Legacy*, ed. Darraj, xi.

[50] Elmaz Abnader, "Just Off Main Street," http:// usinfo.state.gov/products/pubs /writers/abinader.htm

[51] *Scheherazade's Legacy*, ed. Susan Muaddi Darraj, 41.

> If we are women we can add to that list veiled woman and exotic whore.[52]

Shifting the locus of identity to other minority groups in a quest for affinity and analogy is perhaps best exemplified by the title of Suheir Hammad's first major work, *Born Palestinian, Born Black* (1996).[53] By identifying with the ethnic Other, the Arab-American writer has chosen ethnicity, has chosen colour. Equally interesting is Leila Ahmad's confession in *A Border Passage: From Cairo to America – A Woman's Journey* (1999) that she did not become "a woman of color" until she lived in England, and did not become Arab until she moved to the USA.[54]

What is clear is the emergence of an ethnic ethos which solicits sticking together, defence of group turf. By embracing ethnicity, Arab-Americans have perhaps been growing more defiant, more adamant about challenging and speaking back to authority. To endorse her ethnicity, Elmaz Abinader, tired of being stereotyped, will slip into her Arab character with kohl around her eyes and incense in her house:

> I'm sorry, the coffee's cold and I need
> o get home. I need to burn
> frankincense and cedar logs,
> I need to outline my eyes with kohl.
> I need to shroud myself with embroidery
> and arabesques. I will practice
> marching to Marcel and recite the teachings
> of Mahmoud.[55]

Other examples of ethnic representation or identification can be seen in the countless references in Arab-American prose and poetry – increasingly criticized for being overdone – to culinary pecularities or Arab music. "Grape Leaves,"[56] "The *Language of Baklava*"[57] – such phrases, which appear in titles, verses, book covers, in every chapter and every line, seem to carry as much emotional weight and signification as national flags or

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[52] Joanna Kadi, *Food for Our Grandmothers*, xvi.

[53] Hammad tells that she is aware of how Audre Lorde, a famous African-American poet, discussed black as being a political identity as well as a cultural identity.

[54] Leila Ahmad, *A Border Passage* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1999): 238, 254.

[55] Cited by Maha Said, " The Face of the Enemy," 200.

[56] Orfalea, *Grape Leaves: A Century of Arab-American Poetry*.

[57] Diana Abu Jaber, *The Language of Baklava*.

emblems. The songs of the Lebanese singer Fairouz have equally become a means of representation as binding as a national anthem. In their seemingly innocent associations, these images invoke not epicurean nostalgia or sweet melancholic longing for the Old Country but communal loyalty. They show the ethnic's ability to generate the sense of difference out of a shared cultural context. They further help, through cults of coffee-making and the preparation of *national* dishes, to invoke acts of self-referentiality with a view to locating origins, posit affinity, recognize connections, and promote a sense of brotherhood. It becomes quite clear that even the food cult has been gradually politicized to create or maintain cultural or ethnic distinctiveness.

It is important to grasp the epistemological underpinning of the repositioning of Arab-American communities. Cultural and political collectiveness has not been the only factor in the shifting of identity. Religion has also recently been enlisted to set them apart from mainstream America. Michel Laguerre is probably right in thinking that "we are embarking on an era of restructuring and deterritorialization of the nation-state." At one time it was the Jews who were constructed as a minority on the basis of their faith. Now it is the Muslims who are set apart by positioning them in what Laguerre calls a 'theoscape'[58] to gauge their suspect status.

To speak of a growing awareness of ethnicity among Americans of Arab origin is to endorse what William Boelhower prophesied in *Through a Glass Darkly* – that no one "can predict when the ethnic difference will surface, and where, and why, and how."[59] What follows is the thought that Arab-American ethnicity perhaps possesses a temporal dimension and may be transient. There may, indeed, come a time when Arab-Americans feel that their ethnicity is superfluous, and that its opacity and flexibility are inscribed in time, and may change over time. In other words, the Arab-Americans' growing awareness of their ethnic identity has been the outcome of 'coalition' and 'solidarity' in alleviating collective tension in the face of discriminatory behaviour and the whims of political crises.

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[58] Michel Laguerre, *Minoritized Space: An Inquiry into the Spatial Order of Things* (Institute of Governmental Studies Press and the Institute of Urban and Regional Development, Berkeley: University of California, 1999): 29.

[59] Boelhower, *Through a Glass Darkly: Ethnic Semiosis in American Literature* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987): 31.

Being coded, registered, and recorded, placed in suspect positions,[60] their social affinities questioned, their financial resources monitored and contested, their political views investigated, they have no choice but to embrace an ethnicity that was perhaps thrust upon them but from which they have no desire to escape.

It should be clear by now that Arab-American ethnicity is, to borrow Werner Sollors words once more, an ethnicity by "consent" rather than by 'descent' ("descent language," he says, "stresses our positions as heirs, our hereditary qualities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and 'architects' of our fates to choose […] our destinies, and our political systems"[61]). This is inseparable from what Laura Browder believes ethnicity to be. To Browder, "ethnicity can be an option in a way that race never can" – in the context of the advent of Arab ethnicity, the latter cannot be viewed chiefly as primordial, but as situational or transitory. It is mainly caused by persistent mainstream exercise of social repression and intolerance, not on account of cultural difference but on account of political inclination.

Since Arab ethnicity is politically oriented, one wonders whether it will last long, especially in view of the fact that other people of the 'tribe' are beginning to warn against too much 'tribe',[62] The course being steered towards identitarian ethnicity may be reversed as long as there are people like Naomi Shihab Nye who reminds us that

> we are still proud of everything peaceful and beautiful that endures. Then speak beauty if we can – the beauty of culture, poetry, tradition, memory, family, daily life. Because men with hard faces do violent things, because fanaticism seizes and shrinks minds, is no reason for the rest of us to abandon our songs. Maybe we need to sing louder.[63]

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[60] They were targeted for electronic surveillance (FISA, the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act of 1978). Later on, they were practically the only group in the USA affected by some parts of the (AEDPA) Antiterrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act of 1996.

[61] Werner Sollors, *The Invention of Ethnicity*, xiv.

[62] Sherif Elmusa makes this point in one poem, when he implores "poets, critics / members of other tribes / please let's not reduce the poetry / of the tribe / into a sheepskin of poems / about the tribe."

[63] Cited by Maha Said, " The Face of the Enemy."

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Making It Survive Here and "Dreams of Return"

Community and Identity in the Poetry of Mohja Kahf

SAMAA ABDURRAQIB

IN HIS BOOK *Modernity at Large*, Arjun Appadurai argues that in this age of constant human motion – tourists, immigrants, refugees, migrant workers, exiles, etc. – the world has become increasingly less stable. This instability complicates the formation of communities and networks because the threat of shifting (location, people, etc.) is constantly present in the background. This motion does not only seem to complicate national and international political policies but also affects the way people interact socially. Appadurai claims that as a result of this growing human mobility, many people exist in a world that is similar to Benedict Anderson's notion of imagined communities. The notion of imagined worlds does not mean that real and concrete communities do not exist, for mass migration and relocation simply destabilize what it means to belong to a community; as Appadurai argues, "the warp of these [communities] is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion."[1] Constant motion creates new poles around which a person must navigate in order to form a concrete sense of self and of belonging. The further, both physically and temporally, a person moves away from the homeland, the harder it is for him to claim a community in that homeland. When

[1] Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996): 34.

people 'permanently' leave a location, are they still 'of' that location, and when they arrive at a new location, are they a part of the community in that location?

Mohja Kahf, a Syrian-American poet, deals with this question of belonging in her volume of poetry *E-mails to Scheherazad*, in which she writes (semi-autobiographically) about existing in limbo – struggling to be a Muslim in America, while also struggling to balance her Arabness with her Americanness. The crux of the issues the poetry deals with is: how much is she Arab and how much is she American? In order to belong to either category, she must have a community – a group of people with whom she identifies and who identify with her. Much of *E-mails* deals with the construction of this in-betweenness – the liminal place between Arab and American.

In several poems in the volume, the 'American' world is presented as being full of possibilities, for it holds the promise of successful manifestations of hybridity and multicultural community. Kahf, of course, problematizes the harmonious vision(s) of America. She sees the complications involved in being a Muslim and (more specifically) a Muslim immigrant in America today. While the images of American communities narrated by the speakers in the poems arise from current lived experiences in America, the images of the homeland tend to be formed in memory-space (some self-generated and some supplied by others). These images of the homeland, while often beautiful, seem more distant; they are full of echoes and reminiscence rather than possibility. More often than not, the poems about the homeland depict narrators who are searching behind them rather than looking forward towards a hopeful future.

The communities Kahf constructs in her poetry are more or less actualized in the imagination. The question is whether they can withstand the materiality of the conditions they live through or hold up when they are brought into the actual world. Because of the complex nature of our lived experience, the imagined communities, as the volume progresses, become more and more tenuous. The poetry tracks a progression: Kahf moves from initially relying upon physical and tangible community to defining who she is to an internal confirmation of self. By the end of the book, Kahf has turned inward to create community and define her identity.

Theorizing Home, Identity, and Community

For diasporic individuals, the elements of home, identity, and belonging are not always congruent. While a person's present home may be America, and while her nominal identity may have become hyphenated in order to accommodate their new, naturalized status, if she does not feel welcome in a place, she will not feel as if she belongs there. The relationship between these three issues is one that is left unresolved, because the notion of home and place is one that is in constant flux as a result of people's constant movement. Rootedness can be theorized about – people can always claim that the place where they find their roots is their home – but the realistic issues of citizenship and day-to-day life problematize even this assumption. If a person left Egypt when she was five, how can she continue to claim Egypt as her home, the place where she belongs, if she has been living in the USA for twenty years? This leads to a series of other questions that, as R. Radhakrishnan has determined, remain complex and unanswered. In thinking about diaspora and identity Radhakrishnan asks: how can a person be both one thing and 'something other'? If an individual is hyphenated, which one is she *really*? How do multiple selves coexist? What is the relationship between these selves and national identity (which isn't necessarily the nation one occupies)?[2] Home, in its most rudimentary translation, can be posited as an answer to these questions. Home, at a basic level, is a place where we fit, a place where we are accepted, and a place where we belong. Home is inextricably bound to place because, as Madan Sarup writes, "roots are in a certain place. Home is (in) a place."[3] Yet home is not only a place, it is also community; it is the relationships that we create and sustain in these places. Sarup argues that "we are born into relationships that are always based in a *place*";[4] these relationships form our attachments to places and vice versa. Having a community does not wholly concretize the connection between home and belonging, because it is too easily reduced to binaries: people either belongs to a place or they don't. There are, of course, many nuances and

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[2] R. Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations: Between Home and Location* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996): 204.

[3] Madan Sarup, "Home and Identity," in *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, ed. George Robertson (London & New York : Routledge, 1994): 96.

[4] Madan Sarup, "Home and Identity," 96.

complications involved in having a sense of belonging, but a community at least begins to allow diasporic individuals to feel as if they are 'of' both places – they have a community in the homeland that recognizes them as being of that place and a community in the present home that recognizes them as being of that place.

However, if the nation/community in which the diasporic individual currently lives is not as nurturing a home as it should be, then s/he may be tempted to look back to his/her homeland for comfort and belonging. The author may create and strengthen ties to the homeland in order to make her/himself feel less nomadic.[5] In retrospect, the homeland becomes a place that doesn't question the author; it is the place of primary community – the place where all connections to people began. This affects the author's sense of identity, because, despite the hyphenation in his/her classification, s/he feels more Arab (for example) than American. In mind, s/he sees that America has rejected him/her, and s/he imagines that there is still a community in the homeland where s/he belongs and with which s/he identifies.

This 'looking backwards' to the homeland is not restricted to first-generation immigrants who are feeling displaced. Because immigrants are often marked by physical difference (skin colour, visible cultural differences, etc.), the notion of feeling displaced often transcends immigration generations. 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 colour, their family background, and other ethnic unassimilated traits," America never quite feels like home to them.[6] These children often do not feel the promise of 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 exclu-

[5] The process of this narrative of immigration, exclusion, and reminiscence is not new or unique; it has been written about in immigration novels and memoirs, and it has been theorized about widely. This reminiscing would, of course, depend on the reason for leaving the homeland. If the person is escaping persecution, reminiscence may be different from what it would be in the case of a person who escapes to make a better life for himself or herself.

[6] Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations*, 206.

sively" Other.[7] The children imagine a community in which they can feel perfectly in place – they imagine an India (for example) that accepts them, their beliefs, and their customs. The bonds of allegiance to America are weakened because the 'community' of America has, in their eyes, betrayed them.

Immigrants and their American-born children often configure the homeland and the present land differently because they have different relationships to both 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. Both of these interpretations occur in the imagination. But when relying on imagination to supply the fodder for representation, how does one interpret these places? Whose interpretation is correct? Radhakrishnan writes that home, to the diasporic individual, "becomes a mode of interpretive in-betweenness, a form of accountability to more than one location."[8] This accountability becomes tied up with representation – the hyphenated individual plays a balancing act between representing the homeland of her past and representing the homeland of her present. This act of representation becomes fraught with issues of intention, accuracy, and honour. How does an immigrant, a diasporic individual, represent the land she left behind? How does she represent the present land if she feels that she does not belong there? 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?"[9]

Salman Rushdie argues that the worlds of the imagination and representation do not fit together snugly; they are inevitably faulty. Yet, despite this faultiness, diasporic individuals must continue to re-create homelands of the past. He writes that "exiles or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt."[10] The reclamation occurs in the re-

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[7] Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations*, 206.

[8] *Diasporic Mediations*, xiii–iv.

[9] Madan Sarup, "Home and Identity," in *Travellers' Tales*, ed. Robertson, 98.

[10] Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," in Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism, 1981–1991* (London: Granta/Penguin, 1991): 10.

creation of landscapes and relationships – it occurs in the imagination and reconstitution of the homeland community. Yet these representations are inescapably fallible:

> our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind.[11]

The argument Rushdie presents places diasporic individuals in a limbo of sorts: they attempt to re-create, in their minds, the homeland because they do not feel they belong in their present home, yet the homeland they imagine can never be accurate. Inevitably, when a person of the diaspora returns to his homeland after an absence, he is returning to a place that doesn't quite resemble the place he had imagined. And now, despite the fact that he had felt a sense of belonging when *thinking* about his homeland, he can't help but feel a bit out of place while he is there. This sensation is amplified for the child of immigrant parents who identifies, for example, as Pakistani and imagine herself in Pakistan, but is visiting Pakistan for the first time (as an adult). It would seem that the worlds of the imagination and representation do not exactly come together, and that this lack of coherence has a detrimental effect on feelings of belonging. The Pakistani-American who imagines he belongs in Pakistan finds that he neither belongs as a Pakistani in Pakistan, nor as an American in America.[12]

However, Rushdie argues that these errors in depicting the homeland aren't problematic – it exemplifies, rather, the nature of relating personal history to national history. Radhakrishnan also suggests that there is not *one* interpretation of the homeland; interpretations are multifarious and are all correct in their own particular ways. And while these answers to the problem of representation may be correct in one way or another, they do not wholly account for the predicament. The question about representation is not simply one of correct representation; it is about *how* one goes

[11] Salman Rushdie, "Imaginary Homelands," 10.

[12] Both Rushdie and Sarup identify this inability to belong as being in constant exile. I would disagree with this assessment because, although an individual may feel unease in their land of origin (and/or the land in which they currently live), this isn't exactly comparable to being physically kept out of their homeland.

about imagining in order to produce these representations. For second-generation immigrants especially, it becomes difficult to conjure up an image of the homeland that is anything other than imagined. How can this imagined community sustain a sense of identity when it is intangible?

With both the past and present communities partly inaccessible, the diasporic individual finds himself in a conundrum when he tries to put flesh on the bones of his notions of the past and present home. If his identity is rejected in his new home, the community he imagines and attempts to create will not be able to withstand the real and lived conditions of discrimination, hatred, and ostracization. Because his sense of belonging is tenuous, his sense of identity as, for example, an American is equally tenuous. Yet, he cannot invest himself entirely in the homeland of the past, either. The more time he spends away from his past homeland, the less precise his memories become. Time moves on in the homeland, but his memories remain static; there will be a disjunction between the imagined and real versions of his homeland community. The diasporic individual who left too young to remember the past home (or a second-generation immigrant) finds himself in a slightly different predicament. His cultural and physical markers relegate him to the role of 'Other' in the present home, yet he does not have his own memories of the past home. He must rely on the memories of others (parents, elders, etc.) to construct an imaginary community; but how can he make this community his?

These are the challenges Mohja Kahf addresses in her volume of poetry. She recognizes that issues of identity are infolded within issues of representation and community. The intangibility of these communities is not wholly satisfactory, because the imaginative capacity of a community cannot assuage the real displacement, isolation, and ostracization of the experiences of Kahf's speakers. Her solution is, to use Radhakrishnan's words, "to actively learn to find 'Indianness' within."[13] Once her narrators begin to focus on, in their case, the Muslimness that is 'within' them, the reader is given the sense that this is, perhaps, the 'community' that really matters.

[13] Radhakrishnan, *Diasporic Mediations*, 209.

Mohja Kahf: "Learning to Pray All Over"

The contentious elements of home, identity, and belonging are immediately brought to the forefront in Kahf's book at the very outset. She begins her book with a poem about immigration that illustrates the way in which immigrants must straddle lands, both looking forward to a new community, and back to an old community. The poem "Voyager Dust" relates the story of a grandmother who has travelled to America from Syria with voyager's dust that has "settled in her scarves." This dust has a two-pronged meaning in the poem – it both gestures to the land left behind and, as it settles on the shoulders of her American-born grandchildren, it gestures to the new communities to be formed. The dust also serves two functions with regard to community and belonging. Because the dust settles on the shoulders of the grandchildren, it creates a figurative bond between them and the community their grandmother left behind. Yet the evanescent weight of the dust also has a bearing on the children's senses of belonging – do they have a relationship with Syria (like their grandmother) or are they only American (because that's all they know)? Does the dust whisper to them as well?[14]

The voyager dust in the poem serves as a metaphor for imagining community. Carrying the dust helps the grandmother and her grandchildren imagine that they are somehow linked to the Syria that was left behind. Despite the shifting of locations, the grandmother can imagine a community in Syria that has a place for her. This imagining is so important to the grandmother's sense of identity that she feels compelled to pass it on to her American-born grandchildren. Arjun Appadurai emphasizes the importance of this type of imagining when he considers the formation of communities in a shifting world:

> we need to bring together the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images [...] the idea of the imagined community [...] and the French idea of the imaginary as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations.[15]

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[14] The voyagers dust whispers a message to its bearer: "We will meet again in Damascus / in Aleppo. We will meet again" (1).

[15] Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 31.

Although his theory focuses on the role that technology plays in the construction of these imagined communities (i.e. creating the images that we call our reality), Appadurai's argument also addresses the role that the imagination plays in forming identity because it speaks to the way in which we rely on external sources when constructing a notion of our selves and deciding where we belong in the social world. For the Arab immigrants and children of immigrants in Kahf's poems, this construction of an Arab-American self relies on socially produced images/stories about the homeland and the aspiration to be Muslim in America without scrutiny – the dream of many. This then breeds a sense of two imagined communities – the subjects both construct themselves as Arabs who imagine there is a community in the homeland to which they belong, and construct themselves as Americans who imagine that there are other Muslims in America who share the same 'aspirations'.

These imagined communities and worlds create a sense of belonging in Kahf's poetry. When she writes about homelands, she does so with a sense of familiarity, even though one narrator admits that she "left Syria many years ago, as a child / and [doesn't] remember Syria."[16] She writes about family still living in Arab countries, family recently leaving Arab countries, and she creates beautiful pictures of Arab landscapes and neighbourhoods – all, we assume, constructed in the imagination and based on other people's memories of 'home'. And although many of her speakers do not have real memories of Syria, they hope that "Syria remembers [them]" (11); they reconstruct this imaginary relationship between themselves and the homeland by writing about the people and relatives in Syria, for example, who remember them.

Kahf's poems dealing with American community present images full of potential and possibility. In her poem "Lateefa," for example, she paints a hopeful picture of a wedding that becomes metonymic for the multicultural Islamic community she imagines: at this wedding a Pakistani-American Muslim woman, Constance Mustafa, is marrying a "West Indian" Muslim man while an Afro-Caribbean Muslim woman is eating Hungarian potato salad and chicken, and drinking grape soda. The narrator takes the whole picture apart in order to examine the individual components, "baby, paper plate, chicken, brother, Lateefa, soda, the Hun-

[16] Mohja Kahf, *Emails from Scheherazad* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2003): 11. Further page references are in the main text.

garian potato salad, and the woman cleaning up the mess" (21), and sighs that only in the USA – in Jersey – can such a combination happen. The narrator asserts that "if we love what we are we can make it / survive here" (23) – meaning that our Muslimness will mesh with our Americanness and will complement our Hungarianness (etc.) and we will be a community enjoying the plenitude of all of this diversity.

She revisits this idea of American community in an even more imaginative fashion in the poem "My Babysitter Wears a Face-Veil." In this poem, rather than reporting on the burgeoning community she sees (as at the wedding), Kahf presents a purely hypothetical moment in the story of Selwa, a babysitter who wears the niqab (or a face veil) while running errands in her husband's 4x4 with "mountainous truck tires." Selwa inevitably turns heads as she travels through New Jersey, yet the most significant moment is when she stops at a red light with other drivers and "continents grind" as cultural icons (music, figurines, etc.) intersect for a moment (33). This prompts the narrator to pose a series of questions: "At intersections do drivers know / each other for a moment"; "Is traffic transcendental"; and do the drivers (all of the drivers, including Selwa) "see behind the blind spot for a moment?" This moment at the traffic light is fraught with the same potentialities as the wedding, because there is the chance that the drivers can look beyond the blind spot of physical differences and see: "yes, we are all American here on this thoroughfare."

Both of these poems have the potential for beauty, yet they both contain moments that are difficult to read as positive, because the possibilities are presented nebulously, thus giving the impression that something not quite so beautiful lurks in the background. The beautiful scene that is Constance Mustafa's wedding, for example, is harshly interrupted by a police officer demanding that they move their cars or else they'll be ticketed. The officer has no patience for listening to pleas about the beautiful wedding – the officer decides that, because there is no priest, there is no wedding, and if there is no wedding, then "you people" are parked illegally. So, even as the narrator is experiencing the beginning of (what could be) a beautiful community in which all facets of identity exist in harmony, the harsh reality of their lived conditions (i.e. being Muslim in America) presents a disruption. Selwa's story ends in a similarly ambiguous manner – Kahf leaves all of the questions hanging in the air, so that all the reader is left with is a momentary stop at a traffic light that is filled with suggestion, but with nothing actualized.

As the end of the volume draws near, this nebulousness crystallizes into doubt. Kahf continues to construct landscapes of the homeland and familial ties to the 'mother country'; she continues to write about remembering fields in Damascus, remembering relatives back home, and visiting "old, old cities" (16). Out of the melding of these memories and imaginings, Kahf continues to construct an identity that straddles communities – both Arab and American. But as the volume draws to a close, she creates more narrators who are wandering and searching – asking questions that remain unanswered.

The unanswered questions of belonging culminate in the poem "Jasmine Snowfall," in which the speaker tries to make a connection with the homeland, but fails because she is not 'of' that place and can only rely on the words/memories of others. The poem begins with the narrator calling out to different Arab poets (Nizar Qabani, Mahmoud Darwish, and Fadwa Toqan). She then poses several questions which place the homeland in proximity and in relation to the USA – "What is the scent of mint or a city"; "What do the stones / of Jerusalem mean / what is Beirut and the sea?" (93). The poem then makes reference to the inability of the US landscape to approximate what is seen in the homeland: "Is there a replica at Epcot or Disney"; "Can I watch it on MTV?" (93). The reader is immediately confronted with the narrator's search for replication and her inability to find it. The reader is also confronted with the tenuous nature of her imagined Arab community. The only way she is able to recognize her community is through the work of the poets and the images she conjures up in her imagination. Each poet she mentions writes (in some way – either as an exile or as still living in the country) about their relationship with their country and with their people. The narrator is searching for the same type of relationship because she wants to be able to understand the other part of her identity. This metaphoric searching is mirrored nicely in images of physical searching as the narrator wanders through Chicago's O'Hare Airport looking for paths home – searching for a way to "board a homeward plane" (93).

This problem of searching and not belonging is explained by the fact that the narrator is one of the "children of '67" – children who, we can assume, are children of the post-Arab–Israeli war of 1967 – who have "sprung from between the cracks" (93) and are "born from the womb of an airplane" (94). This interstitiality – not knowing how to recognize the homeland and not knowing exactly how to feel at home in the current land

– leaves the children in a state that is, in essence, worse than the condition of exile. In a later stanza, the narrator mention further poets (Etel Adnan, Samih-El-Qasim, Nazik Sadiq al-Malaika, et al.), many of whom have an antagonistic love–hate relationship with their home countries. A few of them are or were exiled or long time immigrants because of political reasons; others of them were persecuted in their homelands for protesting its occupation. Yet, regardless of how volatile the relationship is, each poet at least has a relationship – the narrator does not. The narrator writes that as the "gate scrape[s] shut behind [her]" (94) she becomes separated from the language and, by extension, the culture to which she belongs. The beautiful poetry of the exile loses its meaning for her, because the "gate of language" has placed it just out of reach. The narrator (and the other children of immigration) exists "out here beyond / the last bus stop of […] exile" (94), therefore poetry reminiscent of homeland (and return) isn't accessible to them. The narrator worries that, just as they are out of touch with the land, "the world of white jasmine" (94) is out of touch with them and has forgotten them. And finding meaning in the poetry of America doesn't help the situation, because the narrator finds that these poets (Whitman, Sanchez, Hughes, Dickinson, et al.) don't know "how to pronounce [their] names" (94).

What the reader is left with, then, is the sense that the children of immigrants can never find a space and create a community with meaning. How, if they have never seen the homeland ("smelled clover or cardamom"), would they know the difference between what is real – in the sense of the homeland – and what is Memorex – in the sense of what they absorb in the USA? The narrator (once again) leaves us with questions yet provides no answers.

The next poem in the volume, "The Fork in the Road," presents the same conundrum (searching and belonging) in a more urgent manner. Kahf once again addresses the issue of belonging with a certain degree of indecision and in this poem, in order to find "the salve for your wound" (96) – which I am interpreting as the metaphorical wound of being of two places and not belonging in either – the narrator tells the reader to travel back to the homeland and search the streets for the places and people who remember his/her family. Once found, you must "Enter the crumbling houses / Say: I was born here / have you ever heard my name?" (96). The other option provided is to travel into the "heart of America" in order to search for the grave of your "lost brother / whose blood you carry" (97).

In each quest, the narrator advises to search different lands in search of community (either new or old) – but which community is most fitting? Are we more like our grandfathers or more like our brothers? Kahf, again, provides no answers, yet the urgency of this decision is paramount. The poem closes with: "Which do you want, choose / You only get one journey" (98).

The final poem in the volume, "Learning to Pray All Over," provides a resolution (of sorts) to the questions about community. This poem begins with a distinctly different image from the previous poems about community – it presents an image of solitude and timelessness. The poem begins: "Alone / In a great jelly of time and space / I will wallow in formlessness" (99). The indeterminate nature of the locale and the moment contradicts the "zoom lens into the twenty-first century" that is Jersey City during Constance Mustafa's wedding. The solitary nature of this journey stands in stark contrast to the noisiness of the wedding. This poem abandons the need to belong – the need to be a part of a community (both ancestral and present). The poem instead focuses on the relationship between the self and the "spiritual dimension" of life. The "rhythm to space and shape [her] days" (99) is no longer the dream of multi-ethnic communities – it becomes the silence of prayer.

This poem also takes place in the imagination – so Kahf is still imagining community – yet she and the "spiritual dimension" of her life are the only members of this community. In this solitary community, the realities of lived conditions have no effect on her. She will not eat, because she will no longer feel hungry; she can walk around unclothed; she will pray without being ordered to do so. Here, Kahf doesn't need to rely on others to form her community and construct her identity. The degree to which she is Arab and the degree to which she is American (i.e. the external/physical markers of identity) no longer matter. In solitude, the identity that matters is her Muslimness, and this can be affirmed by her prayer – which (in this poem) is an inward act. This, in the end, becomes the most salient and stable community for Kahf, because it is the only element that can withstand the threat of "human motion."

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Meditations on Memory and Belonging

Nada Awar Jarrar's *Somewhere, Home*

DAWN MIRAPURI

> Where should we go after the last border?
> Where should birds fly after the last sky?[1]
>
> Tomorrow I will pack my bags and hope to run away and find you in that place where my soul's secrets remain, somewhere from which there is no further to go, somewhere home.[2]

AS I WAS WORKING ON THIS ESSAY early in 2009, the Australian government was in the process of enhancing border-security measures to address the increasing numbers of refugees and asylum seekers arriving by boat. When public opinion mirrors political rhetoric, it reveals a deep lack of compassion for the people who are made refugees and who seek asylum because their lives and those of their loved ones are threatened by war and conflict.[3] This public opinion exacerbates the difficulties encountered by refugees in their quest for somewhere new in which to find safety, community, and belonging. These desires, basic human needs, are undermined by political rhetoric that

[1] Mahmoud Darwish, "Earth Presses Against Us," in Darwish, *Unfortunately, It Was Paradise: Selected Poems*, ed. & tr. Munir Akash & Carolyn Forché, with Sinan Antoon & Amira El-Zein (Berkeley: U of California P, 2003): 9.

[2] Nada Awar Jarrar, *Somewhere, Home* (London: Vintage, 2004): 145. Further page references are in the main text.

[3] Ben Pobjie. "Revenge of the Boat People," *New Matilda*, http://newmatilda.com/2009/04/24/revenge-boatperson (accessed 3 June 2009).

situates them as unscrupulous individuals whose choices were framed with a desire to evade legal channels of resettlement.

Reading Nada Awar Jarrar's *Somewhere, Home* in this context sharpens the need to think more compassionately about the displaced persons themselves. Jarrar's novel, published in 2003, won the 2004 Commonwealth Writers' Prize for best first book. In our time, the book resonates for its themes of displacement, memory, and belonging. Each of the three stories making up the book depicts expressions of a yearning to belong. The essence of this book is perhaps to be found in the epigraph to the middle story from the (recently deceased) Palestinian 'national poet' Mahmoud Darwish (which is also one of the epigraphs of my essay). This middle story, framed by two others that express nostalgia for the past, concerns a young woman's relentless but fruitless quest to belong following the Lebanese civil war, and concludes with Jarrar's homage to Darwish, in which she echoes lines from his poem "The Earth Presses Against Us." Darwish's poetry provides a language through which Jarrar expresses the plight of the Palestinians as well as of all other people who suffer expulsion, occupation, and exile. Jarrar's own lines encapsulate this enduring sense of despair.

In this age of mass migration, refugee crises, and global mobility, it could be argued that the experience of displacement, relocation, migration, and diaspora is no longer the exception but the rule. Reviewers of the novel are in agreement that it speaks to the modern condition of dislocation. The cover of the 2004 Vintage edition quotes an endorsement by the Irish author Brian Keenan: "In an age of dislocation *Somewhere, Home* lights up the lost road to ourselves and the home place of the heart." In the *Sunday Herald*, Susan Flockhart writes that the book is an "exploration of the myriad associations we all attach to the concept of belonging." In the Adelaide *Advertiser*, Chris Brice draws on Jarrar's personal history of migration to explain her "fascination" with the concept of home. He situates Jarrar within a family with a history of migration and diaspora. Her Australian mother's Lebanese family has lived in South Australia since the end of the nineteenth century, while her father was an engineer from Lebanon. Jarrar grew up in Lebanon but was exiled during the civil war, when the family found itself unable to return from London. The next twenty years were spent abroad in London, Paris, Washington, and Sydney, before returning to Lebanon, where she has resided since. Rayyan al-Shawaf, in the Lebanese *Daily Star,* situates the novel specifically within

a genre of writing on the Lebanese civil war. Al-Shawaf observes that Jarrar presents a "refreshing approach to exile, identity and war" because her meditations on "home as personal, filial and maternal concern" contrast with the "heavy-handed and moralistic" approaches usually adopted by other Arab and Lebanese writers on the war. Unfortunately, Al-Shawaf also sses Jarrar's novel as addressing the broader postmodern condition: "who better than a Lebanese to convey the melancholic drama of exile, both physical and emotional, and the insistent pang of homelessness that gnaws at so many of modernity's abandoned and confused progeny."

Critics have argued that valorizing displacement as a modern condition undermines the difficulties that are experienced by the majority of displaced individuals.[4] Usually, the latter do not enjoy the life-styles described as hybrid or cosmopolitan, nor do they become the celebrated figures of postcolonial exile. The concept of hybridity, for instance, has been criticized for concealing the structural differences of social, cultural, and political domination evident in local encounters.[5] Aijaz Ahmad emphasizes the fact that "most migrants tend to be poor and experience displacement not as cultural plenitude but as torment."[6] In an interview, Jarrar reveals that war has specific, enduring impacts on individual sensibilities:

> Those who have incurred violence – in Lebanon, Bosnia, Rwanda, Algeria and in other hot spots of the planet – know it: war installs itself in the depth of one's being and fuses itself with one's skin. And right at the moment when you think you have forgotten it, it remembers you.[7]

Reviewers have not explored how Jarrar's use of the interplay between memory and forgetting explores the impact of war. Mithu Banerji, for

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[4] Critics have argued that identity discourses in postcolonial theory reflect a limited perspective. For detailed critiques, see Aijaz Ahmad, "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality," *Race & Class* 36.3 (1995): 13–16 and Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism," *Critical Enquiry* 20 (1994): 328–56.

[5] See Aijaz Ahmad, "The Politic of Literary Postcoloniality," 15–16, and Sara Ahmed, *Strange Encounters*: *Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality* (London: Routledge, 2000): 12–13.

[6] Aijaz Ahmad, "The Politics of Literary Postcoloniality," 16.

[7] Maya Ghandour Hert, "*Somewhere, Home*, de Nada Awar Jarrar: Nostalgie féminine à troix voix," *L'Orient–Le Jour* (25 April 2003): 6.

example, suggests that the novel demonstrates the author's quest for belonging by "way of her past" but does not show how memory is deployed in the novel.[8] For Banerji, Jarrar's use of memory situates her in a lineage of postcolonial authors writing on the "melancholy of loss and the inherent urge to reclaim smatterings of a past age." These kinds of readings continue to undervalue Jarrar's specifically Lebanese perspective.

None of these readings situates the novel within the context of memory discourses on the Lebanese civil war despite overt indications in the text. The war is highlighted when Jarrar reports the horror of it:

> The last year of the war in Lebanon was madness multiplied tenfold. They heard of anti-aircraft rockets being fired between neighbourhoods, of people being dragged from their homes and dumped into mass graves half alive [...]. It was to be the country's last and most terrible descent into violence before the end of the civil war. (117)

The reader is made aware of the civil war on the second page of the novel. In part one, we are introduced to Maysa, who, pregnant with her first child as the Lebanese civil war commences, leaves her husband in Beirut to return to her family home in the Lebanese mountains, while "Beirut smolders in a war against itself" (4). Her return enables her to fulfil a long-held desire to document the stories of the women in her family. The pending birth of her child amidst conflict compels her to seek safety in the home on the mountain, where she can forget the war raging below. The second story depicts Aida, who, though living in the West, is haunted by the memories of her youth in prewar Beirut. Her memories bring up unspoken shame and guilt related to her behaviour in the past. In the last story, Jarrar depicts Salwa, an elderly Lebanese woman reminiscing about her youth in Lebanon and her life as mother and wife in various cities in the West. Collectively, the parts explore remembering and forgetting and situate the Lebanese civil war as an act of historical trauma that ordinary individuals are trying to come to terms with. Reading the novel through this perspective reveals a politically enabling work that is directed at Lebanese attempts at recuperation in the post-conflict period.

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[8] Mithu Banerji, "Back where they belong – a lyrical debut novel tells of three civil war exiles" *The Observer* (22 June 2003): 17.

The Lebanese civil war and literature

In April 2009 the Lebanese people marked the thirty-fifth year of the beginning of the Lebanese civil war. In the absence of a national memorial project, in downtown Beirut, the people, including the group "Memory for the Future," erected memorials to the 200,000 dead, 17,000 missing, and 400,000 wounded during the war. Their slogan during the commemorative period was: "the past remains present."[9]

Postwar Lebanon is faced with the challenge of balancing private and public memory of the civil war. Sune Haugbolle writes that a government-sponsored general amnesty in 1991 fostered a culture of amnesia in the postwar years. As a result of this, many of the crimes committed remained unresolved. To complicate matters, a significant number of those who had committed war crimes assumed government positions after the war. Moreover, no conscious decision has been taken by Government to preserve the history of the war or to openly discuss its causes. The reconstruction of downtown Beirut under Solidere, for example, occludes the city's involvement in the civil war.[10]

The general consensus is that the issues of memory and trauma remain unaddressed in Lebanese civil society.[11] The war itself created a surge of literary activity. A group of women authors who wrote from within Lebanon during the war challenged the political rhetoric that underpinned the sectarian warfare by presenting a more humanistic approach through which to define morality. They came to be defined as the Beirut Decentrists.[12] These writers crossed political lines to provide an alternative to the war stories that justified the fighting by presenting humane perspec-

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[9] "The Past Remains Present: Lebanese Mark Start of Civil War with Calls for Awareness," http://theinnercircle.wordpress.com/2009/04/14/lebanese-mark-start-of-civil-war-with-calls-for-awareness/ (accessed 30 May 2009).

[10] Miriam Cooke, "Beirut Reborn: The Political Aesthetics of Auto-Destruction," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 15.2 (2002): 421–22.

[11] The American University of Beirut held a conference in 2004 titled "The Sociology of the Lebanese Civil War Novel," to discuss memory and trauma in the post-civil war era, on the premise that these remained unaddressed in Lebanese society; see Kaelen Wilson–Goldie, "Opening a Dialogue: The Sociology of the Lebanese Civil War Novel," *Daily Star* (14 May 2004).

[12] Miriam Cooke, *Women and the War Story* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1997): 3.

tives that resisted the nationalistic narratives.[13] Lebanese literary production after 1990 reflects the tension between remembering and forgetting.[14]

I will argue that *Somewhere, Home* participates in the dialogue within Lebanon about the memory of the war. Memory discourses maintain that the obsession with memorializing processes reflect the concerns of the present. Andreas Huyssen writes that the twentieth century as a whole experienced trauma through its history of genocide, war, conflict, and oppression. Nations and groups of people come to terms with histories of violence by enlisting memorial practices that range from public amnesia through public memorials to truth and reconciliation commissions.[15] Memory practices are integral to the process of reconciliation with these traumas and operate on both private and public levels. State-sponsored narratives about Beirut in glossy publications such as *Beirut City Centre*, published a year after the war, construct a "specific memory of the war that enables its erasure."[16] These sterile representations contrast sharply with fervent private displays of the memory of the war and its sectarian basis, evident in Beirut even now through the public showing of flags and photographs of martyrs.[17] In *The Future of Nostalgia,* Svetlana Boym argues that nostalgia can be a specifically enabling form of memory practice. Boym defines a form of nostalgia called critical nostalgia that can be mobilized to challenge the narratives of the present. Critical nostalgia is constructively evoked where the narratives of the present threaten to eradicate the memory of the past, its lessons and its legacies.[18] In Jarrar's novel, nostalgia, remembering, and forgetting are deployed in the chapters

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[13] Roseanne Saad Khalaf, "Introduction" to *Hikayat: Short Stories by Lebanese Women*, ed. Roseanne Saad Khalaf (London: Telegram, 2006): 13–14.

[14] For detailed discussion, see: Mona Takieddine Amyuni, "A Panorama of Lebanese Women Writers, 1975–1995," in *Women and War in Lebanon,* ed. Lamia Rustum Shehadeh (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999): 89–108; Miriam Cooke, "Beirut Reborn," 401; Roseanne Saad Khalaf, "Introduction," 15–16; and Elise Salem Manganaro "Lebanon Mythologised or Lebanon Deconstructed: Two Narratives of National Consciousness," in *Women and War in Lebanon,* ed. Lamia Rustum Shehadeh (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 1999): 112–27.

[15] Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (New York: Routledge, 1995): 9.

[16] Miriam Cooke, "Beirut Reborn," 396.

[17] Sune Haugbolle, "Public and Private Memory," 199–201.

[18] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia* (New York: Basic Books, 2001): 41.

as a mode by which to provoke critique on the memory discourses that have been engaged as strategies by individuals to deal with the fact of the historical trauma caused by the civil war.

My reading will show that in the first part of the novel, the lacuna presented by the obvious omission of the civil war reflects the amnesia that has prevailed in the postwar era. I will show that this kind of amnesia fosters forms of subjectivity and representation that abrogate responsibility and hinder reconciliation. It will be shown that, in the second part of the novel, Jarrar conveys the necessity to address the issue of communal guilt and shame in relation to the war. My reading of the third story in the novel is that Jarrar focuses attention afresh on the people left behind through migration or exile, to show that their loss of a loved one who has moved away needs to be highlighted in memory discourses.

What price amnesia?

> As Beirut smoulders in a war against itself, I have returned to the mountain to collect memories of the lives that wandered though this house as though my own depended on it. And as my heart turns further inward, I nurture a secret wish that in telling the stories of those who loved me I am creating my own. (4)

In the first part of the novel, Jarrar reveals the debilitating effect of amnesia with respect to the civil war on representations of Lebanese identity. She does this by relating the story of Maysa, pregnant with her first child while Beirut erupts in civil war, whose response to her crisis of insecurity and helplessness is to return to her family home in the mountains. There she stays until the end of the civil war, chronicling the lives of the women in her family. Her acts of memory constitute a conscious process of locating a genealogy of resilience in the women who came before her. However, this genealogy serves no useful purpose in the present if Maysa is unable to incorporate it into her present reality. Jarrar reveals that Maysa's retreat into the past provides no sustainable form of identity – it demands, rather, that she deny her present reality, thereby crippling her ability to embrace it. Through Maysa's story, Jarrar mounts a critique of memory discourses that seek to excise the memory of the civil war from representations of Lebanese identity.

Cultural theorists have written that people turn to memory to anchor themselves in times of instability and uncertainty.[19] Maysa's interest in the past is to gather the stories of the women in her family: her grandmother Alia, aunt Saeeda, and mother Leila. The original intention of her project is to preserve her history for the future, to: "gather stories about my grandmother and her children and put them in a book to read to my own children" (47). The project reveals itself to be shaped by her anxieties and the desire to situate herself within the genealogy of women who had demonstrated similar anxieties. For example, she finds justification for her return to the house in the stories that betoken the women's enduring connection to it: she writes of Alia focusing on her "beautiful house" when she becomes aware of the reality that her husband may not return to her (27); she writes that her aunt Saeeda claims never to have wanted to leave their home and that her mother Leila admired the signs of "home" everywhere in the house (50). Further, her stories of the women's vulnerability and anxieties serve to allay her own. For example, she recounts how her father confessed to her mother that he had once seen his mother crying. He claims that on the night of the accident that nearly claimed the lives of her children, Adel observed that his mother "came into our room thinking we were all fast asleep" and, leaning over, placed her hand on Rasheed's head as he slept (60). She writes the stories with the intention of passing them on to her daughter.

The validity of Maysa's stories is undercut by narrative tensions that question her authenticity as an unbiased chronicler. For example, though she argues that she must return to the house because it is where "everything began" (8), the reader learns, from her husband Wadih, that neither Maysa nor her mother lived there (50). There is no received or documented history on which to draw. Alia's vulnerabilities have never been conveyed to her children. Before she writes Alia's story, she laments the insufficient evidence and wishes that Alia had "showed each of them a moment's weakness, a taste of unclouded tenderness" (32). In addition, a leather-lined notebook that she finds in a cupboard is "empty" with "no words to comfort or inspire" her (13). In the absence of documented or received history, Maysa acknowledges that the reality is that she has "no way of knowing all these things now" and that she must resort to her imagination (11):

[19] Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 17–18.

> The truth is that I don't know. I strain to remember the look in her eyes and come up with little more than a mixture of tenderness and distance, the look of a woman with secrets that she will not disclose to a child. (31)

The resulting stories are a blend of imagination and fact, written to enable her to understand her anxieties and withstand the chaos raging in her world. Maysa confesses: "I haven't really discovered anything new, but I've been trying to write my own thoughts down, my own unfocussed musings" (48). The problem is that the history she narrates is a projection of her own subjective desires.

Hayden White argued that historical facts need narrative to relay them and that the power of the narrative lies in its investment in a moralizing impulse.[20] Maysa composes elements of fact from the past into a narrative that is held together by her own design. The stories reflect her personal limitations and fears; by recording them and framing her ancestors similarly, she becomes locked in what Huyssen describes as a "compulsive repetition."[21] A good indication of this is that she writes each of the stories of the women to reflect aspects of what she sees in herself. For example, she describes her mother Leila as oscillating between "bliss and desolation" (56) and that both Saeeda's and Alia's fears of rejection lead them to refuse to admit their desires openly (45). These stories are explained when she finally concedes that her "own attempts at belonging have always seemed half-hearted [...] a kind of unconvincing recognition of a universal need that slips from me whenever I attempt to embrace it" (78). So the stories that Maysa tells validate her insecurities and confine her to repeating the actions that she takes to allay them. She reads the events in history only to find evidence of her condition and not for its enabling impulses. In looking for signs of displacement and weakness, Maysa fails to see that the women were not helpless but demonstrated agency in adversity. For example, another way to read Alia's resolve not to send the letter to her husband to ask him to return is to see her decision as based on self-reliance rather than on weakness. She chose not to mourn her loss but to embrace what was open to her: her children and her house. Similarly, although Saeeda suffered the misfortune of a failed marriage and then found herself ensnarled in a string of obligations to care, first, for her husband's

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[20] Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in *On Narrative*, ed. W.J.T. Mitchell (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981): 14.

[21] Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 8.

parents and, then, for her own, she harnesses her creative energies to tending a neglected garden and turning it into a magical space. She was reputed to have spent so much time tending the garden that "heady scents seeped into her clothes" (40). Each woman found a way to find meaning within the confines of what was available to her. Huyssen argues that memory is "always more than the prison house of the past"; however, these signs are invisible to Maysa because she is focused exclusively on finding a similar sense of displacement.[22] Eventually, these memories become her virtual prison-house. Finally, after sixteen years of living on the mountain, she longs for escape from her "splendid, crumbling house" (31). When she finally returns to Beirut and her family, the pull of the past recedes and she sees an "image" of the house "encircled in shadow" (79). In frustration, Wadih finally explains to her that the stories that she collects are those she tells herself because she is unable and afraid to embrace her own (78). As a war had raged at the time, her stories are bankrupt testimonies, because their only role in the postwar crisis of representation is to advocate forgetting the present in favour of the past.

Maysa's obsession with the house thus enables her to musealize the past. The house is invested with inordinate power as the place where "everything" began (8). Here, Pierre Nora's theories on *lieux de mémoire* illuminate Maysa's motivations and actions. Nora argued that *lieux de mémoire* are sites that embody memory and allow a sense of historical continuity to persist. Nora observes that when "memory is no longer everywhere, it will not be anywhere unless one takes the responsibility to capture it through individual means."[23] Nora's observations were made in relation to the contemporary tendency to memorialize in the age of globalization. His theory is illuminating here because Maysa's obsession with the house can be attributed to a form of musealization in the presence of uncertainty. At one point, she fears that "she has left too pronounced a mark on this house, so that its past is fading away to make way for newer memories" (63). Maysa's actions extend to her personal embodiment of the spirit of the ancestors: she "will carry all the wandering recollections, all the thoughts that have been and the people who vanished with them" and her body will represent a "coming together of a host of spirits" (63).

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[22] Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 8.

[23] Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 16.

These sentiments reveal that Maysa has not only preserved the past as static memory, but she has also challenged herself to become the incarnation of the spirits and energies of the past. In this context, her process of recuperation creates a static memory that cannot accommodate change; in becoming the embodiment of the spirits of the past, she denies her own identity and her own existence.

Maysa's denial of her history is represented by the lacuna of the Lebanese civil war in her narrative. Huyssen suggests that in memory discourses the visible reveals signs of the invisible.[24] In this part of the narrative, the marked absence of the civil war reveals Maysa's inability to incorporate its reality into her identity. The part is made up of chapters on the stories of each of the women, Maysa, Alia, Saeeda, and Leila. Maysa's record begins in the months before the birth of her child, stops at the birth of the child, then resumes when her daughter is sixteen years old. This sixteen-year gap mirrors the period of the Lebanese civil war. Maysa mentions it in passing to contextualize her apprehension prior to the birth of the child but does not attempt to record or understand it in the intervening chapters. There is no attempt in any of the chapters to understand or contextualize the war. Maysa simply removes herself from Beirut and erases all record of it from her biography of the genealogy. The story of this part excludes the narrative of the sixteen intervening years that represents the period during which the civil war officially occurred. If Maysa's impetus to remember is underpinned by the need to re-member in a context of dissociation and displacement, then the process of selective remembering cannot restore a sense of wholeness and belonging.

Andreas Huyssen writes that "the act of remembering is always in and of the present [...] inevitably, every act of memory carries with it a dimension of betrayal, forgetting, and absence."[25] Maysa's choice of the past over her present is an act of betrayal of the present. The pathos of this betrayal is heightened through Maysa's awareness: she longs for liberation from "this weighted longing for a distant past" (12) and ponders the price she has paid in negotiating the "constant pull between the places and people I have loved" (79). Her choice of the past over the present disconnects her from the evolution of Beirut's own memory and identity. Cut off from it, she becomes a "mere outline of the surrounding air" (67). Her

[24] Huyssen, *Twilight Memories*, 10.
[25] *Twilight Memories*, 3–4.

desire to choose the safety of the past over the insecurity of the present proves to be debilitating. Emptied of a sense of belonging, she finds that the stories cannot fill the "hollowness in her heart" (33).

In this part of the novel, Jarrar's depiction of the chronicler Maysa raises the question of the representation of history and identity. Maysa is a flawed chronicler whose selective and creative forgetting disables the prospect for real reconciliation between past and present. Haugbolle observes that amnesia has plagued Lebanese treatment of the memory of the war. Many in Lebanon today feel a sense of nostalgia for a "Golden Age" of prewar Lebanon that can be attributed to "an attempt to overcome feelings of meaningless and discontinuity and provide personal and national history with a linkage that it seems to be missing."[26] By narrating the impact of this kind of forgetting, Jarrar reveals the imperative to be critical of memory discourses that exercise a creative process of denial. This denial is an indictment of the silence about the war and its causes. Although there are sections of Lebanese society who believe that the nature of the war itself makes it difficult to open up for public debate,[27] this amnesia itself defeats the prospect for reconciliation, because without truth there can be no forgiveness. In the next part of the book, Jarrar explores the theme of reconciliation by highlighting the need to address issues of national guilt and shame.

Guilt, forgiveness, and reconciliation

> They tended flowers during the day and murdered people at night,' she continued. 'Isn't that what one of them did to you?' A pained expression crossed his face. He was just a boy, you know.' Amou Mohammed spoke very quietly. 'Probably more afraid than I was.'
>
> Aida suddenly felt suffocated by the calm that had descended over the room. 'How could you forgive him?' she asked angrily. 'How could you do that to me?' (119–20)

In the second part of the novel, Jarrar enlists nostalgia to address the issues of guilt and reconciliation that remain unaddressed in the postwar period. The political potential of nostalgia has been recuperated in the work of cultural theorists working in various fields, including cultural

[26] Sune Haugbolle, "Public and Private Memory," 194.
[27] Haugbolle, "Public and Private Memory," 196–97.

studies, queer theory, and Holocaust studies.[28] Nostalgia is considered to be politically enabling when it reconnects the past to the present in ways that foster cultural resistance to forms of amnesia that perpetuate specific political realities. In this part of the novel, Jarrar connects Aida's personal nostalgia for aspects of her childhood with nostalgia for Beirut itself, thereby linking the personal past with a broader communal and social history. My reading of this part of the book situates it as a form of testimony to cultural memory, because it presses for reconciliation to assuage communal guilt.

Aida's nostalgia imbricates longing for the past with painful recognition of her own guilt. Her story is that of a young woman who was seventeen when civil war broke out in Lebanon. The family leaves Beirut shortly after the first battle for Ras Beirut begins (85). Their lives resume in various European cities. Her sisters marry and build successful lives in the West, though each carries within her the longing for Lebanon, the only place where they each felt grounded.[29] Aida is "haunted by echoes of a home long gone" and her "near perfect memory" allows her to remember Beirut in all its minutiae (84). In her memory, the vision of Beirut itself is perfect: full of sunlight and never rain, filled with sweet air and bounded by the soft blue Mediterranean.

Reading this longing as a form of nostalgic "romance with one's own fantasy" undermines the conscious intention Aida requires to "cling to childhood" and reject "new beginnings" (83, 85):

> Sometimes her strength would leave her and she would find herself feeling unexpected joy at a golden autumn or summer rain, or in the kindness of strangers with coloured eyes. For a moment, confusion would sweep over her until she gathered herself together once again and remembered all the things she left behind. (85)

These conscious decisions resonate with the sentiment of impossible mourning described by Vijay Mishra in his thesis on mourning in diaspora. Mishra argues that the diasporic sensibility can be marked by a condition of mourning predicated on a loss that the subject does not wish to replace. "To do so," he argues "would taint the purity of the object

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[28] Sinead McDermott, "Memory, Nostalgia, and Gender in *A Thousand Acres*," *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28.1 (2002): 401.

[29] Nada Awar Jarrar, *Somewhere, Home*, 120.

lost." The subject "turns away from reality and clings on to the object of mourning even when reason dictates that the object can no longer be grasped."[30] Aida's rejection of new beginnings is motivated by the imperative to protect the foundations of her mourning. The basis for this mourning becomes evident in the memories of Aida's relationship with Amou Mohammed, the Palestinian refugee who worked for her family. Like many other Palestinians who lived in the refugee camps around Beirut, he "spent most of his time at his place of work, visiting his wife and children at the camp on the other side of town only on the occasional Sunday" (93). A militiaman kills Amou Mohammed in the last days of the civil war. It is the conversations between Aida and his ghost when he visits her that reveal how Aida's memories about Beirut are inflected with memories of guilt and shame associated with her memories of Amou Mohammed. Aida's mourning is not predicated on restoring an idealized version of the past but is rooted instead in an inability to transcend her unresolved feelings of guilt over the war. For these reasons, Aida denies herself new beginnings, because she is unable to transcend guilt or absolve herself from it.

Aida's memories of shame and guilt reflect what Svetlana Boym describes as critical restorative nostalgia. Boym suggests that restorative nostalgia "manifests itself in total reconstructions of the past."[31] These reconstructions reinstate the negative and painful aspects of the past not merely an idealised version of it.[32] Aida's memories in connection with Amou Mohammed consist of a complex intermingling of love, shame, and embarrassment. Aida's inability to admit her embarrassment and discomfort at Amou Mohammed's poverty adds to her sense of shame. A good example of this occurs when Amou Mohammed takes Aida and her sister Sara to the camp to visit his family. The author writes that Aida was "too embarrassed to say she did not want to go" to the refugee camp with Amou Mohammed because she "dreaded the thought of entering the unknown world of refugee camps and poverty, and what she imagined would be total squalor" (94). The author reveals that though Aida knew about the plight of the Palestinian refugees, she did not "want to see the

[30] Vijay Mishra, "Diaspora and the Art of Impossible Mourning," in *Diaspora*, ed. Makarand Paranjape (New Delhi: Indialog, 2001): 36.

[31] Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

[32] Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*, 41.

same sorrow in a hundred other pairs of eyes" (94). At Amou Mohammed's home, the narrator writes, Aida watches the family accept them but, unlike her sister, is unable to get over her embarrassment at their poverty. She remains uncomfortable and awkward, and while her sister Sara happily eats and talks, she is gently reminded "to make do without a knife and fork today" (97). Aida cannot express her apprehension about the visit, nor can she express her feelings about it afterwards. When pressed by the ghost of Amou Mohammed on her feelings about the visit to the camp, she can only repeat Sara's impressions that he turned "hell into heaven just by being there" (98), but cannot express her own apprehension and embarrassment about it. On another occasion, Aida remembers feeling guilty because her innocent request for corn on the cob results in Amou Mohammed's paying for her corn. Rather than accept his generosity with gratitude, she feels guilty about it (123). Her inability to express her guilt results in her misplaced anger toward her little sister Dina's innocent observation that "Amou Mohammed is wearing Daddy's shoes" (123). In each of her memories, Aida contrasts her self-interest with Amou Mohammed's compassion. Whereas she focuses on their poverty and their difference, he welcomes them warmly into his family and offers a feast; while she feels embarrassed about his poverty, Amou Mohammed tries to soothe her anxieties and reassures her of his love. For example, his reply to Dina's observation about the shoes is generous and intended to allay Aida's embarrassment: "I'd thought I'd wear them for our special day" (123). In fact, it is his generosity that shames Aida even more, because she does not offer the same compassion and generosity towards him.

Jarrar firmly enfolds Aida in the war situation by exposing her apathy. This is relayed through an incident in which Aida, as a diffident fifteen-year-old returning home from a shopping expedition in fashionable Rue Hamra, comes across a young shoeshine boy weeping but does nothing to help him. By contrast, her sister and Amou Mohammed go looking for him. The incident lives with Aida, who is shamed by her lack of compassion, because even though her sister and Amou Mohammed are unsuccessful in their search for the boy, they did what they could (109). The narrator's insight illuminates Aida's guilt, revealing that both Aida and the boy recognize the moment: the boy hangs his head, in a presentiment of Aida's apathy, while Aida's heart holds a "mixture of concern and dismissal" (108). Aida's ambivalence is similarly expressed towards her own beloved Amou Mohammed, whose signs of weakness arouse a simi-

lar revulsion: she had seen Amou Mohammed "waver between gentleness and frailty, and wanted only to turn away" (106). Her fear of witnessing the "bewilderment" in the eyes of refugees like Amou Mohammed and the boy reveals her fear of being shamed out of apathy and ambivalence into action (110). Her fear of his tears shows that she is most afraid of confronting her own inability to meet his raw humanity with the same kind of compassion that he had always demonstrated towards her.

The acuteness of Aida's nostalgia is associated with this shame and guilt, which she is unable to escape by seeking absolution from others. She appeals to the ghost of Amou Mohammed by explaining that the shoeshine boy had been on her conscience (110), but he neither absolves her nor offers consolation: "the boy got over his sadness, Aida" (111). Her need, however, points up the lasting legacy of her apathy: "I didn't, I just want to know if I'm ever going to get over it" (111). The author explains:

> She had wanted him to be angry with her, to tell her that she had been wrong to neglect the weeping boy. She wanted him to say there was a way to make it up to him and to her family, and to tell her that although she had a kind heart, she did not yet know it. (111)

Aida's story thus reveals the communal guilt that has become inscribed in the Lebanese community in the post-civil war era.[33] The ghost of Amou Mohammed disappears after Aida returns to Beirut, even though it was his conversations with her that had prompted her return. As her "life's champion" (131), he had protected Aida with his compassion. In Beirut, he disappears, leaving her to resolve the issues of memory, guilt, shame, and trauma among her own people – reconciliation and the absolution that she seeks must come from engagement with them and not with his ghost.

Aida's attempts to locate a sense of belonging in Lebanon are fraught by her marginalization by those who stayed put during the war. Her new friend Dr Kameel rejects her idea of starting a nursery school in the old abandoned house in the mountains, arguing that those who want to change things have the least authority to do so: "It's always like this. People like you return, not having known the terrible years of the war, and you want to teach us about life" (143). Dr Kameel's accusation that Aida has "never tried to know" what he feels (143), can equally be directed at him, as he,.

[33] See, for example, Mona Takkieddine Amyuni, "A Panorama of Lebanese Women," 93 and Sune Haugbolle, "Public and Private Memory," 193.

too, has never tried to understand Aida's own need for belonging, nor how the civil war has affected her. Haugbolle argues that a culture of amnesia affects those who lived through the war as well as those who were either too young or not present. For survivors of the war, amnesia affords distance from the trauma of the war and the sense of collective guilt. For the latter group, amnesia is a reaction to a society that does not let them easily know the war.[34] The impasse between Dr Kameel and Aida provides an analogy for the tendency towards amnesia that plagues returning Lebanese. Reconciliation cannot occur where there is no forum in which to work through collective guilt.

Aida's nostalgia unsettles contemporary narratives that deny the need for communal recognition of the residual feelings from the war. Her longing reveals the urgency of reconciliation between all aspects of Lebanese community life affected by the war. Lebanon's state policy at the conclusion of the war of "no victor, no vanquished" effectively created a culture of amnesia. Internationally, this model of conflict resolution is adopted in contexts where the costs of truth and reconciliation

> are believed to exceed the benefits. There are some who believe that opening up dialogue of this nature would only aggravate sectarian differences again. Consequently, in Lebanon, the absence of a forum for truth and reconciliation has created a disjoint between public and private memory and fostered a culture of censorship.[35]

Jarrar's text is a testimony to the private memories that confront the public narrative of postwar reconstruction. This kind of nostalgia is politically enabling. It urgs initiatives towards reconciliation, a space-clearing gesture enabling people who have survived the trauma of the war to move forward. Aida would need a space to utter her guilt and to receive absolution. Compassion is required for all parties in order to move on. This kind of nostalgia stages a critique of state and legal policies that have prevented this process from occurring and, in their burning desire to put the past behind them, have fostered a culture of amnesia.

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[34] Sune Haugbolle, "Public and Private Memory," 194.
[35] Haugbolle, "Public and Private Memory," 193.

Remembering those left behind

> I wait to see you again, Father, thinner than I have known you and older. I will call to you and watch for an instant as a stranger's look passes over your face before you finally run to hold me [...] you will take my hand and walk me back to where we started from all those years ago, past the pain and bewilderment and all the living in between. (227)

In this last story, Jarrar challenges normative readings of the archetypal narrative of displacement through migration. Promptings to read the sentiments of loss so prevalent in discourses about displacement and migration arise through the story of Salwa. Here, an older Lebanese woman reminiscences from her bed in a nursing home about life lived in a number of different places in the world. Salwa was born in Lebanon, married at the age of fifteen, moved to the USA as a young mother, and finally settled in Adelaide, South Australia. While memory renews a sense of self, Salwa is not caught in the vortex of mourning her homeland, but the loss she bears with her on all her journeys has been that of the abandonment experienced when her father left them when she was a child. Salwa's story is a personal tale of loss and also a broader narrative about a history of migration and its enduring effects on those left behind.

Memory in this part of the novel serves to reinvigorate Salwa's sense of identity. Memories are her only form of escape from a deteriorating body and confinement to a nursing home. Dislocated from family, tended to by caring and sympathetic nurses, she restores herself through her memories, in which she is "smiling and fearful no longer [...] beautiful and light and full of hope" (149). By remembering her youth, she becomes Salwa, a young Lebanese woman with desires, a wife and mother. In the nursing home in Australia, she is wholly dependent on others for her personal needs; her words are often inaudible to those around her and she has to insist on being listened to, as her thoughts and opinions are deemed to be the musings of a sweet but inconsequential old woman (197). Moving to the West has required her to divest herself of aspects of her identity: she becomes Sally in the West and is required to speak English instead of Arabic. However, her memories do not dwell on cultural contact or assimilation. Settling into her new home in Kingston, South Australia and enjoying her role as mother and wife, content with the "new-found stability" of their lives, Salwa observes: "somewhere in the

back of my mind, in that corner where joy lies hidden among memories, I am surprised at the unencumbered pleasures that fill my new life" (189).

Alongside Salwa's memories of personal fulfilment are also memories of abandonment that arise from a more specific event, the loss of her father. Her personal reflections on this loss punctuate her otherwise happier memories. Her father, like many other Lebanese men of his generation, left the country in search of "better opportunities" (220). Salwa never saw him again. Her recollections reveal that she has grappled with reconciling herself with this loss all her life. Her struggle to understand why he could "abandon" her – whether he deliberately wiped tenderness from his memory or simply forgot because he was consumed by the "sense of adventure"– is a futile exercise; all that remains is an overwhelming sense of abandonment and rejection (180, 210). Despite this, the daughter's struggle for comprehension is couched in compassion for her father's circumstances:

> Sometimes I think that it must have been hard for him too, being alone in a foreign country and everything. At other times I wonder if he might have come back if one of us, Mathilde or myself, had been a boy. (219)

Here, Jarrar reiterates that the heavy price that is paid in the search for a new beginning is reflected in the cost of creating an ending. The tension between remembering and forgetting here emphasizes the fact that there can be no resolution. Remembering and forgetting are both fraught with challenges that seem insurmountable in the event of trauma and loss. In this sense, Jarrar echoes Edward Said's observation about the complexities, for the exile, surrounding the notion of return: "all of us speak of *awdah*, 'return,' but do we mean that literally or do we mean 'we must restore ourselves to ourselves'?"[36] In this sense, the notion of restoration is reflected in Salwa's careful weighing-up of her father's motives – a balancing-act between remembering and forgetting and the conscious intention to leave this dialogue open.

Salwa's narrative can be read as a testament to a history of migration and the enduring legacy of loss and abandonment that follows in its wake. Her father and all the men who quit Lebanon to work abroad left behind them a legacy of loss. Jarrar uses the narrative of Salwa's story to demon-

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[36] Edward W. Said, *After the Last Sky: Palestinian Lives*, with photographs by Jean Mohr (London & Boston MA: Faber & Faber, 1986): 33.

strate that this history of movement has contributed in fundamental ways to the community's identity.[37] The theme of Lebanese men going abroad to work runs through the novel, in which women of every generation are married to husbands who spend most of their time abroad earning a living. Alia's husband visited periodically and only returned to live with her in old age; Saeeda's husband left Lebanon and never returned; Salwa's brother-in-law Shafiq and her son-in-law Riyad also spend substantial time abroad away from their families. Each woman is silent about the painful realities of their situation: that their husbands would have established new bonds of belonging and lead other lives abroad in their long absences. For example, in part one, Alia tentatively acknowledges her fears about her husband's life: "other questions come to mind about what your life is like so far away and whether you have found your own comforts there, your own release" (26). Khaled, the friend of Alia's husband who returns to the mountain after twenty years abroad, reveals more explicitly the reality that many of the men had other families and another life which they kept from their Lebanese families. As the narrative reveals, a culture of silencing and forgetting precludes any acknowledgment of these families. Through Salwa's narrative, Jarrar enacts testimony to the culture of forgetting that underpins this Lebanese legacy. It is an act of testimony to the other side – to the adventurism and search for opportunities that so characterize the community. Salwa's story presents the side of diaspora that is not critically addressed because it does not speak of arrivals, only of the painful endings and the agency that is required to consciously forge ahead in order to redress this loss.

In this context, Salwa's memories of the effect of abandonment by her father enable her to empathize with other young people who are similarly separated from their families: the girl in her grandson Nabil's photograph, for example, is a "poor young thing" because her father does not live "nearby" (225). Knowledge of the impact of this kind of separation enables her to understand that the behavioural problems manifested by her grandson may have their genesis in the experience of feeling abandoned by his father. Remembering this legacy enables Salwa to ensure that it

[37] Fouad Akram Khater documents the impact on Lebanese society of a long history of emigration to and from the Lebanese mountains; see Khater, *Inventing Home: Emigration, Gender and the Middle Class in Lebanon, 1870–1920* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2001).

does not occur unnecessarily. When she finds out that there are plans to keep her grandson Nabil in Australia because it would be better for him, she insists that he is returned to Lebanon "back where he belongs," and with his mother (216). The past is the source not only of pain but also of explanatory power, and provides an enabling impulse in the present. Aware of the consequences that this unnecessary separation will cause, Salwa prevents the cycle from recurring by ensuring that her grandson returns to his mother in Lebanon.

Conclusion

In Jarrar's hands and through *Somewhere, Home*, Ahmad's idea that most displaced people are seeking "a place from where they may begin anew" assumes more profound dimensions that are associated with the cleansing of guilt, shame, compassion, and loss.[38] Home is a place that enables some consolation through reconciliation: a site that is cleansed of the emotional residue that itself renders people displaced. Historical traumas such as the Lebanese civil war raise the problem of representation in reconciling the different and competing discourses that are implicated on all levels, political, public, and private. Through Maysa, Jarrar demonstrates the futility of selective forgetting wherein the Lebanese civil war and its causes, effects, and horrors are simply excised from the narrative of history. Excising a part of the nation's identity, albeit a traumatic one, indicates a reluctance to embrace it as part of one's history. It reflects the problem of representation: which Lebanon is commemorated – as the price of recognizing the horrors, causes, and implications of the war – requires painful critical self-reflection. Aida's guilt- and shame-ridden memories are the consequence of not having recourse to reconciliation. Without a space to clear these emotions, Lebanese people are unable to come to terms with the trauma within their community in which they were all somehow implicated. Salwa's story obliquely critiques histories of resettlement and migration to reveal the devastating impact of the fascination with "somewhere new" and those "better opportunities," especially for those who are left behind.

With this in mind, Jarrar's meditations on the implications of war, conflict, and belonging resonate specifically for Australia, which has not had

[38] Aijaz Ahmad, "The Politic of Literary Postcoloniality," 16.

the misfortune of civil war but is essentially comprised of migrants from all over the world. It is a place that many have come to because it offers the prospect of somewhere in which to begin again. Although the novel participates specifically in a Lebanese discourse about memory of the civil war, as a novel written by an Australian-Lebanese author it offers Australians insight into the challenges faced by those who have experienced it and invites a nation like ours to act with compassion towards them. In part three of the novel, Jarrar depicts Salwa reflecting on the refuge that Australia has provided for her:

> Beyond this window and the tree that stands outside it, beyond the city that surrounds us, out where sky and earth appear to meet, this country reaches out, measureless and extraordinary, a refuge in a far-flung world. (196)

The generosity that Jarrar indicates here is a spirit that we must aspire to in the context of increasing numbers of people all over the world who are continually displaced by civil war and military occupation. Jarrar's meditations on memory and belonging highlight the challenges that they face and the unbearable burden of the emotional residues of these displacements, a burden that may at times seem inescapable. In this context, Jarrar's novel is a plea for greater compassion towards those who seek refuge in Australia: by whatever means, and in whatever guise, they choose, or are compelled, to approach her shores.

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